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Individualism and civic participation : an essay on a certain way of thinking about citizenship

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**INDIVIDUALISM AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION –
AN ESSAY ON A CERTAIN WAY OF THINKING
ABOUT CITIZENSHIP**

Abstract:

Individualism, although inherently contrary to the spirit of collectivism, is the basis for the development of modern civic attitudes. For the most part, individualism determines the degree of interest in politics and the quality of democracy. Individualism is also the basis for the development of civil society, as the unique characteristics of each individual impact the civil society dynamics, quality and impact on those in power.

Key words:

individualism, civil society, democracy, participations

Individualism is a concept that not only is the foundation of the liberal way of thinking and acting, but also defines all varieties of liberalism¹ [Bartyzel 2004: 23-57, Chmielewski 2001: 122, Szacki 1993; 40-41, Karnowska 2005: 13-25]. It means faith in the greatest value for the Liberals – in the human being endowed with autonomy, ability to make rational choices, and to define what is good for them individually, independently from the common good [Chmielewski 2001: 133] According to the message of individualism, „every adult should be able to make - sine ira et studio - all decisions concerning many aspects of their own life, as long as they are compatible with the freedoms of other people. This belief is the original and the only defensible meaning of liberalism” [Pietrzyk-Reeves 2012: 21].

The matter, however, is not for individualistic preferences of individuals to be turned into selfish attitudes. In fact, in the modern meaning of the concept, its core is seen primarily through the prism of reconciling individualistic

¹ It is widely known that there are numerous schools of liberal thinking. One can state even that we are living in the veritable thicket of liberalisms – this has been remarked upon by such authors as Jacek Bartyzel, Jerzy Szacki, Adam Chmielewski, Danuta Karnowska.

tendencies with the person's social presence. It is recognised that in any society those very individuals are „the only source of energy and initiative” [Szacki 1993: 42]. Philosophers have sought to overcome this dichotomy of community versus individualism, to reconcile the individual with both their freedom of choice and living within a society. Therefore, the accepted principle should be that contemporary thinking about individualism is significantly different from its interpretation in earlier periods when liberalisms were being shaped.

Nowadays the concepts of individualism and social nature of man have been redefined, though it does not mean total disappearance of disputes concerning the status of individuals and their relationship to society - only the force of their impact has lessened. The reason for this lies in the evolution of thinking about individualism not only among the critics of the idea, but also among liberals. It is recognized that ”the concept of the human person, located entirely outside society, not connected to anyone by any ties of obligations and duty, not subjected to any determining and shaping external factors, endowed with its own autonomous morality is meaningless. (...) – as one cannot give any sense to the notion of a human being who has not been shaped in any community; a being that, in other words, would resemble humans from the pre-social contract time” [Chmielewski 2001: 127-128].

Thus, society ceases to be a collection of atomized individuals, and becomes a mass of individuals who have the power to exercise their individualistic preferences, making the community of which they are members gaining their energy and commitment. This mechanism lies at the heart of reconciliation of the individual and of the social. The condition for stability of the resulting consensus is that both the individual and the community are not unchangeable entities, prone to stagnation, but are constantly on the move, subject to constant change processes and renegotiation. Therefore, their mutual relations are in fact continuous negotiations, deliberations and repeated conclusion of agreements. This process results, on the one hand, in creation of commitment to others, but most of all it manifests itself in freedom - with all its anxieties and responsibility for one's decisions, both to oneself and for the benefit of society of which an individual is a member.

The formation of the balanced relationship of an individualistic being with the community forces not only compromises, but also adoption of certain attitudes towards participation in social life. In discussions on the types of civic participation, two models permanently inscribed in the behavior of individuals are the leading ones: the liberal and the republican model. They are widely regarded as contradictory, but it is easy to notice that they also can complement each other. In fact, they were developed on the basis of a similar canon of values, and aspire to determine the best model of involved society. Both in the

republican and the liberal paradigm an important role is played by civic competencies and the person of a social leader. However, their relative importance differs depending on the model of civic participation.

The constitutive characteristic of both the liberal and republican model of citizenship is the idea of freedom, as without it it would not be at all possible to form the notion of a citizen. Of course, this category has a different meaning for proponents of liberalism and another for Republicans. The difference lies primarily in the different meaning given to the idea: for liberals, freedom is synonymous with lack of coercion. Sometimes it is even commented that the supporters of liberalism „run away from politics”, because in their opinion any involvement in social life, in the activity of the community questions the primacy of freedom over all other phenomena, and thus constitutes a threat. Hence the liberal suspicion of actions taken by individuals in favour of other people [Cizewska 2010: 83]. The above approach, however, is not a common way of thinking about freedom among liberals, as it is particular to supporters of liberalism described by Marcin Król as „liberalism of fear”. Simultaneously among many forms of liberalism some currents favour activities of citizens in the public sphere, as a consequence of the positive dimension of freedom in liberal thinking [Król 1996: 197]. Its proponents emphasize the need to „make friends with politics” and to have courage in influencing it, because only in this way the public sphere can be improved, and thus in turn better protecting the freedom of the individual.

It is worth noting that such a way of thinking about freedom - in its positive dimension - is close to the Republican approach. Also in this model we can distinguish two sub-models: „Athenian” and „Roman”. Republicanism derived from the traditions of Rome overlaps with liberal thinking on freedom: there is the belief in the primacy of individual freedoms over community life. As noted by Elżbieta Cizewska „while its supporters evade the question of what is happiness, they also, on the other hand, just like the Athenian Republicans emphasize the importance of participation for the common good, and combine individual freedom with the freedom of the state” [Cizewska 2010: 81]. Therefore, the interpretation of the notion of freedom of followers of the „Roman” Republican school is very similar to the assumptions of the „liberalism of courage.”

The most demanding as concerns civic attitudes is the „Athenian” model of Republicanism. Its supporters acknowledge that humans are social beings and can only find self-fulfillment through public action for the common good. Contemporary exponents of this position are the communitarians, claiming that only by working for the common good is possible to realize individual good as well. Thus, there is a clear primacy of positive freedom and the common good over negative freedom and personal individualism².

² It is a rather simplified and generalised summary of the communitarian thinking. It is due

From the different understanding of the idea of freedom in liberal and republican positions also grows a contrasting perception of the relationship between the individual and the community. While the „liberalisms of fear” recognize the absolute primacy of the individual, understood as an individual being, over any manifestation of communalism, in the Republican and „liberalism of courage” concepts and positions the relationships are significantly more complicated. They offer no clear opposition between a rational individual, having the right to individual happiness and autonomous decision-making and the community life style. It is recognized even that without individualism the community would lose its opportunity to participate in the the achievement of the common good [Weryński 2010: 52]. Of course, individualism and the community are not seen as equal in the „Athenian” Republicanism, as its supporters stipulate the need for primacy of the community over the individual

This is where the issue of differing interpretations of the problem of civic morality stems from. In this case, the dividing line is drawn between the mutual commitment of citizens in republicanism, and „the value of individual achievement in the private sphere” in liberalism [Weryński 2010: 52]. This translates naturally also to the approach to the state. While in liberal thinking, civil society exists prior to the state, and state is only an instrument of pursuing individual interests, for contemporary Republicans the state is an emanation of the common good. That is why society cannot be fully realized beyond the control of the state. Indirectly, these opposing liberal and republican attitudes towards the state also affect the concept of civil society. As noted by Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski [2008: 154], „according to the communitarian concepts, civil society creates citizens; on the other hand according to the liberal current - citizens make up the civil society, but for them to be able to create it they must be equipped with, firstly, a suitable social capital, which allows individuals to act together; and secondly, have a minimum of civil culture that allows one to see among the objectives of collective action not only their own particular interest, but also the value of the common good”.

According to the researchers, none of the types/models of participation, however, occurs in pure form. Undoubtedly, what should be very strongly emphasized, individualism has a significant impact on the accepted patterns of participation, especially in the liberal models. It is also worth noting that the level of individualism has bearing on the degree of knowledge about politics and interest in it. In the modern world, knowledge about politics is often the passport to strengthened civil control. Acknowledgment that the nation-state is having increasingly less of an impact on the lives of its citizens is associated with

mainly to the nature of research subject of the present article. More on communitarian models of freedom can be found in my book “Disputing the community. Communitarian ideas in modern Polish political thought”, Toruń 2011.

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the problem of „outflow” of significant decisions to the global level [Wnuk-Lipinski 2004: 102]. As rightly noted by E. Wnuk-Lipinski [2004], „from the individual perspective, of fundamental importance are the economy, security (internal and external), and ecology. And these very areas are more and more slipping away from democratic control at the level of a national state, and increasingly (...) are shaped by decisions made in the corporate mode by translational military and economic structures”. A citizen may therefore feel no need to raise their awareness about politics, which is undoubtedly related to wariness resulting from the lack of belief in their ability to influence reality.

On the other hand, it is difficult not to notice a certain paradox. An increasingly complicated world with remote center of power (affected by globalization) needs more and more educated citizens. The reason for this is primarily the belief that „citizens’ ignorance is the enemy of democracy, and a breeding ground for demagogues, as well as the potential social base for possible authoritarian solutions” [Bobbio 1987: 35]. Lack of knowledge also promotes social apathy, which adds to the superficiality of democratic institutions. This weakening of local citizenship (on the nation-state level) favours the withdrawal of individuals from the public sphere of activity into the private sphere. And this process in turn promotes decision-making in democratic procedures (elections, referenda) by only a minority of citizens. Proof of this thesis may be the declining electoral participation in Poland.

This problem is reflected in both theory and empirical research. In a democratic culture, as emphasized by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, involved individuals must duly recognize objects of the political system and have knowledge of the political and administrative processes [Almond, Verba 1963: 67]. Of course, gaining knowledge is subject to being interested in politics, and these two elements have a positive impact not only on the consolidation of democracy, but also on its quality. This principle applies not only to so-called new democracies, but also those that are widely regarded as permanent and unwavering. Particular attention to this issue was paid by Robert Dahl, and Jacek Raciborski indicates that „polyarchy is not a set of institutions imposed on the society. They would not exist if citizens did not take complex actions, for example not want to get to know their options during elections and would not want to make that choice.” Thus, the „civic knowledge is important from the point of view of the key systemic imperative - the continuation of democracy.” [Raciborski 2011: 198].

The postulate and condition of universality of knowledge about politics as a determinant of development of civic participation is not always accepted. The liberal concept of democracy advocates individualistic nature of citizens and the knowledge they possess [Lalman, Oppenheimer, Świstak 1994; 124]. This

assumption recognizes the absolute rationality of individuals and the possibility of its use for the realization of individual interests. Thus, the knowledge possessed by an individual - determining the possible choices - serves only that individual, and not the public, and therefore can be seen as part of liberal, not republican, postulates of action for the common good [Raciborski 2011: 199].

Slightly different, but still visibly related position is represented by the proponents of deliberative democracy and the elitist concepts. They point out that „expectations regarding citizens' cognitive skills are so high that even the authors behind them recognize that in the mass democracies such competences are not widespread” [Raciborski 2011]. Since civic participation is not a universal phenomenon, a question emerges: on what basis does democracy actually function? David Held, answering this very question indicates that democracy meets its formal standards above all by its particular brand of elitism, and applying relevant procedures for working out the respective positions [Held 2010: 301-312]. The main advantage of these procedures is not so much their wide reach, but openness, inclusiveness, equality of differing views [Habermas 2005: 521-547].

Views on the importance of knowledge about politics for citizen participation in the deliberative democracy systems are complemented by concepts of elitism, that ever since the Antiquity emphasize that knowledge, including that concerning politics, is necessary first of all for individuals holding power. In modern times, the elitism theory was further developed by Joseph Schumpeter, who indicated that civic competencies do not always apply to society as a whole, and do not have the ability to spread. The condition of their being used for the common good is the belief that those who are actually interested in politics do possess sufficient knowledge about it. We are thus faced again with the issue already mentioned in the present article: that in this case the minority decides the fate of the majority, so the question is whether we are still dealing with a democracy? Schumpeter emphasizes the need to discontinue treating the democratic regime in the utopian categories - and as such he considers the notion that democracy is authority exercised by the people. In reality, the system is limited only to people's choice of representatives, who should not be disturbed later in the exercise of power [Schumpeter 2009: 327].

The problem that needs to be highlighted at this point focuses on the criteria to be applied to allow periodic elections, and possible sources of motivating the citizens to participate in them. Elitists propone that it is enough to create conditions of equality and accessibility of the election, while refraining from any form of persuading the citizens to participate in them. They argue that there will always be a group of citizens interested in politics, having knowledge about it, who will participate in the election procedures as a result of the civic competencies they possess [Schumpeter 2009: 327].

Theories explaining the reasons for civic participation or deficit thereof, often feature those which indicate that a high level of knowledge about politics has no effect on political participation and absenteeism [Godlewski 2008: 101]. It is the inevitable consequence of the replacement of a well-informed citizen by one that compensates the lack of knowledge with other mechanisms, such as using cognitive heuristics, thus making decisions without having a thorough knowledge of the facts, and usually only basing them on specific decision-making patterns that allow for quick decisions made at low cost³.

The perception of both the place and role of the individual in society, as well as the standards to be met in order to become (or not) an active, involved citizen participating in the creation of reality, is undoubtedly important for the vision of civil society. For the purposes of this discussion, we should focus primarily on the liberal tradition of civil society, which clearly separates the public from the state, so that the public is no longer equated with the political community the ways it is viewed in the Republican civil society tradition. What to the fullest embodies the liberal thinking about civil society is the fact that the individual is no longer identified with the community, and remains beyond its jurisdiction. This does not mean arbitrary nature of individual actions, but only the right to freedom (often perceived in a negative sense), they can benefit from thanks to their rationalism⁴. However, freedom replaces the civic virtues, thus increasing the individual's rights while at the same time reducing their obligations towards others. This results in the individualization of the concept of a good life and exclusion of the common good principle⁵. What then causes the formation of civil society? First of all, it is the tendency of individuals to live in a society, a consequence of human need for security. Thus, the state becomes only an abstract legal entity, a guardian of individual freedoms and protector of citizens' sense of security, especially in the economic dimension. An expression of the liberal tradition of civil society is both its diversity and separation, „not only because of the differentiation between the civil society and the state, but also due to the recognition of the individuals and their objectives, and the concept of the good life as a fundamental” [Pietrzyk-Reeves 2012: 116].

³ Researchers differentiate three kinds of cognitive heuristics: accessibility (when an event that easily springs to mind seems more likely to happen), representation (when we compare a given situation to a typical one), anchoring (formulating an opinion on a given subject we often operate using the opinion of others we had heard before).

⁴ Similarly as in the Republican tradition, also the Liberal current of thought about civil society show two trends: „liberalism of fear” and „liberalism of courage”. In the case of „liberalism of fear”, an individual clearly takes advantage of their right to be free from any coercion of the community or the state. In the „Liberalism of courage,” while also benefiting from the „freedom from”, individuals are also inclined to cooperate with others, thus showing their support for the „freedom to”.

⁵ It is limited to the sum of individual goods.

Civil society thus becomes a space for individual choice-making, self-determination, what in turn may contribute to the emergence of conflicts.

For liberals, civil society is also a space free from state interference, a sphere in which the process of self-organization of society occurs, finally also a self-government, „forming a dam for the excessive concentration of power” [Pietrzyk-Reeves 2012: 116]. It is, therefore, constituted by everything that is outside the state, including both private and public associations, as well as various forms of cooperation, which contribute to building a culture of public trust, public opinion and finally political parties.

The political dimension of civil society is supplemented by economic reasons. It is in the sphere of economy that, according to liberals, most activities of a community nature take place: production, sales and consumption require the appearance of spontaneous relationships that are as natural in the political sphere as they are in the economic one. Only community relations rooted in the economic dimension may determine the existence of civil society in the political sense. The economic sphere became the prototype for the liberal public sphere: initially all alternatives to the state were appearing in the economic stratum. It was a place where the seeds of the „public opinion” first appeared, what in time caused the emergence of the public sphere intended to develop as a result of a debate in which citizens express their collective judgment on matters, impacting also the elite [Habermas 2007: 25-27].

Public sphere in the liberal tradition is an integral part of shaping and strengthening civil society. While the private sphere is limited to the individual efforts in favour of one’s family, in the case of the public sphere one has to “leave the house” in order to discuss local and national politics, etc., what largely shapes one’s opinion. It translates directly into the realm of politics, for example by the distribution of votes in parliamentary elections. However, what is happening in the public sphere is largely independent of the political sphere, because it operates outside its current goings-on. At the same time the public sphere is clearly separated from the private sphere, as the dilemmas being resolved in it relate to matters “relevant to the community” [Koczanowicz, Włodarczyk 2011: 14-25].

In the liberal tradition of thinking about the citizens and their participation in the life of society and the state places them outside the state. The above does not mean hostility of the citizen towards the institutions of the state, but only the perception of the citizen, “not so much in their direct relationship to the state, but a citizen with associations outside the state, independently of it.” [Raciborski 2011: 38]. Thus a citizen retains his or her individuality, by which he or she may affect the quality of civil society - however, becoming a citizen depends more on interaction with other citizens. As indicated by Jacek

Raciborski [2011: 39-41], this cooperation can take place in two ways: in a civil society understood as (1) “constituted by people communicating and associating in order to influence the state towards a favorable allocation of some goods (...), or defending some of their freedom, their goods from the state” or (2) “an autonomous civil society civil treated as a sphere of private interests, in their very broad sense, including economic; selfish and conflict-prone by nature.”

But regardless of how civil society is viewed, to talk about it at all it must be recognized that its basic, key element is a citizen. It is difficult at the same time not to indicate the citizen’s individualistic attributes that influence the shape and quality of civil society. The examples worth mentioning in this context, are the sense of being represented, the sense of being able to influence policy, and – last but not least - the sense of possessing knowledge [Gliński 2006: 62-74]. These examples of “feelings/convictions” constitute the individual perceptions of both the politics and one’s personal influence over it. Moreover, they point to the need for an individual perception of the role of civil society and citizens that make it up. Therefore they should not only be identified using the sociological dimensions [Raciborski 2011: 44].

Of course, the most desirable type of citizenship is citizenship that is involved, engaged. Through participation a citizen legitimizes political power not only during the democratic elections, but also at times between them. The importance of civic competencies should again be emphasized - particularly knowledge and interest in politics, as in today’s world a decline in various forms of civic participation is clearly noticeable. This applies above all to conventional forms of participation (elections, participation in associations and protests). At the same time, however, we are witnessing an increase in participation in unconventional forms of influencing the policy, such as being active on the Internet. Undoubtedly, Internet as a medium facilitates individualization of citizenship, but on the other hand it also requires collective action to impact policy choices. It is also an instrument of communication, for which the researchers of citizenship and civil society have great hopes - first of all because the Internet allows one to cross borders, and thus facilitates formation of civil society at the global level [Barber 2008: 446-521].

Individualism, although inherently contrary to the spirit of collectivism, is the basis for the development of modern civic attitudes. For the most part, individualism determines the degree of interest in politics and the quality of democracy. Individualism is also the basis for the development of civil society, as the unique characteristics of each individual impact the civil society dynamics, quality and impact on those in power.

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