The Vital Centre – endangered or encouraged

The Vital Centre – the politics of freedom. It is an idea of defending liberal democracy against totalitarianism and a state-regulated market economy against centralisation. It is also an idea for modern people of creating a sense of community and solidarity based on liberal principles as an alternative both to a traditional community which sees itself as created based on natural law and religious doctrine and to a totalitarian, regulated society. The aim is to restore the balance between individuals and the community. In the liberal view, liberal community consists of diverse, creative and active individuals, citizens who think critically and make conscious decisions, also in the realm of politics and who cooperate for the good of the pluralistic community. A liberal democratic community is internally diversified and integrated in its diversity. Its members, individual citizens must be aware of the need to maintain the balance between freedom and responsibility, which constitutes the basis of citizenship.

Here I intend to draw attention to two threats which in contemporary society endanger liberal democracy as the vital centre. One is populism, another uncontrolled, chaotic virtual communication and the collapse of the concept of truth and trust as the results of critical thinking.

1./ Populism is a major threat to liberal democracy, mainly because it creates a bi-polar image of society divided between “the people’ and the elites. In this image “the people” is a homogenous, uniformed community of people who "think alike" and uncritically follow their leaders. From such a community of “the people”, today typically identified with a nation, those who think differently are excluded and stigmatised as “enemies of the people". In the populist model of society, there is no place for minority protection and for individual rights. Politically populists believe in the absolute power of the majority, without checks and balances, responsibility and accountability, legal procedures and the rule of law. The will of the people, the will of the nation is the supreme good, above the rule of law and constitution. Such thinking is the basis of “illiberal democracy” in which democracy is identified with the power of the majority, without liberal control. An example of this way of thinking is a statement made by a senior Polish politician Kornel Morawiecki, a veteran of the Solidarity movement and the father of a right-wing prime minister of the Polish government Mateusz Morawiecki. He declared in the Polish parliament on the 2nd of December 2015 that “The good of the nation must be above law, even above the constitution”. The rule of the majority understood in this way may easily transform itself into tyranny.

2./ Another threat to liberal democracy is the irrational rejection of the truth in the “post-truth” society. It is based on the idea that there is no truth, there are only narratives, all equal and all equally to be trusted or mistrusted. The idea of relativism of truth has its origin in cultural relativism and anthropological studies of non-western societies. However, it has become one of the main concepts of post-modern society, with a strong ideological flavour of equality and struggle against dominance. Positive in many ways, this tendency in contemporary Western society has also another face, that of rejection of the truth and trust based on verifiable scientific knowledge. The Internet offers a widely used possibility to communicate and express opinions without any responsibility for words and accountability, without the ability and need to think critically and select information. People, especially young ones, live in bubbles of their social media and ignore or reject knowledge or arguments which do not come from their “significant others” or “influencers”. As we have seen in some recent elections the truth does not matter, what matters are momentary impressions, jokes, memes, and expressive personalities. Virtual facts are no different from facts in real life. Communication and expressions in the virtual space are often anonymous, so there is no responsibility and no accountability. This is very dangerous for liberal democracy and makes very large segments of the society, especially young people, vulnerable to demagogy, and easy to be manipulated by cynical populists who want uncontrolled power.

Is there any way to stop and reverse this trend? Virtual communication can’t be just switched off. Censorship and control from the state may only be applied in clearly defined cases such as hate speech. The only reasonable strategy seems to be widespread and consistent education for the ability to critically think and select information. It is also essential to promote liberal values, especially the protection of individual and minority rights and the accountability of elected leaders. It is also important to keep reminding ourselves that in the liberal concept of society, our freedom as individuals is limited by the freedom of other individuals. This principle not only excludes hate speech but also makes us aware of responsibility for words and expressions in the public sphere and public space, also in the virtual space. There are, of course, many problems with liberal democracy, which are used as arguments against it, such as time-consuming deliberations, low effectiveness and slow decision-making in comparison with dictatorships. Problematic is also a kind of asymmetry between the liberal elites and the society which needs security, including ontological security and strong leadership. Liberal elites try to create a social and economic system of democracy and a state-regulated economy in which all citizens find comfort and prosperity, which, however, require active attitude and participation. This is often rejected by people whose aspirations for comfort and level of consumption are growing. They mistrust the elites and rebel against them in the populist spirit. The liberal elites are left with a sense of failure and disappointment, or sometimes a kind of “splendid isolation of the right ones.” This, however, does not improve the comfort of people, especially those whose understanding of what is happening in the rapidly changing world around them is limited. Liberal democracy gives them freedom but also demands responsibility. Freedom is a burden, and it is often easier to follow those who claim to be strong leaders and promise to give people what they require without their own critical thinking and responsibility. The lack of ontological security generates a sense of disorientation and fear, so there is room for demagogues. The chaotic communication in virtual reality provides all sorts of unreliable but often exciting and attractive in their simplicity answers which circulate in bubbles of communication and create virtual reality which functions alongside the real world. The system of liberal democracy has proved to be the one which gives freedom to citizens and creates a well-functioning, economically effective community. This truth is, however, not generally accepted in the society. This is a weakness and a failure of the liberal elites. They have not been able so far to convince the majority of society of the supreme values of the liberal democratic system. Education and the reform (perhaps with some more state control) of internet communication to eliminate its anonymity, may give some chance to change this paradox, of course in addition to elimination of pathologies of the liberal democracy, if and when they are diagnosed.

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