AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

Danilo Zolo

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■ *The modern state faces new challenges. The complication of social relations, the rise of direct 'manual' management, enhancement of the role of special services, and mass hysteria surrounding security issues are just some of the current problems. How will the rise of these perceived threats transform the democratic nature of modern states?*

Naturally, new challenges change the relations between what used to be called 'civil society' and centralized structures of state power. In my opinion, we should distinguish between two phenomena. The first one is a process of stratification of institutes of political representation which used to be the basis of the traditional 'democratic' model. Its principle axioms – pluaralism of political parties, competition between political programs, free choice of the voter between the competing elites — have all turned into vague, often rather formal statements. Parliament has ceased to perform its representative and legislative function as it has been squeezed out by 'government' that seeks to secure all powers in its own hands. The will of executive power has been replaced by the (purely fictional) will of 'sovereign' people, and the doctrine of 'popular sovereignty' has turned into a totemic mask, as pointed out by Hans Kelsen.

The second phenomenon is the mounting pressure of the executive power on citizens. Social life is dominated by individual political, economic, and financial elites all serving private interests. **This 'new transnational capitalistic class' dominates the processes of globalization from the height of crystal towers of world megalopolises.** And the party system has turned into a small apparatus that is both the source of its own legitimacy and the source of promoting the interests of large industrial and financial companies.

In this form, 'post-democratic' power performs a controlling and repressive function in relation to the behavior of private individuals. In Western countries the welfare state is fast becoming extinct. In its place we can observe the strengthening of penal control over the population from the side of both governmental and private structures, from the growth of segregation of the poorest social strata, and through **the steady increase in the number of prisoners. We are moving, as Loic Wacquant wrote, from the social state to the penal state**.

As far as I know the only attempt in non-Western countries to establish a political model alternative to liberal democracy is the 'Asian Values' project in the Indian-Pacific region. Such countries as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have made an attempt to establish political structures alternative to democracy and inspired by Confucian tradition.

In the modern state the system of interaction between elites and the societies managed by them is undergoing considerable change. How would you characterize this process?

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political elites in the form classic theorists like Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl conceived them. The doctrine of

'pluralistic democracy' together with 'sensibility and accountability' doctrines have been replaced by an **authoritarian populism that flourishes thanks to the instruments of mass communication**. Political parties acting as a bureaucratic apparatus of the state bargain among themselves and with other actors of corporate polyarchy, denying any control or sanctions in relation to themselves and ensuring huge self-financing. Personally, I do not see any chance of restoring relations between citizens and the 'democratic elite.'

gets worse day by day. We should not forget either the phenomenon of terrorism: I mean the dual phenomenon of wars and aggressions (Anglo-American wars against Afghanistan) and the imminent terrorist response of the Islam world (someone once said that 'a terrorist is the one who has been terrorized'). In our world, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is terror that is legitimate, not a global civil society.

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■ *Civil society was formed in the struggle against the claims of the state to enlarge its powers. States are now globalizing alongside the simultaneous emergence of a global civil society. How will this simultaneous, parallel development of global states and global societies take place?*

If by the global state you mean a structure which has global centralized power that could be concentrated in the hands of one government representing — to a certain extent — expectations and interests of the world population, I'd say that there is no such state today. A global state cannot be a neo-empire state where the political power of one superstate dominates.

I do not see signs of the development of a global civil society either. The world is divided into a group of strong states and a huge group of poorer and poorest countries. 20% of rich states swallow up 90% of the world's wealth produced annually, while 20% of poor countries do with just 1% of it. And the situation

gy. Do you think future developments in these technologies will have a significant impact on the evolution of current forms of democracy?

There is no doubt that the main role in transforming Western democracy has been the mass media, and television in particular. Multimedia businesses continue to applaud new information and technological breakthroughs as was the case in the beginning of the era of interactive communication. A growth of political culture and competence is said to be the positive result, as well as the improvement of people's participation in the creation of policy. Indeed, thanks to new complex devices and systems, opinion survey systems, automated programs of getting feedback, and of course cable television, citizens can amuse themselves with daily political 'do-it-yourself' exercises. **They say the electronic agora will cease to be a myth and will usher in an era of 'democracy of immediate referenda.' I do not see any reasons for such optimism**. The asymmetric,

selective, and non-interactive nature of electronic communications is unlikely to change in the future. There won't be more opportunity for users either to choose information they receive or criticize it. The independence of users will be at even greater risk because the strategies of multimedia communications will tend to use covert persuasion. **Political communications being dependent on TV ratings, theatrics, and certain actors, will have less and less rational content.** By using TV systematically, political leaders will appeal to citizen-consumers with an offer of their 'products' in full conformity with the accurate strategy of TV marketing.

We cannot deny that it was in the shortest possible time that the World Wide Web became the most effective instrument of spreading cultural, scientific, economic, and political information as well as the most popular means of communication between people. However, opinions differ when it comes to its influence in the sphere of political interaction. There are experts, and I am among them, who pay attention to the lack of time, attention, and knowledge which are essential for people's political participation (in spite of advances of the Internet). Nor should we forget that new technologies have aggravated global inequality. The so called 'digital divide' splits the 'globalized world' into two parts, with only 6% of the world population plugged into the Internet. In Europe there are 41 times more Internet users than in Africa, though the population of Africa is hundreds of millions more. 60% of Internet users live in Canada and the USA, while only 2% live in Africa and the Middle East. ■

Danilo Zolo was speaking with Julia Netesova