

## CITIZEN'S COMPETENCE AND PARTICIPATION IN NEW POLITICAL PARADIGM OF THE NEW COMMUNITARIANISM.

Jarmila Jurová

### 1 Introduction

In basic communitarian document called *The Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities* we can find the communitarian claim for strong democracy as the basic assumption for their agenda. Benjamin R. Barber defines "strong" democracy as democracy with the participation of all the people, citizens in at least some aspects of self-government for some time. Such a concept of democracy offers a new way

of thinking and acting in liberal society. Compared to the common opinion -that the excess of democracy can paralyse liberal institutions- Barber claims that the excess of liberalism erodes democratic institutions and causes many crises: cynism of voting, alienation, privatisation and increasing paralysation of public institutions. In a strong democracy there is the rule of citizens rather than the rule of representatives to whom they passed their power and responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Strong democracy does not mean politics as life vocation as it is in the case of professional politicians. It means politics (citizenship) as a way of life – a characteristic and natural role of someone, such as the role of a parent or citizen.

### 2 New Political Paradigm

In communitarian perspective government should be representative, participative and responsive to the needs of all the members of community. Working democracy requires mature civil society.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand civil society in many aspects inclines to moral neutrality and requires a kind of citizen competence, mainly the capability of critical thinking. On the other hand, communitarians consider a good society the one which aims for promotion of the core of key values, and enables

active participation of communities in social life. Etzioni emphasizes that *"a society without some shared virtues cannot exist."*<sup>3</sup>

Communitarian approach is set against state regulation of mostly every moral behaviour, but communitarians *"advocate state restraint because they believe that the society should be the main agent responsible for promoting moral behaviour, relying on education, persuasion, and leadership."*<sup>4</sup> Good society is a society which formulates the notion of a "common good", sets and promotes common values, and although it in a part interferes in private sphere of an individual, it aims to foster only a limited set of key virtues. As Etzioni claims *"law in a good society is first and foremost the continuation of morality by other means."*<sup>5</sup>

### 3 The role of state

So, what is the role of state in such a concept of society? Chovancová writes that while liberals perceive market as the best medium for individuals to find their job as well as place in society, communitarians do not rely on the invisible hand of the market.<sup>6</sup> They rather advocate certain form of welfare state, which provides some social security in society. Moreover, *"market mechanism, which distributes the benefits and burdens, often seems unfair [...]".*<sup>7</sup> Hence, the issue of the market is closely connected with the issue of social justice.

Communitarians claim that what we need today is not more or less government – we need *"different government"*.<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to promote approach which searches an alternative to assertion of state power and democracy.

New paradigm requires some changes which will gradually reflect in the life of society. The first assumption is that the state or government attempt to get others into motion – communities such as families, neighbourhood groups, community organizations, private companies. They should actively participate in the life of society and common good. This is related to the second assumption that government should revise their approach to programmes – political programmes should be mandatory, however, as David Osborne writes, today's governments are rather *"market-*

oriented"<sup>9</sup>. The third assumption of a new paradigm is to avoid bureaucracy and create a more entrepreneurial form of government, so that people can choose between competing service providers. The governments treat people as customers rather than clients.

The idea of choice is closely related to the fourth assumption. New paradigm fosters government operating *"by the people" rather than "for the people."*<sup>10</sup> It means that governments (via professionals and bureaucrats) do not provide services for dependent clients, but they empower people and communities to solve their own problems. In this context new paradigm stresses *"opportunity"* more than *"entitlement"* and with opportunity there comes also responsibility.

The last, but not least assumption has much to do with decentralization and centralized decisions are no more preferred: *"New paradigm leaders are pushing decisions and authority down to state and local governments."*<sup>11</sup> This, naturally, requires the development of the public sector, rising interest of the public in political issues and participation of citizens on social and political life.

#### 4 Citizen Participation in Democracy

In communitarian perspective society needs foremost more citizens who are willing to study political matters systematically.<sup>12</sup> Without the understandig of how special interests make their way, citizens will not be able to respond effectively. Once they are informed, they must make it their civic duty to organize others locally, regionally, and nationally to act on their understanding of what it takes to clean up life in their country or society. Robert Dahl emphasizes that it is reasonable to ask that the rulers – the citizens – be politically competent; that is, they should possess adequate knowledge of what they want their government to achieve, and a predisposition to act in ways intended to bring it about.<sup>13</sup> Only a small part of citizens is really interested in politics these days, and, except participating in elections, they even less actively take part in political life in a form of campaigning for particular candidate work for political party, or the membership in some political organization. The average knowledge of citizens about political issues is fractional. Also Taylor

claims that an average voter is not much interested in political issues, he has little information, and he is often even manipulated by political propaganda or media.<sup>14</sup>

Etzioni emphasizes the need for informed and educated public so that the society could initiate the changes in the sphere of politics and search for a common good: *"Thus the challenge for the politics of change is to find ways to mobilize the great underrepresented majorities."*<sup>15</sup> One of the answers is in mobilizing public opinion. However, here must be noted, that political activity and mobilization does not always relate to political literacy. If the citizens are convinced about the uselessness of any political activity in particular system, then their absense in elections and political life actually reflects their political competence rather than incompetence or illiteracy.

According to Dahl most citizens receive a level of formal education sufficient to ensure political literacy and their political understanding is further increased by the widespread availability of relevant and low-cost information supplied by the media and political leaders competing for office and organized in political parties.<sup>16</sup> Amy Gutmann emphasizes the role of schools in the educating of children (as future citizens and voters) and in cultivating of virtues, which preceed the deliberate decision making (truthfulness, tolerance, rationality, non-violence, ability to conduct a sophisticated dialogue etc.).<sup>17</sup> Skills and knowledge from politics are then developed and cultivated by a wide scale of relevant information from media, as well as from political leaders applying for public positions and political parties. This information enables citizens to form their own opinion about politics, programmes, and political candidates which is later expressed as their will in democratic elections.

However, this process is not as direct as it seems. Many changes often happen in society: there appear new parties, relationships, and social movements that, on one side, are *"the source of the needed political energy"*<sup>18</sup>, but, on the other hand, when they become more complex, citizens become confused. At the same time, it must be said, that social movements in political sphere are effective because they draw on strong shared values and molding symbols (feminist movements,

environmental movements, movements for human rights etc.). Communitarian movement is, actually, one of them.

Another factor that influences citizen competence is surely media. They can, on the one side, contribute to the information level about political issues, but, on the other hand, they can widely manipulate public opinion.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 How to increase political literacy

Citizens informed about political situation and the increase of their political literacy is the basic assumption for democracy in general, but communitarians emphasized this claim even more than anybody else. They suggest a few steps that can help to increase political literacy of citizens.<sup>20</sup> The first one is giving authority to smaller units within larger units (local governments, smaller territorial governments), within which citizens are more competent. The second step is to encourage assemblies of randomly selected citizens engaged in deliberation about current political issues as they could provide what opinion surveys cannot: judgements arrived at by a body of well-informed citizens after deliberation assisted by experts. Another step is to use telecommunications as the means of information. In media organized discussions between citizens and officials, life discussions with experts would help explain political situation and give objective information and knowledge. And, finally, communitarians require a kind of empathic understanding of others.

## 6 Conclusion

Citizens in hitherto relatively homogenous countries are likely to find it particularly difficult to sustain a sense of a common good, and even a concern for fundamental human and democratic rights, when they witness a dramatic increase in the number of people in their midst who are ethnically or racially distinct. This problem which has been central to the political life of the U.S. for two centuries, has now entered into political life in European democracies and as Dahl writes "*it may well become the central political issue in democratic politics in the coming century.*"<sup>21</sup>

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- <sup>2</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*.
- <sup>3</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. Introduction, p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Common Good*, p. 150.
- <sup>5</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Common Good*, p. 158.
- <sup>6</sup> CHOVANCOVÁ, Jarmila. *Liberalismus versus komunitarismus*, p. 100.
- <sup>7</sup> CHOVANCOVÁ, Jarmila. *Liberalismus versus komunitarismus*, p. 8.
- <sup>8</sup> OSBORNE, David. Beyond Left and Right: A New Political Paradigm, p. 286.
- <sup>9</sup> OSBORNE, David. Beyond Left and Right: A New Political Paradigm, p. 286.
- <sup>10</sup> OSBORNE, David. Beyond Left and Right: A New Political Paradigm, p. 287.
- <sup>11</sup> OSBORNE, David. Beyond Left and Right: A New Political Paradigm, p. 288.
- <sup>12</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, p. 244.
- <sup>13</sup> DAHL, Robert. Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding, p. 261.
- <sup>14</sup> TAYLOR, Charles. 1995. Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere, p. 201.
- <sup>15</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, p. 227.
- <sup>16</sup> DAHL, Robert. Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding, p. 264.
- <sup>17</sup> GUTMANN, Amy. The Virtues of Democratic Self-Constraint, p. 163.
- <sup>18</sup> ETZIONI, Amitai. *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, p. 230.
- <sup>19</sup> DAHL, Robert. Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding, p. 265.
- <sup>20</sup> DAHL, Robert. Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding, p. 269.
- <sup>21</sup> DAHL, Robert. Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding, p. 269.