

## Can an Ungovernable Society Be Governed?

Article by Raffaele Alberto Ventura

June 29, 2023

Global elites amassing unimaginable wealth, insatiable consumption, reckless depletion of natural resources and growing social dissatisfaction: the status quo is untenable and doomed to collapse. Only decentralised, pluralistic, bottom-up approaches to leadership can offer an alternative to rising techno-populism and ensure cohesion to our fragmented societies.

Capitalism can only survive through unlimited growth. No longer able to guarantee unlimited growth, capitalism is becoming ever more savage. Wealth inequality is growing. Stimulating consumption – at times under the progressive guise of individual self-realisation or the Green New Deal – appears a vital necessity for the system, with its attendant pollution and overexploitation of natural resources.

We are seeing ownership of the planetary means of production (IT, logistics and financial infrastructure) concentrated in the hands of a tiny global elite, guaranteeing it profits by unprecedented economies of scale. While some visionary entrepreneurs are household names – Steve Jobs yesterday, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk today – seemingly straight out of a Schumpeterian fantasy, the fact is that most of the biggest capitalists are anonymous, ghost-like figures who elicit no oppositional sentiment other than vague paranoia.

Worse still, the structures of political representation and decision-making are breaking down. Social media has caused a radical shift in the processes of politicisation: the influence of the great aggregators of societal demands, such as political parties, is waning, leaving behind fluid, unstable and intersectional political issues driven by outrage.

But there is arguably some good news: this status quo is untenable and doomed to collapse. This collapse will not lead to a new and better society necessarily, but at least the possibility exists. So it is in the fault lines of the current system that we must look to act; in this “crisis” that isn’t, because it will never end. While this “ungovernable” society must nonetheless be led, it can no longer be “governed” based on the principles of modern sovereignty. The entire relationship between society and its political, administrative and technical leadership must be reimagined.

### A crisis that isn’t

For half a century or so, political and social change has defied the predictions of the prevailing paradigms of knowledge in an ever starker manner. To speak of crisis – by implicitly qualifying unexpected phenomena as *deviations*, *exceptions*, *hiatuses*, *interruptions* or *anomalies* – is an attempt to save these paradigms through a classic strategy of propping up “normal science” that has been carefully conceived by philosophers of science. To speak of crisis is to suggest there will be a return to a normal state, once the system has overcome a passing fever.

“Crisis” is therefore a conceptual device through which we refuse to accept the collapse of our instruments of knowledge. It is also a means for political and intellectual elites to protect themselves by protecting the knowledge on which their legitimacy lies, despite its now diminishing returns. In the

absence of a courageous act of epistemological rupture, the chaotic search for alternative paradigms will continue to fuel pseudoscience and conspiracy theories.

*“Crisis” is a conceptual device through which we refuse to accept the collapse of our instruments of knowledge.*

While it is undeniable that we are witnessing historic upheaval, using the word “crisis” to describe it is not a neutral choice. In this state of permanent crisis, everything becomes a *technical* problem, a question of risk management, large-scale governmentality. The so-called environmental crisis is clearly not a passing fever but a permanent state that requires a radical adaptation of our lifestyles and, beforehand, our values.

Freeing ourselves from the imaginary of crisis is thus a necessary step for examining the dramatic transformations that we are experiencing and for thinking about change. It must then be replaced by new imaginaries – an ambitious undertaking.

### **Can our societies still be governed?**

In his important 2018 book *The Ungovernable Society: A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism*, Grégoire Chamayou argued that concerns about governability were a pure neo-conservative fantasy that emerged in the 1970s. But it is a serious issue that was part of a much broader debate at the time.

First, there is the question of the *legitimacy* of modern democratic institutions, which has haunted philosophers since the fall of the Ancien Régime and is revisited time and again. Functionalist sociology has shown that society, as well as meeting material needs, must also satisfy the cultural, moral and ideological conditions for *integration* – in other words, an imaginary. Now that God is dead, how can a secular society provide a foundation to its norms? Should it settle for Kant’s cold solution – the categorical imperative to which autonomous individuals freely submit – or for an even colder “legitimation by procedure”? Should it reinject “politics” into society, as would Nazi legal thinking, best exemplified by Carl Schmitt, suggest and which left-wing Schmittians argue today in making a case for populist reasoning? This has been attempted by Podemos in Spain and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France; the Five Star Movement also tried this in Italy, showing how courting the “people” at all costs can further the right’s agenda. Greens, who potentially offer the most radical imaginary, have been unable to establish it.

Western societies still enjoy extraordinary material wellbeing, but suffer from a growing moral malaise, a symptom of which seems to be the rise in populism. The central contradiction can be summarised as follows: forced to generate social needs at scale to produce sufficient demand to absorb the production surpluses resulting from technological progress and market competition, the capitalist system has created more social needs than it can satisfy. This dissatisfaction, which is likely to grow as decline accelerates, paralyses any production of political legitimacy. Thus an approach to public planning that only uses accounting, trade or finance as its metric is not able to respond to political demand that transcends these dimensions.

Should we then give up governing our societies? This seems unrealistic: there are no functioning complex societies that do not directly or indirectly plan how they are run through the coordination of

individual behaviour. There needs to be someone, somewhere in charge of social planning, otherwise each person will act in an uncoordinated and often individualistic manner. The neo-liberal system appears to be a highly rules-based system. The massive production of risks obliges the system to react in mitigation of these risks, which in turn produces new risks that must be mitigated in the endless vicious circle that we call modernisation. But diminishing returns set in, making this risk management increasingly costly and ineffective. As legitimacy is eroded, power can only be exercised through coercion and the brutal management of public order.

## **The fuse theory**

Over the past decade, leadership has been principally thought of as *cathartic*. It has been about recycling demand for change to legitimise new political forces: the Five Star Movement blazed a trail that Macronism, on its own terms, has tried to follow. This calculation has created a mechanism for the turnover of power that was nicely summed up by France's prime minister, who recently admitted that she saw herself as just a "fuse". Therein lies a traditional function of leadership.

According to the *Ynglinga Saga*, a terrible famine struck Sweden during the reign of King Domald, prompting the people to make many sacrifices to the god Odin. The first autumn they offered him cattle, but this had no effect. The second autumn they sacrificed men, yet things got even worse. And so the third autumn they decided to spill Domald's blood on the altar: the king was sacrificed by his people, and the harvest was good for many seasons to come. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer recounts a similar myth in the sacred wood of Nemi, near Rome, where the priest-king was ritually sacrificed. In this confusion between leader and scapegoat, anthropology reveals an underlying truth about the essence of sovereignty.

*The so-called environmental crisis is clearly not a passing fever but a permanent state that requires a radical adaptation of our lifestyles and, beforehand, our values.*

In ancient myths, leadership is an anointment in preparation for real or symbolic sacrifice. This should not be seen as a simple superstition about the ability of men to influence the gods and of gods to influence harvests, but rather an intuition about what, to this day, underpins the legitimacy of a leader: an obligation to *take the fall*. We do not need leaders to *govern*, but to be sacrificed in the event of a "bad harvest". Today, more than ever, bad harvests abound. The gods are thirsty and must be appeased.

## **Which leadership? Which imaginary?**

In the Schmittian paradigm, the political sphere is that of pure decision making. Leaders are the people who *act decisively*, just as Alexander the Great cut the Gordian Knot, and then *take responsibility* by sacrificing themselves. Decision making comes in when different solutions to a problem are rationally equivalent and the solution cannot simply be deduced. Yet decision making has less to match reality (on the spectrum *true vs wrong*) than to match with the needs of the group (on the spectrum *inadequate vs adequate*).

Decision-makers are there to guide the process in a broad direction. By choosing a course of action despite *external* uncertainty, they ward off procrastination and get the collective moving again, thereby at

least reducing *internal* uncertainty, which depends on the social group's cohesion. This is achieved by constructing an imaginary which determines the hierarchy of goals and values necessary to ensure the maximum use of resources and coordination of forces so that, when faced with unexpected events, the group does not completely disintegrate. That is more or less the traditional paradigm.

While today's society is coordinated through an imaginary, it does not automatically follow that we can create one imaginary that satisfies everyone. Indeed, a fragmented society will not be able to produce enough legitimacy around a single political vision. The "post-modern condition" also applies to leadership, which does not have to be unified if it can operate in a decentralised manner. The re-emergence of civil-society organisations, in the guise of organised minorities, for example, signals a shift towards political pluralism that should not be overlooked. This fragmentation brings risk – in France's republican narrative, the risk of "separatism" leading to civil war – but opportunity too: it offers a decentralised system of government which, at every level, creates political legitimacy around different visions that are closer to the real culture and needs of individuals.

The diversity of social expectations and sensibilities makes it necessary to combine different leadership models that can reflect this diversity without getting bogged down in permanent conflict. For some years now, perhaps most clearly in Italy and during Trump's presidency in the US, we have seen a techno-populist blend that brings together "populist" leaders, specialising in achieving consensus, and opaque but supposedly "effective" administrators. To date, this model has proven effective in preserving the status quo; for it be used for change, social forces will have to be marshalled in the same direction. Until recently, this change could still have come from the top down, but today it must come from the bottom up: it is here that civil society organisations, like unions, have a key role to play. These are places that still build legitimacy and have a genuine ability to influence political choices. They must champion not just material priorities, like how long we work, but urgent, civilisational priorities concerning work's essence, its meaning, its purpose.

The newly emerging political order is a pluralist, multi-layered legal system consisting of collective entities whose legitimacy derives from their ability to provide social or "moral" services. Leadership, understood as a capacity to coordinate the transition towards a new model of society, can only really be plural, just like the plurality of imaginaries that characterise post-modern society.

In this sense, political ecology can play a meta-political role, provided it reconciles the demands of work with those of the environment. National and supranational institutions have a duty to guarantee the conditions for interoperability between the plurality of imaginaries, normative orders and levels of power for the sake of the only cross-cutting and universal priorities: ensuring peace and preserving conditions for life on planet Earth.



Raffaele Alberto Ventura is a Franco-Italian essayist and philosopher. He is a columnist for Italian daily newspaper *Domani* and has published three books, the most recent of which is *Radical choc: Ascesa e caduta dei competenti* (2020, Einaudi).

# GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

---

Article in English

Translation available in French

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/can-an-ungovernable-society-be-governed/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*