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BOOK REVIEW: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF CRISIS: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY PERSPECTIVE

Marián Sekerák*

DUFEK, P. - BAROŠ, J. - BLÁHOVÁ, S. - KŘEPELOVÁ, T. - TAUFAR, P.: *Liberální demokracie v době krize: Perspektiva politické filosofie. [Liberal democracy in times of crisis: Political Philosophy Perspective]*. Prague: SLON, 2019. 308 s. ISBN 978-80-7419-277-7; Brno: Masaryk University, 2019. 308 s. ISBN 978-80-210-9166-5.

In their book entitled “*Liberal democracy in times of crisis: Political Philosophy Perspective*” the team of authors from Masaryk University in Brno reflects current discussions on the problems and challenges of liberal democracy. The monograph is the output of a research project supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic. The reviewed book has interdisciplinary character, as the authors are experts in the fields of Political Science, Philosophy, and Law. These are authors both with rich academic experience (**Jiří Baroš, Pavel Dufek**), as well as those who are currently Ph.D. candidates and are at the beginning of their academic careers (**Sylvie Bláhová, Tereza Křepelová, Patrik Taufar**). They are all well aware of the fact that they are analysing very complex phenomena, current political and normative problems, essentially contested concepts, and conceptual stretching in the case of some paradigmatic terms.

In the book, we can find eleven chapters that offer a cross-sectional analysis of the subject: the evolution and challenges of the current theory of democracy, the controversy between Realism and Idealism in political philosophy, the comparison of the aggregative and deliberative approach to conceptualisation of democracy, the differences and relations between legal, political and democratic constitutionalism, the analysis of the concept, principle, and

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instrument of the separation of powers (namely the separation of institutions, persons, and functions), the conceptual and institutional relationship between human rights and democracy, the concept of political representation, the majoritarian principle as the default decision-making rule in a democracy, the issue of individual and collective identity, and the fact of pluralism and diversity in a liberal democratic society which is almost inevitably accompanied by normative disagreement both of the substantive and procedural kind.

It is obvious that the authors focus on topics and areas that belong to their own long-term professional interest; this is manifested in the used analytical tools and approaches. They succeed in maintaining internal consistency and coherence of the chapters, although their order is quite debatable. Especially the tenth one devoted to identity in liberal political theory and the so-called offensive definition of political in Liberalism (author **Sylvie Bláhová**) differs from others by its character. Its approach is much closer to political psychology which diverts the chapter from book's primary analytical focus oscillating around political and legal philosophy. A little unusual and surprising is also the fact that the book from the field of political philosophy/theory (these terms are used by authors interchangeably) was peer-reviewed by two experts, both of whom are lawyers.

All sections are characterised by a sensitive and balanced approach of the authors and the strict observance of scientific neutrality which means that the book as a whole abstains from any particular attitude or ideological position. This is obvious and praiseworthy in particular in the ninth chapter (author **Jiří Baroš**) devoted primarily to two competing moral traditions: liberal and Aristotelian-Thomistic one. A balanced approach to both of them (with deliberate omission of a radical tradition) is something that the author is very concerned about. Sometimes, however, such "cautionary" approach and a central position are detrimental as it obscures the search for some more fundamental answers to the pressing questions of our current Western-type democracies.

The scope of the chapters is not limited only to political science; the works from the field of philosophy and law have been encompassed as well. Similarly, the authors' thorough familiarity with the books and articles of domestic and foreign academic provenance is exemplary. It should be noted, though, that I can imagine an inclusion of some other major works of the Czech (and Slovak) social sciences and humanities, as for example **Pavel Barša's** book *"Síla a rozum: Spor realismu s idealismem v moderním politickém myšlení"* (Power and Reason: The Dispute of Realism and Idealism in Modern Political Thought;

Prague: Filosofia, 2007) in the chapter no. 2, or **Marian Kuna's** comprehensive monograph *"Etika a politika v perspektíve Alasdaira MacIntyrya"* (Ethics and Politics in the Perspective of Alasdair MacIntyre; Ružomberok: FF KU, 2010) in the aforementioned chapter no. 9.

Anyway, authors' overall contribution brings not only commenting on or adoption of already-known philosophical opinions but is characterised by developing their own, original ideas. This also brings some views which remain open to contestation, such as those presented by **Pavel Dufek** in his chapter no. 7 on representative democracy. Here (p. 155) he remembers that elections are viewed not only as an act of legitimization of candidates but also a sign of dissatisfaction with the exercise of the mandate. However, he does not take into account that individual elements of the electoral system may have a grave impact on the gain or loss of the mandate. If a candidate does not defend his/her mandate, it does not only mean that the voters "punished him/her" for his/her political performance. A candidate can get even more votes than in the previous elections and still fail to defend his/her mandate. The problem may be electoral engineering, resizing of the electoral district, or electoral threshold which has not been reached nationally by the political party for which he/she run.

It is important that the authors pay due attention to the phenomenon of populism which is inextricably linked to the crisis of liberal democracy. Today, there is almost no political theorist who has not yet academically analysed the issue. With a bit of exaggeration, one could say that after a deliberative and representative turns there is also a kind of "populist turn" in political science, not so much in terms of methodology than of the issue-centeredness. In his chapter no. 4 devoted to legal constitutionalism **Jiří Baroš** remarkably defends a moderate form of constitutionalism that "must avoid the hubris of promoting *too controversial concepts of human rights*" (p. 115; emphasized M.S.). Otherwise, it would favour populists for whom expanding human rights perceptions to other marginalized and disadvantaged societal groups is one of the main political targets. The author does not offer a more precise definition of what he understands by these "too controversial concepts" but we can intuitively suspect what it could mean. Although his reasoning is undoubtedly guided by good intent in order to find some minimal possible conjunction of the views of proponents of non-populist political doctrines, it may ultimately mean a resignation to the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, namely a thorough protection of human rights and civil liberties, including minority rights.

The path of protection of liberal democracy simply cannot mean a retreat or step back vis-à-vis the populist concepts.

Aforementioned notes just show that the book is really thought-provoking and encourages intellectual reflection. There is no doubt that it represents a fundamental contribution to the current Czech (and Slovak) academic debate in the field of the theory of democracy. After a possible translation into English it undoubtedly has the potential to reach and attract a wider scientific audience.