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Internetový recenzovaný časopis vydává
Fakulta sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy v Praze,
Katedra politologie Institutu politologických studií

Editorial

Democracy in Times of Crisis

The present special issue of *Acta Politologica* aims to contribute to the wider debate about the present state of democracy, which received a fresh impetus in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. If the financial crisis was caused, as is often argued, by the neoliberal policy of liberalisation of financial markets, it can be considered as a mere consequence of a deeper political crisis, i.e. the crisis of democracy itself. The signs of this crisis include the impotence of democratic institutions in the face of the powers of global capital, privatisation of public space, as well as depoliticisation of the decisions affecting the public affairs.

Nonetheless, the main symptom of the present crisis of democracy is the perceived lack of a viable alternative to the neoliberal paradigm, which, in spite of having been shaken in the aftermath of the financial crisis, still maintains its hegemonic position. Indeed, the perceived helplessness of the mainstream political parties to counter the neoliberal hegemony has contributed to the recent rise of various right-wing populist movements, such as the Tea Party Movement in the US, the True Finns Party in Finland, or Jobbik in Hungary. Nevertheless, the economic crisis and its aftermath also gave rise to various left wing protest movements, such as Occupy or Democracy Now in the US, the Indignados movement in Spain, or the Gezi Park protest movement in Turkey. While the sheer size of these movements attests to the renewed interest in public affairs among today's youth, it also remains true that they failed to produce any material change on the political landscape.

These developments present a challenge to political theory and political science. They make us reflect anew about such questions as the relationship between democracy and liberalism, the nature of power relations and distribution of power in current democratic societies, or the possible venues of popular resistance against the hegemony of current political and economic elites. In short, they make us reflect upon the perceived gap between the democratic ideal and everyday reality of "actually existing democracies", to borrow Nancy Fraser's expression, but also on the possibilities of bridging this gap.

Questions like these are discussed in the articles collected in the present special issue. The issue comprises of eight papers written by authors from six European countries. While some of the papers are mostly theoretically oriented, others contain an important empirical component. Nonetheless, all of them aim to demonstrate the relevance of political theory in the light of current political developments.

The first four articles address various important issues discussed in contemporary political theory. Asger Sørensen reflects upon the nature of liberalism and its relation with (democratic) politics. The key contention of his paper "Approaching Political Philosophy through the Critique of Liberalism" is that liberalism, in all of its guises, is an essentially anti-political project that ultimately aims to eliminate the very need for political government. As such, it presents a major challenge to contemporary political philosophy as well as democratic politics.

Neomal Silva, on the contrary, brings forth a qualified defence of Rawls' political liberalism. While agreeing with those critics of Rawls, who maintain that his political liberalism effectively excludes the voices of various marginalised groups from the political process, Silva argues that this shortcoming can be easily rectified. The bulk of his paper "Emancipation through the Use of Liberal Democratic Values?" presents a modified version of Rawls' political liberalism, which would enable inclusion of these otherwise marginalised voices.

Jakub Franěk's paper "Arendt and Foucault on Power, Resistance, and Critique" turns attention to the topics of power and resistance in the work of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. By bringing these two thinkers into a mutual dialogue, Franěk aims to reveal various connections between their respective works and at the same time to resolve some apparent paradoxes associated with their theories. In conclusion he argues that both Arendt's and Foucault's insights remain highly relevant in the light of present political developments.

"Schmitt and Mouffe on the 'Ontology' of the Political" by Babrak Ibrahimy is also concerned with the treatment of a common topic in the work of two seminal political thinkers: Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe. Ibrahimy argues that Mouffe misconstrues Schmitt's concept of the political by presenting it as an ontological category and by insisting that the contents of the political as friend/enemy distinction can only be articulated in antagonistic form.

The next two papers fruitfully combine discussion of important theoretical issues with empirical research. Pelin Ayan Musil examines Chantal Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism in the light of recent protests against neoliberal policies. Focusing primarily on the Gezi Park protests from her native Turkey, Ayan Musil contends that agonistic democracy in Mouffe's sense may in fact require a prior articulation of the political conflict in antagonistic terms.

Emanuele Leonardi's paper "Populism as Adaptation" turns attention to Ernesto Laclau's conception of populism and, specifically, to his interpretation of the recent development of populism in Italy. While he in principle agrees with Laclau's argument about continuity between the populism of the Italian Communist Party during the first Italian Republic and the populism of the League of North in the 1990s, Leonardi argues that it fails to assess the crucial link between processes of local governance in Northern Italy and transnational circuits of valorisation as fostered by global neoliberal networks.

The final two papers shift attention to the problems of democracy at European level. "Power, Justice, and National Culture in an Expanding European Union" by Marc Woons explores the issue of a dilemma faced by potential EU member states that are effectively forced to make a choice between joining the EU at the cost of sacrificing certain aspects of their culture, and maintaining their culture at the cost of foregoing the benefits of EU membership. Taking into account both ethical and pragmatic aspects, Woons argues that the EU accession procedures should be changed to minimize this dilemma.

Mihai Dinescu in his "EU Democratic Deficit and the Civil Society" examines the historical origins of the often discussed problem of European democratic deficit. His key contention is that the roots of this problem can be traced to the tradition of a centralized-nation state in continental Europe and especially in France.