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Paradoxes and Flaws in Speaking About Value

Absract

This article examines two main values in the contemporary social and political discourse: liberal constitutional democracy and civil society. It tries to show that in both cases there are inconsistencies in using these terms. In the first case, several contradictions appear making democracy an oxymoron term; concerning civil society it turns out that what fits best the criteria of this concept is usually not associated with it. This analysis is compared with the Neo-Hegelian political views of Giovanni Gentile's follower, Benito Mussolini. Under logical analysis, Mussolini's ideas prove to be consistent and coherent although sound strange at first glance.

Key Terms

Democracy, Civil Society, Contradiction, Neo-Hegelian Logic, Corporation, Totalitarian State, Democratic State, Free Media.

Değere İlişkin Konuşmalarda Ortaya Çıkan Hatalar ve Paradokslar

Özet

Bu makalede çağdaş sosyal ve politik söylem içerisindeki başlıca iki değer incelenmektedir: liberal anayasal demokrasi ve sivil toplum. Bu terimleri kullanıldığı her iki durumda da bazı tutarsızlıkların bulunduğu gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. İlk durumda, demokrasi oksimoron bir terim haline getirildiğinde bir takım çelişkiler ortaya çıkmaktadır; bu, sivil toplum söz konusu olduğunda bu kavramın kriterine en çok uyan şeyin, genellikle kavramın kendisiyle ilişkisi olmadığı konusunu tersyüz etmektedir. Bu analiz, Giovanni Gentile'nin takipçisi olan Benito Mussolini'nin Yeni-Hegelci politik görüşleriyle karşılaştırılmaktadır. İlk bakışta tuhaf karşılanmasına rağmen Mussolini'nin görüşleri, mantıksal analiz altında tutarlı olduğunu kanıtlamaktadır.

Anahtar Terimler

Demokrasi, Sivil Toplum, Çelişki, Yeni-Hegelci Mantık, Kurum, Totaliter Devlet, Demokratik Devlet, Özgür Basın.

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1. Hidden contradictions in current discourse on values

In October 1928, Benito Mussolini gave a speech at the anniversary meeting of the editors of Italian fascist newspapers claiming that they had the unique opportunity to work in free media as they lived in a totalitarian state. At a first glance, such a statement is either arrogant or stands on the edge of absurdity. However, as we will be witnessing later on, under more precise scrutiny Mussolini's comment turns out to be neither. Let's now leave for the time being the enthusiastic Italian spirit and proceed to our own day.

What can we discover if decide to examine the most popular contemporary value democracy? There are several versions of democracy, but the most popular one is "the liberal constitutional democracy". I am going to analyze consecutively each of the components of this extended value. Let's begin with the democratic component. Usually, two main elements are claimed as constituting democracy, i.e., a) rule of majority and b) political participation.¹ These two self-evident aspects shine brightly (or at least are expected to do so) on the surface of any democratic government. Nevertheless, the predominant practice of developed democracies casts significant doubt on the presence of these elements. As a rule, political participation tends to be well below 50%. If we take as an example recent elections for the EU Parliament in Bulgaria in May 2007, we can see that little less than 30% of the electorate took part in them. The governing coalition won half of the seats; therefore, less than 15% supported its candidates. It is obvious that the real majority remains indifferent and silent. Similar situations prove that democratic procedures and institutions today lead to an aristocratic rule of the minority, that is, to a strange formation, which can be justifiably called *democratic aristocracy*.² This is how we encounter the first paradox in the contemporary discourse on values; it is a contradiction in terms or *contradictio in adjecto*.

Speaking about the liberal component, it has three substantial principles: a) concern for the individual, b) political equality, and c) civil liberties being of paramount importance. On the background of the grand coalition tendency in current politics, when the whole party spectrum is occupied from left to right through the center, there is no much space left for any of these elements. Within a grand coalition, concern for the individual withdraws to the back since what is really significant is to cope with the impossible, i.e., to keep together and utilize opposite, even contradictory, positions. Political equality remains only *de jure*, because *de facto* any political actions are of no use since all options have been already exhausted: the electorate has no choice left but to look passively at what is going on at the governing scene with no hope to change whatsoever. The similar is the situation with civil liberties except for one curious nuance: civil liberties exist both *de jure* and *de facto*. They can be practiced in the most unrestrained way namely because they have no impact on the political life. Drawing upon liberal procedures, power has achieved such a status that it gets in charge of the entire political life. It has achieved the final objection of any power leaving the

¹ Max J. Skidmore, *Ideologies: Politics in Action*, New York: HBJ, 1989, p. 14

² It is more appropriate to speak about oligarchy instead of aristocracy as the ruling minority serves not the interests of the nation but its own group or personal interests. However, from a logical point of view, this does not make difference and remains a *contradictio in adjecto*.

opposition (as far as any has remained) in dismay. This is a new totalitarianism grown up on liberal institutions; it produces another contradiction in terms, *liberal totalitarianism*.

Finally, the constitutional component is not free of paradoxes either. Constitutional component, in the extended expression about democracy, is meant to guarantee that majority is not going to abuse its power subjugating minority under its dictatorship. This is the reason why democratic constitutions normally provide a number of checks and balances that make sure minority can enjoy its civil liberties, political equality, and can take part in political life. However, in the current political circumstances the wording of the constitution has to be turned upside down in order to make any sense, that is, ruled majority possesses certain rights that the ruling minority cannot deprive it from; one reads minority but means majority and vice versa.

It is time to go back to Mussolini's statement which we mentioned earlier. Actually, he says that media could either be self-dependent—a, or depend on corporations—b, or on private individual—c, or on a certain party—d. By b and c he envisages democratic countries and by d means Bolshevich party. In Italy media depends neither on b, nor on c, nor on d; therefore, it is self-dependent—a.³ This is a simple example of *modus tollendo ponens*. Here the crucial point in Mussolini's reasoning is clarified: media in Italy can be self-dependent and not to be torn apart by contradictory interests of profit and power seekers namely because Italy is a totalitarian state⁴. In fact, Il Duce's argument goes according to Hegelian tradition and, in particular, according to the Neo-Hegelian ideas of Giovanni Gentile. Gentile teaches about organic unity of the society and the state when individuals, families, and communities have the same goal and that very goal is the state. In this sense, media coincides with the state, cannot have different purposes from the state, and due to this is self-dependent.

It looks like that Mussolini's claim is not so absurd at least within the Hegelian logic. On the other hand, contemporary democratic discourse turns out to be full of contradictions—aristocratic democracy, totalitarian liberalism, minority meaning majority, etc. It is worth to point out here that democratic and fascist discourse are viewed from different logical positions when the first is found to be inconsistent and the second—consistent. In the first case, contradictions arise from the point of view of classical logic, which does not allow contradictions in valid reasoning. Mussolini's claim makes sense only when it is considered against the standard of Hegelian thinking (although in this case not because Hegelian logic adopts smoothly contradictions and even needs them). The way of thinking of the democratic discourse partially resembles what Hegel calls negative dialectics. In negative dialectics, contradictions are explicated but they stand side by side with no interaction and cannot be resolved in something third. That is, negative dialectics belongs to the limited level of intellectual faculty of understanding and has not achieved yet the level of reason to which speculative thinking belongs. According to Hegel, there are two forms of negative dialectics—skepticism and relativism; they both are interim and tend to be substituted by speculative thinking. Skepticism and relativism are quite problematic ways of thinking while oxymoron

³ Benito Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi*, vol. VI, Milano: Ulrico Hoepli Editore, 1934, p. 250

⁴ Mussolini apparently denies the privilege of being a totalitarian state to the Soviet Union.

thinking of the current democratic discourse seems to cope smoothly with its own contradictory nature. The principle of this later type of negative dialectics is neither skepticism nor relativism but domination. All contradictions are utilized for the sake of domination. Contradictions are masked and neglected, demands of reasoning are ignored too, because the only thing that counts is carrying out domination.

2. Some deficiencies of term ‘civil society’

Although civil society Renaissance looks like being over, this term still carries at least some implicit importance. Among many definitions and descriptions of what civil society is, Charles Taylor’s contribution is especially elucidating and useful. In an influential article published in early 90-s, he offers three criteria for which social and political reality should be considered as matching the concept of civil society: “(1) In a minimal sense, civil society exists where there are free associations that are not under the tutelage of state power. (2) In a stronger sense, civil society exists where society as a whole can structure itself and coordinate its actions through such free associations. (3.) As an alternative or supplement to the second sense, we can speak of civil society whatever the ensemble of associations can significantly determine or deflect the course of state policy.”⁵

No doubt that almost everything known as civil society can be subsumed under the minimal sense. However, this sense is too broad to provide anything specific capable of being used for any social and political analysis. The second and third senses are much richer and it is worthwhile to concentrate on them. What is usually meant by independent organizations of citizens barely can qualify for the assessment that society is structured through these organizations. Various networks of non-government or non-profit organizations can be considered at best as a detail of the social structure but not the structure itself. Even less, the NGO ensemble can significantly determine or deflect the course of the state policy. Does this mean that civil society is in a fetus state in the West as well as in the new democracies in the Eastern block? Charles Taylor admits that not everything is perfect with civil society even in the most developed democracies, but still it is possible to match empiric reality with the theoretical criteria. This can be done along the lines of the notion of corporativism. Looking at contemporary corporations within the social structure, it is not difficult to discern that they come very close under Taylor’s second and third criterion. Furthermore, they are capable of inflicting such damages on a state that this can put under question its very existence (think about damages that developed countries suffer annually from relocation of businesses to friendly tax policy places and flexible labor markets). All this inevitably proves that civil society has already reached a very developed level, but its essential ingredients are not Green Peace, Helsinki Watch, and various charitable organizations as usually is assumed.

It is not a secret that corporations are for profit and protection of interest of citizens and work for more prosperous civil environment is either a beneficial side

⁵ Charles Taylor, “Invoking Civil Society,” in: *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit, ed., Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996, p. 68

effect of their day to day businesses or an intended policy aimed at increasing profit by different means. There are several trends within which corporations work in order to provide services to various groups of citizens. On the first place, efforts are applied to improving education and healthcare of their own employees and their families as well as their general living conditions; then, often are addressed needs and concerns of the population in the areas where a given corporation operates; through their foundations, corporations even deal with a limited number of national and international issues relevant for the general citizenry including higher education and research.

In spite of the increasing corporatist awareness about needs of citizens, state is much more instrumental in providing well being of its citizens than civil society (both in the form of NGOs and corporations). Not only welfare states within the EU (Scandinavian countries in particular) dedicated special attention to elevate the life quality of their citizens. But even in the US a significant tendency of concern for the wellbeing of their population can be followed throughout the 20th century. The first significant improvement in the social sphere was marked by Franklin D. Roosevelt's the New Deal introducing Social Security, which allowed citizens to receive a certain federal allowance when retire. Besides, the New Deal brought "national protection for collective bargaining, minimum wage legislation, insurance for bank deposits, workmen's compensation, regulation of banks and stock markets, additional protection for workers, and regulations on industry and employers".⁶ Later on, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society introduced Medical Care (a federal funding for elderly citizens), federal assistance to education, and various programs of the "War on Poverty".⁷

The idea of corporatism was not alien at all to Mussolini's fascist state. Furthermore, it constituted the practical center of the organic unity of the state and society. Corporations were meant to establish the unique third way besides capitalism and communism. They were set in the form of governing councils representing equally capital and labor.⁸ Representatives of employers and unions were expected to cooperate for the sake of the nation (and at the same time of any single individual) embodied by the state and not just for the benefit of the corporation itself. Corporations covered all industries; what allowed them to encompass the entire population and all spheres of life.

It can be summarized that there are four types of taking care of the needs of large citizenry over 20th century: NGO sector, the capitalist corporations, the capitalist state, and the fascist corporations.⁹ The first one is associated with civil society, but as we tried to show here, it is in charge only of a fragment of civil society and not of the most important one. The capitalist corporations play a significant role in providing for the needs of the citizens (outside the remuneration they give to their employees), but their deficiency is in a very limited compass of their charity and other forms of financial care including precisely selected groups: own employees and their families, residents of the areas where a given company is present, some other citizens matching special criteria

⁶ Max J. Skidmore, *Ideologies: Politics in Action*, p. 72

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72

⁸ Patricia Knight, *Mussolini and Fascism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 55-56

⁹ There is a fifth type—the socialist state, but it is principally different from the others and goes beyond the scope of the present article.

(gifted students or prominent/promising scholars in certain field). Moreover, there is another theoretical and moral feature, which bears practical consequences—all corporative non-profit activities are undertaken for the sake of the final check cashing. Capitalist state, at list during the pre-Thatcher/Reagan times, excels both the NGO sector and corporate concerns for the citizen civic activities, social and personal needs. Fascist corporations, lack the profit centered deficiency of the capitalist ones; besides, they cover the whole population like in the capitalist state approach.

It will not be a far-fetched claim to say that concerning civil society another irony is taking place (although not so striking like in the case of the democracy discourse): on the one hand, the core of the civil society is located among the principle share holders of the big industries and, on the other, civil and social initiative provided by Mussolini's corporations is in no way inferior to the conditions for personal development a democratic state keeps ready for its citizens.

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