

Governance as a Strange Elephant

Past Legacies, Current Complexities and Future Challenges

On Navigating Troubled Waters (Ferenc Mészlivetz and Attila Pók eds., iASK 2020)

Introduction

The other night, as I was reading a book with a poetic and tragically apt title, the TV showed a crowd of rioters raiding the Capitol building in Washington DC. It was as if everything on the pages came to life in front of my eyes in the form of emblematic visual images: the crisis was visible, the tension palpable and never before have I felt a greater need for the return of common sense, rationality, solidarity and faith in institutions and shared values that societies have been trying to perfect and expand since the Enlightenment. Just like in a bad, sensationalist CIA-movie, I saw an example of the worst of our current civilisation: a deep crisis of not only political legitimacy but of democracy. The power of the past, the terrible ghost of the twentieth century came back to haunt, leaving me and many sleepless. What is going to happen? What is the way out of this?

This volume honours the work of eminent thinker and former MEP, *George Schöpflin*, who has spent much of his life writing about the correlations of nationalism, identity, rationality and myths in the formation of cultural and political communities, Eastern and Western European democracies and political cultures. *Katalin Bogyay*, a life-long colleague and friend delivers a moving *laudatio*, describing his many achievements – both as an academic and as an active politician. Historians, political scientists, philosophers, economists, sociologists, and natural scientists, under the auspices of the Institute of Advanced Studies Kőszeg, joined together not to simply honour Schöpflin's achievements but to contemplate further many of his ideas.

The volume stands out from the range of traditional dedicated volumes, not only because of its surprising cohesion, but also the strong conviction of all its contributors to think deeply about the current interlacing crises humankind is faced with. Albeit with differing views, they all go beyond simplistic public discourses regarding probably the most pressing issues of our time: suitable governance in service of the public good. It is one of iASK's missions to have such an interdisciplinary approach to our current societal and civilisational issues, and the contributors all belong to this community of scholars. They often discuss these issues with the seasoned Professor himself, which might explain the academic sophistication of the arguments, as well as the fact that the authors do not always exhibit similar assessments or political stances. George Schöpflin's intellectual curiosity and his enjoyment of witty debate is echoed by the foreword, "[i]f you are not only tolerate but enjoy disagreements, you have to be Central European" (p. 7).

The volume consists of short essays in three larger sections according to the scope of investigations: *Mitteleuropa*, *The Future of Europe* and *Uncertainty and Global Governance*. The structure also reflects the focal points of Schöpflin's interest and enormous *oeuvre*. The essays are also connected across these three larger sections by virtue of their topics and aspirations. Firstly, all of the essays reflect committed and careful inquiries about the challenges of governance today in the search for meaningful visions and solutions. Secondly, driven by the conviction that it is people and ideas that shape the future, the texts interestingly showcase how individuals (intellectuals) play an undisputed role and have the responsibility to convey important lessons from the past in order to create better futures.

Asymmetries of Governance in the EU

The concern for the future of governance and the ideal forms it will take are discussed at various levels of nation states, or regional representation (CE and EU) and on the global scale. The essays all try to grapple with the difficult problem of trying to imagine a system where many of the positive achievements of the Enlightenment, the political systems it has given painful birth to, and the hard-earned peace in some parts of the world, could be retained as well as expanded to larger constituencies.

The essays in the volume list several case studies from Central Europe in order to highlight differences of past grievances, deriving from geopolitical catastrophes. *Iván Bába's* essay is an empathic account of Central European satellite states and their painful imperial legacies; or the difference in the ways in which they relate to their own recent pasts and form specific non-inclusive trends in memory politics, shaping often polarised, ideology-infused images of national pasts, as *Attila Pók* aptly shows through six case studies of using and abusing national pasts. Both geo-politics and cultures shape the way societies in the region want to see themselves and their interests represented, at the level of the nation state as well as at the European level.

Jody Jensen in her essay, takes a deeply-felt and sharp critical look at the Central European democratisation process since the 1989 political changes. Utilising the traditional parable about blind men trying to define an elephant, she exposes how much European integration has been marred by partial perspectives, unequal value systems and double standards as regards the Western European constructions of Central Eastern Europe. She argues that in the process of “catching up”, Central and East European societies have largely been left behind and ignored. *Ferenc Mészlivetz*, in his eloquently written narrative account also provides an interpretation of all the pitfalls, struggles and dead-ends that states and civil movements have tried and failed on both the East and West. He calls for a radical change in attitudes towards each other, and radical change in the way both national and EU political systems exacerbate and reconstitute inequalities in the form of outdated institutions, self-congratulating myths and old-fashioned ideologies. Clearly, the “elephant” in the room for many of the authors is indeed good governance, which is rather hopeless to create on the premises of enduring inequalities, exclusion and polarisation both at the level of nation states or that of the EU.

Regarding EU, integration there are diverging views that need consolidation, and potentially every intellectual, political scientist or analyst sees it differently from those who are practicing it every day as EU officials. *György Schöpflin* himself, in a recent essay called *The European Polis* critically examines the structure, the ideals and the actual working praxis of EU institutions.¹ In contrast to an EU as a diverse cultural space, he views it rather as a polity comprised of an aggregate of relations between its bureaucratic institutions, agencies and main legislative, executive and judicial bodies. He points to many elements, ranging from the absence of an actual embodied *demos* and the asymmetrical relationship between the member states through to the absence of a proper system of checks and balances between the Commission, the Parliament and the Court. In his view, it is far from having achieved a “harmonious” and equal co-existence of units in the form of national polities. Currently citizens are far from feeling any responsibility in return for their rights as EU citizens – because of the distance between them and their representative bodies at the EU level. Schöpflin aptly cites the lack of emotional relationship that people feel towards many of the EU’s achievements – like the Schengen area, free mobility of goods and services and travel etc. – even though the withdrawal of these would have deep emotional impact.

¹ Schöpflin György: Az európai polisz in *Korunk*, 2020/8, pp. 38-49.

To be sure, providing an accurate critical diagnosis of the flaws in the make-up and the workings of a system is the first step towards efforts to fix it. The question is at which level (or scope) is it best to start: the national, the supranational or the global and what relationships need to be forged among states and their institutions. The topic of nation and nationalism is one that has been prominent in George Schöpflin's *oeuvre*, and it is one that frames several essays in the current volume. Again, authors meaningfully dialogue with several of his former works. *Ahmet Evin*, a prominent scholar of modern Turkish history and EU-Turkish relations, writes about the origins of Turkish nationalism and bridging the East-West divide, trying to grapple with the duality of rationality and identity that both have historic roots in Western Enlightenment and Romanticism. He ponders how in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Ottoman youth reformers were impacted by Western notions of the nation. Besides showing the transfer of ideas to the Ottoman Empire, he also reveals the crucial historical differences that distinguish the formation and function of Turkish nationalism from those in the West. In a similarly fascinating manner, *Dimitar Nikolovski's* essay discusses recent changes in the production of the Macedonian nation. Through the case study of the 2018 referendum around the name change, he convincingly explores a deeply divided political community, the rupture between the nation and the state and how polarisation has been achieved by the competing agendas of ethnic homogeneity and EU integration wrapped in anachronistic new mythologies. In an essay grounded in political theory and the history of ideas instead of empirical inquiry, *Ferenc Hörcher* asks the question of what common ground remains for a productive dialogue between the overly polarised stances of liberal leftist and conservative and nationalist ideologies.

Pathways to Global Governance

Authors echo each other in lamenting the crisis of liberal democracy, the loss of noble ideals and disillusionment. Political and social liberalism often gets confused with economic liberalism, as if liberalism excluded virtues of equal chances, and solidarity (i.e. caring for those in need). The idea of the welfare state, as if it was an outdated, 20th-century phenomenon, is retreating. It seems to be irreconcilable with a globalised economy and the ways in which it has weakened governments and states. However, as Jody Jensen makes very clear, it was once about solidarity, a core European value. There should be provisions and structures that stem from the mutual recognition of each other's worth, including the social others, the weak, and the disadvantaged. Structures are needed that provide a safety net for all those unable to keep up with the rapid changes of digitalisation, or other natural or health catastrophes. In agreement with this contention, *Erhard Busek* argues that the welfare state and the social market economy are closely connected with the development of a continental and global system.

At the global level, both *Erhard Busek* and *Sean Cleary* call for a fundamental change in the ways in which governments construct inclusive and efficient policies and fulfil their functions suited to the new requirements of the upcoming era – such as managing change (especially the climate and health crises and the digital boom), regulating the free market, forming cohesive and resilient political communities, and ensuring the accountable and transparent practice of power. The need for adequate leadership, creative and long-term visions, the inclusion of the *demos* and reforming political cultures for the digital age, are just some of the basic suggestions that they provide. To this *György Csepeli* adds the basic pre-requisite of re-evaluation of our long-held values to see if they still hold up in this period of epochal change (or interregnum) or period of liminality, citing Victor Turner. He describes our current civilisational stage as VUCA world (characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), or “chaordic world”².

² Where chaos is co-existent with order. See Jensen 2014, or p. 142 in *Navigating Troubled Waters*.

Concretising the vagueness of values, we learn that overcoming planetary idiotism is of utmost importance, and the constant pursuit of the advantages (and profits) of the self.

Civic Duty and the Role of Individuals

The question of what role and space of action individuals have in this process is also relevant and one that the authors in the volume also ponder. *Jody Jensen*, at the end of her essay, opens up the space for the potential agency of individuals exactly at this point in time in history, when the old order is dismantling before our eyes, but a new one is not yet in place. In such a civilisational vacuum, the space for action and intellectual creativity can have fundamental impact in shaping the future.

In the volume there are several short pieces that are about influential – or almost forgotten – individuals, who embodied interesting connections between the world of theory and that of praxis and have contributed ideas concerning the future of governance and democracy. *László Z. Karvalics*, for instance, went to great length to rehabilitate Nicholas Doman, a scholar of international relations and practicing international lawyer, and the idea of a “world state” he formulated in his 1942 book. Proving that thinking about the future of global governance is not new, Karvalics outlines Domán’s ideas of a democratically organised, universal world state, and a government-controlled economy. The notion that mankind would eventually evolve into one epistemic community creating a universal civilisation and a technology-led social transformation strikes ever more familiar chords today, especially since the survival of our species is at stake. Utilising technological advancement in order to expand the limits of governmental control, instead of national rivalry, is also an often recurring plea when the long-term social-political impacts of digitalisation are discussed today. Unfortunately, the Second World War, in the author’s view was an ultimate proof of the inadequacy and untimeliness of Domán’s utopistic ideals. He did not produce any great works afterwards but practiced and taught law in the later years of his life.

András Nagy’s essay on the Hungarian reception of Kirkegaard is a short gem of intellectual history. Through Kirkegaard’s story, Nagy outlines another twentieth-century story of disillusionment and demise of ideals, about how the public good could and should be best achieved. The essay effectively illustrates that the power of imagination and political thinking is never independent from life-experiences. Other great personalities, such as the famous ornithologist nobleman István Chernel, and the tragically-fated writer, *Ágota Kristóf* (well-known abroad, but hardly read in Hungary), in *Mónika Mátay and Henrietta Trádler*’s beautiful historical account, also exposes the contingency of thoughts, theories, stories and memories of living people together with the universe of their ideas. Through these tales of remarkable individuals, the volume also reminds us of such contingencies and how vital it is to pass on these stories to a wider audience of young generations, even if they prefer to read digitised visual images instead of real books.

Unfortunately, (public) intellectuals, who are able to convey complex ideas in a meaningful way, accessible to many, is in decline. György Schöpflin is one of the few accomplished open-minded and deep-thinking public intellectuals left in Hungary. This exposes the problem of intellectual continuity and makes the absence of adequate disciples and the possibility of dialogue painfully apparent. Fortunately, this volume, showcasing different or even competing viewpoints, engaging contributors from various backgrounds, disciplines and generations, is a valuable compilation where we can see the dialogue continued.

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