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Book review: Bogdan Szlachta, *Liberal Democracy. Origins, Establishment (?) and Demise (?)* Demokracja liberalna. Źródła, ustanowienie (?) i kres (?)

“And why is it that, if a law can make what is unjust just, it cannot turn evil into good?” [Cicero 2008: 112]. The question posed by Cicero captures well the essence of Professor Bogdan Szlachta’s reflections, spread with great sweep over nearly seven hundred pages of a book entitled *Liberal Democracy. Sources, Establishment (?) and Demise (?)*. It is not the formal aspect (the number of pages), however, but the substantive dimension of this *oeuvre* that renders this position important. It was published in 2022 by the *De Republica* Institute Publishing House.

The subject of the Cracow-based political philosopher’s analysis is the extremely ‘slippery’ phenomenon of liberal democracy. A phenomenon that is slippery, hence the more one tries to encapsulate it in simple concepts and propositions, the faster it slips out of the hands of the impatient researcher. That is why Professor Szlachta’s method of analysing liberal democracy is much more subtle – the object of study should be thoroughly covered from beginning to end. In doing so, it becomes clear that liberal democracy is not an object, but rather something more akin to a river meandering through time and space – a stream of ideas fed by numerous tributaries that disappears into the subterranean currents of history, only to emerge unexpectedly and with renewed vigour in subsequent eras, eventually overflowing into the totality of Western political life. Thanks to Professor Szlachta’s Benedictine work, the Polish reader has the opportunity, for the first time, to encounter such a precise description of this phenomenon, taking into account philosophical, political, historical and religious perspectives.

The problematic nature of the analysis of liberal democracy stems from the fact that this phenomenon is a composite of sorts of the ‘democratic moment’ and the ‘liberal moment’. These moments are only partially compatible, and their coherence is illusory. The first element of this composite – the ‘democratic moment’ – was born in Ancient Greece and preceded the ‘liberal moment’ by two millennia

– a long time indeed. And one should be aware of this fact when discarding the clichés of individual freedom, human rights, the dignity of the human person or the concept of the state, all of which were utterly alien to the Greeks. We must abandon the conviction, so ‘natural’ in thinking about democracy, that this system is inclusive and participative – on the contrary, the characteristic feature of ancient democracy was *exclusion* (whether of a sage like Socrates in Athens, or the exclusion of the rich in favour of the poor, as in Aristotle). Democracy is therefore a corrupt and contemptible system – it is not based on justice, although at the same time it incessantly multiplies the law. Democracy *in its naked form* homogenizes and standardizes like a powerful road roller, and Prof. Szlachta’s publication analyses this process with precision.

The analysis of the ‘liberal moment’ can also lead to intellectual confusion. This stems from the fact that the concept of liberalism itself is not a homogeneous one, having undergone a profound metamorphosis over the course of several centuries. The very fact that philosophers as different as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are considered to be the fathers of liberalism should discourage a simple labelling of ideas and concepts. While there is no doubt that they laid new ground for the anthropological foundations of the liberal approach (e.g. the shift from communitarian thinking to the concept of individualism, with the individual abstracted from cultural context), the subsequent transformations of liberalism can hardly be regarded as evolutionary. This kind of ‘genetic mutation of liberalism’ is particularly evident when, instead of natural rights/entitlements, utilitarianism – as for Mill and Hobhouse – becomes the point of reference for 19th and 20th century liberals, and the culmination and realization of their ideas becomes the ubiquitous welfare state, which must strike terror into the hearts of the followers of Locke. How did this happen? Is it merely a ‘perversion of true liberalism’, so that liberalism needs to be renewed, or is this revolution the result of an immanent mechanism built into the logic of liberalism itself and hence any attempt to return to the source is doomed to failure because the source itself is already poisoned? It is by no means an easy question to answer, but Professor Szlachta’s analysis provides useful intellectual tools for doing so.

Western political thought

There is therefore no doubt that the liberal democracy that spread after the Second World War has not been immune to fundamental transformations. However, the question of the logic behind these transformations is legitimate. Here we are at the heart of the process observed since the beginning of modernity, the essence of

which was pointed out two and a half thousand years ago by the founder of political science, Plato. In his *Laws*, the Athenian posed the key question of politics: what or who is the measure of things? God or man? Plato, in contrast to the Sophists (e.g. Protagoras), pointed to God [Plato 1988: 103 (716c)]. This path was followed by Aristotle, the Stoics, Cicero and Christianity, who pointed out that it is God who is the source and measure of the good, including the common good. Modernity challenged this approach. The Sophist response and the concept of man as the measure of good and evil began to enter the arena of history. From this point, almost as in Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*, there follows a degeneration of regimes. If it is not God, if it is not natural law that is the measure of legal rights, then what is? How can man and human rights be defended in the absence of God? How can one reasonably speak of human dignity and, more pointedly, how can one believe in human dignity, this supposed core of liberal democracy, without believing that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God? Who decides what we mean by human dignity? Who has the normative authority? Where and in what is it anchored? In the state? The individual? The will of the people? The will of the majority? Which majority? The 51% of citizens versus the 49% of citizens? The majority of yesterday or the majority of today? What is political and what is not? Where are the limits of political will and the competence of the authorities, and who defines them? Professor Szlachta's publication emphatically demonstrates that Western political thought has made the constant questioning of all foundations the basis of its premises. The common species form of all human beings has been negated, followed by the negation of natural rights, and reason itself and its ability to discern objective good and evil have become questionable, to say the least. Consequently, any order based on justice is called into question. Law ceases to have permanent characteristics and becomes merely the effect of a temporary will, a whim of a particular political power. At the end of this process of destroying all normative foundations, the only thing left on the battlefield is a big logo that reads 'liberal democracy'. But what is behind this logo? Is there, in the end, any content that is not subordinated to the will of... well, whose will, exactly? Is it not ultimately the case that the political process, which began in the modern era has conceded to the proponents of Thrasymachus that the law can only serve the strongest? After twenty-four centuries of wrestling with the science of politics, Aristotle's warning resonates anew: "It is the peculiarity of man, in comparison with the rest of the animal world, that he alone possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and the unjust". At the same time, however, "if he be without virtue, he is a most unholy and savage being, and worse than all others in the indulgence of lust and gluttony" [Aristotle 1962: 6-7 (1253a)]. If successive iterations of liberal democracy,

up to and including its agonistic version, question the very possibility of it being based on morality, as something supposedly so indeterminate, volatile and fluid, can such a system survive?

If this short piece is meant to be a review of Professor Szlachta's monumental work, the author raises far too many questions. This is true. But let these questions serve as an incentive to explore the contents of Professor Szlachta's book, for after reading it, the answers to these fundamental questions will be much easier to find. All the more so since a great advantage of the publication is the extensive footnotes, rich in detailed bibliographical references, which make it easier to deepen one's reflections. Suffice it to say that the 25-page bibliography alone contains 558 entries!

There is no doubt that the market is awash with publications on liberal democracy. However, not many of them analyse this phenomenon in such a comprehensive manner. If we do not wish to be subjected to superficial analyses and wish to gain a proper distance from the subject, this publication serves as an excellent aid to this end.

Aristotle (1962), *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. and ed. Ernest Barker, 1253a, New York, Oxford University Press.

Cicero (2008), *The Laws*, in: idem, *The Republic; and, The Laws*, 44, trans. Niall Rudd, New York, Oxford University Press.

Plato (1988), *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle, 716c, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.