

I. ARTICLES

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WHAT IS HAPPENING? BETWEEN UTOPIAN POPULISM AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT*

I. OPENING REMARKS

One is sorely tempted to recall the words of Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, that the *spectre of populism* is walking the world¹. Of course one may haggle over the degree to which such politicians as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Norbert Hofer, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orbán, Recep Erdoğan, Aleksis Tsipras, Beppe Grillo or ‘our’ Jarosław Kaczyński deserve to be called populists. If we are to accept that the essence of populism is (1) referring to the ‘will of the people’ (of the nation, the masses, the ‘working class’, the ‘sovereign’), (2) anti-elitism (at least as far as rhetoric is concerned) and (3) an inclination to equate governance based on procedures with decision-taking impossibilism (coupled with a more or less ostentatious questioning of the principles of procedural democracy), then all of the figures listed above are populists.

However, it would seem to me that rather than bringing ‘closure’ to the definition of political populism, and assigning a populist stance to certain or other politicians, it is more important today to consider the following three issues. Firstly, are we really dealing with a turn towards populism—understood (1) as a rise in the number of populist (as outlined a moment ago above) political options and (2) as growth in society’s support for these options? Secondly, if we agree that there are indeed more and more populist options and that they are attracting steadily increasing interest and social acceptance, then we should strive to indicate the most important causes of this state of affairs—both those one could define as more situational, and those that are structural. And thirdly, we should seek answers to the question regarding what systemic-institutional solutions are capable of acting as an effective barrier to populism.

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¹ See G. Ionescu, E. Gellner, *Introduction*, in: eidem (eds.), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London: Wendelfeld & Nicolson, 1969: 1.

II. A POPULIST TURN OR JUST A SERIES OF POPULIST INCIDENTS?

Here and there one hears opinions that none of the three of the most spectacular triumphs to date of the populist political option (victory for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] in Poland's parliamentary elections in 2015, the Brexit referendum won by those in favour of Great Britain leaving the European Union, and Donald Trump's win in last year's presidential elections in the USA) prove at all that we are dealing with a populist turn.

Let us begin with Poland. Just under 19% of voters authorised to cast a ballot actually voted for the Law and Justice party. Moreover, if not for the particular combination of circumstances favourable for Law and Justice (the coalition of left-wing parties not reaching the seven-percent threshold, and the appearance of the party Razem [Together], which ultimately ended up outside of the Sejm, but drew voters away from Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform] and SLD [Democratic Left Alliance), this party would have had to form a coalition government, much as happened in the years 2005–2007. The case of the referendum regarding Brexit is referred to as a peculiar kind of accident on the job: proponents of Great Britain remaining in the European Union practically had it in the bag. But they underestimated the persuasive force of *fake news* and were incapable of responding appropriately to propaganda based on post-truth. As for the latest presidential elections in the USA, attention is drawn to the fact that Hillary Clinton actually obtained more votes (by around 3 million) than Donald Trump. So in actual fact one could say that Trump was to a slight degree the accidental beneficiary of the complex system for determining the president of the United States, in which the absolute number of votes cast for specific candidates does not necessarily determine which of them ultimately gets to move into the White House.

The purpose of these and similar opinions is to convince one that on the whole little has changed, that we are still (at least here in the 'EU Europe' and in North America) living in a liberal democracy. There are indeed no grounds at present for claiming it to be otherwise. Yet at the same time it would be hard not to notice the spectacular growth in number of social movements and political parties that openly renounce the democratic liberal order. And hard not to notice that social movements and political parties ill-disposed towards liberal democracy are to be found both on the right (for example the German Alternative für Deutschland [Alternative for Germany], the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid [Party for Freedom], and the French Front National [National Front]), and on the left (e.g. the Greek Syriza, and Spanish Podemos) of the political stage. Many of these groupings today can count on the support of a quarter or even a third of the electorate. Another gauge of the increasing political significance of the 'anti-liberal option' is that a large chunk of its programming is being adopted by the 'middle parties', thereby shifting towards the left or the right (and the latter more often).²

² Holland stands as a good example of this tendency. This year's Dutch general election was won by Mark Rutte's People's Party. But one of the important reasons

As such there is some kind of deep and crucial change taking place before our eyes. The political (and probably also social and cultural) reassessment taking place can be seen even more starkly in the changing style of public discourse. Irrespective of whether issues that would seem to have already been resolved long ago become the object of dispute (e.g. obligatory vaccinations challenged today by so-called anti-vaccine movements), the actual course of the said disputes involves less and less dialogue. Conversations are transforming into parallel monologues, the goal of which ceases to be seeking agreement or aiming to draw up a list of differences, and is becoming the desire to destroy or at least ridicule one's rival. And thereby the model of the culture of dispute developed with much effort over well over half a century, which assumes that a dispute (and even conflict) should ultimately lead to an increase in the empowerment of the parties involved in it and not their exclusion from the debate, is collapsing.³

III. THE FIVE CHIEF CAUSES OF POPULISM

The growing supply of populist options and increasing demand for them are not developments that simply came into being by themselves. Both should be perceived rather as a reaction to an entire sequence of overlapping tendencies in the European Union and in the majority of developed countries outside of Europe since the turn of the twenty-first century. I shall mention here the five such tendencies that seem the most significant to me.

1. A growing deficit of democracy

Responsibility for this growing deficit lies above all with the growth in number of institutions that, although they possess a great deal of power (influence, control and resolution), are not headed by people selected via general elections and neither are they transparent to the public. Such institutions today, for example, are both the likes of the International Olympics Committee or FIFA, and the World Bank or European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, both global corporations and global NGOs, both sundry government-linked boards and commissions employing party nominees taking no political responsibility for their decisions, and ratings agencies for some time now symbolising impunity in the discretion of assessments.

The second most important reason for the increasing deficit of democracy is that of administrative and bureaucratic over-regulation. From the perspective of the general public, this is not only about ever more aspects of everyday life becoming subject to thorough regulations, but also that the justification for many of these regulations is ideological.⁴

behind this victory was the inclusion of some of the postulates of Geert Wilders' populist Freedom Party in its electoral manifesto.

³ See J. Habermas, *Uwzględniając Innego. Studia do teorii politycznej [The Inclusion of the Other. Studies in Political Theory]*, Warsaw: WN PWN, 2009.

⁴ A number of detailed EU regulations regarding, e.g. ecological aspects, animal rights, landscape protection, or even counteracting discriminatory practices are treated by some citizens as

2. Crisis in the politics of recognition

I use here the term ‘politics of recognition’ with the meaning given to it by Charles Taylor⁵ and Axel Honneth.⁶ It therefore concerns a certain axionormative perspective according to which every individual and every social group has the right to expect the recognition of their choices regarding identity, their lifestyles, convictions, expectations and claims, and so on, by other individuals and groups as well as by state institutions. Of course this right to recognition does not come free of conditions, and of course not every stance can count on recognition. Yet this does not change the fact that practically the entire second half of the twentieth century was a period of continuous expansion of recognition for declared values, claims and choices. Suffice to mention the desegregation policy of the United States—picking up pace from the sixties of the previous century, second and third wave feminism, the gradually improving legal and status-related situation of ethnic and sexual minorities, or societies and public institutions gradually becoming accustomed to the anti-discriminative demands of disabled persons.

Something began to go wrong in the steadily accelerating process of great social inclusion at the turn of the twenty-first century. The most avidly discussed testimony to this deterioration is the gradual increase in anti-immigrant moods. Most researchers obviously link this to the recurring terrorist attacks (initially by Al-Qaeda, later by the so-called Islamic State) and the refugee crisis in Europe, which reached its climax in the years 2015–2016.

Yet there came a point when this arresting of the social inclusion process also began to increasingly often signify the withdrawal of recognition for groups that had already obtained it, and the refusal to grant it to collectivities only taking their place in the queue for the legally guaranteed right to be themselves. Here the sharpening of language used in public discourse should probably be acknowledged as the first and most self-evident cause of such a turn of events. It would seem to constitute a specific *backlash* to the lengthy period of political correctness, which although admittedly protected the rights of sundry minorities and contributed to progress in social democracy, also ultimately began to be perceived as a kind of SEP (somebody else’s problem) technique⁷ and a new form of censorship.

Finally, the current crisis in the politics of recognition also derived from the fact that it did not equally embrace all groups experiencing a deficit of dignity. Its beneficiaries were above all persons discriminated due to their ethnic

a reflection of the ‘post-materialistic world-view’ supposedly about to become the official ideology of the European Union.

⁵ See Ch. Taylor, *Etyka autentyczności [The Ethics of Authenticity]*, Cracow: Znak, 1996.

⁶ See A. Honneth, N. Fraser, *Redystrybucja czy uznanie? Debata polityczno-filozoficzna [Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-philosophical Exchange]*, Wrocław: WN DSWE TWP, 2005. Also in regard to Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, see: A. Modrzyk, *Pomiędzy normatywizmem a realizmem. Od teorii uznania Axela Honnetha do radykalnie refleksyjnej krytyki społecznej*, Cracow: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013.

⁷ Cf. M. Czyżewski, K. Dunin, A. Piotrowski, *Cudze problemy O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce*, Warsaw: OBS, 1991: 7.

background, the colour of their skin, or their sexual preferences; on the other hand, the politics of recognition contributed less (and continues thus) to, for example, a reduction in levels of economic discrimination.⁸

3. A growing nostalgia for collective identities

Late modernity and post-modernity brought with them the conviction that one of the signs of the socio-cultural changes we are witness to is the fast and probably irreversible shifting of societies from (1) a collectivistic orientation towards an individualistic orientation, and from (2) identification based on attributed status (for example belonging to a nation, to a local community, to a family) to identification based on achieved status. One of the results of this shift was supposed to be (and for a certain time indeed it was⁹) decreasing interest in collective identities.

However, to the surprise of sociologists and most probably politicians as well, this tendency was not a lasting one. In the individualised society, more and more individuals began to define themselves and construct their strategies of social self-presentation not on the basis of differences, but similarities. A consequence of this change is not only the rise in popularity of nationalistic movements (for some time now the subject of a great deal of what is being said and written), but also, for example the growing number of all sorts of fan communities, a blooming of supporters' organisations, a kind of fashion for local separatisms. There is one more thing worth noting: that the renewed discovery of collective identities is frequently coupled today not only with de-individualisation, but also with de-individuation.¹⁰

4. The financial crisis and globalisation that is no longer in the black

The financial crisis, the symbolic beginning of which was the collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank, has meant and continues to mean for dozens of millions of individuals identifying with (or aspiring for) the middle class a jump in their sense of economic and status-related uncertainty. However, there is something else that is equally as important: this crisis has made the general public realise that the sole absolutely certain beneficiary of the policy of loosening state supervision of the financial sector is the financial sector itself.

This bitter discovery has coincided with an intensifying disappointment with globalisation. People have begun to realise that its most important feature is emergence, and that in the face of the growing complexity of the con-

⁸ See e.g. J. Urbański, *Prekariat i nowa walka klas*, Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2015.

⁹ See U. Beck, E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Riskante Freiheiten—Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994.

¹⁰ 'De-individualisation', or standardisation, is a process that socialists have devoted and continue to devote much attention to. An equally important sociological phenomenon, though seen less in reflection and research, is 'de-individuation', understood as a normally brief but very intensive 'melting' of the 'me' identity into the 'we' identity—cf. M. Krajewski (ed.), *Deindywiduacja. Socjologia zachowań zbiorowych*, Warsaw: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2014.

temporary world, this emergence is increasingly often going to mean a deficit of control over political, economic and social processes initiated both from a grassroots level and from above.¹¹

5. The decline in trust in political and cultural elites

At least two of the four tendencies indicated so far (the growing deficit of democracy and the intensifying sense of uncertainty caused by the financial crisis and uncontrolled side effects of globalisation) may be acknowledged as direct causes of another evidently emerging tendency, that is the declining trust in the elites.¹²

This fall in trust in the elites also seems to be a social response to their self-exclusion. Another factor putting people off of the elites today is their increasingly dynastic character. Dynasticity comes across as a rather natural (and even acceptable) attribute among business elites. It is tolerated, though with a touch of scepticism, in the case of elites in the world of culture. But where political elites are concerned, there is no consent for it.¹³

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One may haggle over whether the causes behind the growing wave of populism as indicated above are systemic in character. They are inasmuch as all (perhaps with the exception of the third) are products of the most important political and economic institutions determining the shape of the present day. And they are not inasmuch as not one of them was determined in advance; each is the result of a confluence of circumstances that by no means had to happen, and that could have been avoided.

At the same time each of the five causes I mention for the ‘populist turn’ is partial, and in its own way situational. The question, therefore, is whether some kind of more original cause is situated above these partial, situational causes (of which one could probably indicate dozens more)? This would seem to be so, and that this cause is the collapse of the social contract of which the essence was the idea of the *welfare state*. This idea was (both in Europe’s west and, though in cropped form, in the countries subscribing to real socialism¹⁴) a kind of *collective sense* as defined by Mirosława Marody.¹⁵ The rulers prom-

¹¹ See M. Krajewski, *Incydentologia*, Warsaw: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2017.

¹² See I. Pańków, *Przyszłość czas odwetu*, *Newsweek* 2017, no. 15.

¹³ Just over a year ago there was still much to suggest that a candidate from the ‘Clinton clan’ (Hillary) would be standing in the race to the White House with a candidate from the ‘Bush clan’ (Jeb). If that had happened, it would have meant that the Americans would have chosen between a third term (in quarter of a century) for somebody in the Clinton family, or fourth term (since 1989) for a member of the Bush family. One could of course describe this as simply a coincidence to which one should attach little importance. However, one could also say that the very fact that such a situation could come about is confirmation of Robert Michels’ ‘iron law of oligarchy’ or (at least) confirmation of numerous popular opinions regarding the ‘solidifying’ of the political scene.

¹⁴ See W. Narojek, *Socjalistyczne „welfare state”: studium z psychologii społecznej Polski Ludowej*, Warsaw: WN PWN, 1991.

¹⁵ See M. Marody, *Sens zbiorowy a stabilność i zmiana ładu społecznego*, in: A. Rychard, A. Sułek (eds.), *Legitymacja. Klasyczne teorie i polskie doświadczenia*, Warsaw: PTS, UW, 1988: 269–299.

ised the ‘general public’ an improvement in living conditions unprecedented in history (only in the West, sadly) as well as a series of social care entitlements. In exchange, the public was expected to drop its aspirations for empowerment in the political sphere (or to be more precise—it was supposed to delegate its entitlements to a professional political class¹⁶).

IV. SHORT-TERM EXPECTATIONS OF THE RULED, MAKE-SHIFT SOLUTIONS OF THE RULERS

All the circumstances indicated above evidently entail significant changes where social, economic and political stances and preferences are concerned. They may be described in great detail: for example, when monitoring the ‘flows’ of support for specific political parties or changing social attitudes towards fundamental systemic solutions, such as the principle of three-way separation of powers, private ownership, the freedom to gather, the right to privacy or charge-free health care. One could also attempt to present these changes using more general revaluations. Three of them seem of key significance to me.

1. A demand for the concrete!¹⁷

However banal it may sound, everybody has become a little fed up of the ‘fluid reality’. And so calls for the concrete are to be heard increasingly often. More and more individuals and groups want to see a shift *from talk to action*, from forms of activity that—like the proverbial pilot programs or social consultation—might not have any tangible, far-reaching and lasting consequences, to measures whose effects will be both palpable and irrevocable.

The desire for concretising and the concrete probably has a great deal in common with the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for contemporary individuals to observe the effects of actions taken (both those taken by themselves, and those behind which stand all different sorts of power-related entity). This is prevented, or at least severely hindered, by the lengthening of chains in the webs of cooperation. Important and impatiently awaited effects are not only receding in time, but their authorship is also becoming problematic and blurred. The longing for the concrete also derives from irritation with the omnipresent euphemisation. There is talk of the concrete today practically only during election campaigns and in business presentations. Afterwards it turns out anyway that the devil is in the detail, that the express promises made need to be chiselled, watered down and softened—to make them palatable, so that stripped of their sharp corners they pose no danger to anybody, and (which is really the most important) so that they cannot be checked and

¹⁶ Cf. D. Karłowicz, Lud stracił wpływ na politykę, *Rzeczpospolita* of 13–15 August 2016.

¹⁷ For further reading regarding the ‘concretistic turn’, see R. Drozdowski, M. Frąckowiak, *Smutek konkretny*, in: *Smutek konkretny. Materializacja idei / dziury w całym*, Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015: 13–22.

verified too easily or too quickly. Perhaps this hunger for the concrete and persistent looking around for it is also a result of the growing disappointment with procedural democracy, which in its attention to legalism and the correctness of the actual form of rule is increasingly annoying in its verbosity, in its normative fudging (*everybody is right to some degree*) and its non-conclusiveness. Finally, this turn towards the concrete would also seem to be the consequence of growing weariness with organisational forms and processes, common features of which are hybridity and complexity.

2. A return to the past is a guarantee of a better future

The latest and unfortunately the final book by Zygmunt Bauman bears the title *Retrotopia*.¹⁸ 'Retrotopia' is a word invented by Bauman, a term meant to epitomise the conviction that one has to search in the past for inspiration for thinking of a better tomorrow.

Bauman's *retrotopia* may therefore be understood as a (conservative) longing for an allegedly better and better-ordered yesterday. Yet according to Bauman himself, retrotopian thinking tends to be induced by a feeling of uncertainty and fear of the future. The past is no 'paradise lost'. And by no means is it unduly idealised. One would find it hard to erase from social memory that this past was replete with injustice and violence. However, the evil one knows proves better than a future unknown. As a result, people living within the Schengen zone are beginning to long for the reintroduction of border controls, believing that as a result the terrorist threat will subside, while businesspeople are demanding ever more protectionist economic policy from their governments. Nineteenth-century perceptions of political and economic sovereignty are reappearing. The idea of the nation state, the 'owner' of which is not society but the nation, is coming back to life. Old, anti-modernisation ideologies are coming back into favour.

3. Anti-establishmentarianism and anti-systemness

If the existing social, political and economic system is not only unable to effectively resolve old problems, but also constantly generates new ones, then a self-evident response to this state of affairs is consistent refusal to acknowledge the establishment, and positioning oneself consistently in opposition to the most important institutional solutions determining the shape of collective order (such as representative democracy, the separation of powers, the sanctity of private property, and the freedom of assembly).

Today that anti-establishmentarianism and anti-systemness signifies above all an anti-party stance. Potential voters, required every four years to assess what the parties have to offer, are ceasing to trust political parties because they are losing belief in them representing their interests. Political parties are beginning to be perceived as organisations in which the rules of the

¹⁸ Z. Bauman, *Retrotopia*, Cambridge: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

game are very similar to those that apply in business corporations. They are also beginning to be treated as the façade to the *real* political system, there to veil what is going on inside. The first effect of disappointment with political parties is, of course, non-participation in elections. The next is withdrawal from public life, and even from the public sphere: citizens not casting their votes become increasingly less civil.

Disappointment with political parties is also prompting people to support new, ‘post-party’ initiatives that aspire to ‘upturn the tables’: do disassemble the old institutional order, and do away with the old elites. So far, though, such initiatives have either faded in significance over a relatively short time (as in the case of Occupy Wall Street, and probably to be the case with the Komitet Obrony Demokracji [Committee for the Defence of Democracy] in Poland) or have become institutionalised themselves, becoming ever more similar to the parties.

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The new economic and political trends that I have indicated (and their related new social expectations) are evoking three kinds of reaction from the rulers. The first could be defined as playing the waiting game. At the foundations of this tactic lies the conviction that a sufficiently large number of fail-safes are built into a liberal democracy, protecting it from populism and political extremism, as well as a sufficient number of self-repair mechanisms. The second type of reaction is keeping one step ahead. This time liberal democracy is saved through its intensification. This would seem to be the route taken, for example, by Canada under the governance of Justin Trudeau. However, the third type of reaction by those in power covers diverse measures aimed at replacing liberal democracy with some form of non-liberal democracy¹⁹ (‘practical democracy’²⁰ ‘democratorship’,²¹ or ‘soft authoritarianism’).

Obviously authorities that choose pro-social dialogue submit to control and do not aim to steadily expand the scope of their dominion, they do not break the law, and neither do they restrict civil freedoms; such administration continues to be perceived as a good form of government desired by the citizens. Paradoxically, though, such self-limiting and restrained authorities also come across to many people today as authorities that do not deserve respect. The fact that they choose not to govern unceremoniously apparently proves that they lack determination and courage. And the fact that they refrain from the occasional shortcut or taking more resolute action is perceived as their weakness.

The passage from a liberal to a non-liberal democracy is therefore achieved with partial social consent. The question is, what does this systemic change mean today in practice, at least in countries belonging to the European Union?

¹⁹ See F. Zakaria. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

²⁰ A definition by the right-wing columnist Krystyna Grzybowska.

²¹ See Ł. Wójcik, Demony demokracji, *Polityka* 2014, no. 30.

Its essence seems to be an increasingly noticeable change in the model of government, which may be described in the following four points.²²

Firstly, government getting involved in the constructing of a non-liberal democracy aims for its own re-centralisation. We have already become used to government becoming increasingly scattered and web-like over the last quarter century.²³ Today, though, we are dealing with the opposite trend: a reduction in the number of decision-taking centres, a departure from the policy of delegating powers, and also with a restoration of hierarchical relations.

Secondly, a feature of post-liberal government is its unceremoniousness. What I have in mind here is not only the rulers shedding scruples deriving from the fact that wielding power sometimes has an aspect involving force, but also the deliberate celebrating of the uncompromising actions taken by the *government that is in power*. Until recently attempts were still being made to conceal the entire 'kitchen' of governance, as capable of arousing ethical and aesthetic doubts. Today the trend is rather one of highlighting it. 'Dirty' aspects of wielding power, based on non-veiled violence or totally unmasked cynicism, are ceasing to be something to be ashamed of. Moreover, these are precisely what are now meant to be testimony to determination and lack of hypocrisy. They are supposed to testify in favour of those governing, to legitimise their presence, and to lend them credibility as authentic advocates of change, who in trusting their own rationale have the courage to dispense with any PR shock absorbers.

Thirdly, government in its post-liberal rendering is inclined to interfere in areas that were not previously subjected to regulation by those governing. Post-liberal government perceives itself as a sheriff meant to bring order in area where there never was order, or where it has begun to break down. As such it desires to amend, with the aid of administrative-bureaucratic instruments, the invisible hand of the market, to 'unplug' the channels of promotion, to steer by hand the media and institutions of culture, subjugating them to the 'pedagogical tasks' of the state, and the like. Unshaken belief in sociotechnics and regulatory mechanisms lies at the foundation of all these desires.

And fourthly, another characteristic of government in the style of a sheriff is that the procedural correctness of governing is less important for it than the content of decisions taken and their anticipated consequences. This brings it closer to Schmitt's decisionism and to all those practices of governing that strive to overcome the 'impossibilism' of procedural democracy.²⁴

²² Some of the comments below regarding the changing model of government were first formulated in the article *Dekapilaryzacja władzy*, which I wrote together with Maciej Frąckowiak, and which was published in this year's second issue of the journal *Studia Socjologiczne*.

²³ See e.g. A. Appadurai, *Strach przed mniejszościami. Esej o geografii gniewu [Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger]*, Warsaw: WN PWN, 2009; M. Castells, *Sieci oburzenia i nadziei. Ruchy społeczne w erze Internetu [Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age]*, Warsaw: WN PWN, 2013.

²⁴ Cf. e.g. P. Pluciński, *Decyzjonizm zamiast debaty? O przeciwstawnych wzorach działania w sferze publicznej*, *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 73(4), 2011: 194–213.

V. TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT?

If one can defend the proposition that the deepest and simultaneously original cause of the current crisis in liberal democracy is the collapse of the social contract, the core of which was the social-caring model of the welfare state, then a question that must raise its head is obviously that regarding a new social contract. Is it at all possible today, and if so, how should it look? What should it embrace, who should be its guarantor, and how should it be negotiated? Such questions intimidate one by their gravity. However, we should no longer run away from them.

It would seem best to begin talks regarding the new social contract with a discussion about its mainstays. And in tentatively joining this conversation, I would like to suggest three such mainstays.

1. Guarantee of security in status and dignity

A feature common to the Law and Justice programme *Rodzina 500 plus* [*Family 500 plus*] and other such ideas, such as universal (and guaranteed) basic income, the so-called civil pension or the ‘thirteenth wage’ recently proposed by Civic Platform for pensioners, is the radical approach to the principle of wealth redistribution. Until recently all such ideas were highly criticised—and not only by liberals, but by practically the entire political mainstream—as dishing out public money, as driving entire segments of society into conditioned helplessness, and—indeed—as a manifestation of populism. Today the discussion is no longer about *whether* but about *how*.

This is because everybody is beginning to realise that in conditions of ever greater meritocracy, the number of individuals marginalised and pushed out of the most attractive segments of the labour market (or not admitted to them at all) will increase. The ever faster pace of technological change and the accompanying ever more demanding expectations in terms of skills will increase the size of the *superfluous workforce* comprising people who want to work, but whom the job market does not need.²⁵ In addition, with every year that passes there will be an increase in the number of individuals who not so much are incapable as do not want to participate in the highly competitive social relations.

It takes little effort to guess that a system increasing social security and guaranteeing all citizens a *minimum of dignity* will be perceived by many as one huge case of political corruption, and as a new type of political deal in which the financial and cultural elites are protecting themselves from an uncontrolled explosion of social dissatisfaction, from some contemporary kind of rebellion. I personally would prefer to think of this system as an essential shock absorber for the psychosocial costs of the efficiency-based order.

²⁵ Cf. J. Rifkin, *Koniec pracy. Schyłek siły roboczej na świecie i początek ery postrykowej* [*The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*], Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2001; Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał* [*Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts*], Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004.

2. Amendment of decision-taking mechanisms

In an ever more complex world, the significance of experts should increase. The problem is that having experts in power limits democracy, and—as Antony Giddens described it—is one of the mechanisms for uprooting people from participation in social life.²⁶ Thus on the one hand depriving citizens of the right to (co-)decide on matters of importance to them (such as, for example, retirement age, power generation policy, or replacing the national currency with the euro) is an evident curtailing of democracy. Yet on the other it is hard to resist the impression that subjecting such issues to a vote (and especially a referendum) is, in the time of post-truth, becoming extremely dangerous.

Perhaps, therefore, democracy should become increasingly deliberative.²⁷ Those same social media that are blamed today—largely deservedly—for the lowering of the standard of public discourse may prove an irreplaceable tool enabling a return to the debate between citizen and government, and make it more effective than at any time whatsoever in the past. Perhaps too certain issues really should be resolved today by expert bodies. That would mean that the next urgent and strategically important political task is to create effective mechanisms for controlling government by experts.

3. Education for empowerment and autonomy

It may be a truism, but it has to be reiterated at this point: a well-functioning deliberative democracy requires educated citizens who are capable of thinking in categories of the common good and of calculating in a long-term temporal perspective. But education also means protection against the threats and potholes entailed by the two first mainstays I mention of the new order. Without education supporting and stimulating ever greater aspirations for empowerment, then projects whose goal is to ensure security in social status and dignity really could lead to an increase in conditioned helplessness and an escalation of the entitlement mentality. Without measures stimulating civil involvement, solutions devised as tools for the redistribution of wealth may prove increasingly stigmatising. And their side effect might be not a decline but an even faster growth in the stratification of status.

VI. ENDING

Let us return to Poland for my closing remarks. After one and a half years of government by Law and Justice one may describe this party as good at interpreting social expectations. The most important response to the intensi-

²⁶ See A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności* [*Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*], Warsaw: WN PWN, 2001: 3–49.

²⁷ See Ch. Mouffe, *Agonistyka. Polityczne myślenie o świecie* [*Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*], Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2015.

fyng hunger for the concrete is, of course, their *Family 500 plus* programme (instead of non-specific social promises, concrete money). Called retrotopia by Bauman, the longing for the past—whose source is fear of the future—is being appeased by Law and Justice with a policy of selective reactivation of the Polish People's Republic. The best example of this policy so far is the withdrawal of the obligation of school for six-year-olds and the elimination of the junior high school stage, and thereby a return to the old PPR schooling system. However, the reaction by Law and Justice to the social aversion towards the elites and the (though selective²⁸) anti-systemic character of a portion of Polish society is, firstly, highly anti-elitist (and at times anti-intelligentsia) rhetoric used by this party's most important politicians and, secondly, a 'revolutionary' aspiration to interrupt (at least on a symbolic level) the continuity of the legal-institutional order inherited from the previous governments.

One more question for the very end: can the policy applied today by Law and Justice be acknowledged as a step towards a new social contract, based on the three mainstays I have pointed out? Undoubtedly *Family 500 plus* is a pro-dignity programme, which at the same time is meant to increase the level of social security (and incidentally create internal demand). As for the reforming of decision-taking mechanisms, here the actions of Law and Justice are heading rather in the direction of creating (and in fact reinforcing) a single strong centre of power. By no means can we talk of an expansion of meritocracy, or all the more so of the introduction of elements of deliberative democracy. It is also hard to discern in the measures taken so far by Law and Justice any elements of a policy whose goal would be to stimulate aspirations for empowerment and emancipation. One could rather speak of a tendency in the opposite direction.

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WHAT IS HAPPENING? BETWEEN UTOPIAN POPULISM AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

S u m m a r y

The first part of this article is an attempt to identify the main structural reasons for the 'populist turn'. Of them the key one was the collapse of the social contract the core of which was a model of a welfare state. In the second part, the reactions to the tendencies responsible for the current crisis of political confidence in those who govern and of those being governed are presented. The social side expects from the governors a 'policy of concrete solutions'. At the same time, the attitudes of those who are governed become increasingly anti-establishment, anti-system and are

²⁸ In Polish society today, this anti-systemness means above all a powerful anti-party attitude, which has already been discussed. At the same time, though, an anti-systemic attitude does not go hand-in-hand with actions aimed towards constructing some kind of alternative institutional order, while thought regarding (existing) state institutions is dominated by the firm belief that they should not so much be replaced by others as made more efficient.

generally and steadily turning away from the uncertain future. Those who govern, on the other hand, adopt expectancy attitudes or are heading towards non-liberal democracy. In the third part of this article, an attempt is made to outline the main provisions of the social contract, which have been considered to be (i) guarantees of the security of the status and dignity, (ii) a greater than before reliance on meritocracy and deliberative democracy, and (iii) education to subjectivity, emancipation and autonomy.