Mass society in the network society

Notes on reading of Ortega y Gasset and the question of the "new revolt of the masses"

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Introduction

Populism and the imminent phenomenon of political extremism today are closely related to the issues of the disinformation war, the threat to the election process in democratic countries and the threat to the democratic order, as well as profound changes in international politics. These phenomena cannot be separated one from another. It is difficult to diagnose what is the cause and what is the result. Therefore, traditional analyzes of populism seem insufficient.

Populism and extremism are often explained as part of a social theory that focuses on economic issues and social inequalities. Certainly, this method is still not devoid of justification. The mobilization of the "dissatisfied" majority against the "privileged" minority is a permanent component of authoritarian and totalitarian movements, as Hannah Arendt has long ago shown in the category of "mob".

Before Hannah Arendt, before almost the whole of Europe was dominated by totalitarianism, the phenomenon of "social mass" was described by José Ortega y Gasset. The appearance of this phenomenon was considered inevitable and at the same time threatening to liberal democracy. The Spanish intellectualist did not give any recommendation how to deal with the problem, but he pointed to the need for a cold and wide diagnoses.

Almost a hundred years after the publication of Ortega's book contemporary changes in civilization put us in a number of respects in a similar situation. In the introduction to his considerations, he underlines the role of demography (a huge increase in the number of people on the European continent in the 19th century). The phenomenon described by him today is responsible for the increase in the world's population and the problem of migration and refugees. For Ortega, this is why it is so important that it is clearly visible and countable.

The essence of his considerations concerns, however, the civilization breakthrough, which consists in a fundamental change in the way of life and the disappearance of previous hierarchies in Western societies. Regardless of how the current situation differs from the situation from almost a century ago, the current situation should be explained with the help of a similar, broad category of civilizational breakthrough, which is coming with increasing acceleration, accompanied by a new labour market and new social stratifications. One should consider the hypothesis about how the

new means of communication, which is the Internet and social networks, triggers the process that can be called the "the revolt of the masses".

The network society, broadened participation and tribalism

Some postmodernists diagnose this phenomenon in terms of the disappearance of great narratives. This description is incorrect to some extent. Indeed, it is necessary to diagnose at least a partial breakdown of the central great narrative that characterizes the structure of public discourse in classical liberal democracy. This does not mean, however, that the narratives present in individual nodes of the network do not have the same marks of a great, old central narrative. These individual niche narratives do not only deal with local issues, but can be no less all-encompassing than the former central big narrative. Niche narratives are characterized not by their locality but by their individuality, isolation and lack of dialogue with other narratives, and therefore by an overbearing undisputedness.

The Internet provokes evolution from the society of the spectacle to the network society. The society of the spectacle has its central place, where public discourse focuses. These are big newspapers, relatively few TV stations, leading universities and colleges, etc. The center of public life can be described as a theatrical scene with a relatively small number of actors playing the game in front of a broad, but relatively passive audience.

With regard to the network society, the metaphor of the central scene becomes less useful[1]. The importance of the central scene is weakening, and so does the transparency of the political process. However, a developed network of communication of a new type appears, the structure of which is formed by numerous interconnected nodes (niches) of unequal importance and power. Each of these nodes can be characterized not only by the composition and number of its participants, but by the discourse and narrative that dominates it. This phenomenon is often given the name of tribalism.

In the analysis of these phenomena, the difficulty is caused by the number of dispersed narrations (often with a particular content – see below: Irrationalism of the modern mass human) and the study of their connections. An important role is also played by quantitative analyses (frequency and vector connections), which in turn requires appropriate software.

At the same time, the ease of access to information via the Internet and its interactivity enable a phenomenon that should be called extended participation in public life. An individual participant of the Internet (through social networks or by creating their own websites) has both a very wide access to information and can create and publish (edit) his or her own content. In fact, each FB site can become a small newspaper with several thousand recipients. Much bigger percentage of society is politically active in this way[2]. High civic activity is a classic postulate of supporters of liberal democracy. The phenomenon of extended identity, however, is not synonymous with the implementation of such a postulate due to the fragmentation of narrative and tribalism.

A significant tension appears between the phenomena of tribalism and broadened participation. The individual participates in the communication node of his own tribe and is partly restricted to its cognitive horizon, and at the same

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[1]Christoph Türcke, Digitale Gefolgschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine neue Stammesgesellschaft, (2019)
[2] An interesting research question is to what extent this type of activity on the Internet is correlated with participation in elections.

time participates in the mass society. This second wider horizon is still present in the consciousness of the individual. In this situation, the search for its location in society becomes one of the key issues for a large part of society, often even more important than the material situation[3].

The phenomenon of **fragmentation** is accompanied by a strong **search for identity**[4]. It ceases to be rooted in a community that assigns a specific role and a specific place in society to everyone. At the same time, the individual wants social recognition, has a strong sense of dignity, is ready to rebel against exclusion. This modern individualism is conditioned by the network environment of social communication. To have an identity to be recognized by others, to lose identity is to be excluded and unnoticed. Individuals and entire social groups expect such recognition from the general public and the state and are ready to demand and fight for it.

Such a political process of incidents, however, may be due to the special attitude of the individual and society in which the individual seeks support. The typical personality of our time ("contemporary mass man") turns out to be extremely labile and under pressure of various and contradictory currents. The resulting loss, which intensifies the operation of the Internet and social networks, increases the need to define one's own identity, which unilaterally is sought but also imposed.

The interdependence of the phenomenon of broadened participation and contemporary identity search is an important source of populism. Populism gives a sense of identity seemingly above the tribal one, essentially modeled on tribalism (in the various forms of nationalism).

Identity and mass irrationalism

Interactivity of the Internet and social networks points to the previously underestimated features of society from the point of view of psychosociology. According to the well-known and classic studies of the American sociologist David Riesman, the majority of society are outsider-controlled personalities. These studies from the 1950s[5] of the American sociologist were read primarily as evidence of the passivity of a large part of society. Today, Rieman's results can be read as stating that the vast majority of society are easily manipulative. At the same time, other studies show that about 5% of the population are sociopathic individuals often with a high degree of intelligence and capable of ruthlessly manipulating others, also on a mass scale[6].

The reference of these findings to the network society indicates the possibility of shaping social niches (network nodes) in which sociopathic individuals build their own environment around them. Such niches can be hardly visible for a long time and are not controlled by the general public. Individual individuals can be motivated to act as an external operator wants.

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[3] If it is perceived as a threat, it is done by comparing with others, the prestige associated with material well-being and not the lack of fulfilment of elementary needs.

[4] Francis Fukuyama recently took the position on this issue in his work Identity. Contemporary Identity and the Struggle for Recognition (2018), paying attention to the cultural, social and political significance of the phenomenon.

[5] The LonelyCrowd, 1950

[6] Marta Stout, The Sociopath Next Door. The Ruthless Versus the Rest of Us, 2005

Reaching for power may emerge as one of the tribes that wants to control other tribes. In this case, the political process loses the character of negotiations of interests between individual segments of society.

In a disintegrated society, showing the features of tribalism, with a strong need for identity, the principle of political representation characteristic of liberal democracy is questioned. The slogans of populists refer to symbols designed to merge a massive and at the same time fragmented society, which allows them to gain political initiative and often an advantage over traditional political groupings. This situation favours populists such as Orbán, Le Pen or Kaczyński.

The "mass man", as characterized by Ortega, is devoid of a sense of duty, considers the well-being and comfort of life as natural. Ortega writes "treats the convenience of life as the order of nature". A certain level of prosperity and comfort of life is treated today as a matter of course, which is connected with the huge advancement of technology and production efficiency. In this sense, the observation of the Spanish thinker seems to be at least partially obsolete. The property of the "mass man" described by the Spanish thinker, however, is shifted to another area of life. Contemporary mass man seems to think that acquiring knowledge is done effortlessly and acquiring related competences.

Hence the special role of quasi-science and the collapse of the authority of in-depth knowledge and the threat of new forms of irrationalism. The deeper cultural background is a phenomenon that should be called the **transrationality** of modern science[7]. Science loses its educational and Enlightenment properties. This is combined with the use of technologies that are largely non-reflective because the mechanisms of its operation are unknown. Modern science has contributed to the decomposition of many traditional beliefs and myths, but it has failed to fill the space left after them. The Internet is filled with irrational contents with quasi-scientific justifications. A loud example of this is the movement of the anti-vaccination movement[8]. Historical phantasmagories (like in the Polish case the image of a great pagan Polish-Slavic state) or the religion of Odin (which is connected with the Christchurch attack in New Zealand) are disseminated on a mass scale, creating at the same time the communities of believers and activists. Amateur appeal to modern physics (with its quantum phenomena, which are less understandable to a wider audience), allows propagating irrationalism based on quasi-science.[9]

Statistics show a tendency towards irrationalism in societies with a high level of education[10]. Irrationalism touches on the notions of society, economy and politics. It creates a cultural climate that significantly increases the fragmentation of public opinion and creates favorable conditions for populism and irrational political choices. The symbol may be a smartphone, reminiscent of a magic wand more than any old tool used by a man, in the hands of millions of its users, unaware or advanced technology that contains neither the social mechanisms that it launches.

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[7] The technique of the industrial society was understandable (ie. the principles of the steam engine operations).

[8] Interesting data is provided by "Impfen auf Befehl" Der Spiegel No. 14 (30.03.2018), showing how serious part of the population is ready to question the need for mandatory vaccinations and what, as a consequence, it poses political problems and questions about the possibility of a prescriptive policy in this area.

[9] Let's give as an example the work "Quantum reality. Scientific explanation of paranormal phenomena "(2018). The key words *paranormal* and *quantum physics* bring Google over two million entries.

[10] Monika Grzesiak-Feldman, Psychologia myślenia spiskowego, 2016

Symbolic violence and war 3.0

The Internet creates new political mechanisms and provides new tools of aggression in international relations.Organized and wide aggression (which is disinformation) is possible between states without declaring war in the traditional sense. Gaining via the Internet the impact on particular individuals and the environment, while filling in the public space of the opponent with appropriate content becomes an effective tool of influence. In particular, there is the possibility of a hidden influence on the election. A special case of such aggression is attempts to influence the election and support candidates who are beneficial from the aggressor's point of view. Such activities can be effectively hidden and, to some extent, secret, thanks to the tools provided by the Internet.

It is a weapon to create broad narratives that produce a political climate suitable for the aggressor's purposes. The narrative about the decadence of the West combined in the propagation of hatred towards sexual minorities is an important part of the Russian policy of the need to rebuild the political order on the European continent[11].

The creation of fake news in certain conditions intervenes in the political process in order to shape moods (eg. alleged kidnapping of a Russian girl in Berlin in 2013, which was to contribute to the intensification of anti-Islamic and anti-peace moods)[12].

The Internet is also a sphere that is particularly useful for terrorist groups (which does not exclude the support of aggressor countries). It is possible to manipulate the distant and psychologically unstable individuals, building their motivations for extreme and aggressive actions.

The classic mass society of the twentieth century, evolving in the society of the network and deprived of the "central stage" and "fragmented", which also accompanies the extended participation, becomes less transparent and prone to irrationalism, collective lability of mood and political climate. This is a fundamental threat to democratic mechanisms that assume the rationality of choosing a reference to common sense based on a popular and knowledge-based knowledge. In it, the level of social trust decreases (in particular the level of trust in the media, which does not contradict the use of irrational content) that is needed for functioning.

Recommendations: Legal order in the network society

New means of communication provoke profound changes of mass society that took shape in the 20th century. The new type of mass of society has its counterpart in shaping the entire social environment, social groups and individuals. The phenomenon of extended participation is a phenomenon that corresponds to the phenomenon of the rebellion of the masses described by Ortega.

The collective wisdom of the "Crowdwisdom" seems to be misleading and erroneous. A wave of irrationalism, especially if it is supported from the outside and becomes a weapon in political struggle, supports populism and political radicalism. As a consequence, this may lead to the collapse of the democratic order. Spontaneous behavior or self-regulation do not constitute any guarantee.

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[11]https://www.martenscentre.eu/publications/kremlin-propaganda-focus-how-eu-has-become-enemy-eyes-russia
[12]https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm

The frequently cited recommendation saying the need for educational activities, although right, seems insufficient. It is difficult for the average participant in the network to require professional skills that are often needed to unmask the fake news or discourse aimed at constructing an influential narrative.

Intensive international cooperation. These issues cannot be resolved within the nation-state. Extensive cooperation within the EU (which enables the legislative process) as well as bilateral cooperation is required.

Legislation. New legal regulations are needed, which should apply to both domestic and international law. You need a network code, which you would not be obliged to comply with legal sanctions. Such regulations should include the possibility of delegalization of **manipulative activities** (deforming social discourse) such as the use of net bots. New legal regulations should include the possibility of excluding entities that do not comply with the network code, and also state entities and, in extreme cases, entire countries.

The creation of such regulations requires serious analyzes of legal theory and encounters difficulties related to the observance of the principle of freedom of speech and expression and to avoid the use of censorship.

Finances. The phenomenon of disinformation is related to the issue of the advertising market and the data market and the associated circulation of money. Legal regulations should address the issue of the circulation of money in the area of disinformation.

Monitoring should be an important part of activities that create order on the Internet and support the creation of legal regulations responsive to changing and new phenomena. Obviously, monitoring must have an international dimension. Effective monitoring must be supported by intensive research and analytics, which is necessary in the light of new phenomena and continuous variability.