THE STORM OF POSTMODERNITY. PRESERVING THE CIVIC SPIRIT, THE PERFECT MORALITY AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE COMMON GOOD?

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ABSTRACT: The Storm of Postmodernity. Preserving the Civic Spirit, the Perfect Morality and The Consciousness of the Common Good?

According to Alexis de Tocqueville „in democratic countries the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one. Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another". Robert Putnam demonstrated that „a democratic government is strengthened not weakened" by cohabitation with a „strong civil society". But what is a civil strong society? What means a civic person? What is a civic life? What are civic actions? What is civic interest? It is true that in our time the most important five civic responsabilities are: voting, staying informed, community involvement, practicing tolerance, passing it on? Can the democratic process acquire axiological qualities and valences separated from historical conditions and the human/social capital conditioned in its historical turn?

Keywords: *civil society, civic interest, civic commitment, civic spirit, civic virtue, common good, community, constitutive rules, institutional succes, moral trust, social understanding, tolerance,*

JEL Classification: Z1, Z13

Most theorists generally define institutions as „structures of interaction aimed for satisfying primary social needs". Social development itself depends on their existence and functioning.[1]

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1 According to Douglas North "institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction", constraints being either informal or formal (in North, C. Douglass, 1991, *Institutions*, The Journal of Economic Perspectives – volume 5 (1), pp 97-112)

Sociology is particularly interested in the diversity of the fundamental organizational models of society, as well as its „constitutive rules".

Representing „forms of social organization", institutions are „essential resources" by offering specific means for solving various social problems or for overcoming „social conflict".[2]

Two „complementary" approaches compete in the analysis of institutions. One concerns for structure (oriented towards „building models"), the other for evolution (oriented towards an analysis from a historical perspective).[3]

Most „institutionalists" generally agree that, for example, institutions shape political, which in turn are shaped by history. Any institutional change affects the identity, power and strategies of political actors.[4]

For its part, history has a decisive role, because in any institutional transformation there is a „path dependence".[5] But what is the meaning of the „institutional success"? What does institutional effectiveness mean? What makes an institution successful? Giving the „actors" the opportunity to mediate the differences as effectively as possible under conditions when their preferences are if not divergent at least heterogeneous? [6]

The institutions are intended to achieve specific purposes. Based on the inputs coming from the social environment, they produce outputs in response to their aspirations and requirements.[7] Citizens, for the most part, evaluate institutional competence and performance (representative government for example) by generally similar standards: „efficiency, crea-

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2   They are social rules imposed either through laws or through other mechanisms of social control, providing a platform for conflict resolution in their capacity as normative patterns of behavior (in Zamfir, Cătălin, Stănescu, Simona (coordinetors), *Encyclopedia of social development*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2007, p. 331.

3   *Ibidem*, pp. 329-337

4   "The institutions determine who are the legitimate actors, their number, the ordering of the action and what information the actors will have about the intentions of each of them" (in Goodin, Robert E., Klingemann, Hans-Dieter (coordonators), *Textbook of political science*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2005,p.138)

5   "Where you end up depends on where you come from and there are some destinations you just can't reach, where you are from" (in Putnam, Robert D., *Making democracy work*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2001, p.201)

6   In Putnam's view this conception would exclude a lot of the roles that institutions play in public life (in Putnam, Robert D., *Making democracy work*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2001, p.21)

7   *Ibidem*, p.21-22

tivity, coherence, responsiveness, practical results".[8] The essential question is what the institutions do with their preferences? Do institutions affect social preferences? Two views are involved in formulating an appropriate answer to this question. On the one hand, economic approaches argue that „only individuals can have preferences", these being external to institutions.

The set of preferences established rationally enters in a complex „institutionalized" game, the institutions being in a way obliged to control the exchanges between the actors without influencing their preferences. Only the actors' strategy changes in the context of institutional changes, but not their preferences. The main problem is the institutional construction that must achieve an „effective aggregation into a collective choice, of the preferences of individuals. On the other hand, the cultural or sociological approaches supports the existence of a so-called dictate of the „logic of fit".

It is the institutions that suggest to the actors what they „should prefer" in a given situation. This view does not deny the „intentionality of individual action", but it does suggest a „cognitive" incompetence necessary for agents to be „completely rational" in interacting with others. In a way, this approach supports not only an institutional determination of preferences, but even their creation by institutions.[9]

The main objective remains to build institutions able of „integrating the individual and the society".There are three main schools of thought that explain the institutional performance. The first is focused on the importance of the „institutional project".[10]

Montesquieu, for example, pointed out that at the „birth of a new politic's body" institutions tend to be modeled by the leaders, but later, due to firmly entrenched structures and processes, the roles are reversed. The prominent representatives of this orientation - from John Stuart Mill to Arturo Israel or Elinor Ostrom believe that reaching a maximum performance depends rather on the discovery of those institutional forms able to fertilize in the previously stated sense. Practically, a consistent part of Mill's reflections in „Considerations on representative government" is emphasized by the importance that he attaches to the process of discovering

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8   *Ibidem*, p.96
9   See March, G. James, Olsen, P. Johan, *Elaborating the "New Institutionalism"*, Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, 2005, p.138.
10   See Putnam, Robert D., *Making democracy work*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001, p.22.

the most viable „institutional forms" capable of streamlining representative governance.[11]

A second orientation focuses on „socio-economic factors". Regardless of the scientific dimension and the laborious spirit invested in developing an institutional project, maximizing efficiency can be questionable as long as it is not „an integral part of the modernization process".[12] The research carried out in recent decades by numerous researchers on the development of third world institutions highlights the interdependence between the chances of an effective democracy and social development and economic prosperity. Economic prosperity as well as social development are determining factors in the achievement of an effective democracy, capable in turn of generating institutional development. Theorists such as Robert Dahl or Seymour Martin Lipset also highlight aspects of „modernization" in the debates on „the conditions underlying a democratic and efficient governance".[13]

The third orientation emphasizes the presence of „socio-cultural" factors, its representatives emphasizing as unquestionable the interdependence between „the morals of a society" and its „political practices".[14] Is it enough, however, that in a context in which the institutional project is a maximal one, from the perspective of rigor in achieving efficiency, with a socio-economic environment open to development, the institution is a successful one? Can its success be guaranteed in this situation?[15]

In Dahl's vision, we discover four tendencies of the citizen to achieve the common good:

CITIZENS			
		I agree	I don't agree
Citizens tend to the common good	YES	1	2
	NO	3	4

Figure 1 - Citizen's tendencies to achieve the common good

Source – Dahl, 2002: 397

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11 *Ibidem.*
12 *Ibidem*, p.24.
13 *Ibidem.*
14 *Ibidem.*
15 Or "a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens" (in Putnam, Robert D., *Making democracy work*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001, p. 77).

Citizens 1) tend towards the common good and agree with what it is; 2) tend towards the realization of the common good but do not agree with it; 3) they agree with the common good, but do not tend towards its realization; 4) they don't tend to achieve the common good, nor do agree with what it is.[16]

Dahl points out that any empirical statement about the supposed historical existence or the possibility of the future existence of „virtuous citizens" in a democratic or undemocratic regime must specify whether what he is saying is 1), 2) or 3).

Variant 1), utopian at first glance, is associated with the idea of a maximal consensus that excludes any conflicting form. At the limit, within this analize we can imagine the existence, throughout history, of small collectivities, able to become aware of their common good and to want it achievable.

But, as Zigmunt Bauman pointed out, the reference to the virtues of ever smaller communities seems utopian, because „being local in a globalized world is a sign of social inadequacy and degradation."

Under these circumstances, is the current capitalist world system capable of privileging concepts such as that of returning to the values of the „small and unitary republics"? Traditionalists are still looking for solutions to recover the older conception of civic virtue and the common good, present in the Aristotelian and republican traditions.[17] There is, they say, a so-called „Golden Age of Civic Virtue", characterized by maximum attachment to what the common good means.[18][19]

Selfishness, „high moral relativism", „positivism", „conceptions of a belief in the common good", all of these have removed with modernism the public interest, the belief in the values of the „common good".

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16   See Dahl, Robert A., *Democracy and its critics*, European Institute, Bucharest, 2002, p. 397.

17   Among the representative theorists are noted Almond and Verba („The Civic Culture Revisited", 1989), which describe the particularities of the democratic governments in the USA, UK, Italy, Mexico and Germany and Alexis de Tocqueville („Democracy in America", 1995). As "Democracy in America" revealed, Tocqueville believed that equality was the great political and social idea of his era, and he thought that the United States offered the most advanced example of equality in action (in Almond, Gabriel, and Sidney Verba, eds. 1980. The Civic Culture Revisited. Boston, MA: Little, Brown).

18   *Ibidem*, p. 413.

19   Dahl, 2002, p. 413.

Beyond the ambiguities regarding the strict location in time and space of this era (Alisdair MacIntyre appreciates that the Aristotelian tradition has endured for almost 19 centuries, being repudiated with the change in the conception of human nature and morality), the representatives of this school reject modernity and implicitly appeal to return to the „Aristotelian and republican beliefs of the Golden Age".

However, the open issue is, on the one hand, an issue that is impossible to prove. Namely, the clear evidence that the modernism has sent morality out of history, that the modern politics is less „respectable" or that the people who make up the community are less involved in public life.

Actually, Machiavelli induces through „The Principles" („confrontation of political ideals with political reality was shocking for his contemporaries") the feeling of a blow from which, according to some specialists, „the Aristotelian tradition never recovered".[20]

On the other hand, the suggestion regarding „restoration of the small community", ideal for ability to preserve the civic spirit, perfect morality and consciousness of the common good, seems illusory in a world placed in the „center of the storm of modernity and postmodernity".

Even in a hypothetical scenario describing the existence and maintenance of small communities, the same question would ultimately be asked: whose good should be achieved? Robert Dahl claims that at least three questions cannot be avoided. „Whose good must be considered" when is going to be determined? What is the optimal way so that we can establish this common good „in collective decisions"? And ultimately, „what is, in terms of content, the common good?".[21]

In an attempt to answer the three key questions on the establishment of the common good, Dahl argues that the collective decision should take into account „the good of all persons significantly affected by this decision."[22]

On the second question (how can the common good established by collective decisions) Dahl rather emphasizes the arrangements that make it possible for the common good to possibly be found in the results of decisions.

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20   *Ibidem*, p.415.
21   *Ibidem*, p.423.
22   *Ibidem*.

The common good does not consist of „specific objects, activities and relationships" but of „practices, arrangements, institutions and processes" that exclude the promotion of personal good. It is the unique way, the only one possible, for them to be accepted and appreciated by large communities.

Dahl admits that it would be impossible to specify „what these arrangements should be". He proposes the „criteria of enlightened understanding", relevant to the „search in which we are engaged" as individuals, in the sense that people who can understand their interests would possess an „enlightened understanding of them".

„In order to express preferences accurately", says Dahl, „each citizen must have adequate and equal opportunities to discover and validate (within the time allowed by the need to make a decision) the option in the matter to be decided and which serves the best interests of the citizen".

Moreover, „a person's good or interest is what that person would choose with the fullest possible understanding of the experience resulting from that option and the most relevant alternatives to it". Because „enlightened understanding is necessary", Dahl practically defines „the possibilities of acquiring enlightened understanding essential for the meaning of the common good". And indirectly answers to the third question: what is, from the content point of view, the common good.[23]

Can democratic process acquire axiological qualities and valences separated from historical conditions and the human/social capital conditioned in its historical turn?

Conclusions:

Putnam's research says that the 20th century began and ended with the same commitment of the governing elites: increasing the number of those involved in the self-governance process, as an essential basis for ever wider access to the common good in an era characterized by the geographical expansion of political pluralism.

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23   *Ibidem*, pp. 423-425.

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