

Znoj Milan - Bíba Jan - Vargovčíková Jana:  
*Demokracie v postliberální konstelaci.*  
(*Democracy in the post-liberal condition*)

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Democracy has resurfaced as a popular subject in connection with the crisis of liberal democracy which we now experience. The book *Demokracie v post-liberální konstelaci* [Democracy in the post-liberal condition] (2014) by Milan Znoj, Jan Bíba and Jana Vargovčíková is a reaction to the crisis, which manifests itself in society's disillusionment with the democratic process, decreasing voter turnout, a democratic deficit, the rise of right-wing populism and other "symptoms." In the gloomy reality, the authors don't predict the demise of liberal democracy as we know it and the rise of a non-liberal democracy. Instead, they point out several new liberal concepts which might lead us out of the current crisis. Described in it are four strands within contemporary democratic theory: neo-republicanism, deliberative democ-

racy, post-liberal democracy and radical democracy. These approaches, though presented against the background of the post-liberal condition, are not meant to supplant the liberal-democratic tradition; instead, they represent a continuation and reinterpretation of this tradition which reflect today's realities.

The basic premise of the book is an understanding of liberal democracy as a protean concept which sprang from classical-liberalist roots and has evolved throughout its existence. At first, liberal democracy was regarded as a form of government controlled by the moneyed and educated elites; as suffrage was extended to other groups at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal democracy took on a mass character which — though clearly connected to the liberalisation of society — was taken by some to be

a threat to democracy. Alternative approaches were suggested which aimed to eliminate this danger.

The individual chapters of the book are well-balanced and despite being written by different authors, they tie together well with the notable exception of the first chapter. The book, let us be reminded here, deals with democracy in the post-liberal condition. The topic clearly calls for a historical introduction which would help us understand where the tradition has failed and why alternative concepts should be sought in the first place. The title of the first chapter, *The Post-Liberal Condition and the Limits of Liberal Democracy*, suggests that the text would tie in with the rest of the book; however, the problem is that it doesn't deal with the post-liberal condition at all. Ultimately, the chapter doesn't give an introduction to the theory of democracy and liberalism either. It discusses only few representatives of selected strands of thought in particular periods. Consequently, the chapter seems eclectic and unfinished. For a reader to have a clear idea of classical liberalism after reading the short (6-page) introduction to Locke's and Kant's ideas<sup>1</sup> is not really possible. My suggestion would be to include a high-level summary of the liberal-democratic experience in the introduction, leave out the first chapter, which deals with classical liberalism, competitive democracy

and the social choice theory and refer the reader to relevant literature instead.

As regards the individual chapters, the first one deals with the limits imposed on democracy by liberalism imposes and features a brief discussion of the evolution of the understanding of democracy from Plato to Joseph Alois Schumpeter. It points out the qualities which set democracy apart from other (comparably worse) forms of government and explains why societies should strive to build it. In this connection, the author of the chapter also discusses the relationship between liberalism and democracy and stresses the significance of Schumpeter's ideas. Classical liberal thought was based on the concept of the common good; the thinkers only differed in their views on how this good should be defined and attained. Schumpeter founded a tradition which dismissed the principle of the common good as irrational and unrealistic and even went so far as to consider the attainment of this good as a threat to democracy (p. 23). Thus, democracy was reduced to an "institutional arrangement for political decision making in which individuals get decision-making power by a competition over the votes of the citizens" (Schumpeter 2004: 287). Milan Znoj commented on this, saying that to reduce democracy to a political competition between the elites, leaders and parties renders it vulnerable to its enemies, the oligarchic elites (p. 9).

<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that Kant expressed many liberal ideas, he is not a typical representative of liberalism. Indeed, there's an ongoing discussion whether he can be considered a liberal at all (Miller 2000: 238).

The second chapter deals with the (neo-)republican concept of democracy. The republican concept has enriched democratic theory with a view which reconciles individualism with the principle of the common good, holding that individuals, by pursuing their own interests, increase the common good. People can realise themselves only as citizens actively participating in politics. To achieve this end, there must be rule of law which represents the institutional framework within which individual social behaviour occurs and which regulates this behaviour to attain the common good. The rule of law and the civic society, thus constituted, serve to uphold the liberal political establishment (see: Habermas 2002: 80–85; Skovajsa 2004: 358–359). At the beginning of this chapter, Znoj explains the ideas of Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau, two significant thinkers in the tradition of republicanism whose principal ideas were further developed in the works of later authors. The fact that Znoj did not limit himself to just the description of the ideas of these two thinkers but included other authors who challenged the original theory (e.g. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt) should be applauded. Znoj also adds his own view on the matter. At the close of the chapter, he discusses a recent conception which arose from the republican tradition, namely “republicanism without the substantive good and people’s will,” which seems to be associated with Machiavellian thought. Neo-republicanism and the ways in which it differs from

liberalism and classical republicanism are explained via a concise exposition of the views of Phillip Pettit and Christian List as embodied in their book *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*.

In a section entitled *Zastupitelská vláda* [Representative Government] (p. 37), Znoj identifies three approaches to direct democracy. These are, specifically: the citizens’ assembly model, imperative mandate and referendum. The reason why a chapter which ostensibly deals with representative government contains a discussion of direct democracy or why the classification mentioned above is presented here is unclear. The reader comes away with the impression that the section in question is a superfluous addition to the chapter and that the classification itself is far from ideal. Another problem is that the author did not provide an explanation of these terms, so it is not entirely clear what they refer to. What is, for example, meant by “the citizens’ assembly model?” Governments in representative democracies naturally consist of citizens (more specifically, certain groups of citizens) who assemble in one way or another. Did the author mean rule by all citizens? Or by a majority of them? How large should this majority be? Another point in question is imperative mandate. If we take the term as it is commonly understood, i.e., as a system in which deputies are required to vote in line with the decisions or the political programme of the party for which they were elected, then imperative mandate as such cannot be viewed as a

method of direct democracy. If imperative mandate is understood as a system in which a deputy is duty-bound to act as an “interpreter of the preference of his electors” (Klokočka 1996: 23), we could say that such understanding somewhat approximates direct democracy, provided, though, that the duty is enforceable (and a failure to carry it out leads to the deputy losing his mandate and his right to run as a candidate in the future).

The third chapter by Jana Vargovčíková is entitled *Deliberativní demokracie* [Deliberative Democracy] and subtitled *Rozpravou za hranice liberální demokracie?* [Through discourse beyond the boundaries of liberal democracy]. Deliberative democracy is a concept which strikes a balance between the liberal and republican models of democracy. It is based on discursive links between citizens in a society — a feature which it shares with republicanism. Unlike republicanism, deliberative democracy is opposed to idealism and abstract virtues oriented towards the common good. By synthesising elements of both theories, it represents an “ideal procedure for discussion and decision-making” (Habermas 2002: 87–88; Skovajsa 2004: 359). The chapter does not, however, open with a discussion of Jürgen Habermas, probably the most eloquent advocate of the concept of deliberative democracy; instead, it begins in Iceland where deliberative principles have been put into practice. The author explains the Icelandic constitutional reform, necessitated by the economic troubles of 2008 which led the government to review the existing

principles upon which the political system was founded. The government decided to take an innovative approach to constitutional reform, inviting citizens to participate in the process. To this end, a forum comprising 950 randomly selected citizens was established to elect an assembly consisting of 25 citizens tasked with drawing up and presenting a draft of the constitution which was then put to a vote in the parliament. The author talks about the prospects of deliberative democracy in the post-liberal condition of today and asks whether public discourse and the involvement of a broader base of citizens in the political process could be the solution to the “weaknesses of liberal democracy” and, last but not least, whether deliberative democracy is compatible with the functioning of today’s society (pp. 89–90). Vargovčíková gives an introduction to selected strands within deliberative democratic theory and talks about some of the weaknesses and pitfalls in the application of deliberative principles in connection with the individual attributes of the approaches under study in an attempt to find answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter. The chapter contains several examples of applications of deliberative principles and examples of situations where deliberative solutions are unsuitable. This combination of theory and a discussion of the potential of the approaches to be applied in practice is exactly what the reader expects after reading the introduction to the book. For this, the chapter deserves praise.

The fourth chapter written by Jan Bíba deals with post-liberal democracy and the relationship between liberalism and democracy as discussed in the work of C. B. Macpherson and Norberto Bobbio. The term “post-liberal democracy” refers to approaches which attempt to reconcile socialism with the principles of liberal democracy. Post-liberal democrats believe that the basic liberal-democratic principles, i.e., freedom and equality, can be achieved only in socialism. According to the proponents of this approach, true liberal democracy is unthinkable without economic equality, and therefore incompatible with capitalism (cf. Barša, Císař 2004: 63). According to Bíba, post-liberal democracy represents a “radical attempt to fulfil the promise of liberal democracy” (p. 134). This chapter is a worthwhile contribution to the conversation on the possible synthesis between socialism and liberal democracy. The chapter offers no more than a description and a comparison of the ideas of the two authors mentioned above; however, given the lack of literature on the main topic within the context of Czech political science and political philosophy, the chapter can certainly be considered a worthwhile contribution.

The fifth chapter deals with post-structuralist radical democracy. It was also written by Jan Bíba and is, to some extent, a continuation of the previous chapter in that it attempts to determine how post-structuralist criticism has contributed to the post-liberal democratic project. What is meant by “radical democracy” here? There are many con-

cepts, some too vague, others too specific to apply to all the approaches. Graeme Duncan, for example, said that radical democracy is a social arrangement where all people are able to govern themselves, which they do under the right circumstances. The goal of radical democracy, according to Duncan, is a further democratisation of social institutions which gives citizens more control over the political process and allows them to have a say in government and actively participate in policy-making (Duncan 1983: 189–190). For the purposes of this publication, Bíba coined the concept of “mid-range radical democracy.” Subsumed under the term “radical democracy” are approaches which combine dissociative conceptions of politics with certain strands of thought within post-modern philosophy, particularly the critique of essentialism (p. 186). The author explains the radical-democratic conceptions of Claude Lefort and Chantal Mouffe and shows how radical-democratic thought can be brought to bear on the challenges of post-liberal democracy. The chapter, however, gravitates towards the theoretical and the reader is left guessing as to what shape and form radical democracy may take in practice.

To conclude, we can say that the book is a very interesting one and will enrich the Czech conversation on modern democratic theories. Nowadays, when liberal democracy is being written off as a thing of the past and a failed project, it's all the more important that we talk about new democratic alternatives. These circumstances give urgency and relevance

to the book, although it only deals with selected democratic forms. It raises many questions that deserve in-depth study; however, upon closer reading, one cannot shake the sense that the potential of the book has not been realised and that the book ultimately fails to live up to the expectations associated with its publica-

tion. The concepts are mostly described (except in the third chapter) in general, theoretical terms and the texts more often deal with the origins of the concepts than with their potential for being applied in practice in the post-liberal condition.