ПИРОН Πυρρων АКАДЕМИЧНО ЕЛЕКТРОННО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА КУЛТУРА И ИЗКУСТВА

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The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Dilemmas of Bulgarian Liberals

Boyan Znepolski

Abstract: For a long time, the project of liberal democracy had as its complement the institution of the welfare state as a source of social solidarity. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, this institution was gradually abandoned in favor of a purely formal and rational framework, combining procedural legal rationality with instrumental economic rationality. Today's "revenge of political passions" and the threatening rise of national populist and conservative xenophobic parties and movements is a challenge to which liberal democracy can hardly respond only by striving for more and more political and economic rationality, that is, to turn more and more of society against the regression towards the community considered retrograde. Calls for the rule of law, for the separation of powers, for human rights will not be able to guarantee the social stability of liberal democracies in the near future. The battle for their future will take place precisely on the terrain of the community. The question is: what type of community, if any, could liberal democracies offer in contrast to the return to tribal community desired by nationalists?

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Today we can agree about the crisis of liberal democracy both in the West and in the East, in the USA and Western Europe, but also in Eastern Europe. The similarities are many and significant: a crisis of political representation, the increasing unpopularity of public institutions, the deterioration of the public sphere, strong waves of national populist movements, etc. However, the reactions of liberal and progressive social circles to this common crisis seem to be different. In North America and Western Europe, the crisis came after several decades of hegemony of neoliberalism, which led to the dismantlement or at least the weakening of the institutions of the welfare state. Nowadays, in Western societies, as a response to neoliberalism, but also as a reaction to the powerful national populist wave, there is a strong nostalgia for the former welfare state and the social democratic consensus that marked the entire period and the prolonged prosperity of the glorious thirty years, the *trente glorieuses*.[1]

The crisis of liberal democracy in Eastern Europe is interpreted and experienced differently, since liberal democracy has emerged in a different historical situation. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe were struck economically and politically by the effectiveness of the already neoliberal West (neoliberal politically, ideologically, and rhetorically), but no less decisive proved to be the ideological defeat caused by the strong appeal to the human rights and the seductive images of the Western way of life penetrating Eastern Europe through popular culture. In November and December 1989, protesting Bulgarian citizens chanted the word "democracy" in the squares and on the streets of Sofia, but with that word they meant the rights and freedoms of citizens: the freedom of speech, the freedom of beliefs, the freedom of political association, the right to private economic initiative, the freedom to travel abroad, the freedom to bear your birth name (in the case of the Bulgarian Turks), etc. That means that, since its emergence, liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, in Bulgaria in particular, put the emphasis on the liberal component, which was quite understandable. It was this that was at the heart of the resistance to the legacy of the communist regime with its statism, collectivism, forcibly imposed social and cultural unification of individuals, and ideological unity of the nation. Guided by a powerful common impulse, by a shared collective feeling, democratic movements in Eastern and Central Europe were aimed at the emancipation of

[1] By the term neoliberalism, I mean the processes of deregulation and decentralization in the economy, the revival of the cult of the free market, the dismantling or at least the significant weakening of the institutions of the welfare state, the resulting sharp increase in social inequalities, the marginalization of the lower and middle classes, the weakening of solidarity between individuals and groups in society, as well as the imposition of narcissistic individualism as the dominant value model for life realization. For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon, see D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

individuals from decades of state repressions and restrictions of all sorts. In this atmosphere, the other pole of liberal democracy, the demos and all related questions – how to produce a common political will, what is a common good, that is to say, all issues concerning social bonds and the solidarity of individuals as a key condition of democracy – all these issues were passed over or quite naturally remained in the background, as they did not fit into the spirit of time.

From a liberal point of view, the history of Bulgarian liberal democracy in the last more than thirty years could be seen as a constant struggle of liberal parties and citizens to win back the state and political power from different collective or individual subjects, which since the very beginning have captured them, thus subverting and discrediting the democratic process in the country. This struggle has been combining the mechanisms of electoral and parliamentary democracy with periods of quasi-revolutionary upheavals (1990–91, 1997, 2013, 2020). In the 1990s, what was at stake was the liberation from the legacy of the communist regime, including the change of the country's constitution, bringing about the process of privatization, opening the road to NATO and EU membership, overcoming the grip of the BSP on the political and administrative structures of government, etc. In the coming decades, attention has shifted to new opponents named "oligarchy" and "mafia" and accused of comprehensive corruption processes that paralyze the socio-economic development of the country and undermine citizens' confidence in state and local government institutions. Between the two periods there is a connection of more or less obvious continuity: in the first case, all was about the explicit monopoly of the Bulgarian Communist Party (subsequently the Bulgarian Socialist Party) on the political power and the government of the country, while in the second, it was about the monopoly of the powerful private economic interests of businessmen who came from the BSP circles or the power structures associated with this party and are trying to usurp political power in their own favor. In the second case, an instrument was needed to take a grip on power, and this was called corruption. The term "corruption" in the Bulgarian context should be understood in a political–legal sense of empowering private interests through fraudulent or downright criminal procedures (undermining democratic representation by creating fictitious political parties, manipulating public opinion through private media, buying votes, buying MPs, abusing the judicial system for private ends, etc.).

Copying with the supposedly tough and lasting communist heritage opened up a specific perspective on democracy and its current crisis. In the early 1990s, Jürgen Habermas published a famous article in which he defined the mass civil protests that accompanied the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe as "catch-up revolutions" that sought to

catch up with the model of Western democratic societies.[2] Still adhering to this thesis, today's Bulgarian liberal politicians continue to view the crisis of Bulgarian democracy diachronically, as a crisis of institutional lagging behind the Western model of the 1990s. Therefore, the language that is used to describe the crisis is primarily a normative political–legal language. The urgent reforms that are needed are political and legal reforms (for example the reform of the judicial system) that are supposed to also solve the other problems of Bulgarian democracy. But by sticking to this narrow perspective, Bulgarian liberals fail to understand the crisis of liberal democracy synchronically: Bulgarian democracy must actually solve not only its own problems of lagging behind, but also the problems that nowadays are common to both West European and East European democracies.

In the West, the crisis of liberal democracy is, in many cases, viewed by authors with different political and ideological orientations through the perspective of immanent causes – the political choice and the institutionalization of certain values triggers social processes that ultimately threaten democracy. Here I will give an already trivial example of a causal relationship: the decision to deregulate markets, to dismantle or to weaken the welfare state, and to put a strong emphasis on individuals, their freedoms, and their personal preferences led to the collapse of solidarity, to social divisions and social tensions that ultimately undermine the social conditions of democracy. With this example, I would like to emphasize that democracy should be considered not only as a political regime but also as a type of society. Its crisis can stem from the erosion of its normative legal conditions – the rule of law, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, etc. But it could also stem from the erosion of its normative social conditions.

In order to introduce the normative social conditions of democracy, I will use the widespread problem of nations that have broken down into two nations. In Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, one of the characters (a working -class representative) says the following: "Yes, [...] two nations, between which there is neither relationship nor sympathy. The people they are made up of are alien to each other, their thoughts and their feelings differ; They do not have the same habits or the same morals; They are not governed by the same laws."[3] A century and a half later, the metaphor of the two nations seems to be increasingly relevant. In his speech on July 28, 2004, an American senator, the democrat John Edwards,

[2] See J.Habermas, "La révolution de rattrapage," In: *Ecrits politiques*, trad. Ch. Bouchindhomme, R. Rochlitz, Cerf, Paris, pp. 139–162

[3] Cited in Z. Bauman, *Retrotopia*, trad. Fr. Joly, Premier parallèle, Paris, 2019, p. 115.

said, “The truth is, we still live in two different Americas: one for people who have lived the American Dream and don’t have to worry, and another for most Americans who work hard and still struggle to make ends meet.”[4] In his book of essays *Le temps des gens ordinaires*, the French geographer Christophe Guilluy claims that today’s France is divided into a dominant class and a dominated class, superior classes and popular classes, divided into two worlds: the higher world and the lower world.[5] The opposition of two halves of the same country is gaining popularity in Bulgaria as well. In a text entitled “The Two Bulgarias,” the writer Kalin Terziyski contrasts the “Second Bulgaria” – the Bulgaria of “our people [...] owners of holdings, party leaders, former criminals and current MPs” to the first Bulgaria – “the Bulgaria of the deceived people.”[6]

The metaphors of “two Americas” or “two Bulgarias” can be used speculatively and manipulatively in the everyday life of political struggles for power. However, they also contain a certain amount of truth concerning the present state of Western democracies, including Bulgarian democracy. What is the result in political and practical terms from this painful sense of decaying nations into two incompatible halves? On the one hand, quoting what the Bulgarian poet Hristo Smirnenski wrote a century ago, we can say, “Two worlds, one is redundant.” This is the radical logic of revolution, of civil war – where reconciliation is no longer possible. One half must be destroyed and deleted. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves whether it is not possible to make a common world out of these two worlds. This is the logic of rapprochement, of mediation, of joining the divided halves. If we bring this logic to a successful end, only then can we hope to reach a vital democracy.

What are the causes of the division of nations and societies into two halves? Many political thinkers and analysts point to the neoliberal ideology and neoliberal policies as the main reason. It is neoliberalism that caused the dramatic increase of socio-economic inequalities in many Western countries. The problem is the precarization of workers, but also of large parts of the middle classes in these countries.[7] In itself, the significant socio-economic inequality is morally culpable as it means the inequality of living conditions and of life chances. But it also has direct political consequences on democracy that Charles Taylor calls “a decline

[4] Ibid., p. 116.
[5] See Ch. Guilluy, *Le temps des gens ordinaires*, Flammarion, Paris, 2020.
[6] K. Terzyiski, “The Two Bulgarias” [К. Терзийски, “Двете Българии,” vesti.bg, 26.03.2012. (http://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/medii/kalin-terzijski-dvete-bylgarii-4677711).
[7] The problems of well-being, social justice, and inequality in Bulgaria in the context of the Balkans are analyzed in R. Stoilova, G. Nenova, G. Medarov (Eds.), “Well-Being in the Balkans in a European Perspective,” *Sociological Problems*, vol. 54, issue 1/2022.

in actual citizen efficacy"[8] or "a decline in equal citizenship." By this expression, Taylor refers to the mutual dependency between the degradation of the socio-economic living conditions of many citizens, on the one hand, and their decreasing participation in the processes of deliberative democracy, on the other. Thus, democracy is gradually becoming a regime of exclusion expressing and privileging the interests of a wealthy and politically influential minority.

The main argument that neoliberalism undermines democracy is related to the dismantling of the institutions of the welfare state, which makes impossible to conceive of the public good as a key condition of democracy:

> The great public institutions of the welfare state have been neglected, defunded, or even closed down or sold off and privatized. This is not just a matter of economic exigency. The public good has been devalued in favor of private goods. Democratic decision-making has been sidelined in favor of market efficiency. It is crucial to reclaim citizen decision-making for democracy.[9]

Therefore, neoliberalism undermines democracy insofar as it replaces the public good with private goods. It is namely this process – the replacement of the common good with private goods – that in the Bulgarian context we would call corruption. Here lies the intersection between the definitions of the crisis of liberal democracy in the West and in the East, in Bulgaria in particular. However, the question is how do we define this process, to whom do we ascribe the corruption? For Calhoun and Taylor, the privilege given to private goods at the expense of the public good is inscribed in the very ideology, basic values, and policies of neoliberalism. And the consequences of this orientation are the fragmentation and polarization of the political community and the decline of the common identity, which is, however, crucial for democracy. If the public good is politically so important, it is exactly because of that: it implies wide access to those public goods (accessible and high quality healthcare and education, social security and good wages) that are key factors in creating and maintaining a strong common identity.

Corruption is also important for understanding the erosion of the democratic political community, but it is only one factor involved in a more general institutional framework.[10] It

[8] Ch. Taylor, "Degenerations of Democracy," In: C. Calhoun, D. P. Gaonkar, Ch. Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London, 2022, p. 23.
[9] C. Calhoun, C. Taylor, "What Is to Be Done?", In: *Degenerations of Democracy*, p. 239.
[10] According to Calhoun and Taylor, putting the right focus on corruption should not prevent us from attributing inequality and unfairness to more global socio-economic developments: "Corruption is all too real and widespread – and appears today in the form of gross profiteering, kickbacks, insider contracts, and favors for political donors. Ending these would be a major advance for democracy. But inequality and unfairness are produced not only by corruption of these sorts. As important are commitment to meritocracy and making hierarchical incorporation the

could not be regarded as the prime source of the replacement of the public good with private goods, but rather as one of the effects of neoliberalism that enhances this process. For instance, for Calhoun and Taylor, meritocracy, as a key element in the neoliberal ideology, can itself be seen as a source of corruption in a specific sense:

> Meritocracy may actually bring corruption to the character of those it rewards and privileges. They may think success is everything, which is a constricted outlook. Personal relationships are undermined by exaggerated meritocratic sorting. So is the solidarity that is basic for democracy.[11]

By dividing people by their human quality and value, by absolutizing personal merits at the expense of the role of social relationships, by considering these merits as a basis for rights (for example, the right not to pay taxes) that put the well-being of the elites over the public good, meritocracy appears to be deeply antidemocratic:

> Meritocracy is a profoundly antidemocratic ideology. In place of democratic recognition of the equal worth of all citizens, meritocracy suggests that some are more worthy than others. It is self-serving for the elites, who thinks their positions and accumulated wealth simply reflect their merits. It is disempowering for the others.[12]

The question is how to overcome today's crisis of liberal democracy – in other words, how to overcome the replacement of the public good by private goods, as well as to overcome corruption as one of the elements in this more general process. What is at stake here is the restoration of solidarity among citizens, the creation of "a shared political identity and a sense of common destiny."[13] What steps should be taken in order for these tasks to be achieved? Perhaps the most important is the invention of a new version of the welfare state in Europe from the time of the *trente glorieuses* or the US welfare state since the New Deal time. No one else but the state could provide citizens with accessible high quality healthcare and education, access to cultural institutions, public transport, etc. – public goods which are key factors to overcoming social inequalities and restoring solidarity.

Another large-scale project that has been discussed for years is the Universal Basic Income, which aims to restore the sense of dignity and security of those citizens in a difficult life situation for whom such income would provide social reintegration instead of exclusion and dissocialization. In the American context, the idea of resuming the traditions of associative life is widely discussed: the revival of local communities through the active participation of

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only mode of membership in society, as well as relying on a global, corporate, financial capitalism that benefits elites and owners of capital while undermining the lives and livelihoods of others" (Ibid., p. 211).

[11] C. Calhoun, C. Taylor, "Authenticity and Meritocracy," In: *Degenerations of Democracy*, p. 152.

[12] Ibid., p. 157.

[13] C. Calhoun, C. Taylor, "What is to Be Done?" p. 219.

citizens in various joint initiatives. The goal here is to regenerate the social connections between citizens from below and to increase their faith that together, they could change their situation for the better.

All these measures are obviously aimed not only at the renewal of the political institutions of democracy, but also at the renewal of its social conditions.

However, they all seem to fall into the ideological field of socialists and social democrats. What could they have to do with liberals, liberal politicians, and citizens? I will answer this question using an example analyzed by Zygmunt Bauman in his last book, *Retrotopia*. Bauman mentions William Beverage's famous report from 1942 – one of the exemplary historical documents of the welfare state – and explains in this regard that William Beverage "was neither a conservative nor a socialist." He considered himself a liberal and conceived of his report as a result of a logical liberal approach: he had done nothing else, he says, except to bring the basic principles of liberal ideology to their ultimate consequences. Insofar as this ideology considers individual freedom not only as a supreme value and a cardinal requirement, but also as a priority goal (and even meta-goal) of any political practice, such value could only be correctly asserted if "material conditions of freedom" would be fulfilled. And at that time, as today, they were not fulfilled for much of the British population (...), struck by the following five "huge evils": misery, ignorance, need, idleness, and illness. While these evils are not eradicated through a voluntary policy, "freedom," says Beverage, will remain for this part of the population a slogan devoid of any sense, an illusion that adds insult to the living wound."[14]

In the present historical context, the insistence on the rule of law, the separation of powers, the independent judicial system – all of these irrevocable democratic values – is not in itself enough to guarantee the electoral success of liberal parties. Nor is it enough to overcome today's crisis of liberal democracy. The main dividing line is elsewhere, at the level of the social fabric, and it requires an answer to the questions: What does community mean today? What does solidarity mean? Both liberal parties and liberal citizens should answer these questions and answer with passion.

Unfortunately, these liberal circles find themselves trapped in a discriminating opposition that they fail to resolve – the opposition between the supporters of the open society, with its tolerance, pluralism, relativism, respect for otherness, on the one hand, and the supporters of the closed society, with its conservatism, nationalism, patriarchalism,

[14] Z. Bauman, *Retrotopia*, pp. 141–142.

clannishness, etc., on the other. In their attempt to become the political leaders of their country, liberal parties expect their fellow citizens to quickly understand the superiority of their principles and to enthusiastically support them. When this does not happen, embittered and offended, they isolate themselves with all kinds of fences and engage in endless battles with their opponents, from which they ultimately gain little. Instead, without compromising their basic principles, liberal parties should understand the attitudes of their fellow citizens and try to respond in their own way to the needs, fears and prejudices hiding behind these attitudes. Only in this way will they become a true elite.

I will end my paper with a quote from an article by the late French political thinker Pierre Hassner, from an article published in 1991:

> [But] we also know that humanity does not live only with freedom and universality, that the aspirations that have led to nationalism and socialism, the demand for community and identity, as well as the search for equality and solidarity, will emerge over and over again, which is already happening. As far as liberalism could incorporate them and reconcile them at the same time with the freedom of individual and with the interdependence of the planet, it will receive the chance, after winning the Cold War, not to lose the peace."[15]

[15] P. Hassner, *La revanche des passions*, Fayard, Paris, 2015, p. 21.