How to »Expand Popular Capacities«? Some Critical Observations on Political Culture in the Western Balkans

Jelena Vasiljević

In Stuart Hall's 1988 essay on Antonio Gramsci and the relevance of his thought for understanding Thatcherism, Hall writes the following:

> »People in their right minds do not think that Britain is now a wonderfully booming, successful economy. But Thatcherism, as an ideology, addresses the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary (…) **Without the deepening of popular participation** in national-cultural life, ordinary people don't have any experience of actually running anything. **We need to re-acquire the notion that politics is about expanding popular capacities**, the capacities of ordinary people. And in order to do so, socialism itself has to speak to the people whom it wants to empower, in words that belong to them as late 20th century ordinary folks.«[4]

> Hall 1988, emphasis mine

Even though written thirty years ago, this passage speaks to our epoch as well. Strong, authoritarian leaders attract voters not by bringing them better economic conditions, but by seemingly answering their anxieties, grievances about lost identities, and by offering pleasing and soothing images and fantasies. On the other hand, *we* – the ever elusive and self-righteous figure comprising of progressive intellectuals, active citizens, engaged activists etc. – are appalled; we want an end to autocracies, and a *change* in politics, and in people's hearts and minds. Some of us too, like Hall in 1988, want »ordinary people« to »expand their capacities«, and hence we generally look with enthusiasm at recently emerging protests and movements throughout the region. And we want to »address the people whom we want to empower in words that belong to them as 21st century »ordinary folks.« Yet a couple of problems seem to arise immediately from this unclear relation, both connecting and separating »us« and »them«.

Firstly, there is the obvious paradox of thinking about, and designing top-down incentives meant to strengthen bottom-up »organic« movements. There is something inherently self-denying in an effort to answer the question »how to help people self-organize?« Furthermore, this unspoken presumption that certain (external) actors are needed for a meaningful and effective citizens' action to take place contributes to the very sense of powerlessness among citizens that usually, *post festum*, comes to be seen as a manifestation of a political culture of passivity and dependence.

Secondly, this presumption is also connected with *our* widespread fears of the masses, of their political illiteracy and alleged irrationality, as the specter of populism haunts academic and expert circles time and again. This fear is legitimized by accounts of poor political culture, that, the narrative further goes, desperately needs improvement and strengthening – which then brings us back to the question of *who* is the enlightening subject capable of »doing the job«.

To break this vicious circle of a never quite identifiable *them* who lack proper political culture and *us* who allegedly know the diagnosis but are uncertain about the medicine, and to properly acknowledge the fact that *we are all stuck together* in societies with deeply unsatisfying levels of democracy, I propose re-examining the very notion of *political culture* and the way it is commonly used. The claim that our societies are characterized by citizens' passivity, clientelistic behavior, receptive-

---

ness for authoritarian messages, etc. is hardly disputable. The question is, however, whether these phenomena are best understood, and dealt with, as manifestations of *political culture*. There is a longstanding critique of describing political processes in terms of cultural traits of any kind, as the notion of culture inherently implies *traditional ways of doing things*, shared beliefs and common practices, blurring the role of *changing* situations, actors, and contexts shaping and conditioning political attitudes and behavior (Asad 1973, Kuper 1999, Rapport 2007).

In this respect, a presumption that social and political processes *depend* on political culture, which is in turn defined as »the sum of the fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to political processes« (Pye 1995: 965)[5] is in my mind deeply problematic. Mostly because it posits that, while politics is something processual and changing, values, sentiments, and knowledge are to be understood as something fundamental. Not only that it is flawed because it ignores how values and knowledge of every society are always heterogeneous, and constantly prone to change, but it could also be argued that, in fact, the very opposite is true: it is political processes themselves that shape the values, sentiments and knowledge (of a polity/society/state).

The recent political history of Serbia provides some examples. After the regime change in 2000, and some steady initial successes of EU integration, culminating with 2009 visa liberalization, citizens of Serbia overwhelmingly supported EU integration (more than 74 %). Seven years later, in 2016, the support dropped to less than 45 %.[6] More importantly, let us not forget that there was a period of time when finally it seemed possible to engage the greater public in the discussion about war crimes and atrocities from the 1990s wars. In 2007, on the day the Belgrade District Court sentenced the members of the paramilitary »Scorpions« unit for executing Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica in 1995, national television aired a

documentary detailing the crimes of the »Scorpions« that reached an overwhelming audience.[7] In 2010, the Parliament of Serbia adopted a resolution condemning the crime in Srebrenica. Indeed, during the state presidencies of Tadić and Josipović, Serbia and Croatia had the best bilateral relations, and the two presidents backed a regional agreement on the prosecution of war crimes. All of these political decisions had an impact on citizens' attitudes, ethnic distances, sentiments, and values. The change of political circumstances and leaders, the need for new political elites to set the dominant agenda differently – especially by controlling both state-owned and private media – quickly translates into prevailing narratives, values, and attitudes. Additionally, we should not look at these processes as contained within the nation-states, or even solely within the region. They are intertwined with messages and politics streaming from the EU and other political centers, having (and changing) their own vision about the desirable state of affairs in the WB.

Therefore, if we still want to talk about *political culture* – referring to the conditions enabling the emergence of both dominant political forces, and those challenging them – we need to be cautious of falling into the trap of ascribing it to mentalities and historical predeterminations (which the notion of culture often does). Instead, we must fully acknowledge complex interdependencies, internal dynamics and external factors, and the wider political constellations that this region is a part of. Only then can we also properly assess and become effectively part of the emerging forces of dissent.

To conclude, I will refer to the recent text by political scientists Ferrera and Burelli (2019, forthcoming) dealing with political and economic stability of the EU after the crisis. They develop a notion that EU needs to be considered not as sum of its parts but as a *complex adaptive system* due to »the degree of interconnection and the pressures of mutual adjustment among the parts of a collective.« Properties of such systems are irreduc-

5 This definition was also used in the argument of the workshop »Political Culture in the Western Balkans« which preceded this publication.

6 https://www.b92.net/bbc/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=1437212.

7 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/701057.html. On the influence of such documentary films on shaping and changing citizens' attitudes and sentiments in the region, see Werner 2016.

ible and irreversible: »Irreducibility means that it is virtually impossible to disentangle systemic from sub-systemic causal dynamics; systemic properties are non-localizable and non-aggregative. Irreversibility means that initial conditions cannot be reconstituted via decomposition.«

In a similar vein, I believe that the space of the Western Balkans has become a complex adaptive system where the degree of interconnectedness of local political elites, EU politics, economic and geopolitical interests is at such a level that it is impossible to single out *political culture* as a factor in itself, supposedly comprising of autonomously functioning sets of beliefs, values and attitudes. Only once we accept and fully realize that the political conditions and practices we want to change are not part of the inherited *cultural* repertoire, but are shaped by highly complex and intertwined structural and socio-economic processes, will we be able to respond with adequate (political and structural) propositions and solutions that might »expand popular capacities« and bring about the desired change.