

Making Democratic Political Culture

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The essay deals with the criterion and the distortion of making democratic political culture the basis of the democratic political community in the context of the traumatic historical experiences. The historical traumas of the communities may lead to a fluid or vacuum situation, a non-democratic consolidation, a fall back to personal power, even political hysteria if the assessment of the situation is wrong and bad aims are chosen; to a situation that could bring almost all the countries of Europe to the brink of disaster, and only those countries that could recall democratic political culture and education will be able to keep up with the rise of democratic crowd emotion. A comparative European research into the ways and means of processing collective traumas is not only an area that might shed new light on political phenomena, but a requirement of democratic functioning.

Introduction

There are obvious phenomena involved in the move from the liberal consolidation of constitutional patriotism to the different forms of national collectivism, including ethnicist discourse, and the demand for recompensing national grievances in numerous Central, Eastern and Southern countries of Europe. This is not independent of the fact that these societies have been split, the majorities have lost their sense of security, and the parties involved in the constitutional regime change have exhausted themselves. What is the criterion of making democratic political culture? Which are the reasons of its distortion? I approach this question from the aspect of the unprocessed individual and collective traumas.

The Background of Tolerance

In modern pluralistic democratic societies, citizens with different values and worldviews live together and cooperate. They have acknowledged, and have to continually acknowledge, that there is no single salutary system of values accepted by all. This was demonstrated by the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly the Thirty Years' War, where both Catholics and Protestants were convinced that they, and only they, knew the way of salvation, but neither had the physical power to

force the other to accept their conviction. They thus had to acquiesce in their inability to lead the lost herd on to the right way, and to the other group that was praying in accordance with its own belief. They did not accept the convictions of the other as true, they continued to brand those who confessed them, but suffered that the ‘heretics’, the ‘followers of the Antichrist’, the ‘idolaters’, and ‘papists’ had their places of worship and congregations in foreign lands, then in the far-off places of their countries. Later, they would tolerate the others building their houses of worship and communities on the fringes of their towns and villages, although their doors were not to open towards the centres of these towns or villages. They were later forced to extend this tolerance to those confessing even more different faiths, different cultures, vagrants, even atheists and those with different sexual inclinations. True, the religious wars of the twentieth century, the institutionalized civil wars of totalitarian systems, annihilated this tolerance in several places, but, after the fall of these totalitarian systems, it seemed that non-civil war conditions would be restored. The only difference being that restoration and rebuilding were a new making at the same time – the making of a social organization based on equal human dignity, freedom and democracy, which sees human life as belonging to human dignity.¹

The Cohesion of a Democratic Community

In order to make a political community, what can those living in a country do when unbridgeable gaps separate them from one another and when they do not want to wage unceasing civil war against one another?

Primarily that they establish the rules of the game, procedural forms and patterns of socialization again and again which everyone exercises, upholds and has others uphold. This implies that all members of the community accept, as the lowest common denominator, certain shared fundamental values, equal human dignity, freedom and democracy, the sovereignty of the people as the source of power, and – as an antidote to the amount and centralization of power – the system of the division of powers, checks and balances, which are always in need of further development.

Conviction and conscience become a private affair, the ever-enlarging borders of the private sphere are increasingly accepted, from which the criterion of belonging to the community is cut away more and more. It is increasingly defined as the equality of rights and obligations, the making and maintenance of political community, and the community action of individuals. Yet the repression of external and personal power requires refined forms of social integration, the voluntary, free and continually recreated forms of the cohesion of the political community. If these exist, they are accepted and exert their influence, and seems taken for granted and self-evident from afar. We sense that this is not the case when they do not operate for some reason or another.²

Unprocessed Historical Traumas

The regime change of the countries of North Eastern, Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, which had been occupied by the Soviet Empire and turned into vassal and

colonial dictatorships, and the making of democratic frameworks to replace authoritarian and oligarchic regimes, could not go hand in hand with the growth of the self-evident patterns and forms of democratic political culture and socialization. Not because of some inherent backwardness, but because the patterns and forms of democratic political culture and socialization were lacking and continue to be lacking, and making them has been a task, not a given. Shaping and having them accepted is made even more difficult by the spread of seeking momentary political gain, an organization aristocracy becoming established, concentrations of power being unchecked under the pretext of efficiency, and the determining role of 'a make-believe capitalism, capitalist abuse of feudal relations'. The situation is further aggravated by the fragmentariness of political culture, its being defined by antagonisms and being closed unto itself, and experiences being passed on without coming to terms with them. Former offence, fear and humiliation have a role in almost everyone's life, leading to an attitude seeking to guarantee that the offence will never again be repeated and is excluded, and for the offspring of the offended to pursue amends – after all he is a victim.³

It is the competing roles of victimhood and pursuit of amends that are at the heart of symbolic civil-war situations, the participants of which assume increasingly absurd forms of conduct in the symbolic spaces and time of the political community, seeking to appropriate them and fill them and the times and events they represent with new, often anachronistic meanings.

An astonishingly great number of people believe that they have to, are able to, and can, decide whether Nazism or Communism caused greater suffering and humiliation, and reinterpret historical catastrophes and turning points. Their opposite meanings are not simply the consequences of incomprehension and insensitivity, but inner wounds unhealed. This leads to a confusion of desire, possibility and reality, the corruption of the sense of reality and the crippling of the ability to solve problems. Some 70 years ago, this was what the political thinker István Bibó (Budapest, 1911–1979) called 'political hysteria', applying a concept drawn from psychopathology to individual nations in the metaphorical vein of the crisis literature of the period.⁴

Political Hysteria

The starting point of a political hysteria is a historical experience that is a shock to the entire community. It leads to an ambition that the community obtains a full guarantee that this shock is never repeated. This in turn debilitates thought. Problems on the agenda increasingly become irresolvable if they can in some way be related to the catastrophe. A false state of affairs comes into being, where the community fails to face that its strategy and system are in crisis, and so turns into a cul-de-sac. This is then glossed over by a 'pseudo-solution', the 'illusion of solution', a 'formula for reconciling that which is irreconcilable' or a 'compromise'. Then a false reality is created, which is doggedly insisted upon. This is bound to result in self-esteem disorder. Hysteria is increasingly incorporated into identity, which leads to the excessive wielding of power and a sense of inferiority, wanting to live off entitlements, the devaluation of genuine performance, the disproportionate reverence of sheer success, the pursuit of great amends, the belief in the

magic power of spells and propaganda, and the convoluted protection of false reality. This results in a compulsion to repeat, to pursue further amends even after having obtained amends, which is bound to end up in catastrophe.⁵

This is what happened or is happening, from Germany to Greece, from Poland to the Baltic States, from Ireland to the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, from Italy to Spain, all over Europe, and even more so outside it.⁶

In April 2007, the Soviet heroes' memorial was removed from the centre of Tallin to a cemetery. This was self-evident for the Estonians, because the Soviets were just as much occupiers as the Germans, only they stayed a lot longer, for 50 years or more. However, the Russians who were brought into the city (to be more precise, their descendants) saw this in a quite different light, which erupted in several days of riots.⁷

The courageous Spanish magistrate Baltasar Garzón, who a decade earlier had issued an international warrant for the arrest of former Chilean dictator Pinochet for having Spanish citizens tortured and murdered, started an investigation in March 2010 against Falangist forces for having committed crimes against humanity during the Civil War. Almost immediately afterwards, another judge initiated a procedure against him on grounds of the lapse of these crimes. In order to avoid being removed from office, Garzón had to resign.⁸

Pitted against each other, competing programmes of identity and memory building, as often as not, break through the limits of symbolic civil war. Jedwabne, Naoussa, Londonderry, and Srebrenica are place names of quite unsymbolic civil war.

Competing Regimes of Memory

In the Hungarian political culture, the various grievances, fears and pursuits of amends are manifest in the different interpretations of symbolic dates and traditions. Different interpretations of 1989 include varying interpretations of 1956. Radically different interpretations of 1944 and 1945, the *Shoa*, the opposite or at least different experiences of liberation and occupation, influence the variant interpretations of 1956. The varying experiences, fears and offences of the different experience communities of 1944 and 1945 include the variant interpretations of 1920 and 1918–1919. These in turn include the differences between the interpretations of 1867 and 1848–1949 by the communities favouring different traditions. Driven by the incessant compulsion to reinterpret, all these bear the divisive experiences and repetitive compulsions of historical traumas, wars, civil wars, dictatorships, genocides, population exchanges, territorial losses, regime changes, revolutions and counter-revolutions, piled one upon the other, undigested, suppressed, fossilized, yet as painful as ever and calling for amends.⁹

Division will hardly cease if we refuse to take knowledge or merely brand them. It is better to try to define and describe the causes of divisions and the types of parallel memory building with which they associate.

The Humanization of Power

If we want to weigh the opportunities of stabilizing democratic political culture, we will need to find a conceptual framework for this. The primary standard to measure political

givens and opportunities by is whether they assist or hinder the decrease of pain, suffering, defencelessness, and the hierarchic division of society. Originally and for a long time, this was the criteria for distinguishing between Right and Left in politics, but it lost its meaning due to Nazism and Bolshevism.¹⁰

The meaning of political development is the humanization of power from personal authority to impersonal service. This is a measure whereby a return to personal power is a fall back, an adventurist, romantic and irresponsible enterprise, the price of which will be paid not by the one who wields that power, but the community that the power is wielded over. This is because politics is a series of experiments that takes several generations to carry out, and its success or failure is seen not by its starter, but its subsequent suffering generations. Attempts at concentrating power in the name of efficiency and ensuring the privileges of a new organizational aristocracy require checks, and newer forms separating powers. As opposed to erstwhile power exercised in and derived from the grace of God, the societies based on the principles of freedom and democracy will be overcome by collective madness if those principles are not met.¹¹

The experience of liberation from oppressive authorities and the community itself taking possession of power may lead to a fluid or vacuum situation, a non-democratic consolidation, a fall back to personal power, even *political hysteria* if the assessment of the situation is wrong and the bad aims are chosen; to a situation that brought almost all the countries of Europe to the brink of disaster, and only those countries that were able to recall democratic political culture and education could keep up with the rise of democratic crowd emotion. If members of a political community have experiences of historical catastrophe, they are often overwhelmed by fears of the annihilation of their community. Behind these fears, what we find are wrong aims, false patterns and misleading historical experiences and traumas, which could and should be recognized by reasonable assessment and empathy. We must therefore first and foremost clarify the situation by clearly distinguishing between what is desirable, possible and real.¹²

The Meanings of Nationalism

A widespread explanation sees the rebirth of the all-destroying fanaticism of the religious wars in the rise of nationalism. All the more so because replacing the enemy image of the totalitarian ideologies, the class and racial enemy, with the national enemy image, we have the entire worldview remaining, including all its well-practised destructive mechanisms and negative patterns of socialization.

However, if we do not deem the programme of nation making and building fatally damaging and necessarily destructive, we must also note that, at the level of principles, nationalisms mutually invalidate each other, each regarding itself superior to the other. If we do not regard nation making and building as the work of Satan, if all the negative phenomena associated with the existence of nations and national self-determination are not *a priori* given, they must then be open to explanation.¹³

It is worth distinguishing between the different meanings of nationalism; *patriotism*, which is a sense of loyalty and belonging to one's immediate environment, an emotion, not an ideology; and the *programme* and the actual *process* of nation building, and the

ideology which professes the superiority of one's own nation and the inferiority of the others. Nowadays, the first interpretation is often forgotten, and only the latter one is focused upon, while all four meanings should be borne in mind. It is individual and collective self-determination that takes the place of personal authority by the grace of God, but its method of application and procedure are not yet in proportion to the validity of the principle.¹⁴

This is why it is important to grasp and appreciate the concrete experiences of the processes of nation making and building. When the decision makers of the European Union and their counsels recently declared that Cyprus is a single nation, they misunderstood the situation, because the island is the delineation and separation area of the Greek and Turkish nations as they were established, just as Northern Ireland is the area of the separation of the Irish and British nations.¹⁵

The political transformation of the successor and satellite states of the Soviet Empire and Yugoslavia, their processes of restoration and modernization are simultaneously attempts at foundation.¹⁶ Their substance much depends on their environment, but also on their ability to digest their past. There are two narratives and programmes for this; the templates, the political languages and enemy images, of following the European model and national self-centredness.¹⁷

National Conceit

The discourse of lead-following, imitation, linear progress has a widespread currency throughout the world, just as has the type of discourse holding that national characteristics are a value to be protected and asserted. Both these public and political discourses have a definitive role in Central-East, South Europe, but they can be found in Northern and Western Europe, the United States, Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

The identity programmes of opening up and closing determine the conflict between Russian Zapadniks and Slavophiles. One of the most powerful formulations of the Slavophile position was by the poet Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev:

One cannot understand Russia by reason,
One cannot measure her by a common measure,
She has a special kind of grace,
One can only believe in Russia.

It was likewise a determining in Poland to contrast natural and artificial development, cosmopolitan civilization and national identity, the claim to follow the Western pattern and the myth of the Sarmatian national self.¹⁸

It is now obvious that, as long as texts in the various North, Central-East and Southern European languages could not be accessed in the world languages, we could regard the elements of the ideological programmes of nation building as national characteristics. Now we know that the mythicizing of lead-following and national characteristics were parts of ideologies of nation building and looked very much alike from Estonia to Turkey, from Ireland to Greece. These elements were then transformed and given new contexts in twentieth- and twenty-first century discourses. The types of discourse we have regarded as the Hungarian versions of following the European lead and national self-centredness

belonged and continue to belong in this group.¹⁹ And the related, opposing regimes of memory are not the workings of a few irresponsible, trouble-maker demagogues, but the manifestations of unarticulated, unexpressed, undigested, unmourned loss and pain. Undigested, this material can fire demagogy. They are not the exception but the rule in twentieth- and twenty-first century Europe, fostering worlds closed unto themselves and obstructing the unceasing making of unified democratic political communities.

Conclusion

Of course, I do not believe that the mere exploration and comprehension of the traumas underlying the hysterias will solve the unceasing task of making democratic political culture. These will only mitigate the collective madness. Making democratic political culture requires not only the constitutional frames of a liberal democracy as a *sine qua non*, but also the processes, models and experiences of democratic socialization, all the many efforts that underlie it, including exploration and comprehension of collective traumas. A comparative European research into the ways and means of processing collective traumas is therefore not only an area that might shed new light on political phenomena, but a requirement of democratic functioning.

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