Political Parties: Obstacle to Democracy

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If understood to the letter, a Democracy must be a stateless society. Power belongs to the people insofar as the people exercise it themselves
Giovanni Sartori [1]

The contemporary political model, vulgarly named democracy, is undergoing deep crisis, which can be attributed to many of its systemic features and the political parties are among the main reasons for it. The Party, once encompassing massive social support and powerful movements, has become today synonymous with dishonesty, greed for power and corruption. Many have embarked on journey to recreate it in different ways that strive at mimicking the grassroots, decentralized character of contemporary social movements and the internet.

Some party formations emerged, as they claim, from the movement of the squares that swept Europe in the beginning of 2010's decade, like the Spanish Podemos. Others were influenced by contemporary hacker culture like the numerous Pirate parties. Some former occupy activists initiated the "Occupy the Democrats" campaign, attempting at using the logic of the Occupy movement for overtaking the Democratic Party of the US. All of these and other similar initiatives however remain with questionable results at best.

Totalitarian birth

The negative outlook that political parties have is not due to some distortion but logical continuation of the essence on which electoral politics rest. The introduction of political parties into European public life in the late 17th century

should be considered not as step towards democratization of society but as continuation of the oligarchic tradition.

In England, as political theorist Hanna Pitkin explains[2], representation was introduced from above, by the King, as a matter of administrative control and royal convenience over non-royal localities. Situated between the monarchical elite and subordinated communities, representatives, with their role being institutionalized, began viewing themselves as single, continuing body, pursuing its own interests. Political representation, as foundational basis of the political party, slowly became a matter of privilege, to be fought for, rather than a burden or a mere task.

Their oppressive character is also being demonstrated by the philosopher Simone Weil for whom the Party is to a certain extent heritage of political terror[3]. Its role in the popular uprisings of Europe in the last centuries has been expression of its oligarchical nature, sabotaging democratic efforts "from below" in the name of top-to-bottom solutions offered by the State. Weil's conclusion that totalitarianism is the *original sin of all political parties* echoes Mikhail Tomsky's famous saying: "One party in power and all the others in jail"[4].

In popular uprisings and revolutions societies express certain tendency towards spontaneous grassroots social organizing based on councils and local assemblies. This is what Hannah Arendt calls *lost treasure of revolution* – the creation of truly public space in which every citizen can freely and equally participate in the management of society[5]. This "treasure", as a break in the bureaucratic oligarchical tradition, becomes target of centralized state power and political parties, whose existance this new social direction radically challenges.

The current system, at whose core is the party politics, has nothing to do with democracy in its authentic sense. Instead

of providing the means for people to directly express their views, concerns and solutions on public affairs, political parties tend to exploit popular passions, polarizing societies into majorities and minorities, using the former as a tool to serve their narrow interests.

A common and essential characteristic of all political parties, both on the Left and the Right, as noted recently by author Raul Zibechi[6], is their **obsession with power**. For if they are to succsesfuly fulfill their electoral task that justifies their existence, they must secure for themselves vast amounts of authority. Yet, as electoral politics place political parties in constant competition on national level, while foreign states and private companies are also constantly trying to interfere with the dominant discourse, power is never enough and soon becomes an end in itself. And since there is never limit for the power that each party strives at possessing, it comes as no surprise why so many thinkers has come to view the institution of the party as essentially totalitarian.

One more way in which representative politics hinders democratic deliberation is the former's tendency towards encouragement of antisocial, disordered-like, behaviors. Clinical psychologist Oliver James claims that psychopathy thrives in hierarchical organizations. According to him "triadic [personality disordered] behavior flourishes where ruthless, devious selfishness is advantageous and where an individual is very concerned to gain power, resources or status"[7]. Jacques Ranciere, in an interview for the Greek National Television ERT3[8], also suggests that political representation and electoralism attracts the worst of people, i.e. those that seek power for power's sake. Thus the competitive and hierarchical nature of political parties attracts ambitious, narcissistic individuals, turning them into psychopaths (or encourages them to act as such).

Political “betrayal”

By recognizing the logical connection between representative institutions (like political parties) and unlimited hunger for power we can easely debunk the widely propagated myth of “politicians’s betrayal” of pre-election promises. Its worth noting that this mythical narrative most often comes from electoral candidates or thinkers that support the *status quo* and through it they strive at scapegoating individual “traitors” so as to maintain the integrity of the party system.

Cornelius Castoriadis compares would-be-representatives with merchants of junk that try to push their stuff on us, even if that means saying lies[9]. As he says, what electoral competitors are doing is **trying to deceive, not betray us.** Professional politicians are not traitors but servants of other interests. The electoral race requires competing parties to outbid each other on promises they don’t intend to keep and images they will maintain as long as they bring them votes.

The notion of public interest, most often depicted as national, is a good example for the kind of deception that is being used by political parties. It is constantly being invoked by governments and electoral candidates to serve them as cover for their quest for authority and generate them popular support. In short, politicians attempt at gaining or strengthening their own power by deceiving the essentially powerless electorate that the immense political inequality, which is constantly being reproduced by representative democracy, is of mutual benefit. Thus, it is no wonder why the language of patriotism and nationalism is among the most preferred by governments of any kind.

It is understandable, however, that people might feel betrayed by political parties. In a representative system that strips society from any meaningful means for effective self-instituting people are left with no other options in the

public space but to either place their hopes (and thus their votes) on certain electoral competitor, or resort to abstention from voting. But in reality parties were not and can never truly be on the side of grassroots communities, first and foremost because they are immensely more politically privileged than them.

Nowadays this matter is being further complicated by the dual processes of globalization and financialization. In the contemporary neoliberal era elected politicians, as Jerome Roos explains[10], are being reduced to managers whose function is increasingly that of making the state apparatus work for the profits of bankers and businessmen. It is not to say that the representative institutions are stripped from their powers, but they are being separated even further from society by additional layers of multinational corporate interests.

Party membership and individuality

Contemporary representative oligarchies are making it impossible for individuals and communities to intervene in public affairs without joining or intervening with political parties. Official tools for citizen participation like petitioning and referendums most often have non-obligatory character and are doomed to fail if not backed by any party. Citizenship today is nothing but illusory, since people are forced with the dilemma between withdrawing altogether from the public sphere or submit to party interest. Instead of citizens we have electorate whose concerns for social matters are being crushed by the party’s quest for influence and power.

Unlike the pluralism nurtured by deliberative bodies for participatory decision-making like councils and popular assemblies, political parties demand the maintenance of a party line, even though nowadays they seem to appear more flexible in this aspect. By joining a party, one is expected

to agree to its entire program or at least submit to it, since in crucial moments he/she will be expected to support it or leave. Even if he has not previously been familiar with it, he is supposed to endorse it in its entirity, or to not expect much from his newly acquired membership. Often different aspects of such programs appear to be contradictory with each other, since in their race for power parties sometimes take mutually exclusive positions. As Simone Weil concludes[11], whoever joins a political party is expected to submit his thinking to the authority of the party.

Although parties claim that they offer space for political participation and education to their members and supporters, the reality appears to be much different. What they do instead is spreading rigorous ideological propaganda through which the party elite to exercise control over the new reqruits and the electorate. Parties that attempt at not doing so find it difficult to achieve significant electoral victories.

As a result of this propaganda party members and supporters tend to adopt certain ideological and political “brands”. This “branding” replaces political thinking. One begins approaching public affairs as member of this party and supporter of that ideology, instead of critically evaluating social problems and individually or collectively developing solutions to them.

Parties tend to create positions in favor of or against certain option and call on the electorate to stand behind their position. Taking sides replaces public deliberation with reality being twisted by each party accordingly to its stance, instead of being analyzed in **contextual manner**. Many have suggested that this logic has spread into all spheres of human life.

Handling popular dissatisfaction

As mentioned above, political parties are bureaucratic

organizations that breed oligarchy, not democracy. Their electoral hierarchical nature enforces statecraft, rather than direct public participation, while giving the illusion of being the link between the public and the institutions of authority.

The attitude political parties adopt is twofold. On the one hand, they do everything they can so as to reassert their hold on state power through making powerful allies, briberies, backstage schemes and mass propaganda. On the other hand, they have to respond to demands and matters rised “from below”, by social movements and popular resistance, either by crushing them or by introducing decorative reforms meant at reducing the pressure.

This second level of handling social dissatisfaction can be separated into two subcategories. The first one includes smear campaigns, briberies and threatenings that are being directed towards activists and community organizers so as their movements’s social credibility and integrity to be hurt. This approach is often used by governments on the Right, as recently demonstrated clearly by Donald Trump’s administration[12]. The second one is compounded by the cooptation of social movements through offering positions of power to influential activists and inactment of reforms that create the illusion of specific issues being resolved, as was the case with some *Pink Tide* governments of South America[13]. This is preferred strategy by the Left when in power.

Institutions beyond parties

It is important to note here, that the problem with political parties is not that they are institutions, as some of their most vigorous critics would insist, but that they are **bureaucratic organizations**. Real, direct democracy, where emancipated citizens directly decide on all issues of public life and are actively involved in the implementation of the taken decisions, requires institutions with participatory

character, that are however embedded in and nurturing one radical imaginary, that makes the values and goals of democratic life thinkable and possible.

Unlike the above mentioned grassroots institutions, political parties participate completely in the imaginary of heteronomy. Their form, structure, organization and ideology are essentially bureaucratic and strengthens oligarchy, whether in more or less liberal outlook. Their very existence is a potential obstacle to democracy, constantly suggesting that people are not mature enough to participate in the public sphere as citizens and instead guardians must be nominated to govern them.

A society without institutions, as Castoriadis suggests[14], cannot exist. Thus the efforts at dismantling the state apparatus and other contemporary bureaucratic institutions that enforce inequality and oppression cannot be proceeded without the establishment of parallel grassroots institutions that nurture equality and emancipation. Their creation and maintenance certainly will have its difficulties as no social activity, including that of autonomous organizations and movements, can go unaffected by the dominant order. No one can completely separate himself or his group from the overall of society, but only this necessary step of **exercising democracy** can allow transformation towards forms of social organization and civic culture. And this necessarily includes popular grassroots organizing beyond institutional forms of oligarchy, such as the political party.

Conclusion

Political parties are part of the problem, not the solution. The high levels of alienation and passivity in our contemporary societies are essentially product of capitalism and representation. The electoral spectacle offered by competing political parties seems to resemble to a big degree the one, created by the neoliberal market. The hopes of many

on the Left that the former could potentially restrain the latter are naive, to say the least. What they essentially are is different forms of heteronomy, I.e. determination of people's life by outside sources, beyond their reach or control.

Democracy, because of its popularity and potential, is being used by the ruling elites and their intellectual supporters, to mask the oligarchic nature of the contemporary party system. This has mislead many into blaming popular passions for the oppression, theft and exploitation being done by one government after another. Thus the far-right, with its call for diminishing freedoms in the name of security has grown in popularity.

It is not democracy to be blamed, but the complete lack of it. The absence of broad public participation allows to competing ruling elites to get hold on power and do as they please. For them popular deliberation is undesirable as it will end their reign over society and thats why they replace it with party electoralism. The dominant institutions, on which their authority is being based are constructed so as to embody this "hatred of democracy", to borrow the phrase developed by Jacques Ranciere[15].

For significant social change to take place, a mere imitation of politics, a simulation of public action, like the one exercised by political parties, will simply not do. What is desperately needed is what Hanna Pitkin calls real experience of active citizenship. And this necesserily goes through the reinvention of democracy beyond political parties.

Notes:

[1] Amadeo Bertolo: *Democracy and Beyond* in "Democracy and Nature" Vol.5, No.1, 1993
[2] https://www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NR08-Parlement/Pitkin-RE

PRESENTATION.html
[3] Simone Weil: *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, New York Review of Books 2013, p.15
[4] Op. Cit. 3
[5] Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, Penguin Books 1990, pp215-282
[6] https://freedomnews.org.uk/venezuela-state-power-when-the-left-is-the-problem/
[7] https://new-compass.net/articles/will-disordered-always-rule-us
[8] Interviewed for the series Τόποι Ζωής (Topoi Zois) of the Greek National Television ERT3 (available online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zmzJxlw2GM)
[9] Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoriadis Reader* (ed. David Ames Curtis), Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1997, p.41
[10] https://roarmag.org/essays/autonomy-revolution-movements-democracy-capitalism/
[11] Simone Weil: *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, New York Review of Books 2013, p.43
[12] https://newrepublic.com/article/144592/trump-creating-propaganda-state
[13] https://isj.org.uk/latin-america-new-left-governments/
[14] Cornelius Castoriadis: *Figures of the Thinkable*, Stanford University Press 2007, p.124
[15] Jacques Ranciere: *Hatred of Democracy*, Verso 2014