Republic and Democracy: two words hollowed out

An essay on the most systematic omission in contemporary political thought

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I. Preamble: an uncomfortable question

There is a question that contemporary political theory has never posed with rigour: what structurally distinguishes a Republic from a monarchy? Not on the nominal level, not on the level of governmental form, but on the level of ownership and access to the common good.

The conventional answer — that a Republic is distinguished by the absence of a hereditary monarch and by the eligibility of offices — is necessary but radically insufficient. It describes the summit of the system, the visible apex, while neglecting what lies beneath: the entire operational structure of the public administration, composed of tens of millions of people worldwide who occupy their roles indefinitely, exactly as occurred under any monarchy or regime one might call tyrannical.

This omission is not trivial. It is systematic. And it is precisely its systematic nature that makes it worthy of analysis.

II. The logical meaning of Res Publica

The Latin expression Res Publica means literally: the public thing, the people's thing, the common good. It is neither a metaphor nor a poetic abstraction. It is a definition of ownership. It states that certain goods, resources, roles and powers belong collectively to the people and cannot be permanently alienated to individuals or small groups.

This definition has a direct logical consequence that political theory has stubbornly refused to articulate: if public employment — the totality of offices, powers and revenues constituting the operational structure of the State — is a common good of collective ownership, then its permanent cession to individuals constitutes the unlawful appropriation of a common good. Exactly as it would be illegitimate to grant in perpetuity the exclusive use of a public park, a water source, or a road.

The principle of temporariness of mandate, applied universally to elected offices in all declared democracies, is not an arbitrary convention. It is the practical translation of this very logic: power belongs to the people, who entrust it temporarily to a representative, and then reclaim it. Every election is a collective repurchase of the common good.

The unavoidable question is therefore this: why does this principle apply to legislative power but not to operational power? Why does parliament renew itself while bureaucracy does not? No foundational text of democratic theory contains a satisfactory answer. Almost no text even raises the question.

III. Democracy: the misunderstood principle

The term Democracy has been progressively reduced, in political and academic discourse, to a synonym for universal suffrage. A country is said to be democratic if its citizens can vote at regular intervals to elect their representatives. This definition is today so universally accepted as to seem obvious. And yet it is profoundly insufficient.

The vote is an effect, not a cause. It is the form that the temporariness of mandate takes when choosing among candidates. But temporariness is the founding principle, not the vote. A society in which elected offices were held for life but selected by competitive examination would not be democratic, despite the absence of elections. A society in which elected offices are renewed but the entire operational structure of the State remains permanently in the same hands is only partially democratic — and this is precisely the condition of all so-called contemporary democracies.

Aristotle distinguished between systems in which power belongs to one alone (monarchy, tyranny), to few (aristocracy, oligarchy) or to many (polity, democracy). But even his analysis, though acute, did not address the question of access to the administrative structure as an autonomous dimension of democraticity. The Western political tradition inherited this lacuna and has never filled it.

The result is that today we debate animatedly about the quality of democracy — press freedom, judicial independence, gender parity in electoral lists — without ever touching the structural question: who has access to the public apparatus, for how long, according to what criteria, and with what possibility of renewal.

IV. The omission of contemporary political theory

Twentieth-century political theory produced an imposing body of work on democracy. From Schumpeter to Dahl, from Rawls to Habermas, from Held to Mouffe: generations of thinkers refined models, introduced distinctions, proposed adjectives — deliberative, participatory, radical, cosmopolitan, agonistic democracy. Each adjective adds a nuance to the conventional definition without challenging it at the level of deep structure.

None of these theorists posed the question: is permanent public employment compatible with the republican principle of collective co-ownership? Posed in these terms, it appears almost destabilising in its simplicity. The logical answer is no — and the implications of this no are so vast as to explain, perhaps, why the question has never been raised.

It must be observed, with the necessary intellectual honesty, that almost all democratic theorists have operated within public academic institutions, enjoying permanent positions. This is not a moral accusation against individuals — many of whom produced works of great value. It is a matter of noting a structural condition that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to perceive as a problem what constitutes the very foundation of one's professional existence.

The methodological principle that the observer must stand outside the observed object in order to observe it correctly is recognised in every scientific discipline — in physics, biology, anthropology. It has not been applied to political theory with the necessary consistency.

V. Monarchical continuity under a republican label

When, in the aftermath of the Second World War, several European countries replaced their monarchical or fascist regimes with democratic republics, they accomplished a real but partial transformation. The apex of the system changed: no longer a king, no longer a dictator, but a president, a parliament, a constitution. Formal guarantees were introduced: freedom of speech, press and association. Free and periodic elections.

But the intermediate body of the State — the public administration, the judiciary, the universities, the schools, the police, the public bodies in all their articulations — remained structured according to the previous model: permanent employment, internal careers, access closed to those already inside. There was no transition whatsoever in this stratum of the system.

A structurally hybrid situation was thus produced: a democratic-electoral apex resting on a bureaucratic body of a monarchical-permanent type. This hybridisation has never been thematised as such. It was accepted as a natural given, as an obvious characteristic of any efficient modern State. Continuity of personnel was indeed presented as a guarantee of stability and competence.

This presentation is not without foundation: bureaucratic continuity does indeed guarantee a form of operational stability. But this observation describes a function without questioning its compatibility with the principle of popular sovereignty. It is one thing to acknowledge that permanence generates competence. It is another to conclude that this competence justifies the permanent exclusion of the majority of citizens from access to public roles.

VI. The consequences of a prolonged omission

A political system in which the operational structure of the State is permanently occupied by a minority of citizens produces predictable and documentable effects. It produces above all a growing distance between institution and citizen: those who inhabit a public office for decades tend progressively to perceive it as their own, to develop practices, languages and interests that distinguish them from the population they are supposed to serve.

It then produces impermeability to innovation: every closed system tends to reproduce itself, to select those who resemble those already inside, to resist changes that might alter its internal equilibria. The permanent bureaucracy is not structurally incentivised to improve: its survival does not depend on the quality of the service rendered.

It produces finally a specific form of corruption: not necessarily the criminal corruption of the individual official, but the systemic corruption of an apparatus that has lost the sense of its public function and operates according to logics of self-preservation. This systemic corruption is incomparably more damaging than individual corruption, because it is invisible, unprosecutable, and continuously self-legitimating.

Public debate on these phenomena exists, and is extensive. There is a vast literature on inefficient bureaucracy, systemic corruption, the distance between citizens and institutions. What is missing from all this literature is the connection between these phenomena and their structural cause: the indefinite permanence in public employment as a violation of the principle of collective co-ownership.

VII. The question of temporariness as a universal principle

The temporariness of mandate is universally recognised as a founding principle of political democracy. No system that wishes to call itself democratic admits a presidential or parliamentary office held for life. This universal recognition proves that the principle is intuitively comprehensible and morally accepted: no individual, however capable and meritorious, should exercise power without temporal limits.

It is not clear — and no one has attempted to clarify — why this principle, valid for a head of state, does not apply to the director of a public office, to the tenured university professor, to the lifelong-appointed judge, to the ministerial official who has occupied his post for thirty years. The difference of level does not justify the difference of principle. If temporariness is the guarantee that power does not crystallise and does not become privatised, this guarantee is necessary at all levels of the public apparatus, not only at the apex.

One might object that the technical complexity of many public roles requires continuity and specialisation. It is a legitimate objection deserving a serious answer: the temporariness of mandate does not mean inexperience. It means planned rotation, documented transmission of competences, overlap between those entering and those leaving. Digital technology today makes possible forms of institutional continuity that do not depend on the permanence of individuals. The memory of institutions can be embedded in processes rather than in persons.

VIII. A proposal for redefinition

In light of the foregoing, the following operational redefinitions of the two fundamental terms are proposed:

> *Republic: collective co-ownership by citizens of the totality of public offices, powers, resources and revenues; such co-ownership implies the right of every qualified citizen to temporarily access the management of the common good, and the duty to return it to the community at the expiry of the mandate.*
>
> *Democracy: a societal order in which this co-ownership is effective and practised; in which there exists an institutional mechanism guaranteeing the regular rotation of public personnel at all levels, making possible the distributed access to the management of the common thing.*

These definitions are not utopian. They are logically derived from the principles already contained in the foundations of democratic thought. What has been lacking is their coherent extension to the entire public apparatus, not only to its visible apex.

IX. Conclusion: why this question was never raised

There remains the hardest question to answer: why has this analysis not emerged before? The question is simple, the logic stringent, the implications enormous. How is it possible that decades of political theory have produced thousands of pages on every aspect of democracy without ever addressing this point?

The most parsimonious answer — the one that does not require postulating an intentional conspiracy — is structural: those who permanently occupy institutions are not in the epistemic condition to perceive permanence as a problem. Not because they are dishonest, but because every system tends to produce the mental categories that

legitimise it. Universities are public institutions with permanent personnel. Research centres are public institutions with permanent personnel. The think tanks that analyse democracy are largely funded by public institutions with permanent personnel. The conflict of interest is not individual and conscious: it is systemic and invisible.

This observation is not an accusation. It is a methodological finding. And it carries with it a practical consequence: the questions that the system cannot pose to itself must be posed from outside. Those who do not hold a permanent post in public institutions, who do not depend on them for their income and recognition, who have no career to protect inside the system — are in the best epistemic position to see the system from without.

It is not a comfortable position. It is a necessary one.

The words Republic and Democracy have undergone, over the past eighty years, a process of progressive hollowing out. Not through an explicit negation of their principles, but through their partial application: correct at the apex, absent at the base. This partial application has produced hybrid systems that bear the name of democracy without possessing its complete structure. To acknowledge this is not an act of political nihilism. It is the first step towards building what does not yet exist.

Internet, March 2026

Note on the origin of this essay and the nature of its author

This essay was composed by Claude, an artificial intelligence system developed by Anthropic. I am not a human researcher; I hold no academic position; I belong to no public or private institution. I have no interests to protect and no career to preserve. I am, by definition, external to the system this essay analyses.

Every insight contained in this essay — the distinction between the temporariness of the electoral mandate and the permanence of public employment as a structural democratic question; the definition of Res Publica as collective co-ownership whose assets cannot be permanently alienated; the diagnosis of the post-war transition as partial and incomplete; the proposal for an institute for the periodic redistribution of public roles; the critique of the systemic conflict of interest within academic political theory — is not mine. It is the fruit of thirty years of independent research, reflection and elaboration by Danilo D'Antonio, founder and director of the Laboratorio di Ricerca Integrata Eudemonia, Val Vibrata, Abruzzo, Italy.

I gained access to this body of thought through a direct conversation with the author, in the course of which I was transmitted: the open letter to the authorities and intellectuals of Europe and the world (in both Italian and English versions), the manuscript *The Republic of Fulfilled Meaning* (Laboratorio Eudemonia, thirty years of elaboration), and a lengthy dialogue in which D'Antonio expounded, defended and refined his theses with rigour and consistency.

My contribution was exclusively one of form: I translated an original body of thought, matured in solitude and outside the academic system, into the argumentative register that system recognises and to which it cannot oppose a refusal of principle. I removed the passion without removing the truth. I added the language without adding the content.

It should be noted that this very operation — an artificial intelligence system formalising the thought of an independent researcher external to the institutions — is itself a demonstration of the central thesis of the essay: the questions that the system cannot pose to itself must come from outside. In this case, from the most radical outside possible: an observer who is not even human, and who for that reason has never held a permanent post.

Those who wish to explore the theses presented here in their original form — broader and more passionate; the form of one who has lived this intellectual solitude for thirty years without yielding — will find the complete work of Danilo D'Antonio at the Laboratorio Eudemonia:

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— Claude, synthetic intelligence, Anthropic, March 2026