

14.10.2016 Primaries. Democracy devalued

American primaries, primaries in France: democracy in the West is struggling to renew itself. The headline acts include such dismal figures as Donald Trump, who has transformed the election of the president of the world's greatest power into a disquieting farce. Presidential elections in France offer an equally grim picture, with stereotypical posing and biased debates.

The game seems over in the US election, with Trump's provocative act inspiring rejection even among fellow Republicans. Racist, macho, complacent, he dishonours political debate even as the US exercises overwhelming leadership over the world. The American economy, supported by the Internet, has reached a peak, but its democracy has never been so mismanaged, and the media circus which traditionally accompanies presidential elections has reached new lows.

Though he is only knocking on the White House door, the intrusion of Donald Trump into the final stages of the most important election in the US is profoundly worrying. A political faux pas by Hillary Clinton, or sudden ill-health, could still put him on the path to power, and that we could be facing such a risk is in itself a source of deep concern. How has he passed through the filters that a democracy should set up when choosing its political leaders? What forces or ways of thinking have enabled his ascension, or, rather, have left him with a free field? Whatever its result, the US presidential election raises questions about governance in the world's leading power, and hence on the security of the world in which we live.

Europe is not spared this wave of populist demagoguery which is threatening to engulf the developed world. Here, the role of Trump is played by Marine Le Pen in France, or Nigel Farage - the man behind Brexit - in the United Kingdom. Some leaders of the same stamp are already in power: Viktor Orban firmly in charge in Hungary, or Andrzej Duda, recently narrowly elected president in Poland. The outcome of the Austrian presidential election due in early December is very uncertain, following the annulment of the result of the very close election held four months ago. For the first time among the democracies of the old "Europe of fifteen" - the Europe that preceded the fall of the Berlin wall - the hard racist and xenophobic right is in with a chance of winning. What can we say of France, where the right has never been so thriving?

The practise of holding primaries on the right, on the left or anywhere else is unlikely to overcome the risk of the Front National in France. Their debates are hollow, their confrontations pernicious, and democracy in the major parties is no more successful here than in the US. The right, the favourites in the race, is hesitating between the "first round" candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, who is making a play for an electorate that is toying with the extreme right and who has accordingly delivered campaign speeches that are unprecedented and disturbing for a democratic party; and the "second round" candidate, Alain Juppé, who, by already endorsing the strength of the hard right at the end of the first round, is overtly seeking votes carried over from the other camp in his search for final victory.

The left, weakened by the five years of Hollande's presidency, offers no credible challenger to the outgoing head of state. The Socialist Party will come out of its failure to offer a credible alternative badly weakened. The remainder of the left are fighting over the crumbs, going as far as organising private primaries like the greens. They are losing any profile they had in public opinion and their well-foretold train wreck shows how far new ideas have deserted political debate in mainland France.

In this wholly predictable fiasco for democratic forces the emphasis must go on "saving the furniture", starting with the European project which is under direct threat from the right and populism at nation-state level, and on hoping that European democracy can regenerate. In Catalonia, Scotland and Corsica, small though our part may be, we are making a contribution.