The de-politicization of politics

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The challenge for a liberal democracy is to remain as such, argues Charles Taylor in conversation with Slawomir Sierakowski. Western democracies suffer two types deterioration: a misperception of really existing problems and a lack of vital tension between the demos and the government.

Slawomir Sierakowski: Don’t you have the impression that liberal democracy is dead? Dead, I mean, in the same way that God is dead in the writings of Nietzsche. The realization has dawned that it was always just a myth. Not only do we now know that there has never been a time when democracy existed – democracy defined not only as an act of voting, but also as genuine participation, as a situation in which the demos truly organizes around a political community – but we have also learned to accept this fact.

Charles Taylor: I definitely think that democracy, liberal democracy, is more alive when it’s establishing itself. When there’s such a thing as demos that is taking power from the elites or former rulers – what we might call the Tahrir Square phase. Then we have high participation and a very good understanding what the problems are. But, as we can see in American history and that of several Western European countries, this moment can go on for long. These countries had higher participation during periods when a sort of class war was being fought: Labour and Conservatives in Britain; Socialists and Gaullists in France, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Germany, and so on. So there was a struggle of a people, a demos: peasants and workers against the others, and these others mobilized themselves too. This led to the posing of clear alternatives, a high level of participation. The same thing is happening in India today. Among the Dalits – the lowest strata of the Indian caste system – there’s this tremendous sense that democracy is a chance for them to make this very inegalitarian society less so. In the West, the more rich and educated you are, the more you vote; in India, the less you have, the less educated you are, the more you vote: Dalits and women vote more than other social groups. So the challenge for liberal democracy is to remain liberal democracy – particularly with regard to participation – when it has passed beyond the phase of struggle against the various kinds of structures that benefit the elites. Most Western democracies are at this stage and the level of participation is falling.

There’s something else that can derail democracy, which is happening now in more affluent societies. There are different sources of delusions the people can have, and one of the most powerful of them all is the national myth. The power of this myth can lead
people to very serious misapprehensions about the world they’re in. So that the political struggle gets detached from the real problems that you face. Good examples of this are two very dangerous things happening now in Western Europe. The first is an inability to see that you need immigration, that nobody will be around to pay your pension unless you take people in. Of course, the problem of immigration isn’t a simple one, it has its upsides and its downsides that people have to deal with seriously. But instead of that, people tend to move into a simple sense of comfort in their own ethnicities. This and an inability to deal with immigration’s downsides is reflected in the rise of the radical Right vote, which can be seen here in Vienna, in Denmark and in France perhaps. Not yet Germany, thank God.

The other issue is connected with the economic crisis. Look at what they’re doing with Greece right now: driving them into the ground in order to restore confidence in the bond market. But they’re never going to get back to growth with that degree of deflation, they’re never going to grow enough to pay back the debt. So in two years time we’re going to have another crisis, and we’re going to drive them further down. They should be allowed out of the euro and back to the drachma. It’ll be a tough slope, but the drachma will devalue in relation to the euro and they’ll be able to re-establish the terms of trade with other countries. And the European Union has to assume the debt for those bonds, otherwise the euro’s reputation is going to be ruined. But instead of facing that, Europe is constantly moralizing: “We Germans work hard and those Greeks are only playing around.” Germans might indeed work hard, but Germany is also struggling for its survival.

In America you have the Tea Party movement. They feel that the US is slipping, that it’s no longer a top country in the way it was. And their idea is: “We have to go back to our original values, to the times when everybody stood independently for themselves.” They’re completely blind to the real causes and possible cures for the American situation. This kind of illusion is a great threat to a democracy. In Poland, too, there is a very ugly and stupid nationalism; I’m sorry, but that’s what I see from the outside. These are the two greatest threats to democracy: a misperception of the really existing problems and a lack of vital tension between the demos and the rest, which in the past has produced strong public debate and high participation. This is what produces a sense of voter’s efficacy, citizens’ efficacy. The sense of citizens’ efficacy is clearly connected with high participation around certain issues.

**SS:** Let’s look more closely at these problems. It’s obvious that participation is related to contrast. If you have contrast in politics, then people have a reason to choose. Don’t you think that the contrasts have disappeared from today’s party system? Everywhere, oppositions are simulated: Left and Right, Social Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals all look more or less the same. For me it’s clear – you have also made this point – that one of the reasons for this is the domination of the market over democracy. Imagine you are Zapatero and you have to make a decision about taxes. You want to fight the extremely high youth unemployment and to do so you want to raise taxes. But you can’t because the financial markets will go mad, your rating will go down and drive your country into bankruptcy. Leftist politics seem impossible in one country. Would you agree that this provides additional fuel to the culture wars, to the rightist backlash, to national myths? Is this the source of rightist populism?
CT: Yes, I’d agree. You can see how rightist, populist political parties are gaining strength at the expense of traditional Social Democratic parties. Various frustrations get diverted, for example hostility towards immigrants, and the traditional constituencies of the Left are starting to vote for this kind of party. Perhaps it was also the case in Poland during the period of neoliberalism. But there’s another feature of that, maybe not in Poland, but in richer countries. It’s not so much that the Left parties are co-opted, but that people’s concerns are fragmented into a whole range of different issues. Some care about ecology, others about different aspects of a culture, and so on. You get a fragmentation of issues that in effect means that less energy goes into the single issue – politics. It is very hard to put all these issues into two coherent packages.

SS: It’s often said that the world is more complicated than it used to be, yet for the citizen it has always been complicated. What’s new in the present situation?

CT: During the heyday of Social Democracy there was some understanding that binding all these issues together were two different philosophies, one based on equality and the other on the free market and certain privileges. Almost everyone accepted that each of these issues could be dealt with in a different way, depending on which philosophy one adhered to. It was not always the case, but the general sense of that’s how it felt was very strong. There was a certain kind of Gestalt formation of what the issues are about. As soon as you get more affluence in the working class – we’re talking now about the 50s and 60s in Western Europe –, when the working class accedes to what was previously reserved solely for the middle class (like home ownership), that Gestalt starts to crumble and you get this fragmentation into different sets of issues, which we now expect our governments to deal with. Democratic society might conceivably work like this were it not for two things. The first is that people are backing out of political participation and the second is that these new illusions arise.

The other feature of the shift is the slide towards infotainment in late consumer capitalism – people consume news like entertainment. Media offering that are part of the capitalist system. They seek profit for themselves but at the same time have to be on the “good side”. All big corporations advertise themselves like this.

SS: Would you say that consumer needs are created by the market and that somehow our lives are already sold?

CT: I think that on many issues it’s true, but not on as many as people on the Left tend to think. Obviously, the details of the things we desire are sometimes created by advertising images and so on. But the fact that we don’t look for the bare necessities but desire new things, new products, is something that has to do with the development of the economy – it starts at different moments in different societies. Up until the 1940s, the vast majority of rural people didn’t expect to live better than their parents and grandparents, they just wanted to maintain what they had: own the farm and so on. That’s also how people used to live in Poland until recently. Then, when you get the world of modern consumer capitalism, completely different kinds of expectations arise: I’m going to have it better than my parents, my children are going to have it better than myself, etc. The border between luxury and necessity blurs and moves: television today is a necessity rather than a luxury. And this is a new set of expectations that comes with the success of industrial capitalism.
SS: Why is it that people no longer want to conduct their lives according to religion or anything beyond consumer choice?

CT: That isn’t quite right. That is to assume that consumption does indeed replace something meaningful in their lives. I mean, it can, and that’s a very sorry situation. But a lot of people are growing up dreaming about becoming a doctor, working for Médecins Sans Frontières, great stuff. Nonetheless, at the same time they’re poled into this consumer world. A very small number of people choose to completely back off, to live in communes and so on. In the lives of everyone of us, there’s some kind of balance; but when you aggregate it all, it can turn out to be very bad for democracy. I find a meaning in my life in being a doctor, you find a meaning in your life in writing a novel, she finds a meaning in her life... But these meaningful activities don’t coalesce into the political domain, as they did in the course of careers in old social democracies. People back then thought that politics was something important, so it bleached into some kind of solidarity. And for lots and lots of people this doesn’t seem to be the case anymore.

SS: In my opinion, the problem is that God is dead for a large part of the population. Of course, there are islands where tradition and God still provide meaning to people’s lives and where community can be created in a traditional way. But the rest is subjected to the market, or its logic – that’s the first thing. The other thing, connected to the first, is that social ties are disintegrating. If liberal democracy is finished, then we can also say that society is finished. But you still claim that people don’t cease to live meaningful lives: they can be good doctors, they can be good people without God, or without other people.

CT: Or rather, without society. I can only be a good doctor because I’ve learned things from other doctors. I can only be a good writer when I have readers and other writers with whom to exchange ideas. As far as spiritual matters are concerned, they are simply no longer a national issue; they belong to some people who have spiritual feelings, who may form religious groups and so on. But the issue is how that’s related to political society.

SS: Maybe we don’t need democracy anymore?

CT: Well, we can’t do without it because our lives are dominated by political power.

SS: But still, we prefer self-preservation and security over participation and all those old ways of life. Isn’t it true that ideas are impossible without ideologies? What if the real choice is between the atrocities of the twentieth century, together with clear political alternatives, high participation and so on, and no clear alternatives, no politics, no participation, but security and self-preservation? Maybe the fact that we decided to keep at a distance all those things that were dangerous in the last century makes us unable to organize, to create social movements, to engage. Perhaps we don’t want to engage, and though we know that it would be better to be an active citizen, the fear of what happened in the twentieth century prevails – so we prefer security and self-preservation.

CT: Yes, that could be an explanation for the reaction, but it’s an error. We’re living in structures that require political authority, keeping the law. Even the frame of the market has to be based on that. If we don’t watch how that’s moving, then it can become tremendously destructive. Small groups can lead us into wars, as was the case with Iraq.
Or else the system is allowed to move in a direction where there’s no solidarity, where social bonds begin to wane, where nothing is done to build them up, where in effect some people are doomed to destitution. And that is also degrading to the environment we live in. It’s an illusion that you can simply ignore politics. Another way of putting it is that you can avoid politics only as a free rider. If I just want to write my novels, and there are enough people around me to engage, then nothing wrong is going to happen to me or my children. But in that situation, I’m a free rider, I’m riding on other people’s participation. If everybody does this, the consequences would be terrible.

SS: If we have the free rider problem, then there’s also the prisoner’s dilemma. In order to solve the prisoner’s dilemma you need some sense of trust or solidarity. But in a marketized society there is more competition than solidarity, and trust is disappearing.

CT: Well, I don’t give up on that. Because people can still have some sense of solidarity, even if it’s international solidarity – fundraising for famine or flood for example. But people can even do this nationally, if somewhere in our country a disaster happens.

SS: When you used this example twenty years ago, thirty even, very often choosing ecology or human rights, it was understandable and convincing. But now, you can see that even green ideas are subject to the instrumental logic of the market. The ecological lifestyle is becoming just another form of consumption. All efforts to preserve Mother Earth are just another niche on the market.

CT: Without direction, that’s the problem. Take greenhouse gases for example. What the West is trying to do is to introduce a new structure of consensus through carbon trading. You know what it’s about: you are allowed to pollute only to a certain degree, unless you buy permission from others who are polluting less. Carbon trading produces tremendous incentives to introduce greener technology and greener energy. The incentives are such that the market begins to work for you, people are putting money into investing in green energy, but the decision has to be made on a political level. What we are now seeing is that because of the crazy Republicans in the us, who have the majority in the Congress, the carbon trading law, that maybe could have gone through in the first two years of the Obama administration, has now been shelved. And because the Americans are doing nothing, nobody feels that they have to do anything either – terrible consequences might arise. The market can handle such things only when it is properly directed.

SS: What I’m saying is that there’s no real difference: the decisions are made, but this doesn’t mean that people are making those decisions.

CT: I believe we could get on top of this danger, but it will only be through a number of political acts in a number of crucial countries. Some of them are democratic; some that are very important, like China, aren’t at all. In Western Europe it is much better, but a lot depends on what the United States does. And that depends on whether they can elect saner people. Maybe they can – but that’s a task for democracy.

SS: Would you say that what Tocqueville called “soft despotism” is the case today?
CT: Yes, but only because we allow it to be the case. People are not trapped into this. But it does take new kinds of mobilization and political imagination to get out of it. I put a lot of help into the Obama campaign because I thought that here there were new kinds of imagination and mobilization, both in terms of technique and in terms of slogans and goals. I’m a bit disappointed, because the movement fell apart so quickly, people didn’t fully understand…

SS: …Facebook revolutions?

CT: Facebook revolutions can have an immediate effect and can be really important, but they’re not something you can build on. They don’t produce social glue.

SS: Who produces social glue today? How can we produce a sense of solidarity, something that is absolutely necessary for any social movement or for a democracy more generally?

CT: There is potential motivation still around. If you take a look at polls, you can see a strong sense of national identity. There’s no reason why it should be totally captured by the Right.

SS: But tell me, why in your opinion is the national myth stronger than a sense of solidarity, or even religion?

CT: I think it’s because democracies were established on a strong sense of common identity: the Polish people, the Czech people, and so on. But it also turns out that the way in which authoritarian regimes were opposed in the past was through links of solidarity. In the European case these were based mainly on language. You can’t just re-write history and say, now we’re going to have a European identity. As we developed the modern world, it’s these identities that have become strong. Their positive side is their link to freedom, to liberal democracy. So in many cases, to call on solidarity you have to call on these.

SS: But convince me that the popularity of nationalism, rightist populism, of all those ideologies based on ethnicity, is anything more than a return to biology, to something we might call “the modernized state of nature”, where once again *homo homini lupus est*.

CT: Well, that doesn’t fit the reality. If we go back to the individual level, we see that people have different kinds of meanings. The issue is how we create the link between these different meanings, so that people would feel solidarity, a certain link with others, which in turn would lead to collective action, even though these meanings aren’t exactly the same. There’s always this possible basis. It’s not that we’ve all become total egoists.

SS: Haven’t we?

CT: No, most people aren’t like that. If you take them one by one, they’re really nothing like that. It’s something that Obama did: he appealed to something in all these young people, showing them that we can have a more meaningful political life. The slogan “Yes we can” appeals to the sense of impotence that people have in the political world: we would like to have a more just, a more ecological world, but we don’t know how to go
about it any more. What Obama did was to appeal to all these strong moral ambitions and give people a sense that yes, if we get together, then...

SS: Yes, but what about the substance, is it still satisfying?

CT: It’s not exactly the substance that is the problem. It’s true that it didn’t have the staying power, because people didn’t fully understand how these different issues link. In order to have staying power you need political organization. And the Obama political organization, powerful as it was up to November 2008, fell apart when he got elected.

SS: When we used to have clear alternatives, you could choose a social democratic way of development or a more liberal way of doing things. Now that the substantial difference has disappeared, isn’t the choice we have between “Yes we can” and “No, we can’t”? Isn’t it the de-politicization of politics that produces such choices? Where there’s no real choice of political ideas, the one and only choice is between populists and anti-populists.

CT: Well, you can’t run a campaign on a “these guys are idiots” platform – of course they are, but you can’t run a campaign on that.

SS: In Poland the basic legitimization for Prime Minister Donald Tusk is the fact that he’s not Kaczynski. In my opinion that’s also the case for Obama: the fact that he’s not Bush was probably the most important part of this quasi-ideology.

CT: Ok, maybe I should have put it more carefully: certainly, you get some votes from some people just by saying “we’re not them”. But it’s not enough, you also need a positive program, you need to create a new sense of common purpose out of the hunger of all these different individuals for a more meaningful political life. This hunger really does exist. And “Yes we can” appeals to precisely this.

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