

DEMOCRACY PUT TO THE TEST

**THREE-DAY MEETING
AT PALAZZO DUCALE, GENOA
JANUARY 23-25, 2026**

(Curated by Fabrizio Barca and Luca Borzani)

1. AIMS AND FRAMEWORK

AIMS

The three-day event has two aims: achieving a better understanding of the current challenge to democracy which comes from a powerful authoritarian dynamic coupled with a persistent neoliberalism; bringing to light existing and potential reactions. We are aware of the radical nature and speed of what is happening, at the peak of over thirty years of cultural, social, and political retreat, and amidst an extraordinary concentration of wealth and power. But we are also aware that democracy, by its own nature, is never a given. It is a system that legitimizes and governs conflicts and tensions and thus it is in a permanent state of change. It must continuously adapt its mechanisms to the context and regenerate. Once the vulnus inflicted by neoliberalism and authoritarianism has been examined, the ultimate question is whether reactions are taking place or could take place in response to the current test: can democracy, can democracies, renew their tools, their credibility? And how? Can current experiments and movements, as well as the ideas coming from new generations contribute? Tackling these questions is also necessary to understand what to do today in Italy, the issue that concludes the three-day event.

FRAMEWORK

The objective of the three-day event is being pursued within a very rich but fragmented multidisciplinary context. Therefore, the three-day event seeks to balance two needs: the duty and usefulness of representing different views; and the need to focus the discussion, avoiding a babel of interpretations, while posing precise questions. To this end, we submit to the speakers and the public three-day event a set of assumptions, starting from what is meant by 'democracy', and then addressing the factors behind the current upheaval. We do not aim to offer a shared point of intersection among different interpretations, but rather to clarify our starting point and the reasons behind the questions we pose. If those who gather in Genoa challenge these assumptions, it will be a way to advance our collective understanding.

STRUCTURE

Building on the assumptions and questions, the three-day event will be organized into five sessions:

- I. Democracy, the State, neoliberalism and authoritarianism: past and present*
- II. Democracy, the State, neoliberalism and authoritarianism: future*
- III. New generations and democracy*
- IV. United States, India and China*
- V. Italy: specificities, common sense, and opportunities for parties, labor, and active citizenship*

The first two sessions intersect each other by looking at the same events from two different perspectives: the state of the art today and how it came about; the foreseeable future. The sessions will be distinct, but some contributions will focus only on one perspective, while others could focus on both.

In the **first session**, the inquiry concerns mostly the issues to which neoliberalism first, and authoritarianism later, have given answers that democracy was failing to provide. It also addresses the reasons why these have become hegemonic and have started to co-exist, and the main features of the authoritarian dynamic.

The **second session**, discusses mostly whether and how democracy has tried to react and can still react to the current test and whether and how the current imbalance of social, economic and political power can be changed: attention will be paid to the governance of public decision-making and to the role and interaction of culture/communication and digital technology.

In the **third session**, the perspective of the new generations is adopted: the closure of democratic spaces where a fruitful intergenerational debate/conflict can take place; visions and ideas for renewing democracy coming from youth movements and experiences; their widespread distrust in political organizations and the risk of growing indifference.

In the **fourth session**, we tackle head-on the case of the United States and ask ourselves what the main features of the authoritarian breakthrough are, whether there are signs and chances of a reaction, and to what extent the radical and fast nature of the breakthrough is due to specific traits and the profound crisis of that nation, or rather if it once again signals its anticipatory capacity. By acknowledging that we live in the century of Asia, we also address similar questions for the world's largest democracy, India, and focus on the unique authoritarian model of China, enquiring into the features of its decision-making process.

The three-day event concludes with a **fifth session** that tackles the case of Italy. We inquire into the premises and specificities of the ongoing authoritarian dynamic, its connections with Italian capitalism and society, the causes of a high rise in electoral absenteeism, the challenge of changing the current common sense, and opportunities for radical political reaction by organized labor, active citizenship, and political parties.

2. ASSUMPTIONS

We launch the three-day event by moving from a set of assumptions that guide its framework, and the questions we have posed. The assumptions reflect the research, the beliefs and the definitions of many of the people invited to the three-day event and of many others, but only the three-day event organizers should be held responsible for them. The assumptions will be put to test in the debate. Here they are:

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- a) By ‘**democracy**’ and ‘**popular sovereignty**’, we mean a constitutional system that aims to ensure that all members of society have an effective weight in public decision making, the possibility of not being dominated or subordinated, and a common equality. This end is pursued through a representation based on a truly universal suffrage, widespread forms of direct participation, the division and balancing of powers, public financing of parties, and a legitimation and regulation of public debate/conflict that aims to promote compromises/intersections capable of realizing the constitutional principles of equality and social justice. As an example, **in Italy’s democracy, according to the Constitution, born from the raw material of the previous half-century, central among these principles are:** labor (as a founding base of the Republic, a right and a duty); “to remove the obstacles...impeding the full development of the human person” (i.e. substantial freedom), to be demanded for oneself (right) and guaranteed to others (duty); ecosystem protection “also in the interest of future generations”; the predominance of “the common good” over the freedom of the private economic enterprise; civil servants being “exclusively at the service of the Nation”; the judiciary being “autonomous and independent of all other powers”; the right of asylum for a foreign national “who is denied - in his or her country - the enjoyment of democratic freedoms established by this Constitution”; the repudiation of war; peace, in pursuit of which national sovereignty may be limited.
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- b) **Democracy is never a given, but it is by its nature a system in a permanent state of change that must govern tensions and thus continuously adapt to the context.** The division and balancing of powers, promoting and governing a heated debate and conflict among different values and interests both in representative bodies and participatory spaces, the majority/opposition principle, and the constant emergence of risks (tyranny of the majority, oligarchic drift and influence by concentrations of economic power, betrayal of foundational principles of equality and freedom, corruption of parties, ineffectiveness of public debate/conflict, predominance of bureaucracy, etc.) require constant critical and analytical assessment, civic and institutional control and pragmatic adaptation. When democratic mechanisms fail to adapt to the context, representation is no longer the expression of popular sovereignty. **Populist movements thus rise up, and democracy finds itself facing a bifurcation: taking an authoritarian path or promoting its own transformation by means of more advanced participatory and decision-making mechanisms** (as seen, at the beginning of the last century, respectively in Europe and the U.S.).
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- c) **Democracy, although not necessary for capitalism, can coexist with and influence it. This coexistence is fraught** because capitalism tends by its nature to reproduce concentration of wealth and power, subordination and inequalities that erode democracy, while democracy promotes a rebalancing of power that upsets capitalism. However, coexistence is possible for two reasons. First, due to the malleability of capitalism, the impulse toward risk and innovation is compatible, up to a certain point, with limits both on the control power over material and immaterial capital and on the desired profit rates. Second, the collective market demand and the regulations produced by a democratic decision-making process can create certainties for capitalism’s investments. Thus, in the post-war thirty years, while state and market were co-evolving, democracy, combined with new forms of international cooperation and order, proved able to both stretch and give a direction to capitalism. It did so through many forms of “social control of the economy” that increased social justice within a context of growth, although at the cost of an unsustainable exploitation of both labour in the South of the world and natural resources. In Europe, by developing previous steps, a welfare state consolidated, and it became prevailing common sense that it’s up to the State to supply public goods as people’s rights. But in increasing that control and expanding the dimension of the state, it was assumed that capitalism could continue to produce profits sufficient to provide adequate finances through taxation. And **no adequate effort was made to “change capitalism”** by rebalancing labor power within capitalist enterprises, extending and developing state-owned enterprises, orienting capitalism through collective demand organized, especially at local level, by the state or developing alternative modes of production based on cooperation and shared control. Tensions between capitalism and democracy rose without being addressed in a timely manner.
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- d) Starting in the 1980s, the “reaction of capitalism” to the redistribution of resources and power has had ample room for maneuver. By addressing the existing tensions between capitalism and democracy and through a strong offensive to change the prevailing common sense, **the ideology of neoliberalism – self-proclaimed as a non-ideology – has taken root and become hegemonic. All its principles have eroded democracy’s organizational and solidaristic ability to achieve its objectives:** interpreting human motivation solely in terms of self-interest and denying mutualistic drives; denying the role of society and of “voice” and “conflict” in public decision-making; obscuring its political content, by framing and justifying it as technical; identifying the “freedom of business” – i.e. the freedom of those who control business - as the only way to manage complexity; undermining the existing corporate governance and turning short term profits and then share values

as the only means to assess entrepreneurs' behaviour; assigning a subordinate role to the state in responding to the demands of business; eroding the idea of public goods as universal rights; denying the rationale for labor to organize as a way to rebalance power; responding to the effects of trade and capital liberalization with a compression of labour rights and negotiating power; and turning libertarian goals into individualistic desires to be addressed by markets.

- e) **Neoliberalism has also been able to harness and bias the digital transition into a tool to concentrate wealth and power.** Instead of becoming a means of communication, relationships, and exchange across class and geographic boundaries, and of collective use of data for the common good, it has become a tool for an unprecedented privatization and concentration of data, with the ability to process it, influence preferences, and offer apparently “technical” and therefore undeniable solutions to complexity. A small and powerful elite of “tech oligarchs” has thus gradually taken shape. Their wealth and power is based on the expropriation of social intelligence.
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- f) **The hegemony of neoliberalism has been fueled by the failure of democracy to adapt its tools to the increasing complexity of public decision-making.** A rising awareness of the impact of every decision in terms of gender, ethnic background, and the environment; the acceleration of technological change; the challenge posed and the uncertainty created by climate crisis; the exponential increase in data that “could and should be considered” in decision-making; the growing number of people with education and awareness who demand a say in public choices – these are all factors that call for a redesign of deliberative and decision-making tools of democracy. **Complexity and uncertainty increase the incompleteness of rules and contracts as tools to govern**, i.e. their capacity to establish ex-ante, once and for all, what each agent should do in every circumstance. **They open up the way for a greater role of two alternative tools, an authoritarian and a democratic one:** the first is the concentration in a few hands of the power to take decisions when circumstances arise; the other is an open, informed, heated and reasonable public debate and continuous interaction between local and meta levels of government (*democratic experimentalism*), to give weight to different viewpoints and sources of knowledge in the decision-making process when circumstances arise. **At national level, no systemic move has been made to update the tools of democracy in the second direction.** At EU level some attempts have been made.
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- g) **For a long period, the neoliberal promise – that after some inevitable initial inequality, everyone would benefit, providing they worked hard – generated strong consensus and contributed to its hegemony.** This hegemony extended to all political forces, independently of their cultural background. Often from seats of government, they implemented public, labour, and international policies that were fully consistent with the neoliberal creed. These policies responded to the competitive pressure of the masses – especially in Asia – rising out of poverty (thanks to trade liberalization) by promoting precarious and low-wage work. In Italy, this amounted to the progressive emptying out and erosion of constitutional principles.
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- h) **Often, the existing tools of public debate and control have been impoverished, with the effect of boosting the first, authoritarian option.** In Italy, in particular, several steps have been made: continuously reforming electoral laws supposedly to achieve stability/governability, with the effect of eroding the capacity of voters to choose their representatives and the concentration of this choice in the hands of party elites; drastically cutting the public financing of political parties; mortifying debate within Parliament, through regulation reforms and the reduction of the number of representatives (thus of pluralism); political parties' identification with personal leadership, both at national and regional level – a sort of neo-feudal design – with impoverishment of any debate on vision and strategies; reducing power of legislative assemblies at local level; abolishing intermediate levels of government.
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- i) Meanwhile, both in local and national-global contexts – as shown by a remarkable sequence of mass protests - **several movements and active citizens organizations, with a significant role of new generations, have opposed neoliberalism** and have suggested new values in the realm of civil and human rights that address the abuses of power historically committed on racial, gender and environmental grounds. At local level, they have generated and continue to generate experimental new **forms of participatory democracy**, mutualism, and relationships between public and private actors, coherent with a democratic way to tackle complexity. But in general, no lasting effects have been achieved at national-global level. The deafness of most political parties and the rising obstacles to the capacity of new generations to hold sway in the political arena help explain why these new experiences and values have not scaled up and are not scaling up to a systemic level. But this failure also depends on two further factors. First, dismantling old values and rituals, namely those linked to gender and ethnic subalternities, has not gone together with the adequate, participated and emotional diffusion of new universal values, and even less so of new rituals, while new forms of tribalism came forward; a gap has opened up between the educated avant-garde and the “people”, which, for example, has been exploited in the inversion of meaning of the term *woke*. Second, the rejection by most movements of any form of hierarchy, representation and leadership (leaders are present but they are not dealt with as such, and are therefore not controlled) – theorised as “horizontalism” or “*horizontalidad*” – has often turned into the lack of any effective and sustainable organization. As a result, during the second decade of this century, **many mass protests have failed to catch their momentum and the consequent vacuum of power has often been filled up by authoritarian forces.** Is this changing in recent mass protests?

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- j) Given the persistence and extraordinary expansion in the West of inequalities – in income and wealth, in access to services and recognition, between people and between territories – the succession and overlap of crises unable even to fulfill the promise of creative destruction, the evolution of capitalism in some sort of patrimonial capitalism disconnected from value production, **neoliberalism has progressively lost its hegemony**, in the sense of its ability to generate consent. There have been two effects. On one hand, **neoliberalism has resorted to domination and accentuated its illiberal character**, pushing capitalism into a paroxysmal spiral of unprecedented concentration of knowledge control – fueled by the use of the digital transition. On the other hand, a populist backlash has emerged, rejecting the institutional and political frameworks that supported the neoliberal turn. In the absence of a concrete alternative proposal for developing democracy, the **authoritarian version of populism has often prevailed**.
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- k) It is therefore clear that **the authoritarian dynamic taking place in so many countries has been triggered by the accumulation and interaction of various factors**: the harshness of inequalities and the collapse of social mobility; increasing difficulty for democracy to address complexity (fueled by demographic changes and the powerful re-emergence of China on the global arena); growing distrust in the democratic state (*brokenism*) and a decline in the effectiveness of the process of legislation; widespread disorientation and resentment when the destabilization of a traditional system of norms/values/rites/authority has appeared as a privilege of the few.
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- l) **The current phase can be interpreted as a convergence of neoliberalism and authoritarianism**. Under a message painted in inter-classist terms and with combinations that vary by country, those in government offer: protection from diversity, from the “invasion” of migrants, and from the loss or distortion of past norms and identities; a reiteration of the promise to unleash “individual animal spirits”, by finally eliminating the constraints of the state; but, at the same time, neo-corporatist benefits and transfers to selected groups, fragmenting social solidarity; a guarantee that wealth will remain within national borders (without any promise of redistribution or improved services); decisiveness and speed in decision-making. All this is offered in “exchange” for the substantial erosion of every form of universal welfare (which is deemed to “weaken commitment”) and of all instruments of popular sovereignty such as parliaments, democratic spaces, conflict and participation, institutional checks and balances, oversight and accountability, judicial and media independence. These steps go together with the erosion of what remains of international cooperation and law and with threats and intimidation against peoples and individuals, as well as acts of war and rearmament. The latter is sold as the only tools to guarantee both peace and security and as the way to trigger technological innovation and growth – *military Keynesianism*.
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- m) In some countries, such as Hungary, Turkey, India and U.S., the authoritarian dynamic is more advanced: a majoritarian drift based on ethnic nationalism, a rising control of executive power over political institutions and shrinking space for dissent are combined in a competitive authoritarianism (as it has been called), where opposition can formally compete but the race is rigged, therefore denying the very meaning of competition. Specific attention must be paid to the **authoritarian dynamic in the U.S., for several reasons**: its virulence and speed; the frequent use of “emergency powers”; the recurrent use of executive orders; the punishments inflicted on whoever opposes executive power, by weaponizing the state as a tool for fiscal, regulatory and repressive intimidation and guaranteeing impunity even to thugs operating in the executive’s interest; the attempt to politicize the military; the display of hate presented as freedom from hypocrisy and used to exhibit impunity. It is also the explicit goal of U.S. current executive power to alter the political balance within European nations in favor of right-wing forces that share its authoritarian vision. While U.S. state weaponization is already jeopardising European citizens’ rights through the sanctions issued by U.S.-based financial and digital corporations, as in the cases of international public servants Francesca Albanese and Nicolas Guillou. It is important to understand if and which reactions are opposing this breakthrough. It is also relevant to understand to what extent the U.S. case anticipates the characteristics of the assault on democracy worldwide, or to what extent it is exacerbated by specific national factors such as: the age of its Constitution and the space it gives to the idea of subordinating the public administration to presidential executive power; the fragmentation of the state; the extreme scale of inequality, also due to the absence of universal welfare; the economic, cultural, and political influence concentrated in a small group of oligarch-entrepreneurs; the string of failures and domestic consequences of imperial wars; the scale of gun ownership and violent anti-state sentiment.
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- n) Finally, the **authoritarian dynamic is cemented and emboldened by a powerful influence on common sense**. Here, the so-called “tech oligarchs” (with U.S. at the center and with a strong influence on the global right ideology) play a central role: the power that derives from expropriating social intelligence is complemented by an “oracular authority” – as the persuasive force of their visions and technological determinism has been called. They induce the acquiescence of those whose social intelligence is expropriated and actively promote and amplify public distrust in the state and in collective action, by any means, including falsehood. They present positions and actions in favour of energy and environmental transition and the regulation and oversight of digital platforms – global public goods which would require public planning - as authoritarian measures that obstruct free human creativity and generate stagnation and poverty: a “totalitarian Antichrist”, in the words of entrepreneur-guru Peter Thiel, which would be allegedly sold by scaring people with dystopian environmental scenarios. The battle against the state, and against climate awareness and action, is thus framed as a battle for freedom. But, at the same time, they aim (as in the U.S.) to seize control of the state to turn their prophecies into reality. A **glaring paradox**, in short: an authoritarian turn dismantling the rule of law and fundamental rights and occupying the state for its own purposes is

marketed as a fight against statism. From this point of view, the challenge for democracy is to set up a decision-making and production process of fundamental public goods based on the democratic debate between values, interests and know-hows. And to narrate this scenario in a way that stirs emotions and challenges the prevailing common sense.

3. QUESTIONS

The overarching question – the “zero question” – that the three-day event seeks to address can be summarized as follows:

0. In the face of a social and political transformation marked by deep complexity, the direction taken by digital transformation, an extraordinary concentration of wealth and power in a few hands, a powerful authoritarian dynamic penetrating democracy, and its coexistence with neoliberalism, can democracy renew its mechanisms and rebalance its relationship with capitalism? How?

This overarching question can be articulated into specific questions addressed to the speakers within the five sessions of the three-day event. These questions, of course, reflect the assumptions set out above, which may be criticized, endorsed, or enriched during the responses.

SESSION I. DEMOCRACY, THE STATE, NEOLIBERALISM, AND AUTHORITARIANISM: PAST AND PRESENT

1. What are the essential features of constitutional democracy and how have they been eroded by neoliberalism and undermined by authoritarianism?
2. Are there context transformations (such as the increase in complexity) to which democracy has failed to adapt and to which neoliberalism and authoritarianism respond?
3. Can the powers and scale of the contemporary state peacefully coexist with capitalism? And under which conditions?
4. What are the general features of emerging authoritarianism, and what are its strengths in the battle for common sense?
5. How do authoritarianism and neoliberalism coexist? Is their “escalation” sustainable, or are there signs of rupture?

SESSION II. DEMOCRACY, THE STATE, NEOLIBERALISM, AND AUTHORITARIANISM: FUTURE

6. Big Data, platforms, AI: is it true that digital technology can be redirected to support democracy? Is the tilt of digital technology to suit the concentration of knowledge and wealth actually reversible? If so, how?
7. Why did the democratic revolts of the past decade all over the world fail and often lead to authoritarian turns? And now?
8. Are there systematic signs of democratic reaction to the authoritarian challenge? Which collective actions and social conflicts could arise against the current concentration of wealth and power?
9. Can democracy respond to the growing complexity and uncertainty to which authoritarianism offers an answer – and with what tools? How can the functions of the State and its *modus operandi* vis a vis capitalist firms and social enterprises be adjusted?
10. How can the mechanisms of decision-making, participation and representation be changed to rebuild people’s trust in democratic institutions? What do existing experiments tell us?

SESSION III. NEW GENERATIONS AND DEMOCRACY

11. What ideas and suggestions come from the culture, language, experiments and practices of new generations for renewing democratic spaces and mechanisms?
12. Are there new forms of organizations emerging within current movements that explore a compromise between “horizontalism” and “verticalism”?
13. What obstacles prevent the ideas, experiments and practices of several new-generation avant gardes from reaching out to a larger share of the new generations themselves and society?
14. And how can art and communication help overcome those obstacles and challenge the prevailing common sense?

SESSION IV. UNITED STATES, INDIA AND CHINA

15. U.S.: What are the main features of the current authoritarian dynamic? Are antidotes against authoritarianism at work and what is the role of economic elites and civic society? How much is the current trend the result of national specificities?
16. India: What is the current situation of the world's largest democracy? What are the main features and what is the extent of the current authoritarian dynamic? What are the prospects for reaction?
17. China: How are strategic decisions taken? Does the decision-making process involve the people and how? What is the ultimate nature of the institutional system and of the coexistence of capitalism and authoritarianism?

SESSION V. ITALY: SPECIFICITIES, COMMON SENSE, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTIES, LABOR, AND ORGANIZED CITIZENSHIP

18. What are the specific features of the authoritarian dynamic in Italy? What is its relationship with the forms of society and capitalism? Why is electoral absenteeism so high?
19. How relevant is the prevailing common sense in driving the authoritarian dynamic? How can it be challenged to rebuild collective hope? Which role for our constitutional principles?
20. In what ways can labor unions, active citizens organizations and grassroots movements contribute to the rebuttal of the authoritarian dynamic and to the revival of democracy? How can their local experiences generate systemic impact?
21. What form can political parties take – if any – to rebuild trust in institutions, gather and connect local and systemic knowledge, recreate representation, and renew democracy?