
HUMAN AFFAIRS

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ARTICLES

PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRACY

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Our society has found itself in the situation that, by and large, can be characterized as an effort to build a state which would be democratic in the true sense of the word. In this connection, the most topical question appear to be: what is the true sense of democracy and what does the philosophy on democracy look like?

Democracy is a form of power whose foundational attributes are liberty, equality, and order. Consequently, as one refers to democracy in the true meaning of the word, he means a consideration of these principles. Actually, our society has only embarked upon learning democracy, and the urgent problems our society is facing unambiguously evince this.

With regard to the philosophy of democracy one should remark that each of us understands it in its own way and explains it rather idiosyncratically, which tends to bring about the situation where within the framework of the philosophy of democracy we have failed to reach a reasonable consensus or to arrive at a definite conception. We blindly reject arguments of the other side and, regrettably, we have not developed a habit of listening to other opinions. That situation of ours is evocative of M. Buber's "Me and You" and his famous conception of dialogue. The essence of this dialogue lies in the conviction that a more advanced type of human community is only achievable under the proviso that a man opens him/herself to the other in an open dialogue between Me and You.¹ In other words, a man stands the chance to reveal his/her own self and its value not until he/she has proved to have found his way to the other and to the constant awareness of the other, i.e. of You.

Our democracy, I would suggest, is lacking this "Buber-esque" construal of togetherness, of mutual dialogue, and of mutual understanding. A democratic society is prone to be challenged, which is also our case, with lots of issues and problems awaiting efficient resolution, among these, for instance, belong questions of liberty, authority, sovereignty, power, responsibility, etc.

Within the framework of the topic of democracy, I would like to turn to the past, namely, to J. J. Rousseau and his "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among People", where he emphasized in the development of things a "moment in which violence yielded to the law and nature came to obey laws as well". It was the moment,

¹ BUBER, M.: *Já a Ty*. Praha, Mladá fronta 1969, pp. 9-10.

J. J. Rousseau proceeds, in which the strong could make up their mind to serve the weak and the people decided to attain a special peace for the price of genuine happiness. "All the philosophers who engaged themselves in the investigation of the foundations of society, perceived it needful to descend as far back as the natural state, yet none of them managed to reach it."²

In his early writings, it is the appearance of private ownership that J. J. Rousseau places at the root of evil as such and charges it with triggering inequalities as to the amount of property. All that, complemented by the division of labour, threw people into a web of interdependences upon each other. In the natural state, he argues, people knew no dependence, they enjoyed equality, none of them being superior to another, though essentially people actually lived an isolated life of lonely creatures. What with the appearance of private ownership, the natural state comes to its end, and there arises a society whose development is circumscribed by the right of the stronger, by the divergence of appetites, and by the will to power.

J. J. Rousseau discriminates between the two kinds of inequality among people: the natural one as proceeding from natural dissimilarities and the moral, or political, as resulting from a contract founded on the people's consent. The essence of the moral, or political inequality stems from the circumstance that for some it implies a privilege, whereas for others it is a kind of coercion to obedience. It is in *The Social Contract* that these ideas of Rousseau's have been elaborated more neatly and concisely. Here private ownership occupies a different position and fulfils other tasks in the lives of both individuals and society. Property ought to be privately owned and it also is the foundation of Rousseau's civil society. A government, he holds, must exercise rigorous justice, it must also be honest and protect the poor from the encroachments of the rich; further, it must care about its most humble citizen as about any other. For Rousseau, property is the foundation of peoples genuine civil rights in a civil society.

In a much greater measure than in his other works, Rousseau is preoccupied in *The Social Contract* with the legal organization of society. Each and every person contributes his/her personality and power to the general will, hence each individual citizen is taken as an inalienable part of the whole.

Rousseau suggests that everybody actually makes a contract with his/her own self and he/she is bound by it similar to a member of the government in relation to individual citizens or a member of the state in relation to the sovereign, while the sovereign is understood as the united people. The united people, Rousseau contends, have and cannot have any opposing interest, a sovereign power is in no need of any guarantees regarding its subjects, as it is impossible that the body might want to do any harm to all its members.³

² ROUSSEAU, J. J.: *Rozpravy*. Praha 1978, p. 56.

³ Ibid., pp. 216-217.

So a people is superior to the individuals of which it is composed. It is true that by a social contract a man would give up some of his rights and freedoms for the benefit of the people, that he/she would lose his natural liberty as well as his unlimited right to everything he could attain. But, on the other hand, he obtains civil liberty and the right of ownership. *The Social Contract* is testimony to J. J. Rousseau's evolution of thought in the sense that he came to see civil liberty as higher than that proceeding from nature.

For Rousseau, the appropriate types of government are democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. As for democracy, however, he considers it suitable only for small states, where property and political equality are dominant.

Though insistence on the establishment of social equality, the acceptance of the contractual theory; his emphasis upon the principle of the people's sovereignty, etc. Rousseau ranks among the most progressive French thinkers who considerably transgressed the framework of their day.

In a way J. J. Rousseau is furthered also by J. G. Herder, namely, when it comes to the construal of human society. For Herder, human society is not severed from nature, though, since the emergence of the family, it has been guided by its own laws. Herder believed people should remove all contradiction and suffering from their lives and do their best for the instalment of a harmonious society. Cleavages, he maintained, are removable on the basis of conciliatory understanding, the latter being arrived at through pantheist universal compassion - a feeling of empathy. For such understanding, however, it is essential that people listen to Being.

For the furtherance of this historical perspective, one should not leave out I. Kant and his understanding of liberty. Kant's concern with the issue of liberty first of all compelled him to solve a momentous problem: does human freedom really exist? Kant underlines the autonomy and idiosyncracy of human freedom, in which he had been inspired by Rousseau. These affinities with Rousseau notwithstanding, certain divergences between the two are apparent. They lie in that Kant, while dealing with that problem, is more precise and consistent than Rousseau, especially when it comes to human inner morality. According to Kant, human liberty is only invalidated by the existence of inner moral law. The latter, for Kant, is the Categorical Imperative. In this connection, the following question invites itself: why should moral law be formulated as an imperative, i.e., as an order?

By an order we usually understand a certain amount of coercion where the relations between people are defined by the fact that one of them gives orders and the other obeys them. As far as these relations are concerned, Kant sees no inconsistency, as, he maintains, human will is not congruent with moral law, since human interests and ends are not always moral and good. For Kant, human will is natural cause. A man is compelled to proceed empirically, and it is only when human will, under the pressure of reason, turns away from the ends which promise certain pleasure, to such, which are in themselves certain moral values, it appears as if filtered off into the moral will. The above means it ceases to be a natural cause and comes to be a moral cause, i.e. a cause

which is born from freedom. Yet to have performed this, human will must be coerced into it. That is, however, within the possibilities of man himself alone.

It is only human reason that can ordain human will to do good in the world. For Kant, moral values are at the same time orders and moral obligations. Man can, but need not, respect them, which is a portion of his freedom. At that the man must be always aware of his conduct's consequences and carry responsibility for them. According to Kant, therefore, a reasonable being's will can only be its own will within the idea of freedom, hence, in the practical perspective, it should be ascribed to all reasonable beings.⁴

Kant's conception of morality is great for its humanism and emphasis upon universal human values. It is dear to everybody who cares for Man. Even today one can say that we are actually materializing Kant's legacy in matters relating to the building of a reasonable world which rests on the principle of a reasonable dialogue.

In this perspective, it is necessary to emphasize that in this laconic historical excursion we have addressed J. J. Rousseau, J. G. Herder as well as I. Kant because the problems of democracy and those of the relationship between democracy and freedom, happened to attract T. G. Masaryk's attention too, and were resolved by him in the Rousseauean-Herderian-Kantian vein.

T. G. Masaryk was a proponent of a "democracy-in-constant-reform". It was his wont to apostrophize that democracy is not only concerned with the judgement of general things, moral things concern it as well.

Masaryk's humanism was a harmonious conformity between reason, feeling and human conduct. He adhered to the concept of natural law and he powerfully argued against violence. Masaryk dealt with the relationship of democracy and freedom. The latter was, for him, a human quality whose essence might be best materialized under democratic conditions. It is just the case of the Rousseauean-Herderian-Kantian problem in which a demand is voiced to the effect that philosophy should embrace both empirical investigations and rationalistic critique. It should also take into account challenges of human emotional attitude to the world.

One encounters a similar attitude towards the world on the part of man in one of our greatest philosophers, J. Patočka, whose philosophizing is, on the one hand, influenced by M. Heidegger (primarily by his "Being and Time") and on the other hand, by E. Husserl's phenomenology. In 1936 Patočka's "The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem" was published. The work is illustrative of his guiding theme that logically culminated in his "Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History". J. Patočka created a notion of the natural world within which he primarily concentrated on the analysis of the question what the natural world is, as well as on the critique of its grounding. Patočka studied man as he lives in the world in all the intricacy of the problem. In this he was

⁴ KANT, I.: *Základy metafyziky mravů*. Praha, Svoboda 1990, p. 110.

anxious to display that what appears to be quite clear is not everything, and it is only man who discloses what hides behind appearances.

Exactly at this moment, Patočka believes, that man sets off along the road of history. To grasp historicity through problematicity, that is the way Patočka is pointing in the sense that it is just at this junction that life starts the life that is no longer a life for its own sake, for the sake of some sort of survival. However, it appears to be something qualitatively different: the life that is a life in the name of other ends, the life for an opportunity, free human life. In Patočka's opinion, from the very outset political man is a man of history, a man of space open to freedom. "Freedom, in counterpart, is no less than a shock involving the whole sense of the former life... One is foreboding any longer, and one preaches any more, and none announces anything, and none is listening to "unshakable faith" any longer, now there is sight, while this sight it not merely looking at something which can be kept at a distance and which can be only stated.

While the former sense has been shaken and taken as the "small sense", at the same time there arises an impetus to a new sense, the impetus being palpable and insistent. This manifestness is not evidence of contemplation, or sight. It is a leap into a new sense which is realized within the clarity of the situation of problematicity."⁵

Patočka not only tends to the concrete but he also stresses the idea that our freedom is a prerequisite for understanding whatever positivity. In the long run, however, he embarks upon the problem of consciousness in our action.

He who lives in a democratic society, among whose fundamental values one finds freedom, ought to be responsible for the course of events around him.

In Patočka's phrase, our troubles with our freedom rest in our understanding of one of our opportunities - to leave things as they are, let them speak for themselves in a way that the whole complexity of a given problem should come to the fore, and that later on we should manage to choose adequate means for solving it.

CONCLUSION

Most adequately understood, democracy means the equality of rights for each individual in society, an opportunity of a free choice and decision as well as responsibility for one's action. The above implies that the individual should behave reasonably, i.e., that he consciously choose an optimum alternative within the framework of his opportunities for choice.

Such an attitude requires, however, that philosophy develop towards more structurality instead of placing accent upon ready-made knowledge, which means in its turn that philosophy should be variable and able to model situations in their concrete

⁵ PATOČKA, J.: *Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin*. Praha, Academia 1990, p. 147.

contexts. Among the prerequisites for a competitive way of reasoning I would put a premium on identifying one's projected aim. If, in connectedness to a given problem, one weighs the opportunities, then he should be able to make a concrete decision, which must be constantly verified and corrected, if need be. It is in this perspective that we meant freedom in a philosophical-practical sense. Yet freedom is not confined to this dimension alone. One can speak about freedom in its political and legal sense.

Ours has been a philosophical view of the problem of freedom.