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Citizens in the “Realm of Anti-Politics”

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Abstract: *The term anti-politics refers to a whole catalog of phenomena such as the decline in citizens' interest in politics and participation in formal political institutions, the process of depoliticization and technocratization of democracy, and the rise in popularity of right-wing populist parties and nationalism. The purpose of this article is to explore what anti-politics really is. This requires not only going beyond an analysis of current politics, but also a pure descriptivism that simply registers changes in the attitudes of participants in public life. It is necessary to look at this complex phenomenon not only in the long term, but in different interpretive contexts.*

Introduction

If politics is the obverse of social life then anti-politics is its reverse. The difficulties that political scientists have with clearly defining politics itself inevitably translate into the problem of defining precisely what anti-politics is. The dialectical nature of dependency only further complicates the matter and makes anti-politics even more elusive. For regardless of what form it appears

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in, each proposes specific political actions. Thus, this paradox of anti-politics did not end with the collapse of Communism in Europe at the end of the 20th century¹. The term "anti-politics" has since appeared in many, different contexts, ranging from the neoliberal argument about the futility of political action in a world dominated by market laws and globalization processes, to complaints about the corruptness, ineptitude, incompetence of politicians, who are all the same, and the demand to put politics in the hands of experts, to the belief that only a leader recruited from outside the political establishment will be able to read the will of the people and finally act on their behalf. Anti-politics is, according to M. Truffelli, L. Zambenardi, like a shifting target, difficult to grasp within the framework of any coherent, precise definition². It cannot be assigned any ideological label because it is used by representatives of various political parties, especially populist ones. An in-depth study of this phenomenon requires, firstly, to go beyond the analysis of current politics and, secondly, to abandon pure descriptivism that simply registers changes in the attitudes of participants in public life. Besides, it is necessary to look at this phenomenon not only in the long term, but also in different cultural and historical contexts.

Adopting a longer perspective makes it possible to effectively undermine the notion that anti-politics is exclusively a contemporary phenomenon. M. Truffelli, L. Zambenardi even assume that the origins of anti-politics lie at the very dawn of the modern era as indicated by the writings of T. Hobbes³. This author presented politics as a technical and even more scientific endeavor subject to certain procedures and rules, like arithmetic and geometry, rather than a process of forming opinions or gathering experiences in which everyone can participate. With this approach, politics began to be seen as an artificial and conventional construct.

The technocratic idea present at the root of anti-political thinking can, of course, take different, often contradictory forms, but the common denominator for all of them is a negative attitude toward politics and the treatment of this sphere of social life as a space of irrationality and particular interests. Besides, this is accompanied by the belief that it is possible to free people from the socially destructive weaknesses of politics by appealing to science, which

¹ D. Howard, *Between Politics and Antipolitics. Thinking about Politics after 11/9*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 2. It is paradoxical that the expansion of democracy and democratic values at the global level after 1989 has been accompanied by growing mistrust and dissatisfaction with existing institutional arrangements in consolidated democracies.

² M. Truffelli, L. Zambenardi, *Taking Modernity to Extremes: On the Roots of Anti-Politics*, «Political Studies Review» 2021, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 97.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

provides the neutral and universal standards necessary for effective, in terms of efficiency, community management. This way of thinking, deeply encoded in neoliberal ideology, leads to the depreciation of political participation and the idea of representation. "The only function that, according to the logic of technocratic thinking, can be assigned to parliamentary bodies is to create the illusion of democratic influence on politics, thus a purely legitimizing role. Indeed, technocrats too often ignore the fact that the effectiveness of governance has not only a technical dimension, but also a social one. Effective governance does not boil down to the realization of the public interest, but requires convincing the public that this interest is being realized."⁴ This kind of thinking ignores the fact that even an expert's opinion is always influenced by the current public debate, political positions taken, media campaigns and the opinions of other experts. Thus, expert opinion is not just the result of an analysis of empirical data carried out in accordance with the scientific method, but is the result of the influence of a number of factors of a political nature, that is, it is contextual in nature. It can even be considered that the calls for devolution of power to the local level, or the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process only mask the transformation of the entire social system, which is destructive to politics itself.

This technical and scientific view of politics initiated at the dawn of modernity is certainly one of the initial tropes that sheds some light on this complex phenomenon that anti-politics turns out to be, but unfortunately does not allow to illuminate it in its entirety. After all, the concept of anti-politics refers to a whole catalog of phenomena ranging from the decline in citizens' interest in politics and participation in elections to the rise of right-wing populist parties and nationalism⁵. The withdrawal of citizens from the support of formal political institutions is documented by a wealth of empirical data on declining voter turnout, declining party membership and declining trust in politicians. However, it is worth mentioning that, based on data collected worldwide after the end of World War II, it can be concluded that there was no such thing as a golden age of political support at that time. Even in the immediate post-World War II period, a significant portion of the population disapproved of politicians in power and claimed that they cared more about themselves and their party than the country. However, it can be clearly demonstrated that anti-political sentiment has increased in many democratic countries over the past few decades, which is expressed by citizens' dislike of the actions and

⁴ J. Grygień, *Demokracja na rozdrożu. Deliberacja czy partycypacja polityczna?*, Universitas, 2017, p. 192.

⁵ V. Mete, *Four types of anti-politics: Insights from the Italian case*, «Modern Italy» 2010, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 38.

institutions of formal politics in at least three dimensions: social scope (more and more people are expressing such dislike), political scope (more and more comments are being made on the actions of institutions and politicians) and intensity (stronger and stronger words are being used to express their dislike)⁶. From an analytical point of view, then, anti-politics is not reduced to citizens' negative attitudes toward politics. Rather, it is a symptom of deeper changes. directed into the interior.

The withdrawal of citizens from participation in formal political processes is not necessarily an expression of apathy, but a form of active rejection of traditional politics, just as the motivations of politicians can be both cynical in nature and motivated by a genuine concern to improve existing arrangements. However, if we are certain about the fact that the meaning of anti-politics has grown significantly in the 21st century, we must go beyond pure decriptivism and try to explain what consequences the spread of anti-political thinking patterns, attitudes and social behavior of various actors has for the entire political system. Following the lead pointed out by C. Hay and G. Stoker, it is worth considering in what ways and for what reasons they may be contributing, perhaps even unintentionally, to the perpetuation of an anti-political culture⁷. V. Mete even describes the emergence of such a mechanism, in which various forms of anti-politics feed and fuel each other, resulting in a progressive loss of legitimacy for democratic institutions. As an example, he cites the rise of political passivity among citizens which prepares the perfect ground for the calls of populist leaders and sets in motion the very process he calls the "anti-political spiral"⁸.

From these preliminary considerations, it is already clear that anti-politics can take various forms from anti-parliamentary and anti-democratic manifestations of hostility to political parties and accusations of their oligarchization, through demonization of the welfare state, or finally populist claims of various political leaders to exclusively represent the will of the people. As you can see, in political terms, it is a term so capacious and flexible that representatives of various ideological and political groups can hide under it. Thus, anti-politics is not any coherent doctrine or ideology, but more of a syndrome, just like politics itself⁹. In modern political thought, it can be as much associated

⁶ N. Clarke, W. Jennings, J. Moss, G. Stoker, *The Good Politician. Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, Introduction.

⁷ C. Hay, and G. Stoker, *Revitalising politics: Have we lost the plot?*, «Representation» 2009, vol. 45, no. 3.

⁸ V. Mete, *Four types...*, p. 52.

⁹ M. Karwat, *Syndromatyczny charakter przedmiotu nauki o polityce*, [in:] K.A. Wojtaszczyk, A. Mirska (eds.), *Demokratyczna Polska w globalizującym się świecie*, Warsaw 2009.

with liberal anti-statism as with totalitarianism or populism, or even dissident forms of anti-totalitarianism, as in the case of Eastern Europe, or technocracy. Antipolitics can be initiated from below by citizens, but also imposed from above by politicians. It can be an expression of the need for change within the democratic system, but it can also be the result of attempts to redefine the boundaries between the political and the non-political. All this effectively makes it impossible to encapsulate the idea of anti-politics in a single coherent definition and forces a more complex approach to the study of this problem.

What is anti-politics?

The term "anti-politics" is used to describe various phenomena. It is most often associated with such concepts as political alienation, crisis of democracy, post-politics, depoliticization, and finally populism. In general, anti-politics can be most briefly defined as the negative attitude of citizens toward institutionalized politics¹⁰. However, it is not a matter of current discouragement towards existing parties or politicians, which is normal in a democracy, but with an established denial of institutional arrangements, or sometimes even the essence of politics. This difference is crucial because the long-term lack of political participation and growing support for populism is extremely harmful to democracy, as it threatens its legitimacy in the long run. All the more so because the withdrawal of citizens from formal politics is by no means compensated through alternative channels of articulation, as is often believed. Besides, even if this were the case, some sort of, if only basic, institutionalization of political life is needed for effective governance.

Since there is no agreement in political science on a single definition of "politics," it is all the more difficult to expect to find a comprehensive and, above all, unambiguous explanation of what anti-politics is. Assuming that politics is a fuzzy object of research¹¹, one can at most be tempted to outline the boundary conditions, i.e. to indicate certain irreducible properties for it, and the following can be considered as such: the existence of a pluralistic society and the possibility for people to make collective and binding decisions for all members of the community. Any activity that aims to negate these can be laboriously called anti-politics. Of course, it is difficult to call it a definition, as there is none so far, but such a preliminary outline of the field of inquiry

¹⁰ N. Clarke, W. Jennings, J. Moss, G. Stoker, *The Good Politician...*, p. 17.

¹¹ F. Pierzchalski, *Politics as a fuzzy subject of research*, [in:] M. Karwat, F. Pierzchalski, M. Tobiasz (eds.), *Constituents of Political Theory. Selected Articles of the Warsaw School of Political Theory*, Warsaw 2021.

should be taken as a starting point for further consideration. This is important because the term itself is being used with increasing frequency, but to name different phenomena. On the one hand, the mere increase in the use of the term in various scientific publications may translate into greater conceptual confusion because it does not help to understand what anti-politics is. On the other hand, however, even if indeed, as with many other terms in the social sciences, there is a dispute over the origins, meaning and implications of the use of the term in the study of political phenomena, one can undoubtedly already find numerous works in the political science literature in which authors systematize knowledge in this area and explain the difference between the various meanings of the term anti-politics.

Historically, probably one of the first researchers to use the term "anti-politics" was Bernard Crick¹². While he defined politics itself as the ability to provide the conditions necessary for the reconciliation of different interests in pluralistic societies, the threat to it was precisely anti-politics, i.e. any action aimed at disrupting or even negating such possibilities. In his view, the primary source of the negative attitude toward politics was the proponents of all ideologies, who, in order to achieve the ultimate, perfect, stable society, were ready to sacrifice pluralism for totalitarianism. However, he also feared the influence of proponents of direct democracy, who preferred the tyranny of the majority to mediation and compromise, and enthusiasts of scientism, who, reducing social problems to technical dimensions, suggested entrusting their solution to rational and objective experts.

The next iteration of anti-politics came in the 1960s and 1970s through American scientists, who identified from their research an apparently new form of "political alienation" among US citizens¹³. Negative sentiment among citizens was dampened with the rise to power of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the significant withdrawal of the state from many areas of social life, but it never really disappeared. This was confirmed by a number of studies conducted in the 1990s, both cyclical ones such as the World Values Survey and the Eurobarometer, as well as by individual researchers such as Pippa Norris, among others. These surveys showed, however, that while there was indeed a gradual decline in citizens' support for politicians, elections and political institutions, support for the political regime itself remained stable. The very fact that the majority of citizens continued to support democracy as the ideal form of government became the basis for questioning the thesis of its crisis. Unfortunately, the research simultaneously

¹² N. Clarke, W. Jennings, J. Moss, G. Stoker, *The Good Politician...*, p. 18.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

confirmed that there is a steadily growing number of citizens who are dissatisfied with how democracy works in practice and are open to even deep reforms. It has led some researchers such as Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe to believe that we are not just dealing with a democratic deficit, but an entirely new phenomenon that forces a modification of the existing scientific vocabulary¹⁴. Thus, the language of political science analysis has been enriched with such terms as: "post-democracy" to denote the negation of institutional democratic politics in its current form, or "post-politics" highlighting the paradox associated with the proliferation of representative democracy and new participatory forms of governance on the one hand, with the simultaneous passivity of citizens within mainstream politics combined even with actions on their part of an anti-systemic nature, as a response to attempts at technocratic colonization of contestation through consensus-based procedures, on the other. The ideal of democracy according to which all citizens have the opportunity to participate in political life, speak out in public debate and thus influence the shape of the political order, was contrasted with a picture in which elections are tightly controlled spectacles, the government is actually shaped by elites defending their interests, and citizens feel frustrated and powerless. In the case of the concept of "post-democracy," the prefix "post" means that we are admittedly dealing with a system that institutionally represents continuity and politicians still have to solicit the votes of voters (i.e., it is formally a democracy), but the citizens themselves have been reduced to the role of manipulated participants, i.e., they do not actually play a subjective role in the political game. Similarly, the concept of "post-politics" should be interpreted as activities fundamentally devoid of their political properties. Undertaken for ritual purposes rather than as a form of real influence on the organization and functioning of the life of the political community.

However, anti-politics is more than the aforementioned terms might indicate. More than mere dislike of individual political actors and current politics, but not a negation of democracy itself. Besides, a certain amount of distrust is even necessary for democracy. Only when it opens the gates too wide for populists does it become a threat to it. Anti-politics is also more than apathy, but less than fully informed and responsible involvement in the life of the political community. It can be described as a kind of unhealthy cynicism about formal politics¹⁵. However, it is not a concept opposed to politics, but a complement to it, a specific variety that expresses itself in different, sometimes it might even seem contradictory ways. However, treating anti-politics as a syndromatic

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 24.

phenomenon, we can see completely new, non-obvious connections. Anti-politics is not just a negation of current politics, or a populist political strategy, but part of a complex process aimed at transforming existing power relations.

Even if we admit that anti-politics is an undefined concept in the social sciences, one can already find works that reflect a concern to delineate and organize the semantic field of the term. V. Mete, for example, believes that anti-politics is the sum of several elements, namely: the attitudes and actions of various members of the community directed against political actors and institutions, and the accompanying discourse¹⁶. Criticism of anti-politics focuses particularly on such issues as the low quality of political elites and their detachment from the affairs of ordinary people, and the ineffectiveness of existing institutional arrangements. He stresses, however, that a clear distinction should be made, between the anti-political rhetoric used by ordinary people and that used by political leaders, although one should also be aware that they are interrelated. The definition of anti-politics he cites in the text points to at least three different meanings of the term. First, anti-politics is said to refer to the negation of politics itself. Second, it can mean a lack of involvement in politics, a withdrawal from participation in formal institutions. And third and finally, it can refer to the internal contradiction between declared and realized political goals, i.e. a certain strategy of behavior adopted by political actors that does not necessarily serve the interests of the community.

The mutual coupling of the understanding of politics and anti-politics leads to a unique accumulation of cognitive problems. If politics is a complex multi-dimensional, multifaceted and time-varying phenomenon, it means that anti-politics is equally difficult to grasp. The very meaning of the prefix "anti" before politics can be read in at least two different ways. Thus, it can be an expression of rejection of politics as such and outright hostility to all its manifestations, or it can mean not so much opposition to all possible kinds of politics as to a particular form of politics that is perceived as socially dysfunctional. M. Truffelli, L. Zambernardi inspired by A. Schedler distinguish two types of anti-politics¹⁷. The first negating politics in general as a socially sterile activity, even restraining the ability of individuals to self-organize collective life. The second related to the ambition to challenge current politics as contradictory to the individual and collective interests of members of a given political community, and the drive to re-colonize the political sphere. This distinction, as the authors of the article themselves emphasize, although it has undoubted analytical value, also has a serious limitation. This is because in practice it is difficult to imagine

¹⁶ V. Mete, *Four types...*, p. 38.

¹⁷ M. Truffelli, L. Zambernardi, *Taking Modernity to...*, p. 98.

any alternative to politics for regulating collective life. A perfect example of this practical limitation is the fact that very often the leaders of political groups that define themselves as anti-political do not so much negate politics as such by proposing something instead, but postulate the liberation of the people from the yoke of the incompetent, corrupt, hypocritical current ruling class by putting themselves in the position of an "anti-political politician". So, is it even possible to talk about anti-politics as a homogeneous phenomenon?

For the authors mentioned in the previous paragraph, anti-politics represents an absolute delegitimization of current politics and existing forms of political power, and manifests itself in the form of questioning the representative model of democracy with its leading institutions such as parliament and political parties and the idea of political representation in general, and is associated with the rise of anti-establishment sentiment and hostility to the inevitably slow decision-making process of democracy. Politics is presented as something that must be discarded in order to build a healthy society and economy. Indirectly, then, anti-politics is a response to the defects of politics, including democratic politics. Thus, it can be summed up by saying that wherever there are socially sterile political activities that are reduced to competition for power, anti-politics appears. It is worth adding at this point that the perception of politics changed significantly with the spread of the theory of rational choice and the subsequent victory of neoliberalism¹⁸. The attribution of equal selfish motivations to all people cast a shadow over the entire model of liberal democracy because citizens, on this basis, concluded that politicians, too, were then guided in their behavior by rational self-interest, seeking to maximize it, rather than the public good. This significantly contributed to the delegitimization of democracy, which was no longer perceived as an effective system of representing social interests, and this in turn pushed citizens into the hands of experts and technocrats, who would be more effective in deciding about the fate of the community.

It seems, however, that the common denominator for all varieties of anti-politics is to question imposed rather than agreed with community members forms of politics that remain socially harmful or at least useless. Thus, anti-politics means reacting to the shrinking catalog of issues subject to public debate and the choices of citizens themselves, which is the essence of politics. Deprived of the real, or even potential, possibility of questioning and modifying the existing order, people become subjects of the "realm of non-politics." Politics is the possibility of change, and therefore the ability to take action, which is marked, admittedly, by randomness, but is generally a reflexive

¹⁸ C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, Polity Press 2007.

game between ubiquitous power relations and freedom in collective life¹⁹. While politicization in a broad sense means revealing and questioning what is taken for granted and unalternative, depoliticization entails fatalism and determinism, which limits the human capacity to act, choose and change the existing world. Presenting certain orders as ultimately justifiable, e.g. scientifically or morally, and thus unquestionable raises very serious consequences because defined set of issues and problems cannot become the subject of social choices. The depoliticization practices themselves are presented not as destroying diversity, limiting choice and available alternatives, but as freeing society from socially destructive particularisms. Similarly, moreover, the populist rhetoric used by politicians in the current political game reducing all people to a single category – the people, as well as the political tactic of referring to a referendum is in fact anti-pluralist, totalizing in nature because it does not serve to harmonize diverse voices only to polarize and win one side. Unfortunately, both populist slogans and referendums presented as the true voice of the people are no substitute for qualitative debate, which will not be a one-way message, but a space for the revelation of different, epistemologically treated as equal, points of view. In such optics, the winner takes all, and the loser is left with nothing, which denies the natural heterogeneity, pluralism of social life²⁰, and in this very sense it is anti-politics.

Anti-politics – an attempt at systematization

Previous research on anti-politics usually points to two main sources of its growth²¹. On the one hand, such authors as Inglehart and P. Norris, for example, point to factors on the “demand” side, i.e. they believe that with the increase in education and wealth, citizens have simply begun to expect more from formal politics and are compensating for their disappointment with what is offered by those currently in power by participating in various informal ventures. This is accompanied by a general decline in authority. On the other hand, a group of political scientists has emerged, such as Colin Hay and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that it is politics itself that has changed under the influence of neoliberalism and today has much less to offer citizens, that is, the “supply” of politics has changed. Neoliberalism, in the name of free-market ideals, has taken away

¹⁹ L. Jenkins, *The difference genealogy makes: strategies for politicization or how to extend capacities for autonomy*, «Political Studies» 2010, vol. 59, no. 1, pp. 159–160.

²⁰ M. Freeden, *Democracy dis-integrated: the current conceptual confusion*, «Journal of Political Ideologies» 2020, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 7.

²¹ N. Clarke, W. Jennings, J. Moss, G. Stoker, *The Good Politician...*, p. 9.

power and thus real responsibility from public actors, and has portrayed politicians themselves as individuals following their own selfishly defined interests leading to a de facto slow erosion of the public domain in general. According to this interpretation, citizens withdraw from participation in formal politics because all politicians appear to be equally selfish and powerless. Thus, there is no real choice between parties.

The most commonly represented approach in academic publications is to treat anti-politics through the prism of the easily empirically grasped and thus well-documented negative attitude of citizens toward politics. The second equally common approach is to link anti-politics with populism and instrumental use, of anti-political rhetoric by political leaders, which, by the way, is presented as a response to citizens' negative attitudes. Today, it is even hard to imagine a grouping that does not reach for this type of rhetoric. The third one connects anti-politics with strategy of depoliticization present in various countries, which reduces the state solely to the role of an institutional guarantor of the political order or, in its technocratic guise, to the reduction of all political problems to purely technical issues²². In this approach, the origins of which can be found in Andreas Schedler's 1997 book *The end of politics?: explorations into modern anti-politics*, politics as a communal endeavor of interdependent and, above all, diverse members is replaced, for example, by a self-regulating market order, where the aforementioned multiplicity (of perspectives, values) is reduced to uniformity (of people), and randomness is replaced by necessity (globalization). In other words, anti-politics means replacing the communicative rationality of politics with an instrumental one that comes from a different social subsystem. In the case of a technocratic perspective, all ideologies are questioned, while hiding the impossibility of reconciling antagonistic interests and persistent relations of inequality. In the end, therefore, it does not help resolve political conflicts at all, and leads to justifiable inaction. Promoting professionalism and the technologization of governance in the public space puts markets and direct democracy above the essence of politics, i.e. listening, discussing, and building compromises over the long term.

Given the complex nature of anti-politics and the growing number of publications on the subject, the proliferation of approaches and meanings attributed to the term, it is increasingly difficult to find an interpretative key for the phenomenon itself. It seems that the most interesting and pertinent systematization was proposed by V. mentioned early in the article. Mete²³. He distinguished for analytical purposes in the vertical dimension the politics of

²² Ibidem, p. 23.

²³ V. Mete, *Four types...*

the level of the political system (high) and the level of community members (low), and in the horizontal, internal and external. However, he clearly emphasized that all these types of anti-politics are in fact closely interconnected.

Internal anti-politics refers to the activity and rhetoric used by the leaders of populist parties, who use it instrumentally as part of the current game for political power, and once they have gained it, it allows them to build support for systemic changes that perpetuate their rule. Of course, in his opinion, we cannot equate anti-politics with populism, although it is certainly one of the main characteristics of this phenomenon. Anti-politics is a very common rhetorical tool used by populist leaders. In their public speeches, they like to attack ineffective institutions and degenerate political elites for their failure to solve social problems. The horizon of such anti-politics is set by current political goals, even if they do not negate the meaning of politics²⁴.

In the case of civic (low) anti-politics, the goal is to defend against the inclinations of those political actors who, in the name of the people, technocratic or ideological reasons, want to limit or even completely appropriate the public domain and thus reduce the possibility of making social choices. In this case, the point of reference is the political system as a whole, and not the welfare of some particular part of it. As the author himself notes, it is worth making another distinction at this point, namely between those who are politically active and consciously do not participate in formal politics, and those who do not participate because they are not interested in political affairs at all. He calls the former an "actively anti-political" group; the latter a "passively anti-political" group. Both groups are treated the same in the research, but de facto they are separate categories²⁵.

In the case of "external anti-politics," V. Mete, citing the aforementioned work of Andreas Schedler, made a distinction between two forms of it. The first one related to the claim to make politics irrelevant. And the second geared even to the colonization of politics. In the case of the first form, politics can be presented in several different ways. Thus, in the first, as a socially sterile, even harmful collective activity, whose function can be performed by economic agents or experts. Thus, there is no need for an autonomous political sphere to determine the fate of society. In the second, politics admittedly retains its importance, but the power of political actors is significantly reduced by external actors and the rules they impose.

Compared to populist anti-politics, which does not seek to change the internal rules of the game that organize political life, the "external" forms of

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 43.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 41.

anti-politics, regardless of their origins, constitute an attempt to subordinate politics to logics of functioning that are alien to it. In turn, while the two forms of grassroots (low) anti-politics are united by a common aversion to current politics, they are differentiated by the level of political awareness and involvement of citizens. So-called "active anti-politicians" tend to be educated and well-informed people who frequently discuss politics, regularly appear at the ballot box and generally participate in political life in various ways. They have high expectations of the political system and are ready to substantively criticize the political class, which in turn is not always able to adequately respond to these expectations. In contrast, "passive anti-politicians" are characterized by low political awareness and level of participation. Despite these fundamental differences, representatives of both groups are not opposed to politics as an autonomous sphere, but hostile to current politics and its main actors²⁶.

With the analytical framework of the phenomenon outlined in this way, one broader conclusion emerges. Whether one treats these different depictions of anti-politics integrally or not, they share one common denominator – the conviction that conventionally defined politics is in decline as a real choice between different possibilities. The absence of a real alternative to the existing political order leads to the negation of politics. Politicians, instead of presenting such a policy alternative, either desert leaving the public sphere in the hands of technocrats or impersonal forces, or mobilize the electorate by giving them a false sense of political influence over decisions through new forms of engagement such as the institutions of deliberative democracy²⁷, or at most call in the current political struggle to regain power directly from the hands of degenerate elites using populist slogans. Both deliberation, which proposes consensus instead of pluralism, and populism, which seeks to reduce diversity to the single category of "the people," are expressions of anti-political thinking. In the same way, moreover, as technocratism, which replaces the harmonization of diverse interests with the pursuit of maximizing efficiency, or the accompanying depoliticization, which is a de facto admission of the inability to present a political alternative to existing power relations, and thus to have a real influence on the affairs of the community and surrender its fate to the "invisible hand of the market."

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 46–48.

²⁷ I have written about the problems with deliberative institutions in other articles. See for example: *Demokracja deliberatywna a władza. Iluzje współdecydowania*, «Studia Politologiczne» 2016, vol. 41; or *Deliberacja jako forma wykluczenia*, «Myśl Polityczna. Political Thought» 2021, no. 2(8).

From democracy to the “kingdom of anti-politics”: the anti-political spiral

The more democratic politicians make empty promises, the more public frustration and disillusionment grows with parties that do not keep their word. All this translates into a decline in people's trust both in politicians and in the entire sphere of politics in general, and thus increasing indifference and declining involvement of citizens in public affairs, as well as growing hostility towards the entire institutional system and dominant ideologies. Adding to all this is the process, initiated by politicians themselves, of depoliticizing areas of public life and reducing the issues subject to political co-determination within the community. Their removal from the area of such politics is explained, among other things, by the lack of real influence on globalization processes and TINA-style slogans (There is no alternative). Consequently, this is perceived by citizens simply as the desertion of politicians from areas vital to the interests of the community. This partly explains the intensity of anti-political sentiment in recent decades presented in public discourse as the ultimate triumph of neoliberalism. Global capitalism's appropriation of public discourse led to the belief in the primacy of economics over politics and marginalized the de facto real influence not only of citizens, but also precisely of politicians themselves by spreading the belief in the ultimate and unquestionable nature of free-market settlements. However, anti-politics has not emerged solely as a reaction to the victory of neoliberalism, but should be regarded more as an inherent and peculiar aspect of politics. This is not the first time that citizens have lost trust in politicians and regard them as being corrupt. At various historical moments we have faced a similar sense of powerlessness, and that is when populism usually comes to the fore²⁸. This time, however, the situation seems more complicated because we are dealing with an accumulation and mutual fueling of the phenomena described earlier, which is reflected not only in the spread of negative stereotypes about politics, or a change in the dominant political attitudes, but leads to a profound transformation of the entire public sphere.

Shaped in an anti-political culture, the citizen has a caricatured image of politics. He is convinced not only that social life is self-regulating, but if one rejects the institutional political mechanism imposed from outside by the elites then the people themselves can govern better, more efficiently, more effectively. Politics is thus seen as a pathogen, the elimination of which will restore social life to the people. The prototype of this thinking can be found

²⁸ M. Truffelli, L. Zambonardi, *Taking Modernity to...*, p. 99.

in Thomas Paine's book "Common Sense," in which the author depicts society as a blessing and government at best as a necessary evil brought into existence because of the transgressions of the people. Thus, it is enough to rebuild a healthy social fabric, and the need for government will thus disappear.

In the second half of the twentieth century, this motif, deeply rooted in American political culture, was effectively exploited by, among others, Ronald Reagan, who in his inaugural presidential address portrayed government as a problem, not a solution, rekindling distrust not only of state institutions and self-centered political elites, but of politics in general²⁹. The gap between the society and politics is no longer just a part of democratic civic culture. It is much more especially since politicians in the current political struggle began to use it instrumentally (unaware of the consequences) to fuel discontent and create new axes of division. Thus, the classic division into rulers and ruled has been displaced in favor of new axes of political divisions between: the right-thinking people and crafty and corrupt politicians, citizens and institutions that do not represent their interests, voters and the exclusively self-interested party nomenklatura. With such outlined divisions and cognitively simplified ideas about politics, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that, in principle, professional politicians are not needed to represent our interests. After all, all citizens can equally participate in the governance of society, regardless of their knowledge and experience. In opposition to this "healthy" social perspective, politics is counter-productive, and politicians are incapable of interpreting the interests, principles and values anchored in the daily lives of ordinary people. This type of rhetoric has become the preserve of many anti-political forces, which describe people as victims of political mystification by political elites defending their privileged social position.

With such a skewed picture of politics, people naturally expect that power should be taken away from establishment politicians who abuse it to protect their own interests. This is where the hope placed by the people in strong leaders cutting themselves off from this corrupt party-political environment composed of "professional politicians without a vocation". According to this reasoning, only such leaders can restore political relevance to the true will of the people, because they can read and articulate it. By rising above current political divisions based on partisan values, they can restore unity in the common interest of all citizens. Corrupt political elites only exchange positions without caring at all about representing the real interests of the people. It is a paradox that a leader with a monopoly on interpreting the will of the people

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 103.

and being its sole political depository only swaps places with these degenerate elites giving the people the illusion of real choice and influence.

Unfortunately, this idea sounds attractive and raises aspirations for the establishment of a populist democracy based on a leader who is able to restore through him to the people (often identified with the nation) power and thus control over the country³⁰. An example of such anti-political rhetoric is President Trump's inauguration speech, which stated that his coming to power is not a change of administration, but returning power from the hands of Washington elites to the American people, because what really matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. The example of President D. Trump has fully demonstrated that thanks to social networks, politicians can not only run election campaigns, but also bypass the political establishment and traditional media in mobilizing their supporters³¹.

Thanks to such cognitively simplified messages aimed directly at their audiences, politics has been reduced to the level of slogans designed to activate specific emotions as in the case of the formulation of Mr. Prime Minister of the Polish government from the Law and Justice Beata Szydło used in the context of repairing public finances: "it is enough not to steal," or the catchy, yet extremely harmful slogan, of the Civic Platform: "let's not do politics, let's build Poland." The aforementioned examples are the quintessence of this simplistic way of thinking about politics. Thus, it can be said that institutional politics in its liberal-democratic (representative) form has, in a sense, self-degenerated.

Modern political tactics are a combination of mobilization, lobbying and professional media campaigns that often use various tools from the repertoire of social engineering. The key players are thus adapting to the new situation, that is, declining civic involvement in collective forms of political participation in favor of those that not require contact with others at all or only minimally. The parties have realized that they no longer need mass membership to achieve their goals, only professional "spin doctors". They have accepted the business organizational model as a measure of modernity. They hold party events and conventions, and obtain information about voters through ongoing focus surveys. They are no longer interested in any form of debate, whether internal or with political competitors, but in professionally prepared and conducted political communications for the election campaign. This has nothing to do with conventional public debate in which what matters is free conversation leading to harmonization of different points of view.

³⁰ J.-We. Müller, *What is populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

³¹ M. Truffelli, L. Zambarnardi, *Taking Modernity to...*, p. 105.

The same is true of NGOs, which are beginning to look like professional media agencies. They do not focus on creating public spaces for dialogue only on media marketing campaigns supported by expertise. So, in reality, contemporary public debate is between professional agencies and is not a socially representative forum for dialogue that takes into account different viewpoints and narratives. Non-profit organizations are still presented as important elements of democracy not because they are democratic in themselves, but because they contribute to maintaining the impression of pluralism. They participate in public discourse, but promote individual choices as a central aspect of the democratic system.

Among citizens themselves, those forms of participation that are mediated generally by modern information technologies and borrowed from the commercial sphere of social life are gaining popularity. Such media-inspired consumer political activism, even if it is effective in individual cases, has more the character of a one-time act rather than a sustained engagement in the life of a community. Citizens organize themselves on social media around single issues and activate episodically, often under the influence of a professionally prepared campaign that is personalized in nature. Such experiences contribute significantly to consolidating new patterns of citizenship and changing the political meaning of the public debate itself.

"A separate issue is the negative effect on the quality of public debate, an important element of democratic culture, of the public's closing itself into separate information bubbles and seeking only confirmation of its own beliefs on the Internet. This denies an important attribute of the aforementioned culture, namely the willingness to confront one's beliefs with those of others, the ability to enter a debate, the ability to change one's position under the influence of criticism, and to treat the interlocutor as a discussion partner rather than an enemy. In addition, it is worth noting the alienating and atomizing effect of the so-called social media, which often turn out to be de facto anti-social, because instead of binding people together, they separate them from each other as a result of the typical process of narcissistic presentation of oneself, comparing oneself with others and their lives, and seeking acceptance for oneself, even at the cost of exposing oneself to ridicule or humiliation"³².

Besides, what is particularly worth emphasizing, this type of media is social in name only, and in fact remains economically functional to corporations that profit from it.

Social media is a threat to democracy also because it changes people, and thus changes politics, which becomes "a game, a tool to stimulate emotions,

³² A. Szahaj, *Kapitalizm przeciwko demokracji*, [in:] S. Józefowicz, M. Kassner, L. Nowak (eds.), *Między rozumem a mitem. Księga ofiarowana Profesorowi Stanisławowi Filipowiczowi w rocznicę siedemdziesiątych urodzin*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2023, p. 93.

the victory of the momentary and concrete over the longer term and systemic thinking”³³. It shapes a new kaleidoscopic type of thinking in which complex rational arguments don’t count, but the image and emotions it evokes. Thus, we become more susceptible to “populist propaganda, which is always based on emotions, not rationality”³⁴. Public debate through social media resembles more of a “wild cacophony,” and even if on the surface this seems like a harmless change from its traditional forms, in reality it can lead to information chaos and thus create an ideal environment for the use of advanced manipulative techniques, both by overt political actors and those covert ones who do not pretend to be officially in power, but claim the right to influence any decisions made in these centers. Modern media, just as in the often idealized period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries newspapers were linked to parties, are part of a symbiotic arrangement of various political actors who are primarily interested in pursuing their own interests rather than public goals. Of course, one can use here an argument similar to that of the decline in citizen participation in elections or membership in political parties, that only the forms of political involvement are changing. Nevertheless, questions must be asked as to whether viral public debate actually continues to perform effectively the function of exposing and confronting dissenting points of view. The form that social media imposes is not conducive to reflection. It resembles a screen on which we simultaneously watch several different serials and share our opinions about them, often reducing our activity to clicking on a thumb or heart.

Summary

There are many different and often divergent meanings of the term anti-politics in scholarly studies, but it should certainly not be identified, either with total apathy (indifference) to formal politics or with a crisis of democracy because even if there is a lot of empirical evidence of a negative evaluation of the institutions of formal politics, there is little evidence of a widespread negation of the idea of democracy itself. Nor can we identify anti-politics with citizens’ disengagement from elections and declining membership in traditional parties arising from the belief that all parties and politicians are equally corrupt, or, finally, support for populist groups whose leaders falsely portray heterogeneous populations as homogeneous nations, and the interests of

³³ M. Matczak, *Dla homo ludens z TikToka polityka bez polaryzacji jest jak mecz charytatywny*, <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,30024988,marcin-matczak-dla-homo-ludens-z-tiktoka-polityka-bez-polaryzacji.html> (31.08.2023).

³⁴ Ibidem.

elites as opposed to nations, and democratic procedures and the rule of law as an obstacle to the articulation of the people's (sovereign's) interest, that is, in general, formal politics as unnecessary bureaucracy standing in the way of legitimacy for governance derived from the strong support of the electorate.

Questioning some institutional model of democracy is not yet as significant a problem as it might seem at first glance, but growing skepticism about politics itself should already be of concern because it is destroying communal patterns of thinking. Politics itself is portrayed as a space used by selfish individuals to pursue private goals, rather than as the art of negotiating and making difficult social choices. Citizens cease to understand the fundamentally collective nature of politics, which requires not so much participation in voting as extensive communicative competence.

Regardless of which of the meanings of anti-politics described in the article we will take into account in effect it leads to a distortion and falsification of the essence of politics. Unfortunately, such a general attitude of negation of politics has become deeply and widely rooted among citizens of the democratic world and forces political scientists to analyze its conceptual sources and the forms in which it manifests itself, as well as the effects it leads to in the long run. It can even be considered that these various forms of anti-politics tend to fuel each other. "Politics" is the endless process of defining, justifying, arguing and contesting what is political by members of the community. Its opposite is precisely "anti-politics" as an attempt to deny the plurality of the social world and take away people's right to decide their own fate in favor of an authority external to them³⁵. Anti-politics is an expression of capitulation in the face of historical or economic determinism or totalizing political projects or philosophical systems that destroy the idea of politics as a creative and collaborative enterprise in which self-reflective individuals co-determine their fate. In anti-political thinking, the citizen is objectified, reduced to the role of a mere, involuntary cog, part of a larger, impersonal force determining our well-being and our destiny.

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³⁵ D. Howard, *Between Politics and...*, s. V.

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