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Bonding or Bridging?

Empowerment as a Task of Civil Society Activism[1]

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The concept of Civil Society is usually identified with, and often reduced to, the concept of the so-called Third Sector comprising the non-governmental organisations, NGOs, or, more widely, civil society organizations, CSOs. While this is largely correct, we should not forget that civil society is basically and essentially a concept referring to a spontaneous or bottom-up activity of individuals and groups who assemble together in order to achieve some aims they see as beneficial for themselves or society at large, without expecting the state or other public agencies to do them.

I shall argue that social spontaneous activity is now undergoing a major crisis, thus agreeing with the diagnosis about the decline of the public activity of citizens in most liberal-democratic countries. In my ten initial points I delineate an explanation of, and some justification for, this rather discouraging state of affairs, while the final two contain a suggestion concerning the direction in which positive solutions are to be sought.

(1) First of all I would like to stress that citizens' organised activity should not be seen as generally and univocally good. The concept of civil society is essentially ambiguous: as Robert D. Putnam argues, citizens may spontaneously organise themselves into groups tied by a bond, or they may aim to bridge some gaps[2]. Binding may be understood as a counterpart of the idea

of "community" or "Gemeinschaft", while bridging as a counterpart of society in the sense of "Gesellschaft", an opposition known from Ferdinand Tönnies. Bonding may also be compared, as Putnam did[3], to superglue, while bridging to the miraculous lubricant known as WD-40, which facilitates movement of parts that got stuck or flow of currents which got clogged.

Now, people may gather together in order to achieve some purposes beneficial for the society at large, or may be established to further their own particular interest. What seems nowadays obvious is that nowadays people tend to create groupings aiming to pursue their own particular aims, often at the cost of society, rather than otherwise. In other words, virtues of respect, generosity, kindness, helpfulness, dedication and commitment are becoming increasingly superseded by utilitarian self-interest. Indeed, many came to believe that greed is good.

Also, we are witnessing in Europe an increase of citizens' activity aiming to establish tightly bound xenophobic groups who perceive others as aliens or even enemies. I have in mind most especially undeniable examples of social activity as football hooliganism which in Poland has recently become a seedbed for Nazi ideology and a support for exclusivist public policies[4], the German Alternative für Deutschland or PEGIDA, and numerous other exclusivist movements now mushrooming across Europe. This means that civic activity cannot be seen as good in itself. What has to be taken into account in assessing its nature are values and goods it is aimed to achieve.

(2) The above undesirable forms of civic activity have to do with the presently dominant mode of the management of societies, which calls itself, misleadingly, democratic. Representative democracy as we know it has undergone major changes which gradually turn into its own opposition. What we now call democracy resembles more a "crowd management" rather than a participatory, rational deliberation in which each individual, or a citizen, may have a say, and be heard.

Hannah Arendt understood politics as a space of appearance. I prefer to express this idea by means of George Berkeley's solipsistic thesis *esse est percipi*. Translating this principle from the philosophy of knowledge onto the philosophy of practice, it means that in the public space one exists in so far as one manages to make oneself visible. As we all know, individuals in various spaces of public life do all sorts of different things to make themselves visible or noticeable.

The attempts to focus the attention of others upon oneself is nothing but a form of the struggle for recognition, diagnosed by Georg Wilhelm Hegel[5], and more recently by Axel Honneth[6]. The struggle for recognition, as an important aspect of human nature, was known already to Homer. There is nothing inherently evil or wrong in our attempt to capture the attention of others, to become relevant for them. This concept is a core idea of something which may be called the political aesthetics. The struggle for recognition may assume forms which do not sever the societal ties, on the contrary: it is indeed indispensable for establishing and sustaining them.

(3) However, contemporary modes of construction of the public space, and means made available to the individuals by the sophisticated technologies, promote and encourage pathological forms of the struggle for recognition which undermine social fabric and tear the existing relationships. Individuals do not perceive others as significant others, as members of a community or a society one wishes to belong to, but rather as a faceless, indistinguishable mass, a crowd of dispensable spectators of their own narcissistic performance. The others are perceived not so much as neighbours, partners, compatriots, brothers or comrades in a joint pursuit, but as a source of admiration which we hope to win from them. Our society has thus become a venue for a permanent spectacle we play before each other for our own benefit.

(4) The main pathological form of the struggle for recognition which dominates our society may be called ostentation[7]. Ostentation may be seen in the behaviour of politicians, managers, capitalists, artists, now known rather as celebrities, but also people of the churches, administrators, mayors, etc. An abundance of examples of ostentatious behaviour may be cited.

(5) Some of us are more successful in focusing the gaze of the others on themselves. For this reason, the ostentatiousness of some people has a putting-off effect on the others, chasing them away from the public sphere. They are thus becoming victims of a condition which I call the public agoraphobia. In other words, the present stress on the visibility generates two opposed phenomena: ostentation on the one hand, as well as its reverse, public agoraphobia, on the other. The latter means an immersion in the privacy, and an absenteeism from public activity, mollified only by consumption, luxurious or elementary, genuine or illusory.

Ostentatious behaviour not only generates public agoraphobia; it is also an encouragement or a permission to emulate it. For example, words of a Polish politician who, in reaction to the fate of refugees, has stressed the dangers of offering them a shelter in Poland as they may bring with themselves harmful microbes and diseases, triggered a wave of xenophobic attitudes and incidents. Another Polish politician actively encourages and instigates militaristic leanings among the young. A recent example of extreme public irresponsibility of as yet incalculable consequences on an international scale is Nigel Farrage, the leading figure of Brexit, whose contemptuous performances in the European Parliament have helped to instigate the anti-European Union sentiment among the British citizens.

(6) Technological progress which we now enjoy is employed to facilitate, among others, the flow of information. Present technologies not only serve the one-way distribution of information, from the sender to recipients, but also an interactive exchange. Interactivity is now made possible by the Internet, e-mail and social media: they are media enabling people to enter an exchange of information and to satisfy all sorts of needs. After all, an increasing number of human transactions move into the newly created cyberspace.

However, it has been noticed that the very possibility of being able of entering into an interactive exchange generates a reverse attitude, that of interpassivity[8]. The interpassive attitude is about avoiding the interactive exchange, shunning from it, and delegating it onto the technological devices instead of performing it oneself. So, despite the age of interactivity, or rather precisely against the all-present and persistent injunction to be interactive, many people are escaping into interpassivity. They seek ways, modes, devices or other persons who would discharge their duty for them and instead of them. In the sphere of politics, we often forsake our civic duties and enter into an interpassive relationships with politicians, experts, administrators, or indeed the third sector organizations, allowing, and expecting, them to discharge our duty for us and instead of us. Interpassivity is thus conducive to civic absenteeism and simultaneously helps to rationalise it.

(7) The spread of the interpassive attitudes is closely connected with the intensification of the capitalist processes of commodification. An increasing number of things and services are becoming commodities to be bought and sold on the market. In the conditions of unprecedented inequality in the distribution of wealth, some people are particularly successful in finding such interpassive vicarious replacements in exchange for a remuneration, while others are reduced to selling their services.

(8) As to the role of the third sector. It cannot be denied that quite a number of NGOs or CSOs do a great deal of socially beneficial work. However, most of them are dependent upon financial means distributed by public agencies which pursue particular policies, or are driven by particular ideologies. This has the effect of delimiting the scope and direction of funding of the activity of the NGOs. Speaking from my own experience, I have noticed that many NGOs are not infrequently applying for the thus distributed funds act in a way which aims rather to please the donor rather than to implement the tasks of their organisation. In doing so, they display an attitude well known as clientelism, or, to use a philosophically established term, voluntary servitude[9]. I am also familiar with cases, some of them criminal, of the NGOs being established solely for the purpose of receiving the funding. External values seem more important to them than internal ones. Instead of implementing projects of social engineering[10] in accordance with grass-roots-informed intentions and aims, they submit themselves to the social engineering imposed upon them top-down.

(9) The demise of the civic culture is to some extent related to the massification of artistic culture which became spectatorial rather than participatory. The growth of social inactivity and disinterest in the public matters is certainly aggravated by the exclusion of many impoverished social groups from cultural and artistic life, and by neglects in the area of cultural education. The role of official cultural institutions and the mass media in this process is an ambiguous one to say the least. But at the same time we should be aware that inasmuch as artistic education, as an *éducation sentimentale*, is necessary for instilling sensitivity to social problems and the need for social action in the young people, they are not a sufficient condition for the expected forms of social activism to come about.

(10) As for the future of the European Union, I would like to mention that in a recent book, Jan Zielonka argued that European Union may survive the moral collapse of its official institutions. He claims that it will continue to grow and indeed to integrate thanks to a network of transnational relationships between individuals, associations, companies, businesses and cities[11]. He hopes that the grid of such relationships, bridging distances and differences, will soon grow strong enough as not to be affected by the fall of the inefficient and corrupt formal bodies of the European Union. I certainly wish he were right. I also hope that such relationships will be able to withstand the dangers posed by the

spread of the xenophobic relationships of bonding. At the same time, however, I am sceptical as to the prospect of preserving the values which informed the establishment of the European Union, those of diversity, opportunity and responsibility, should the national and transnational institutions, charged with the task of protecting them, were to be abolished or gone extinct.

(11) The above does not mean that the spirit of solidarity and mutual assistance has completely disappeared. The pessimistic diagnosis, however, seems to call for a reconsideration of the chief aims of the civil society organisations. Many of them successfully assist those in need, both on a local and international scale. What seems, however, to emerge as a priority for their action at the present stage, is a work towards empowerment, individual and collective one. Accordingly, their works should be directed both towards those who, due to their underprivileged social status, have never enjoyed a sense of individual agency, as well as to those who have abandoned it under the pressure of social relationships transformed by the neoliberal ideology.

(12) It also seems that in the present circumstances empowerment can and should be translated into three wide-reaching tasks, that of promoting education, development of skills, and nurturing sensitivity. This means fostering intellectual, practical and imaginative capabilities. Development of these human capacities may help to educate courageous individuals, capable of thinking on their own, able of helping themselves, and taking the initiative on behalf of their own and of their environment.

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2) Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community, Simon & Shuster, New York 2000, p. 20.
3) Ibid. p. 21.
4) Cf. Adam Chmielewski, "Academies of Hatred", openDemocracy, 12 August 2013, http://www.open-democracy.net/can-europe-make-it/adam-j-chmielewski/academies-of-hatred, also "Stealing the

Spectacle", openDemocracy, August 4, 2016, https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/adam-chmielewski/stealing-spectacle.
5) G. W. F Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, transl. A. V. Miller, with analysis of the text and foreword by J. N. Findlay, Oxford University Press 1977, esp. p. 111.
6) Axel Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995.
7) Adam Chmielewski, "Ostentation and Agoraphobia in the City", in: Beauty, Responsibility and Power, Ethical and Political Consequences of Pragmatist Aesthetics, Leszek Koczanowicz & Katarzyna Liszka (eds.), Rodopi 2014, pp. 31-44.
8) The concept and phenomenon of interpassivity has been explored by Robert Pfaller (e.g. "Little Gestures of Disappearance: Interpassivity and the Theory of Ritual", Journal of European Psychoanalysis, 2003, 16), and Slavoj Žižek, esp. The Plague of Fantasies, 2nd ed., Verso, London 2008, pp. 144.
9) Etienne de la Boetie, The Politics of Obedience. The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude, transl. Harry Kurz, introduction by Murray N. Rothbard, The Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama, 1975.
10) For the concept of social engineering, see Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism, Routledge, London 1961.
11) Jan Zielonka, Is the EU Doomed?, Polity Press, Cambridge 2014.

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