

## **NATIONALISM AND CIVIC LIFE: FROM INCONSISTENCY TO INEQUALITY**

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**Abstract:** *There is a strong bond between the individual, the state and the society. Failing to properly address the relationship between individuals inside a community and culture will bring democracy into contempt. Although it should promote values and target important questions regarding the civic life, the state is now more than ever concerned of its well-being in terms of pursuing new markets and promoting empty social discourse. In a sense, it is not democracy which dwindles but its leaders and political representatives. Their inconsistency and lack of discourse brings us today in front of a new challenge: the rise of populist nationalism, a byproduct of immoral markets, widen inequality and a new social contract. My thesis aims at connecting the dots between the decline of civic life due to increased inequality and the rise of populist nationalism, in a soft-despotic context, which settles the terms for a new social contract. Having to do with a Tocquevillean approach on democracy and despotism, my paper will endure the illusion of self-determination, postulating nonetheless the idea of contractualism and civic duty.*

**Keywords:** *civic life; nationalism; democracy; despotism; inequality*

### **1. INTRODUCTION - FROM THE PERPETUAL PEACE TO THE END OF HISTORY**

When Kant proposed the following idea which stated: "the greatest problem for the human species to which nature compels it to seek a solution is the achievement of a civil society which administers right universally" (Kant, 2006:8), he also considered "a perfectly just civil constitution" as being the highest goal for mankind (Kant, 2006:8). I believe Kant was somehow ahead of our time when issuing the above, as we can see nowadays that there is something peculiar happening inside our societies, as they grow more and more apart from a sense of communality and morality, both being aspects of which social and civic life are strictly dependable.

If Hobbes referred to institutions, as means to ensure authority inside the community (Hobbes, 1651), Rousseau built his idea of a society postulating the supremacy of law and order (Rousseau, 2002). They both met Kant's view that each individual has an intrinsic duty whenever he steps inside the society, a duty of shaping itself in order to maintain a common bond with the other citizens with whom he or she interacts, building the society as a whole, its institutions, and with

that, its laws. In Kant's perception, the social contract derives out of necessity, and imposes the actual society, which is meant to protect the individuals (Kant, 2006). For that safety, the state has to provide and guarantee two of the most important principles of life, which is liberty and equality. Hobbes's tyranny has no place inside Kant's theory, as it leads to a violation of any individual's right for self-determination.

Although Kant isn't perceived as an actual social contract theoretician, his contribution in this regard is undoubtable. For Kant, the social contract represents an idea, one of great fortune and also a test for human reason (Kant, 2006). Furthermore, Kant's perpetual peace depends on democracy's success, a lottery at which most states, haven't yet bought any tickets.

As we can see, we haven't yet reached the final form of human government as Fukuyama considered (Fukuyama, 1992), nor we can currently conclude the victory of democracy, as it may have come to a point where it should be improved and frequently adapted to an increasingly dynamic international context. The globalisation and marketisation of every aspect of our lives inflicts many changes upon the democratic establishment and "proposes" many challenges, some of which are still to come.

In the present paper I shall focus on briefly presenting a new form of social contract, which was pointed out early on by Tocqueville, while having an approach on a new form of despotism that pushes the society from having a smooth democracy into accompanying a fierce form of populist nationalism, built upon social inequality and its proceedings. While admitting the current limits of my essay, I strongly consider pointing out, now and in future writings, that there is a strong bond between our civic behaviour and the world we are shaping for the next generations. Of course such endeavours need a broad approach, that's why I shall adjust the present content, accordingly.

## 2. DEMOCRACY AND DESPOTISM IN ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

While being a key figure inside the study of democracy, Tocqueville isn't recognised among the social contract theoreticians that made an impact on the concept. For him, the notions of civil society and democracy were in connection, as the first witnesses the second's evolution. Tocqueville believed that the society included ideas, traditions, institutions and a firm feel of democracy as a state of mind. In order to support progress and political representation, people encounter one another in the public life, issuing public discourse and cooperation between individuals that hold the liberty of free speech and self-determination.

Tocqueville's assertion of what democracy is and could be, still remains topical. While he considered social interaction as being a part of a mechanism that drives democracy on a path of continuous evolution, there are a few negative implications regarding the rule of the majority. As the public debate and discourse narrows, a gap between the individuals and the political establishment unravels. For Tocqueville, the close distance between the citizens and their political representatives stands as a vital aspect of democracy. The centralisation of the political system raises many questions regarding the concept of civil liberty and acts as a tool for any despotic tendency. In other words, the Frenchmen's idea of despotism is quite different from the ones which were used before him. The standard notion of despotism had a violent approach, clear statements, untainted beliefs and so-called ideological targets. On the other hand, Tocqueville's new form of despotism is rather unusual, as it is soft and misperceived. Montesquieu was the first to consider the term *soft-*

*despotism* in the middle of the eighteenth century, in connection with England's rulers, although it was the frenchmen who gave it a context and elaborated on its sense (Scott, 2009: 70). Tocqueville's *soft-despotism* follows the rise of a despotic ruler, that seizes every individual's mind and self-determination without them even noticing. It is silent, misperceived and very efficient. It also allows its citizens to follow what they think they want or need, while the state assures that they get it in a limited sense, gradually turning them in people who are dependable of their ruler, although their actions are in fact limited and controlled. *Soft-despotism* is in some ways an invisible form of controlling the society and its members, up to a point where the ones that rule are so powerful that nothing can move them away from their authority. This is frightening because it is subtle and it derives from a new form of social contract, one that puts everything in the hand of the state.

## 3. THE NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE ILLUSION OF SELF-DETERMINATION

*Soft-despotism* creates the illusion of self-determination not only by allowing people to democratically elect their political leaders but by charging them with the ideas of which they are autonomous, although that isn't entirely true. It also operates by the rules and laws that are rightfully established and by which, they exercise control over the society, limiting any individual growth beyond their reach. Additionally, it guides the society by its own will, restraining any reactionary temptation.

A *soft-despotic* establishment doesn't use force or any other violent behaviour. It is quiet and peaceful, but most important, it doesn't show its real face. By controlling the citizens and guiding them accordingly, the tyranny is senseless. The power of the people remains strictly on paper, while the tyrant makes sure its authority is legitimate and the popular demands are obsolete. In some ways, things haven't changed much since Tocqueville's notes were made. What is indeed different from then, is the fact that the economy is now above the political dominion, it being in control of policy making and the political interests' spectrum.

Nowadays markets control every aspect of our lives and there is literally nothing that money can't buy. This particularly assures that people of different social status live separate lives and don't encounter one another inside the society, as they share different road lanes, tickets lines, stores, while allowing those that are wealthy enough, to

benefit from the marketisation of everything (Sandel, 2012:7). This social discrepancy leads to inequality, lack of solidarity and tolerance, the absence of social debate and most important — a disunited society.

Children go to different schools based on their social status, get a limited amount of respect and opportunity, and don't live up to the expectations of a so-called democratic society. Furthermore, a market society being one in which a child is paid to read a book a day, or a convicted criminal can optionally choose to upgrade his cell if he pays the right price, raises questions about the way we wish to spend our lives and the future we create for our next generations (Sandel, 2012).

In my opinion, the so-called *soft-despotic* upheaval is being determined by a change of social contract, due to increased inequality that has formed in connection with the lack of social debate and inappropriate leaders/models. The new social contract that I am referring to, is oblivious for those who sign it. In other words, the citizens approve of it tacitly. It can be compared to Hobbes's social contract, it being the result of yielding responsibility to a leader (in our case elected) that is suitable to lead the society. Although in both cases the authority is accepted, what differs from Hobbes's notion of social contract is the fact that in its newest form the authority doesn't act in plain sight, whereas its actions are invisible and they target the individual's faith, being also absolute, though with a softer approach.

Inside a society which is governed by the new form of the social contract, people tend to be persuaded by the apparent equality and liberty. They live with the illusion of self-determination and don't even consider the leaders as being tyrants but merely tutors (Tocqueville, 2005:333). Their thought is being darkened and seized by the authority in the virtue of the new social contract. The saddest part is that the citizens are involuntarily choosing to enter this contract as they are unaware of its implications and of the *soft-despotic* engagement that it assumes.

Currently, the new social contract installs upon unstable societies, that face a period of growing inequality, due to the lack of public debate and the globalisation of markets which are expanding beyond imagination and moral standards. The marketisation of everything shares a fair bond with inequality and contributes to the lack of social interaction and public discourse. People don't find debates attractive anymore and that concerns the way we conduct our civic life, being a part of a society meaning we need

to take a proactive position inside it, sharing views and opinions that might enact a coherent social discourse for the community and the political establishment to consider. Of course, being torn apart by inequality, people live totally separate lives, not being close to each other in order to socially interact and to develop common grounds. This brings us in front of an anxiousness behaviour by our counterparts inside the society, constantly showing that we are on a path to separation and intolerance towards one another.

The civic life suffers under the pressure of raising inequality and the results of an unbalanced social discourse tend to go on the extreme. Such results determine the way we cast our votes, share our public thoughts, and react to the political behaviour. Furthermore, the inconclusive political discourse and the inefficiency of the political establishment has made the voters edgy and unsettled for compromise. This is why liberal democracy is held responsible by so many nowadays, for the lack of accuracy in policy making, and also why populist nationalism is gaining more and more success among the European societies.

#### **4. THE DECLINE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE RISE OF POPULIST NATIONALISM**

There are three aspects that we should consider whenever we are labelling a form of government as being populist (Fukuyama, 2018). From Fukuyama's point of view, the first aspect is that it "supports policies that are going to be good on the short run but bad on the long run". The second characteristic is that of "addressing only to a certain part of the society" (an ethnic or racial group), while emphasising a kind of national identity that excludes any other "outsiders". And for the third characteristic, Fukuyama points us in the direction of a much more identifiable aspect, that of the "cult of personality" which is relevant for the style of the populist leadership (Fukuyama, 2018). All three of these aspects being put together are consistent to the label of populism. As we can easily see nowadays, in some states, all three of the characteristics mentioned by Fukuyama are being marked.

The inconsistency of assuring a constant public discourse served as a standpoint for the political class to indulge in a kind of empty political discourse. The latter were convinced that the more they pursue economic benefits for the society as a whole, the more the citizens would prosper and

tend to support them for another mandate. In this regard, they have failed to consider addressing bigger questions, for which the population had interest in, such as those related to education, values, inequality or day-to-day problems that affect every part of the society. Unfortunately, false made promises and unbalanced strategies regarding markets and development, created the perfect context for liberal democracies to fall into contempt.

Many people of whom were fed up with the current establishment, casted their votes in order to support change and a new vision. What they failed to consider themselves was the replacement of a liberal form of democracy with one of which its tendency is to promote a populist approach and a sort of extreme nationalism, that isn't accustomed with respect for every individual and tolerance towards different minorities.

Due to the lack of public debate, and of course increasing inequality, people don't consider all the aspects before using their ballots. This leaves behind any moral and opportunity-related discussions, and pursues only what is the fruit of what Kahneman consider it to be the first system of thinking, which is the fast, intuitive one, that doesn't accommodate analytical assessments and reason-based approaches (Kahneman, 2013: 22). In other words, the flaws of not-entering into a debate regarding aspects of our lives, might end up as being an important reason for the society's current and future evolution. As we are more and more acquainted with the appearance and intensification of the extremist discourse, of the parties which promote a nationalistic approach throughout their populist leaders, we should be worried about the evolution of democracy on the long run.

It could take years for it to be downgraded to the point of inefficiency, but the process has started to move on rapidly and to collect more and more adherents which believe the latter establishment was to blame for everything that didn't work in the past and still doesn't work in the present. Thus, the only solution is a radical change, as always. While reinforcing the constant need for a coherent public discourse and constant debate regarding important aspects and big contemporary problems, the solution for the current nationalism is caught somewhere between the alternatives for a democratic revival of both policies and leaders/models.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In order to engage with the tough questions that we face nowadays, we must consider as part of

our civic life, the importance of the public discourse and the role that it plays inside a democratic society. In spite of Sandel's opinion regarding "the declining of the civic spirit" contemporary issues related to democracy have a broad spectrum of challenges, that can't always be put on the shoulders of the citizens, as inactive individuals. The representatives are also responsible for the failure of the political class, which constantly diminishes in trust, coherence and is unable to sustainably address the important aspects of our lives (Sandel, 1996). Covering a gap of faith, left behind by the mainstream parties, the far right spectrum succeeded in discourse and approach, by filling the holes of those fed up with the two or three decades of unfair politics, that failed to address major parts of the societies, closing up for elites and leaving the ordinary people in sorrow and disdain.

From the point in which liberal democracy embraced the globalised economy and market mechanisms associated, there were a few decades in the making. As some believed for many years now, democracy is not intact, on the contrary, it dwindles as time goes by. Therefore a more robust civic live won't be the solely answer for the democratic questions raised by various changes inside societies as a whole. Notwithstanding, the strong bond between the individual and the state thickens every day, that is why it is up to the citizens to inflict change inside their societies, in order to correct the wrongful path of the current democracy's drift. Formed on grounds of inequality and immoral markets, the new social contract that enacts a soft-despotic engagement of the society by those who lead, has changed the way we live our lives and enabled us to give up everything for almost nothing. Linking the way we conduct our civic duties, to the deterioration of democracy, is surely a questionable act in many views.

My thesis has tried to figure out what are the motives behind the upheaval of populist nationalism, pointing towards the fact that there are many variables which contribute actively on disrupting the bond between the state and the individual, forcing democracy into crisis. The unquestionable importance of participation in the civic life, as being a virtue among individuals represents one of the reasons for which democracy should harness the public discourse and debate. In order to conclude, I wish to reiterate the importance of civic life, not solely as a mechanism to ensure inclusion and social dialogue but also in a sense of underlining the fact that there couldn't be a democracy without its people.

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