

THE CORONAVIRUS IN LIBERAL AND ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES AND THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to compare the effectiveness of two political systems: liberal democracy and illiberal democracy in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. The analysis is based on the theoretical assumptions of non-Marxian historical materialism. In the first part of the article, I present the concept of ‘regulative credit’ which has been introduced within the framework of this theory. In standard socio-political conditions, the growth of regulatory power is usually contested by citizens. However, in a situation of danger, when social order is undermined, citizens support the authorities’ extraordinary regulations. This social support, called regulative credit, lasts as long as the danger persists. In the next section, I briefly characterize liberal and illiberal democracies. In liberal democracy, there is a balance between different branches of power, and citizens share a socio-political consciousness of an individualistic type. In illiberal democracy, the executive branch of power – though democratically chosen – has an advantage over the two other kinds of power, and citizens share a socio-political consciousness of a collectivist type. Those differences result in diverse reactions of the authorities to a situation of threat. The political authorities of an illiberal democracy usually react faster, in comparison with the political authorities in liberal democracies, that react slower. Also, the attitude of citizens toward the introduced restrictions vary. Societies of illiberal democracies are more self-disciplined and more willing to accept restrictions from above. Whereas societies of liberal democracies are more individualistic and less willing to accept limitations. In the fourth part of my paper, I analyze briefly the influence of the pandemic on globalization processes and on the relations between the EU and the nation states in Europe. In the summary (section five), I predict that the mass use of modern technologies to control social life

and strengthening of the sovereignty of nation states will be the two most important effects of the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: pandemic, coronavirus, COVID-19, liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, globalization

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of 2019 and 2020, China and, later on, other countries of the eastern Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Macau) experienced an epidemic of the coronavirus (COVID-19). After about three months of intense battle with the disease, the epidemic appears to be easing off in its former epicenter, China, where such restrictive protective measures such as rigid quarantine, a prohibition on unnecessary presence in public spaces, and a requirement to maintain a safe distance from other people were introduced. The European countries, which – initially, at least – appeared to be less enthusiastic about the introduction of severe restrictions of civil liberties to limit the spread of infections, are now the main locus of the disease. The differences are so visible that they have given rise to a discussion about the relationship between freedom and safety and about the advantages of illiberal systems, in which the authorities are much more effective at protecting their own citizens.

BETWEEN SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND ANTAGONISM

Let us consider the issue at hand in the context of the theoretical assumptions of non-Marxian historical materialism (Nowak 1983; Nowak 1991). In this theory, political authorities are a social minority which, having at its disposal the means of coercion, expands its control over social life. The authorities may force citizens to undertake certain actions or to prohibit some of them, with the use of violence or threats of violence. The level of power regulation in a society is shaped by the proportion between the actions undertaken voluntarily by its citizens and actions undertaken (or not undertaken) because of sanctions or the threat of sanctions. When the level of power regulation exceeds a threshold which is not accepted by the society, acts of civil disobedience appear (Nowak 1991: 33-37). Such a conflict between the authorities and the civil society should not, however, be understood in too simplistic a manner. According to Nowak: “The authority performs certain integrative functions for the society. Above all, it secures the minimum of social order, without which no society can exist” (Nowak 1991: 39). Certain regulations of selected aspects of social life are made in all citizens’ interest because the maintenance of social order increases the effectiveness of citizens’ voluntary and enforced actions. Therefore, the growth of power regulation will not always lead to social contestation.

Still, certain events in social life will disrupt such understood social order. For example, various unfortuitous events: environmental (earthquakes, floods), biological (epidemics, crop failures), or social (terrorist attacks) increase the risk incumbent on

the undertaken actions and the level of unpredictability, which destroys social and cooperative ties. In the face of a threat, the introduction of extraordinary regulations – and sanctions for violations of those regulations – by the authorities is in the interest of the whole society, so it does social unrest is not triggered. On the contrary, it increases social support for the authorities. Thus civil society supports the government by giving it a regulative credit of sorts,¹ for the duration of the crisis. Once the danger has passed, everything returns to normal, and citizens' disobedience with regard to the authorities' bureaucratic activity re-emerges.

In view of the reflections above, we can see that the authorities' 'regulative' activity is a better solution than a passive approach. Importantly, the regulations should be introduced at the right time and in the right way. If they are implemented too early, they will not gain the society's acceptance, and they will be ignored. As regards the method of implementation, they should be introduced in steps and in a complex manner (Brzechczyn 2004: 303-304), to prevent their evasion by individuals who, for various reasons, do not want to act in the common interest and do not comply, for example, with the quarantine, the injunction to practice the 'social distancing', and similar restrictive rules. Such a way of introducing extraordinary regulations will also restrict the diffusion of the pandemic, so it is also more likely to be effective from the purely medical point of view.

LIBERAL AND ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY: AN ATTEMPT AT ANALYSIS

In order to compare the effectiveness between two mentioned in the title of this section political systems, we must distinguish between liberal and so-called 'illiberal' democracy. The latter term is rather unfortunate because the prefix 'il-' suggests that this variety of democracy is based on a simple negation of individual freedom, the key value of liberalism. Meanwhile, in illiberal democracy (at least, in its European version), freedom is understood the way it was in the ancient and modern republican thought: as related to being responsible for the community and to acquiring a set of public virtues. However, we cannot simply replace the adjective 'illiberal' with the adjective 'republican' or 'communitarian' because in the countries of the eastern Asia, collective socio-political consciousness is based on a different axiological foundation, namely, the social philosophy of Confucianism (Huntington 1996: 103-109; confucianist-liberal philosophical exchange, see: Rogacz 2015: 82-86).

Every political system can be characterized at the level of political practice and at the level of ideals. According to Piotr Przybysz (1999: 134-136), comparisons between different political systems can be faulty or proper. An erroneous comparison occurs when we collate, for example, the practice of a given political system with the ideal of another political system. In a proper comparison, we should collate two political systems at the level of political practice or at the level of ideals.

This rule should also be applied to comparisons between liberal and illiberal democracies. Consequently, we can distinguish between the political practice of liberal

¹ The concept of 'regulative credit' referring to inter-social relations was first introduced in Brzechczyn (1993: 447, 449-450).

democracy, the ideal of liberal democracy, the political practice of illiberal democracy, and the ideal of illiberal democracy. For a proper comparison, we should set together the ideological levels of liberal democracy and illiberal democracy or, alternatively, the political practices in the two systems. It would be erroneous to compare the ideal of liberal democracy with the practice of illiberal democracy or vice versa.

In both varieties of democracy, the authorities are elected by the citizens, and the division into the executive, legislature, and judicial branches is preserved. However, in liberal democracy, the influence of the executive branch is limited by the increasing prerogatives of the judicial branch which can block the decisions of the executive branch if they violate the rights and interests of various minorities and identity groups. It is the courts that evaluate whether the rights have been violated; the evaluation is not the subject matter of the public debate the result of which is sealed in polling stations (Lilla 2016: 135–138). That practice limits the rule of the elected executive authorities who can only serve as neutral arbiters of various advocacy groups. Consequently, the political process in liberal democracy is characterized by a kind of proceduralism: political decisions are to be made solely by institutions which have appropriate competences, and they have to be compliant with the increasingly complex law. As a result, political leaders' personal responsibility for their decisions is diluted, and the possibility of holding the leaders to account during the elections is limited (Antoszewski 2018: 57). On the ideological level, liberal democracies are based on individualist liberalism in which the very concept of common good is negated and individual rights and liberties have a priority over the communal interests.

In illiberal democracy, the executive branch gains greater power than the legislative and judicial branches (Antoszewski 2018: 59). In that variety of democracy, freedom is interconnected with the sense of responsibility for the community. The state is not a neutral arbiter but an active supporter of domestic entrepreneurship in the unequal rivalry with global corporations as well as of the cultural and historical identity of the society. The basis of a political process are decisions made by a political leader (or the leadership of the political party which has won in the elections), and that leader is the actor ultimately responsible for the results of those decisions, and who will be called to account for them at the next election. Illiberal democracies refer to a version of collective ideology – they put an emphasis on communality and subjugating individual rights to the interest of the community.

CORONAVIRUS IN ILLIBERAL AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

The adjectives 'liberal' and 'illiberal' primarily refer to social and political consciousness. Meanwhile, in the eastern Asia, we can distinguish at least three main types of socio-political systems: post-communist, illiberal autocracies, and illiberal democracies. One example of a post-communist country is China governed by the apparatus of Communist Party which, directly or indirectly controls the economy and culture (for the structure of Chinese society in terms of non-Marxian historical materialism, see Rogacz 2016: 176-179). Singapore and Macau could be classified as illiberal autocracies, and Taiwan and South Korea – as illiberal democracies. I will limit my analysis to

the examples of China and Taiwan.

According to the media, the first case of the coronavirus disease was reported in China on November 17, 2019. However, the Chinese authorities initially ignored the threat and repressed those who tried to inform the public about the threat of a new epidemic (for instance, Li Wenliang, a physician from Wuhan and eight other persons from the medical personnel). It was only on December 31, 2019 that the Chinese government notified the World Health Organization about the virus. In the first half of January 2020, the virus spread throughout China. That was facilitated by the celebration of the Chinese New Year which traditionally attract tourists from around the world and during which the Chinese travel back to their families. The Chinese authorities only ordered a lockdown in Wuhan, accompanied by a number of regulations supervised directly by the army, on January 23, 2020. As reported from China by Nicholas A. Christakis, the educational and cultural institutions were closed there, and the quarantine period was prolonged.² Chinese municipal authorities only allowed one person per household to go out to do the shopping. The official regulations pertaining to the pandemic were very detailed, for example, only four people at a time could enter a lift, and they had to stand in the four corners of the space. The safe distance rule was also followed in other public spaces, such as offices or bus and railway stations. Christakis ascribes the effectiveness of the Chinese anti-epidemic strategy to the authoritarian rule and collective culture prevalent in that country.

During the first phase of the development of the epidemic, the Chinese rulers ignored the new disease and censored the information about its spread. This was possible because of the social control held by the Communist Party of China, which is much greater in this state than in autocratic systems, not to mention the democratic ones. When the censorship of the information proved to be ineffective, the authorities took action against the pandemic. Still, contrary to the propagandist campaign carried out globally after the epidemic was halted, we could hardly see the Chinese reaction as exemplary in the face of the threat (Birrel 2020). Rather, the suppression of information and the persistent cover up are reminiscent of the (dis)informative politics of the Soviet Union after the Chernobyl catastrophe.

By comparison, China's neighbor Taiwan began mass control of people coming from Wuhan as early as December 31, 2019, and the authorities forbade travel between Taiwan and China at the end of January and the beginning of February (Lanier, Weyl 2020; Shen 2020; Turecki 2020). The Taiwanese government introduced a ban on the export of surgical masks, and it ordered more of them from the private manufactures, which were able to produce 10 million pieces a day. Soldiers helped produce the masks, working on 62 additional production lines. A central epidemics command center was set up by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The center monitored the spread of the pandemic and informed the citizens about the current situation. Quarantined people were monitored electronically, with the use of their mobile phones. The authorities verified whether the people broke the rules and

² The reporter illustrates his observations with photographs – they are available on his Twitter account (<https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1237020518781460480.html>; Retrieved March 16, 2020); also see Birrel 2020, Turecki 2020).

ensured they did not leave their houses. The government rationed the protective masks, also by the use of electronic means. Every Taiwanese person could buy two masks a week for themselves and for their family members. In order to avoid leaving the house, they could make the purchase online. People who went out to a store could learn online about the availability of the masks in pharmacies. Moreover, a special Internet platform was created, with maps of the areas with the quarantined and infected people. According to Jaron Lanier and E. Glen Weyl (2020), “the Taiwanese response, based on an ethos of broad digital participation and community-driven tool development, was fast, precise, and democratic”.

European countries (Spain, Italy, France) where liberal democracies prevailed, initially took a different approach – they prioritized freedom over the safety of the whole population. The extreme version of such an attitude at the beginning of pandemic was represented by the British government. Patrick Vallance, Boris Johnson’s advisor, opined that a quarantine would be effective in the case of a pandemic but not the coronavirus which only had the characteristics of an epidemic. The low fatality rate means that most of the population can have a mild case of the disease (Łepkowski 2020). According to Vallance, “about 60% is the sort of figure you need to get herd immunity” (“News” 2020). The British method, as noted by Łepkowski, has some disadvantages as it “indicates the conscious awareness that a per mille of British citizens will be sentenced to death for the purpose of the natural ‘immunization’ of the remaining people” (Łepkowski 2020). The groups with especially high risk of dying are those aged 70 and above more and people with suppressed – for various reasons – immunity. After a time, though, the British approach was modified, and restrictions similar to those in other countries were introduced: schools, stores, cultural institutions, etc. were closed, and social distancing was encouraged, if not enforced.

What were the reasons for the differences between the actions of the authorities in the varieties of democracy (liberal and illiberal)? They could be explained with the concept of regulative credit. I assume that under the conditions of an increasing threat to social order, the phenomenon of regulative credit leads to greater support for extraordinary regulations introduced by the authorities. The question arises, then, why the illiberal democracies of the east Asia usually introduced those regulations earlier than the liberal democracies of Western Europe. Those seemingly small differences in time had a significant impact on the course of the fight against the pandemic. They resulted from the different impact of regulative credit in the two types of democracy and from the position of political power in those political systems.

The executive branch in an illiberal democracy has a greater ability to introduce extraordinary regulations and sanctions. Moreover, it is also expected to assume responsibility for the members of society and to actively protect them. The action of the authorities is reinforced by a collectivistic type of socio-political consciousness. In illiberal democracy, then, the effect of regulative credit is present, which is strengthened by social discipline and by subordination to social order.

In liberal democracy, on the other hand, the executive branch is restricted by the legislature and the judiciary, as well as by a set of autonomous (‘apolitical’) institutions and offices, which prolongs the decision-making process. Additionally, an indi-

vidualist type of social and political consciousness weakens the influence of the effect of the regulative credit. The restrictions of freedom introduced by the authorities are not followed by the citizens as on such a scale as they are in illiberal democracies.

It is worth noting that the different reactions if the political authorities east Asian and European countries may in part be explained by SARS-1 epidemics that the Asian societies directly experienced in 2000/2003. Having gone through this experience already, the state authorities took the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic very seriously from the beginning (I owe this observation to Achim Siegel, see also: Pueyo 2020). However, in order to take into account the influence of past events on the behavior of different political systems, we should introduce to our analysis the mechanism of social learning. In case of a political system, social learning contains at least two dimensions: diagnosis of the given state of affairs (e.g. efficiency of health system) and practical recommendation of changes/reforms. Because the decision-making process in liberal democracies is usually much more diffuse than in illiberal democracies (not mention autocracies), this second type of political system is able to learn from past experience in a more effective way and introduce more rigidly desirable reforms and procedures.

NATION STATES IN THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

Faced with the pandemic, we re-examine the issue of globalization and the role of the sovereignty of particular states. In David Goodhart's (2020) words:

We no longer need the help of rats or fleas to spread disease — we can do it ourselves thanks to mass international travel and supply chains. And we are no longer self-sufficient when things go wrong. When a corona vaccine is eventually discovered, we will have to wait our turn in the queue as we no longer have a UK-based manufacturer. Talk of the need for de-globalisation seems suddenly to be everywhere.

We could assume that globalization processes have hitherto eroded the sovereignty of nation states. Let us take a closer look at what sovereignty is, then. The power regulation of a state authorities can be divided into the internal (dependent solely on the authorities of the state) and external (dependent on various international agents) parts. The degree of dependence or sovereignty of a state can be evaluated on the basis of the relationship between the sphere of internal regulation and the sphere of general power regulation. The fraction which expresses the relation of the numerical sizes of those sets can be called the sovereignty ratio. If it equals one, then globalization processes lead to the elimination of effective sovereignty (the state as a market) in favor of transnational organizations and institutions. If it has a value in the range between 0 and 1, then globalization processes make the state dependent on external agents. For a sovereign state, the ratio is equal to zero (Brzechczyn 1993: 446).

The European Union was severely criticized, on the one hand, for confessing, through Ursula von der Leyen, that “we are all Italians,” whilst at the same time, for not being more proactive in the face of the Italian crisis. One decision made by the

authorities was to provide tens of billions of euros for counteracting the results of the epidemics but only came in March 2020. Particular states closed their borders, restricted air travel, and banned the export of medical equipment (such as masks, gloves, respirators, and PPE) independently from one another.⁵ They also independently prepare assistance programs for domestic business.

It should be noted, though, that the transnational level is not optimal for deciding how to fight a pandemic in particular countries. First of all, the pandemic does not spread equally throughout Europe. It would be not only difficult but also ineffective to introduce the same regulations, at the same pace and simultaneously, in Italy (tens of thousands of infected people, a few thousand deaths – as of March 2020) and in Lithuania (tens of infected people, a few deaths). On the other hand, diversified regulations for particular European countries would unnecessarily prolong the decision-making process, and their belated implementation would be unsuccessful. It is easier to see what should be done in Italy or Lithuania from Rome or Vilnius, respectively, than from Brussels.

In other words, in this case, it would be more efficient to leave the decision making to the nation states and not to delegate it to transnational institutions, which will not be directly accountable for the decisions to voters in each country. That does not mean, however, that the authorities of nation states do not err or that they would choose a correct strategy (for example the United Kingdom). In such cases, the losses will be limited in scope to one society – which can hold the decision makers accountable on the occasion at the next elections. Having said that, the critique of excessive globalization does not entail approval for international isolation. Controlled globalization would be an optimal solution – with international aid and cooperation, necessary for minimizing the repercussions of natural catastrophes, coupled with a mechanism of learning on the part of the authorities of particular nation states. The presence of that mechanism, though, presupposes the existence of truly sovereign nation states and not of illusory states deprived, by globalization processes, of their power to make decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that once the epidemics is over, there will be social and political changes in at least three areas.

(i) Modern technology will still be used for constant and common monitoring of citizens' behavior. After September 11, 2001, electronic surveillance was used against terrorism, with respect to a small percentage of citizens. We can reasonably expect that after COVID-19, the electronic surveillance will be used en masse for monitoring the health of societies.

(ii) The sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency of nation states will be

⁵ It is worth noting that up to April 3, 2020, the same customs duties (around 6%) for the export of protective masks produced outside of the European Union was maintained (mail correspondence with Przemysław Szulgit, the president of the Management Board of the TSM POLAND SP. Z O.O. company).

strengthened. The coronavirus has revealed the fragility of globalization processes: in the conditions of developed international economic cooperation, breaks in the delivery of specialized parts and components in one part of the world can disrupt production processes in another part of the world. Moreover, in the face of a threat, certain nation states paid little or no attention to the international structures and organizations (the United Nations, the European Union), and instead they effectively introduced protectionist policies in the areas of the production and distribution of medical equipment, closed their borders, and created programs for overcoming the economic recession.

(iii) Modification of liberal democracy towards its illiberal counterpart. In order to combat the world economic crisis that is will surely be a consequence of pandemic, European states will have to introduce more interventionist economic policies. The domain of public health will become more important element of social safety, which will also include the supporting sectors of the economy and science. Those spheres of life will be excluded from the influence of the ongoing political dispute and market mechanisms. However, they will be subjected to stricter regulation by the political authorities.

Obviously, we do not know how long those changes and tendencies will last and how strong they will be. It is worth recognizing that the current pandemic is the first global event directly experienced by people from all societies in the world. Although, two world wars have fundamentally changed international relations and domestic order of many state policies, they did not have global character as understood above. First of all, military campaigns and Axis powers' occupations did not affect all territories of the world. Secondly, some states remained neutral and their citizens did not take part in the war. Even the terrorist attack of 9/11 was globally observed only via tv screens all the world. By contrast the COVID-19 pandemic directly affects people coming from all societies in the world. It is too early, at this juncture, to speak about the rise of a new *corona's* generation. First of all, the intensity of the pandemic varies from region to regions. Now, one can identify three its epicenters: China, Italy (or southern Europe), and the USA. Furthermore, according to sociological definition a generation is a group of people of this same age sharing common attitude and common hierarchy of ethical values resulting from this same historical experience (Ossowska 1963; Garewicz 1983) that is usually immortalized in culture.

However, above-mentioned social results of the pandemic will weaken the tendency (ii). The strength of this counter influence depends on social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. If coronavirus pandemic contributed to the rise of new world generation, it would block tendency (ii) in stronger way. If, on the other hand, the pandemic remains only the common global experience of the world population, its influence will be much weaker.

The world has seen greater pandemics: the plague of Justinian in the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century, the Black Death in Western Europe in the 14th century, or the 1918–1920 Spanish flu. They each had an impact on the life of one generation, but that influence decreased over time, and if they were not immortalized in culture and

the political praxis, they were gradually forgotten. History is a teacher of life on the condition that people and societies want to learn from it.

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