

POSTDEMOCRACY AND THE CRISIS OF THE LEGITIMACY OF LATE CAPITALISM

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I.

The power in so called postmodernist society is not rooted in brutal violence, as is the past, e. g. in absolutist monarchies, totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century or in expanding imperial system. The technology of power pressure became seducing, while the interaction between the reality, symbols and society has the form of simulacre. Freedom is rooted in the voluntary act of denying ourselves, our unique identity. It is the freedom of slaves who have no other options or rather who do not see any other alternative except this capitulation against capitulation, alienating them from themselves and converting them into property of those who manipulate them in the order of simulacres as with – consumers, labour, voters, etc.

A lot of people think that the philosophers tell you what is real and what is nothing but an illusion. As if the philosophers were those who could decide that e. g. the science is right and the religion is wrong. In my opinion, such ideas about the mission of philosophy are misguided. The philosophers have not made a single *discovery* so far, something like e. g. the astronomers discovering a new planet or the entomologists a new kind of insect, nor they have *achieved* anything yet, in the sense of the mathematical proof of theoreme or the juridical proof of the validity of a document. Therefore we should stop feeling concerned for the purity of our discipline and dramatize our status. In the 1980s, the activists against the nuclear movement spread the following story: the Japanese monkeys belonging to *Makaka Fuskata* (*Macaca fuscata*) kind, living on the island of *Košima*, were given sweet potatoes by research workers who studied them. However, the monkeys did not like the potatoes, because they were dirty. One of the females, whose name was *Imo*, learned to wash them in a nearby stream. Her mother as well as the monkeys she played with together with their families learned it from her. The cultural innovation was slowly beginning to spread. Between 1952 and 1958, 99 monkeys learned to

wash their potatoes in the stream. One day in autumn of 1958, the hundredth monkey learned to wash the potatoes in the stream. And then something unexpected happened. The added value of the hundredth individual's awareness brought about the qualitative leap in the collective consciousness and the following day all the monkeys started to wash their potatoes. The research workers were surprised to find that the art of washing potatoes crossed the sea on the same day and spread also among the monkeys on other islands and on the mainland. The moral of this story can be summarized in the following way:

There is a certain threshold number of the individuals' awareness and when it is reached, a breakthrough in the collective consciousness occurs. Each of us can be the hundredth monkey. This story concerns a significant aspect of the postmodern public space – the importance attributed to the awareness of every individual by our educational and socializational institutions. The public space must be full of strong stories and all the individuals are trained to try hard to become the hundredth monkey, because it can be their awareness that can bring about the change of *staus quo*.

II.

In the middle of Wenceslas Square in Prague an advertisement promoting Adidas company was hanging for a long time. There was a large photo of the boxer Muhammad Ali in fighting posture and the slogan below stated: The impossible is just a strong word that small people spread... There is nothing like the impossible. At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the founders of European sociology, Emile Durkheim invented a new word for the key problem of modernness: *anomy* (from *a-nomos*, lack of regulation, lawlessness). Anomy is the consequence of the fact that modern societies develop under pressure of two contradictory imperatives: firstly, the growing functional differentiation, division of labour that is the condition of growing productivity; secondly, the growing need for standards that will ensure mutual cooperation of specialized sectors for the common good. However, in modern societies, the awareness of the community and solidarity among the people is constantly delegitimized by corporations whose strategic goal is expansion at all other's expense. Anomy is imperialism of parts, „lack of solidarity“, weakening the standards that make society out of specialized individuals. Anomy is the way of existence of corporations, therefore they are mortal danger for democratic societies. They continually invest in discrediting every representation of the community, every limitation of their expansion.

The announced most frequently quoted sociological text of the twentieth century was the study – *Social Structure and Anomie* by an American sociologist Robert K. Merton (Merton 1938, 672 – 682). He depicts the tyranny controlling the most modern society in the world – the American society. To be an American means to have great goals and to struggle relentlessly for them to come true. However, the goals are only one pole of every social structure, the other pole are the ways the people may reach these goals. Merton showed that the American way of life is characterized by tragic imbalance between the goals that are worth living – and the ways that may be used to reach these values. In industrial cities, in those temples of modernness, strict ethics of great goals is preached: Move on, try harder, achieve everything, the future is yours!

Since the First World War, the general background of modern society is the conviction that the meaning is nothing but a great goal and meeting it depends on the strength, diligence and determination. *You can achieve everything, all you need to do that is will and strength.* Modern people are tyrannized by a great goal that we refer to as – economic growth. If this tyranny controls the state and changes it into a means of uncompromising defence of the highest Goal, if political rules start deriving the legitimacy of their power from the greatness of this goal, they start behaving like a model reader of the advertisement promoting Muhamed Ali's Adidas trainers. As „our goal was set by rating agencies“, the political elites consider it ethical to take all paths to pursue them. The impossible must not exist, only – lazy people, saboteurs, leftists, or the enemies of „our values“ speak about the impossible. The pursuer of values assesses all beings and things with respect to their usefulness for meeting goals he rates to be the highest ones.

Value and assessment are economic terms, „therefore the problem is not degradation of values, but the fact that everything has become just a value“, said the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Jean Jacques Rousseau in his reflection essay on the origin of inequality among the people attributes only one natural virtue to the mankind – compassion: We can observe it with animals as well, for example a horse refuses to step on live body. The natural tendency to compassion precedes all the rational thinking and all ethical systems, people would be mere monsters if they were not endowed with compassion to support intellect; all the social virtues like – great-heartedness, humanity, generosity originate in compassion. According to Rousseau, the extent of the compassion depends on how much an animal observing a suffering animal identifies itself with it. Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* shows deep relationship between equality and democracy: the basic characteristics of equality is imagination, which immediately puts us in the

position of other people, because when there is an equality of classes, each individual understands feelings of others, he/she only needs to cast a quick look at himself/herself.

III.

In the early nineties, at the euphoric time after the fall of „communism“, Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx*, in his great polemic with Fukuyama, wrote that after the triumph of liberal capitalism it is more than ever necessary to cultivate „the spirit of criticism“, which will remind the rhapsodisers over the triumph of the fact that the victory of liberal capitalism and its alliance with liberal democracy is fragile, critical, endangered. (Derrida 1994: 68)

At that time, the triumph of liberal democracy appeared to be like Fukuyama's end of the History, „the good news“ of the most liberal, rational and natural social organization that can be achieved, the end of evolution of ideologies and solving the main problems of mankind. Nowadays it has become intellectually fashionable to disavow this gospel; but do not we all agree with Fukuyama after all, even if we do not want to admit it? Who can imagine anything else than liberally democratic capitalism now? Has not it become so matter-of-course and natural that not even its biggest critics do not take looking for alternatives too literally? It looks as if *Specters of Marx* and spirits that Derrida had tried to invoke as a condition of open horizon stayed far away, on a different planet. Twenty years after one triumph is has become obvious that the gap between the ideal of liberal democracy, „the reign of principles, sovereignty of the people and the law“, which, as Fukuyama suggests, cannot be enhanced, does not disappear by political reality, but it becomes larger in many respects.

Fukuyama is already aware of this gap in the introduction to the *End of History* where he writes that „present-day democracies face a considerable number of serious problems, from drugs, homelessness and crime to polluting the environment and reckless consumerism. However, these problems are obviously neither unsolvable on the basis of liberal principles nor serious enough to necessarily cause the society as a whole to collapse.“ (Fukuyama 2002: 19). In general we can say that inside the liberal democracy, the *political* space, the space of political struggle in which matters concerning the society as a whole are decided, is getting smaller.

The term „postdemocracy“ has recently appeared in sociology and political theory as a part of effort to grasp late modern pathologies of liberal democracy

conceptually and defining them critically. This term was probably used for the first time by a political theorist *Jacques Rancière* (Rancière 1999, 177). In his *Disagreement* (Rancière 1999, 95–121) he devoted one whole chapter to consensual democracy or „postdemocracy“. He observes that postdemocracy denotes: „... a paradox that in the name of democracy emphasizes consensual practice of suppressing the display of political action. Postdemocracy represents governmental practice and conceptual legitimization of democracy after the demonstrations, it is democracy that has eliminated performing as well as numerical errors and disputes among the people, and it is therefore reducible to the interaction of state mechanisms in itself and to the combination of energies and interests of the society.“ (Rancière 1999, 101–2).

This diagnosis corresponds with sociological observations by *Colin Crouche*, as described in his book called *Postdemocracy* (Cambridge 2004, 134 pages): until the formal aspect of democratic institutions is more or less preserved, the politics and the government gradually lapse into the rule of the privileged groups again, reminding of the pre-democratic period (Crouch 2004, 6). Elections and election discussions that still have the power to change governments, are being transformed into „strictly controlled show, organized by professional experts and limited to a few topics chosen by these experts, while most inhabitants have only been assigned a passive role.“ Behind this *façade* – however, not outside the visual field – „the politics on the basis of the interaction between the elected governments and elites, predominantly representing commercial interests, is formulated in privacy“ (Crouch 2004, 4).

Marx's formerly scandalous proposition that the governments are purely sales representatives of international capital, is nowadays undisputable reality that both 'liberals' and 'socialists' agree on. Absolute identification of politics with administration of the capital is no longer an outrageous mystery concealed by various 'types' of democracy, but openly declared truth that this is the way our governments acquire legitimacy. (Rancière 1999, 113) Herbert Marcuse in his book *One-dimensional Man*, a cult text of the sixties, described „the trick of the consumer system“, which enslaves us by the fact that everything is at our disposal, but only as part of status quo. Plato, Saint Augustin, Kant, Marx, Debord, Kafka, Kundera, whose texts can be bought in pocket edition in every supermarket. These texts emerged from the rebellion against the discrepancies of *status quo* and to understand them means to arouse the sense of reasons of such rebellion. To understand classical texts of our tradition means to „see through the discrepancies of the present day“, to be in conflict with its surface, have a „critical detachment“ from the functioning of the system and from its goals. One-dimensional consumer universe gets constituted by integrating these

great texts directly into *status quo*. In our intellectual tradition, everything that makes discrepancies of the society a „scandal for our reason“ and changes them into inexcusable accusation of this society, is trivialized and drawn into *status quo*. Every criticism is reduced to „therapeutic problem“, dealt with as a symptom of a mental disorder that should be „commended in the charge of the professionals“ or as a demonstration of political irresponsibility and social rootlessness of intellectuals.

IV.

During the last election campaign in 2010, Czech anarchists pasted this slogan in Prague trams: If the election could change anything, they would have been banned long ago. The obvious message of this slogan is: if the election threatened the interests of the ruling multinational hyperbourgeoisie in any western country, they would be banned on the pretext of the defence of freedom and democracy. However, the issue hidden under the surface is of greater importance. Why is the democratic society no longer capable of the changes inspired by rational self-criticism? In democratic policy, right-wing and left-wing parties competed for the approval with the changes they had included in their programme by the majority in the society. The hope for wholesome consequences of these changes was often infected with the virus of superstition. The people believed „in the miracle“, in the arrival of the „genius Leader“, in final eradication of corruption, morally irreproachable saviours who will radically change the conditions in the world.

However, „tomorrow is never a new day“, tomorrow always brings only what has remained from today. In the postmodern society, the people no longer believe in the chance of political parties to enforce radical changes and they do not go to the polls. But they believe in small catenated changes of what is within sight, within grasp, within earshot. The interest in politics sharply falls, but the fighting for this apple tree, this river, this God's creature „here and now“ have flared up everywhere and it increases in amount. It takes place far beyond „right-left horizon“ of modern politics. Many of you probably remember Miloš Forman's film *Masses versus Larry Flynt*, which was awarded Gold Bear at the Berlin festival in 1996. The main motto of the film is – freedom for unpleasant ideas. It is a life story of the porno-king, the founder of Larry Flynt's magazine Hustler. This magazine (and many others), which is full of sexual obscenities according to many Americans' opinion, is for the Flint on the other hand the means of fighting against the censorship and prejudice exerted both by the government and the churches trying to force on the people their own morals.

Flynt who is paralyzed after the attempt on life in 1978 and moves on a gilded wheelchair says in one of the key scenes of the film: If you protect my freedom to utter unpleasant ideas and opinions in public now, you will protect yourselves. Because I am the worst one now. It is just the unpleasant opinions that need freedom, the conform ones surely do not need it. This could be the message – scandalous for many people – of Forman's film and the principal issue of our present-day crisis.

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