The Political Significance of the Image of the Helmsman and the Modern Trennung

Giuseppe Duso


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There are times when an image can be particularly poignant for communicating a vision of politics because it not only “speaks” to the observer, but also almost seems to express a theoretical argument. This is the case, for example, with Lorenzetti’s famous fresco Buongoverno (Allegory of Good Government),¹ and it can also be said about the image of the helmsman, which, not surprisingly, has been echoed in political thought for millennia. Not only is it particularly informative, it also has a decisive significance from a historical-conceptual perspective that, following Otto Brunner, seeks to identify the Trennung (division) that separates modern political concepts from the framework within which politics has been conceived for two thousand years, albeit through a diversity of doctrines. It is within this framework—shaped by the issue of justice and the relationship of governance between men—that the image becomes so symbolic for politics; this is no longer the case when the concept of rulership and its legitimacy become the primary focus. (In this text, I use the term “governance” to convey the ancient meaning of gubernare navem rei publicae.)²

Just as a Ship Requires a Captain, so a Community Requires Governance

In the frequent references in political thought to the metaphor of steering a ship—with the famous example of Cicero’s gubernare navem reipublicae—the first important aspect to note is the choice of environment: the sea, as opposed to dry land, emphasises the fact that one is faced with contingencies, circumstance, and a series of dangers. Conditions can quickly change and become adverse, as happens during storms, requiring great skill on the part of the helmsman, but which is sometimes not enough to avoid shipwreck; luck also plays its part, and there is no guarantee of safety.³ Threats can come from outside, but they can also come from within, for example from a mutiny by the sailors.

The very nature of a ship requires that there be a captain. In Averroës Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De anima, it is abundantly clear that although they are qualitatively different, like the soul is from the body—indeed precisely because of this—ship and captain are inseparable: only through the captain can the ship become complete, since he sails it and so can fulfil its nature,⁴ and without him, the
ship is ultimately doomed to shipwreck. In a similar way, it can be said that the archein is a natural part of the polis: both reflect the nature of men that requires them to live in community. A political community without guidance and governance is unimaginable. When danger strikes, this need is obvious to the sailors themselves, who urgently seek guidance, just as the sick person appeals to the doctor (the image of the helmsman is often juxtaposed with that of the doctor, both in terms of the purpose of action and the practical significance that reason takes on). However, this need is not always felt, and sometimes sailors challenge the captain in the belief that anyone can steer the helm and is entitled to do so. This leads to a situation where there is a real lack of guidance on the part of those who cannot even imagine what they have to watch out for in order to steer the ship.

**Not Everyone Possesses the Skill Needed to Steer a Ship**

In order for a captain to carry out a ship’s mission, he must possess certain characteristics that not everyone has, namely skill, experience, technical and scientific knowledge, and a sense of kairos. This caveat brings with it an awareness of the differences between people. Since not everyone has the skills necessary for government, it is therefore important to determine who holds the guiding and commanding roles.

However, it is essential to understand what the art of guidance consists of. It cannot be reduced to a theoretical science; rather, it requires knowledge, but also an accumulation of experience and a focus on actual conditions that vary, both the external conditions of weather and sea, and the behaviour of sailors: in short, an understanding of everything that happens in unpredictable ways. What is needed is not theoretical science, but practical wisdom (phronesis), that is, the use of reason (nous) in a practical situation that always arises under contingent conditions. It is a skill that carries with it the risk inherent in deliberation, choice, and decision, because things do not happen according to constant rules: it is a skill that must always be assessed in relation to its actual practice.

**Governance Involves Command**

Guidance not only generates a difference between who governs and who is governed, but also between the different functions exercised on the ship (captain, bowman, helmsman, oarsmen), which is thus marked by plurality. The safety of the
ship hinges on the actions of all the sailors, and likewise that of the polis on all its citizens, in other words, on the constitution of the city.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, even if everyone’s input is necessary, such plurality inevitably means that whoever steers the ship commands it. However, it is a kind of command that cannot be achieved by dominating the sailors and those on board. It is inconceivable that someone should arbitrarily and wilfully dictate everything, since the safety of the ship and those on board is at stake, and that of the captain only incidentally, since he too is on board.

Aristotle likens the role of the captain to arché politiké, which is the rule of free men over free men, as opposed to arché despotikè exercised over the slave, which is based on a difference in status and is concerned with the interests of the master.\textsuperscript{12} By its very nature, political government must be good government with respect to those to whom it is directed.

Governance thus serves a necessary function for navigation, and its objective is the Good of all those on the ship; yet that guidance cannot be carried out by the entire ship. The prioritisation of the political community cannot result in the best form of government being one in which all (which is unthinkable in this context) or many exercise it, as what is crucial is not who governs (one, a few, many), but how they govern. Conversely, the desire of all citizens to govern and not to be governed characterises democracy, which appears to be a contradictory form of government, since it tends towards anarchy and thus towards the very negation of arché.

**A Real Horizon to Guide One’s Way**

The steering of a ship thus seems to be a directional and yet conditioned practice. First of all by a real horizon, in which there are cardinal points, constellations, the North Star: in other words, a series of pointers that enable orientation. These have their own objectivity and constitute constraints that do not depend on the free will of the captain. Leaving the metaphor aside, good governance is that which is shaped by the nomoi (and, later, fundamental laws), and by the way in which, within the context of the times and customs, the rules of justice shared by a community are determined. These are not decided by the one who governs, any more than the destination of the navigation is.

Other factors also come into play, such as the conditions under which one is navigating, the currents, the tides, the wind, the storms: these are all things that do
not depend on the person commanding the ship, but to which he must adapt in order to sail the ship in the most suitable way, and which cannot be determined by abstract theory, but by what is possible under the conditions that arise. If these are constantly changing, the decisions to be taken will always be new and incur a responsibility that cannot be shirked by relying on fixed rules from which action might be deduced.

**Guidance Requires Oneness**

A fundamental tenet of steering is that of “oneness.” The decision regarding the direction in which to steer the ship in order to reach the goal can only be one. Guidance based on different and conflicting considerations is inconceivable. The oneness of command is also necessary because of the plurality of functions within the ship. Thus, the unitary character of governance, from Plato and Aristotle down to Marsilius and Althusius, is the necessary counterpart to the plurality of the political community, which involves differences that cannot be eliminated, but, rather, are functional to the whole. This oneness does not so much mean that there must be just one person in charge, but rather that those who govern must do so in a unified way.

It is not possible here to trace the references to the image of the helmsman that run throughout the Middle Ages up to the genesis of our modern notion. However, it is worth recalling that in Althusius’ take on it, the actions of the sailors assume particular relevance: when they see the ship heading for the rocks, they not only can, but must oppose the captain.\(^\text{13}\) This is a context in which the governed not only have the right to resist,\(^\text{14}\) but are also represented (in the form of the repraesentatio identitatis) by that collective body that is superordinate to those who govern, institutes them, controls them, and recognises the rules of justice within which they must govern. However, despite this supremacy, and because of the plurality that characterises them, the people, through the body that represents them, do not govern themselves, but need the unitary office of the one to whom they entrust the government, to whom they promise obedience, provided that this function abides by commonly identified rules.
The Sovereignty of the People and the Voiding of Governance

The image ceases to hold a specific meaning for politics—despite the fact that in some cases it is still referred to—when all the elements that distinguish it are erased and the will of the individual is given complete power through the concept of freedom. This occurs with the new political science, which stems from modern natural law and is reflected in constitutions from the French Revolution onwards.

A shared objective horizon no longer exists, since there are only points of view about justice, which, due to their diversity, are considered to be the cause of conflicts and wars and must therefore be neutralised. Moreover, if one denies that there is any difference between people, since all are equal, and if equality and freedom are a feature of each and every one individual, then there is no justification for any one person to rule over everyone else. The relationship of governance is at that point seen as, inherently, a relationship of domination, of slavery (as in the ninth natural law of Hobbes’ Leviathan), and unacceptable in the light of the (formal) concept of freedom—understood as independence of the will—which has now become the cornerstone of politics in lieu of the issue of justice. The freedom of individuals is the necessary consequence of sovereign power (rulership), which must prevent anyone from impeding the freedom of another.

Rulership not only has to guarantee the freedom of individuals, however, but also be produced by it, which is the entire premise of the theory. Therefore, it can only be conceived on the basis of the authorisation process that characterises modern representation. That representation is the necessary condition of sovereignty (which, therefore, consists of representative power) is made clear by the fact that in Leviathan it is addressed before the chapter on the covenant by which the sovereign is established: it answers the question of how a political unity (the commonwealth) can be conceived on the foundation of a multitude of equal individuals. Through this process everyone becomes the author of the actions that the sovereign representative (later the representative of the sovereign people) will perform. Paradoxically, it is only at this point that obedience can become absolute: because one basically obeys oneself.

Command is just insofar as it is vested in the legitimate subject, which is the people. This is evident in Rousseau’s general will, which would become enshrined in modern constitutions. Both the nature of governance and the difference between the governed and their governors are erased in the concept of self-government,
which leads to the democratic notion of *self-determination*. In this way, the question of justice, without which no society can exist, is not eliminated; rather, a response is given that, in order to be valid for everyone, no longer concerns the substance (on which there can be different opinions) but the *formal* relationship between the ruler who commands and the subject who obeys. The aim is to prevent the disturbing reocurrence of the question about what is just, which is destabilising for the political order. The will of the people is just *in itself*, because no one does injustice to oneself.

The image that expresses the modern conception of politics is the one found on the frontispiece of *Leviathan*, in which the citizens are not standing *in front* their sovereign, but rather constitute his body: thus, their political will is that of the sovereign (see fig. 2–3 below). It is easy to perceive how such an image not only reflects a particular and absolutist conception of politics, but also relates to modern democracy, since the latter is founded on the concept of the sovereign people and the legitimising function of representation.

**Steering the Ship for a New Democracy**

Only if one is aware of the radical difference between a politics conceived on the basis of the concept of governance and one centred on the formal concept of rulership, and if, at the same time, one is aware of the aporias of the logic of sovereignty, is it possible to understand the tradition of pre-modern practical philosophy and to draw from it a lesson for thinking about the present. To this end, Brunner’s consideration of the break that modern concepts make with a conception of politics that incorporates the principle of governance, appears fruitful. Koselleck is also well aware of the *Trennung*, as is clear from his conception of the *Sattelzeit* that ushers in the modern.\(^16\) However, his attempt to find a common ground between ancient and modern democracy, in order to establish a connection with a text such as Aristotle’s, is likely to miss the radical difference in ancient political thought. In fact, the task he undertakes with regard to democracy, such as that of identifying the temporal dimension in order to be able to compare ancient and modern history, ends up by hypostatising the formal rationality that characterises modern *science*, thus preventing both the understanding of the ancient and the identification of the issues we face today.\(^16\)

Both the question of justice affecting the concrete content of political decisions and the issue of governance, are today compelling within and beyond modern political concepts. From this historical-conceptual perspective, the image of the
helmsman is, like that of Good Government, still relevant to our task of thinking politics, provided, however, that the logic of sovereignty that underlies modern constitutions is called into question. While it is true that democratic legitimacy necessitates the act of authorisation, which takes place through elections, and the authority of the law, whereby the will of the people is manifested, it must be acknowledged that such legitimacy, in addition to being plagued by structural aporias, has no effectiveness due to the presence of political parties and the actual functioning of parliament. Moreover, the democratic self-determination of states becomes illusory once one realises that political decisions are conditioned by the constraints produced by processes—economic and otherwise—with a global dimension.17

Going beyond the current democratic constitutional order, there is therefore an urgent need to rethink democracy. This need applies to state structures, but becomes particularly acute in the case of supranational realities such as the European Union, whose plurality cannot be conceptualised by means of democratic legitimation that is based on the monistic logic of sovereignty.

Notes
In keeping with the image of the helmsman, as seen in the above-mentioned texts, in order to understand the radical difference in the way politics is conceived with respect to the earlier thinking contained in Leviathan, the comparison between the figure of the sovereign and the image of the respublica (found in Kaspar Facius, PoliticalLiviana, 1662), which, insofar as it is characterised by a plural body, conveys the unitary function of governance, appears significant.

Translated by Vanessa Di Stefano
Giuseppe Duso was Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Padua and Director of the CIRLPG (Centre for Research on European Political and Legal Lexicon). He is a member of the Directorate of the review “Filosofia Politica” (Political Philosophy), and since the early 1980s he has coordinated a research group on modern political concepts, which drew on, and radicalised, the German Begriffsgeschichte of Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck (“Conceptual history as a political philosophy”). The group has produced several monographs and essays on both fundamental concepts (politics, political theology, contracts, power, government, freedom, sovereignty, representation, society, state, law, revolution, constitution, democracy, federalism, history, critique, conflict ...) and the classics of ancient and modern political thought, reinterpreted thanks to a historical-conceptual awareness of the Trennung brought about by modern concepts and the aporias that characterise them.3

Tags: conceptual history / governance / sovereignty

3 Aristotle, Etica Eudemia, VIII, 2, 1247 a 7.
5 Aristotle, Metafisica, V, 2, 1013 b 14.
6 This is what happens in the famous mutiny scene in Plato’s Republic, 488 a–e.
7 Plato, First Alcibiades, 134 e–135 a.
8 Plato, Republic, 488 a–e; Statesman, 297e ff., 298 d–e; 302 a.
10 Ibid., III, 3, 1112 b 5.
11 Aristotle, Politics, III, 4, 1276 b 21–30; Plato, Laws, XII, 961e.
12 Aristotle, Politics, III, 6, 1278 b 32–1279 a 8.
13 Althusius, Politica, XXXVIII, 39.
15 Which we have transposed to modern natural law, not so much with regard to the historical emergence of the new concepts, but to their theoretical genesis. See Giuseppe Duso, “Storia concettuale come filosofia politica,” in Storia dei concetti e filosofia politica, ed. Sandro Chignola and Giuseppe Duso. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2008, esp. 141-157.


18 See “On the contribution of the Padua group to the history of concepts,” URL: https://concpolpd.hypotheses.org/ (01.06.2023), from which several publications can be downloaded.