Chapter 1

The Importance of Naive Ideas

In this book, I offer some ideas[1] that I hope may help understand and improve politics in today's information society. My ambition is philosophical, namely, to try to understand and improve the world. That is all. I realise it may seem a lot, indeed overambitious. But I hope that, instead, it may be interpreted as a contribution to a far greater, collective effort. Of course, this brings us to the usual paradox: how significant is a vote or, in this case, a conceptual contribution? Well, I contend, as much as a grain of sand on the beach: one counts for nothing, two still for nothing, but millions can make a huge difference, if only because, without them, there would be no beach. This is the *relational value* of aggregation.

While the ideas in this book are philosophical, they are not meant to be so abstract to the point of being inapplicable. I hope that the ideas I share will help clarify some practical discussions and may generate some positive political changes. I have tried to find the appropriate balance between politics as a theory of governance and politics as a policy practice.

[1] From here onwards, I am talking only about ideas that guide politics rather than about good ideas in general (e.g., scientific ones).

The Green and The Blue: Naive Ideas to Improve Politics in the Digital Age, First Edition. Luciano Floridi.

Thus, the ideas proposed may be defined as *translational*, a term I borrow from medicine, which uses the concept of *translational* research because even the most fundamental findings of a Nobel Prize winner and the most applied practice of a family doctor are not disconnected, but are instead linked by a continuity determined by a shared interest in understanding and improving human health. Insofar as the ideas in this book can be translational, they seek to articulate a primary, or rather foundational, reflection, which can inform clear, strategic guidelines to implement specific political, legislative, economic, organisational, and technical actions in the future. I do not claim this as an original idea. Good philosophy has sought to be translational at least since the time of Socrates. All that was missing was the label.

Offering ideas to improve politics is inherently a political action. This is even more the case today. While politics has always been a *relational activity* that includes its own negation, such a status is increasingly apparent and understood more widely in our society. Let me clarify.

The idea of politics as a *relational activity* serves as a central theme of this book. Now, it is a characteristic of some relational phenomena to internalise their negation. A few examples can illustrate this point. If you think about it for a moment, any lack of interaction is still a form of interaction. Likewise, a lack of communication is itself a mode of communication, because silence also speaks volumes about who is silent and about what. Similarly, a lack of information is a form of information because it has a communicative value: unanswered questions may fail to satisfy our need for an answer but are still informative in confirming our need to know something. Politics belongs to these kinds of relational phenomena. Not participating in politics—i.e., abstentionism—is still a political act, at least insofar as it involves delegating to others one's political power, often in the form of a protest at, or rejection of, political alternatives that have been offered. It follows that it is an illusion to think that one may live in a society without being political. If the idea of a social contract makes any sense (a real conditional, see Chapter 10), we must acknowledge that it is a contract imposed on every individual at all times, no matter whether the individual wishes to subscribe to it. Nobody can escape it. Only solitude can be genuinely apolitical (not solipsism, which is just *believing* to be alone, as opposed to really being alone). If a desert island is home to just two people, like Robinson Crusoe and Friday, politics is already inevitable. Every friendship is political, and every family is political. Aristotle, then, was

partly right in saying that we are all political animals,[2] but in the sense that trying not to be political means being political nevertheless. He was wrong, however, to think that we are political actors *voluntarily*, *continuously*, and *rightly* (not in the sense of "justly", but in the sense of "in the right way"). All three of Aristotle's conditions are somewhat problematic, and today none of them is satisfied, for the reasons I shall now outline.

First, in all existing democracies, we are political actors *involuntarily*, i.e., against our explicit will, not just unconsciously. This can lead to frustration and conflict, as it is impossible to escape politics even when we would like to reject it, for example, because it has disappointed us, and we do not like it. Civil society is only one side of the coin; the other side is political society. Neither exists without the other: their separation is inescapably abstract. Therefore, no one can mark out a private space in civil society without also marking out some public space in the political society, and vice versa. The illusion that such a separation is possible does not directly generate monsters, like the sleep of reason,[3] but it does allow monsters to grow into beasts, such as political apathy (*qualunquismo*[4]) and populism.

Second, in a *mature information society* (see Chapter 8), we are never "always-on politically".[5] Instead, we are increasingly often political actors *discontinuously* (intermittently), *on-demand* and *just-in-time*,[6] usually when social attention is called upon to express its opinion, judgement, or preferences. For this reason, the communication mechanisms of politics are analogous to the communication mechanisms of *marketing*, especially in countries where comparative advertising is allowed (e.g., "this product is better than that one"). This is simply an observation, not a criticism, and I will return to it in Chapter 17. Here, I would like to emphasise that political communication and marketing pursue the same end: to attract or renew, and thus maintain, peo-

[2] See Aristotle, *Politics* (Aristotle 1996).

[3] The indirect reference to Goya's etching is deliberate.

[4] On the "Common Man's Front" (Italian: Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque, FUQ), also translated as "Front of the Ordinary Man", see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Man%27s_Front.

[5] The indirect refence to (Cellan-Jones 2021) is deliberate. A system is always on if it is continuously powered, tuned on, and working.

[6] The indirect reference to the manufacturing, just-in-time approach is deliberate; see (Cheng and Podolsky 1996).

ple's *attention*, be they customers or citizens, on a topic, be it a new product or a new social or political issue. If this happens often, the result is a constant renewal of the stimulus, which requires ever more intense doses of attention-grabbing communication to take effect. For this reason, marketing carefully considers timing: no one launches a new product randomly, if they can control the timing of innovation. At least a year or two must be allowed to pass, so that the habit of the new product takes hold, and its memory is less vivid. Just look at how often a new iPhone is launched:[7] after a while, the old model is discontinued, at which point it becomes replaceable by the new model. This has the added advantage that the risk of obsolescence is transferred from the "old" product to its outdated user. The iPhone does not age—by default, one refers to the latest model, which is always "new"—instead, it is the users who age because they still rely on an older model. The iPhone is always "new" because the latest model is always new, and the pressure is on the customers to "renew" themselves by buying it. Apple enjoys a self-reinforcing leadership position because it has the power to dictate when innovation cycles take place. As long as this cycle is unbroken, the company's hegemonic position remains difficult to challenge. Those under pressure from the competition cannot afford to control the timing of innovation, whether commercial or socio-political. This is why antitrust laws rightly prevent (or at least they should) the synchronisation of innovation in the hands of one or only a few players, and instead promote competition between many. The same analysis holds in politics. Dictatorial politics is like a market monopoly controlling any policy's innovation. However, if politics becomes a constant pursuit of populist, attention-grabbing consensus, in an unregulated political market where only *laissez-faire* options dominate, and competition rules allow a handful of actors to dictate the "market", then politics renounces any control over its renovation agenda. Another move must counterbalance every move, politicians engage in fight or flight, and no one leads. There is no becoming accustomed to the political solutions that have been implemented, only familiarisation with how they are communicated. Not all current politics shares this asynchronism. Nevertheless, the fact remains that while we depend on the political call to action, we are also beginning to show signs of addiction to this call. Unless politics shouts, we do not pay attention. The result is that for us to listen, communication must be of ever-increasing inten-

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Timeline_of_iPhone_models.

sity, simplification (right down to the repetition of a few, elementary slogans, like "Brexit means Brexit" or "make America great again"), and novelty (it does not matter so much what is communicated, but whether that message is "new" or presented in a "new" way), while all the time normalising emergency messages (the "crying wolf" effect). The UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) after the June 2016 referendum (Brexit) is a striking example. The populist marketing of two problems—chiefly, immigration and the bureaucracy of the EU—led to the UK's withdrawal from the EU being sold by the Vote Leave campaign as a panacea. The campaign was successful for many reasons, one of which was that it constantly served to renew an advertising message disconnected from the real needs or reasonable aspirations of the consumer-citizens.

To distance oneself from all this, I hope that the following pages may be read without alarmism and serve to re-evaluate a rhetoric of content (semantics) over one of form (syntax). It is preferable for timing not to be tactical (i.e., merely reactive to the novelties of the political market), but to maintain its strategic quality, that is, focused on the design and *implementation* of the right *human project*.

Finally, let us consider Aristotle's third condition. Aristotle was partly justified in calling us political animals. Still, we invariably face a problem when we are called upon to be political actors, insofar as we run the risk of being so in the wrong way, namely when political power is abused. Power for its own sake promotes selfish interests and unjustly privileges some people over others.

For all these reasons, it follows that, while politics can never be absent in any society, it can easily be damaged. The bad politics of populism, nationalism, sovereigntism, intolerance, violence, extremism, passive and indifferent abstentionism, and sometimes the mere protest vote, *also* manifest a frustration about the impossibility of non-politics. But the more such bad politics becomes established, the more it remains a political move, and the more it escalates, eventually occupying all the space of the political dialogue with negative variants, in a confrontational spiral that ultimately leads to polarisation. It undermines society's confidence in its political capacity to solve problems that require cooperation, solidarity, tolerance, and multipartisanship. Today, there is no shortage of good, well-thought-out solutions to problems because more educated and intelligent people are around than ever before. The difficulty is finding the right approach to remove the obstacles impeding the implementation of these good solutions. Goodwill is not

in short supply but has withdrawn from politics, where it is no longer represented. This withdrawal is self-defeating and reinforces the vicious circle of bad politics. By trying not to engage in politics, goodwill only leaves room for bad politics, which negatively influences how goodwill is exercised. The optimism of the heart is eventually joined by the frustration of reason[8] at seeing so many opportunities wasted, so many crucial solutions delayed, and so many pressing problems exacerbated to the point of becoming unsolvable.

Considering the points just made, the political ideas expressed in this book are intended to be constructive and impartial, as opposed to destructive and partisan. This is not for anti-party reasons—as I have argued above, it is well known that anti-party and anti-political sentiments today form part of the most widespread party rhetoric and sometimes the most cunning politics. I offer my ideas to anyone (political forces included) who may find them helpful as a means by which to improve politics. In other words, the ideas presented here are *open source* and unconstrained. They are adaptable by anyone who wishes to use them, however they see fit, and to the extent that they may consider them useful. All that remains now is to explain the sense in which the ideas presented in the rest of the book are "naive".

The ideas are naive not in the sense that they are *empty* of "the cunning of reason",[9] or unaware of the shrewd calculation of expediency or opportunistic cynicism in the abuse of power. Instead, they have been intentionally *emptied* of all this, *a posteriori*, with disenchantment, but without disappointment. Another analogy may help to explain the point. Let us consider the difference between a brand new Moka pot, one that is empty because it has never been used to make any coffee, and a used Moka pot that has made coffee but has been cleaned and emptied. It is generally accepted that coffee tastes better in the used, emptied Moka pot; in other words, the patina of use (the patina of reflection) improves itself. This is why historical memory is of enormous value: it is a reminder of the persisting presence of meaning, which requires a mental life to be appreciated, and not as a mere record of facts, for which, say, a Wikipedia entry is sufficient. I have emptied the ideas—rendered them naive, so to speak—to welcome back-in the tenets of good politics, namely social altruism and solidarity; the intergenerational pact; sustainable care

[8] The indirect reference to Gramsci's "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will" is deliberate, see A. Gramsci, "Discorso agli anarchici", in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, i (43), 1920.
[9] The indirect reference to Hegel is deliberate (Hegel 2019).

for the world; a sense of a shared home; civic and ecological responsibility; political vocation as a service to institutions, to the state, and to an equitable *res publica* (but we will see that, today, it is better to speak of *ratio publica*); human rights and constitutional values; a cosmopolitan and environmentalist vision of the *human project*, understood as the individual and social life that we would like to enjoy together; and, finally, the very possibility of talking about good and bad politics. All these *moral* relations exist within a nexus of values, as we shall see later.

Today, it takes courage to use the above expressions because political naivety is too often seen either as the ignorance of incompetent beginners or as the cunning of cynical politicians. So, many people either deride it or suspect it is mere rhetoric, a feigned attitude behind which other meanings, ambitions, messages, or manoeuvres hide. This coded language can be deciphered according to the refined art of the most advanced "secondguessology", a term that could be used to translate the common Italian word "dietrology", namely the "study" of what lies behind (the word is based on the root "dietro" (behind), a message). People who wish to engage in this kind of second-guessing can stop reading the book. It is not written for them, because the book intends to say only what it shows and does not intend to show anything beyond what it says,[10] an aspiration of simplicity that should characterise the most thoughtful and mature politics. Or, as Paul of Tarsus writes in the *Letter to Titus*: "To the pure, all things are pure [*Omnia munda mundis*]; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (1:15). The defiled should not take offence, but their punishment is already their very attitude: they will never understand.

My decision to adopt this "naive" approach was the outcome of discussions and dialogue with experienced individuals (see the acknowledgements at the end of the book) who have studied the works of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, de Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, Keynes, Hayek, von Mises, Arendt, Galbraith, Rawls, Berlin, and many others. Yet, ultimately, they have preferred to follow the far-sighted strategy propounded in Matthew 18:3, although in a secular manner: "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven".[11]

[10] The indirect reference to Wittgenstein is deliberate (Wittgenstein 2001).

[11] New King James Version.

Like Ithaca, naivety is the point from which one starts, but also the point to which one must return after the enriching journey of reflection. Hence, rather than a lack of judgment, it is sometimes the highest degree of sophistication to which one can aspire. And if this "forward" return to naivety (as opposed to a backward, unsophisticated regression) cannot, perhaps, save the soul, it may at least help politics. Therefore, maybe a less ambitious and more appropriate title for this book would have been: "ideas that *would like* to be 'naive'".