Introduction

The concept of post-democracy is usually connected to the sociologist Colin Crouch and his book, Post-democracy, which was originally published in 2003. What has been overlooked for a long time is that Jacques Rancière introduced that concept as late as 1992 in his book On the Shores of Politics. He wrote in that book that post-democracy is, a “non-conflicted rule of experts... or... the precise coincidence of ochlocracy with its supposed opposite, epistemocracy, government by the most intelligent... “ (Rancière 2007 [1992], 35). However, the originator of that term is also credited to Sheldon Wolin. It is a quite difficult to say who really has the exclusive intellectual right on this critical concept. It goes without saying that the interest in this concept has increased since 2008 since the global crisis dramatically puts into question the capacity of the actual political order in the West “to harmonically govern with dispersed wants of masses” (Rancière, 2007, 58). Therefore, there is urgent need to find a new political consensus which can determine again the relationship between democracy and materialistic reproduction or capitalism, particularly in the EU and the USA.
I would like to show that post-democracy as a concept is controversial enough even though it seems that there is a basic consensus about it. Almost all agree that post-democracy is about the order in which an oligarchy, using some democratic narrative, systematically pushes people from politics and directs them towards other spheres of life or towards the plurality of the consumer society. However, as the concept of democracy is an essentially contested one, post-democracy also shares its destiny. In my paper, firstly, I wish to introduce two authors, Richard Rorty and Collin Crouch. The former didn’t attract particular attention, at least, with his considerations on post-democracy. The latter is a different story. As far as Crouch is concerned his book is considered a benchmark of the whole debate. They share some kind of the post-democratic melancholy because they would like to reestablish the life and forms of liberal democracy as they once allegedly were.

After their thoughts, I will show the basic ideas of two other key authors, Jacques Rancière and Sheldon Wolin. They are intellectually and ideologically quite close since they, in some way, share the idea of a vortex of demos according to which democracy is a periodical, eruptive and short event. Following this, I will try to show that their version post-democracy is not only connected to the period which started at the end of the 1970s but that it can be traced back to the beginning of representative democracy and even to Antiquity. However, for this paper is more important to show that almost all of these authors (Rorty, Crouch and partly even Wolin), regardless of their intentions and efforts, methodologically can’t avoid the trap of post-democracy. Having persuaded the idea of democracy as an order without arché, Rancière however managed to do that. Others, more or less, firmly insist on the ‘return of real democracy’ or politics but with the same identities on the same sites and forms as it was in previous times. They are stuck in a post-democracy because they forget that the permanence of democracy “resides much rather in its mobility, its capacity to shift the sites and forms of participation” (Rancière, 2007, 60).

A post-democratic melancholy: Rorty and Crouch
Richard Rorty in his text, *Post-democracy* (2004), somehow atypically considers post-democracy just in the context of a strengthening of public security, particularly after the September 11 terrorist attack. Although Rorty doesn’t deny that a further radicalization of terrorist methods could increase the number of victims, his main concern is that “it could abolish many of the socio-political institutions in America and Europe which were created in the two centuries after the bourgeoisie revolution” (Rorty). It is not a surprise that he considers some measures of Bush’s administration as more dubious than the very terrorist attacks themselves. Since the public is willing to accept the controversial security measures, when human suffering is caused by human activity, Rorty assumes that the activities of the intelligent services would suppress the rule of law and the authority’s responsibility to the public. In that way, he legitimizes himself as a liberal since he is afraid of dismantling the court independence and the media blockade of some antigovernment protests. This will not happen because western governments are full of ‘crypto-fascist’ but will happen unintentionally by the mere momentum of institutional changes in the name of the ‘War on terror’. Thus democracy will change, but it will be neither a dictatorship nor totalitarianism but, first of all, a benevolent despotism which will be gradually imposed by a hereditary nomenclature. According to Rorty, democracy, as we know it, can be reinvented only by more courageous citizens.

Rorty’s thoughts on post-democracy didn’t reach a very wide audience unlike Crouch’s book, *Post-democracy* which became a best-seller in Europe even before the global crisis of 2008. The reasons for its popularity can be found in its actuality, clearness and readability which are achieved by applying the sociology of democracy. Crouch started from a paradox of democracy. Although this form of governing has achieved a significant territorial spread, we are witnessing its serious stagnation in the developed countries because of a huge electoral apathy among their voters. Thus, according to Crouch, we are at the gate of post-democracy. His concept of post-democracy is based on the so-called, parabola. He believes that the peak of democracy was achieved during the second half of the last century, when the welfare of employees was, for the first time in the history of capitalism, taken as the key element for achieving the optimum state of economy. In question is the so-called
fordist age which is mainly considered as the golden age of democracy in the West. But, Crouch is also aware that it is possible to see that period as a time of ‘apolitical enjoying in the social welfare’. That period of democracy and its glory started fading when the events of ‘1968’ passed and the subsequent rise of the service sector. It significantly changed the role of physical work and massive democracy. During the eighties, the capacity of the welfare state was gradually reduced and consequently democracy started weakening, particularly in the USA. The key reason for its decline can be found in the crucial imbalance between corporative interests and the interests of practically all other social groups. Corporative interests are institutionalized through a ‘global firm-phantom’ which is well-accommodated to an expansive nature of capitalism and its culture of flexibility.

Crouch shows that governments also try to imitate the pattern of global firms as a role-model and try to rationalize their activities using the same principles. This often means privatization of many of their utilities and assets, particularly those which are at least slightly profitable. The main problem here is that the concentration of huge power in the corporative sector gradually influences on state activities because corporative personal doesn’t only dominate on economy but they also become a class of their own which rules over the state. In that way, politics as such is practically left to ‘a closed elite’, something like the situation in the pre-democracy era. Thus, Crouch defined post-democracy as ‘on the one hand, a condition of frustration or disillusion which follows the democratic period, and on the other, as a condition in which the interests of the empowered minority became much more important then those of ordinary people. He claims that political elites learned to manipulate with needs of ordinary people. In general, the West is becoming more post-class and even more post-identity oriented which is fertile ground for different populist movements.

Concerning Crouch’s idea on post-democracy, He appears to be a victim of a post-democratic melancholy. Namely he is still a supporter of the nostalgic perspective of liberal-democratic consensus found in the 1970s. For example, he still prefers political parties as a necessary instrument for transferring the will of people
to the political level of the community. There is just one deceptively new element, a combination of the traditional forms of political activity with the new identity movements. In fact, his ‘new creative demos’ didn’t stray too far from radical identity pluralism which is socially and culturally rooted in the last quarter of previous century. Moreover, Crouch hasn’t yet lost his faith in capitalism even though he devoted many pages of his *Post-democracy* to the destructive impact of its latest phase. He would be quite satisfied if it were possible to limit the political influence of corporations and their leaders but, at the same time, to save the dynamism and enterpreneurial spirit of capitalism.

In some way, he forgets that the radical pluralism in the West “has been dissolved into an unstructured and fragmented plurality of identities and differences” (Wood, 1996: 260). It happened because capitalism “subjects all social life to the abstract requirements of the market through the commodification of life in all its aspects, determining the allocation of labour, leisure, resources, patterns of life, patterns of production, consumption and disposition of time” (Wood, 1996: 262-263). It seems that Crouch’s suggestions, which should in theory help to reduce the impact of post-democracy, have already played a significant contribution to the realization of its contemporary variant. While he, on the surface, insists on the reinvention of democracy it is difficult to do it without certain awareness that democracy urgently needs some kind of homogeneity, regardless of its forms and places of happening, because “heterogeneity, diversity and multiple selves are no match for modern forms of power” (Wolin, 1996: 44).

**Post-democracy as a consensual democracy: Rancière and Wollin**

In contrast to Rorty, who is more interested in civil liberties then democracy, Sheldon Wollin has been systematically researching this phenomena and trying consequently to hold a democratic stance. Methodologically, he moves somewhere between the history of ideas and critical sociology. He is not always very keen to make a difference between post-democracy and our postmodern era. It is the
consequence of the simple fact that we increasingly count culture as the basic point of understanding of power relations today. Regarding democracy he claims that there are two mutually contesting tendencies. The first is one related to the fear of homogeneity which comes with democracy and jeopardizes ‘the difference’ in a plural society. Therefore, the politics of identity or postmodern pluralism is a remedy for it. On the other hand, there is a centripetal tendency counting on the activities of the big corporations. Wolin shows that the latter leads to the concentration of economic and political power on the side of corporations.

All of that is going on in the process of the transformation of capitalism or, more precisely speaking, its founding institutions, corporations. Corporation is also quite willing to transform all relations beyond itself in accordance to its own model. Therefore, there is a spillover of the economic principles over its traditional sphere of application. This new economy offers consumerism, or sovereignty of consumers, as some kind of compensation for a stronger, democratic participation. In that new context, state and corporation don’t compete with each other but rather it is the competition between different corporations for influence over the state and its subsidies. For example, corporations are increasingly engaged in the policy of punishment because they have already been governing prisons. Thus, those institutions become a matter of profit. Therefore, it is necessary to accept the ideas and practice of management even in the public sector. In this context, politicians are more dependent on corporative money than on their voters. Democracy as a word is still a part of the American identity, even though the people are separated from that form of rule which calls on them. That separation is the main assumption which enables Wolin to speak about a post-democratic or post-representative state. This has huge consequences because the well-known political concepts are increasingly losing their meaning. Wolin responded to this condition and introduced a new concept, for example, ‘Super-power’ which reflects the idea on “the totality based on the two centuries of liberalism and democracy”. Moreover, he even speaks of ‘inverted totalitarianism’. In contrast to the standard version of totalitarianism which insisted on mobilizing its citizens, the new version is based on the depolitization of citizens who live in an atmosphere of fear.
Having developed the concept of fugitive democracy, Wollin made a decisive move by which he is quite close to Rancière’s ideas on democracy, as we will see later. Wollin’s ideas are based on an insight that when democracy is built on a constitution it becomes predictable and convenient to manipulate. Therefore, democracy can’t be a form but only “a rebellious moment that may assume, revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not” (Wollin, 1996, 43). For this idea, he finds inspiration in Aristotle who said that democracy is a matter of those who have to work. If it is so, democracy is quite rare because those who prefer it have to work.

Turning to Jacques Rancière’s ideas on post-democracy. He shows in his book, Disagreement, that it is about “the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasizes the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action” (Rancière, 1999, 101). Rancière deduces his concept of post-democracy through the reconstruction of hatred of democracy. Behind that unusual story is hidden a strong criticism of the procedural theory of democracy which has been accepted by contemporary political science, particularly the theory of democratic transition. Thus, Rancière uses the so-called, ‘democratic man’ who was described by Plato in his The Republic as one who is lazy. Rancière firmly believes that that description from ancient Greece ideologically matters even today. Namely, it is about “an exact portrait of democratic man in a time of massive consumption and global networks” (Ranciere, 2007, 37).

However, Rancière reminds us that ‘democratic man’ and his picturesque lifestyle has never been a particular problem for rulers. As late as Plato it was known that democracy, as a ‘gaudy suit’ or plural society, was not the worst evil but the idea of democracy as “the principle of politics that institutes politics in founding ‘good’ government on its own absence of foundation” (38). What is the source of this absence of founding? Rancière again points to Plato who thinks that “there is the choice that comes the god of chance, the drawing of lots or democratic procedures by which people of equals decides on the distribution of places” (40). Since variously defined nobles have been living from the respect of the origin, age, and cleverness,
they reject the luck of the drawing of lots. That 'law' disdains their values and, according to Rancière, politics at this point can start its adventure. We can see that democracy is no more then an anarchic entitlement, “based on nothing other then the absence of every title to govern” (41). In that way democracy fights routine models of government that can be found on one or another way of distributing (positions and chances). Rancière calls that distribution ‘police’. If such political regimes wish to be something more (than gerontocracy or oligarchy), they needs some assistance from those who have no part.

The oligarchies have historically been using different patterns for distributing places and possibilities. Rancière shows that it is possible to follow their developments since Plato. The first one is the so-called arche-politics. This type of politics founds the community which is based on arche, or the power to initiate or to give a command. It is generally about a prior modern community in which politics doesn’t exit since it has embodied a durable order of social positions.

Apart from that surrogate of politics, Rancière also discovered other variants of its misuse. The second variant is para-politics which is not so much unfavorable to equality but, in fact, leads to the neutralization of politics by certain political institutions. As late as Aristotle, in his theory of type of political orders, suggested that a tyranny should act on behalf of its people to save the city in which it rules. For Rancière, it is business as usual because “politics is a question of aesthetics, a matter of appearance” (Rancière, 1999, 74). Namely a good government can only be one managing to look like an oligarchy to the oligarchs but, at the same time, a democracy to ordinary people. In that way, the rich and the poor serve to the same political system. Consequently, according to Aristotle, any regime has to be a mix regime to survive politically.

The third variant is meta-politics. There is its variant in which Marxists try to interpret the Declaration of the Rights of Man. They consider the difference between man and the citizen as false since politics is somewhere else in bourgeois democracy “beneath or behind it, in what it conceals and exists only to conceal” (Rancière, 1999,
Therefore, the key decisions for community are made in the sphere of economy and the ideology of human rights “is only there to mask radical non-rights” (83).

Besides that, there is another variant of meta-politics, one regarding the end of politics. It concerns a neoliberal narrative which is based on the economic rationalization of political institutions. In fact, it is just another variant of the reduction of politics to police or the abolishment of the interval in which happens the transgression of the place, name or identity of political subject. This narrative of ‘the end of politics’ is inseparable from today’s post-democracy. In question is ‘a consensual democracy’ which is founded on the agreement of certain groups and individuals, so there is no place for those who have no part. The disappearance of politics is the direct consequence of the idea that the state should legitimize itself through its powerlessness. Since the state activities are reduced to management of market necessity, Ranciere emphasizes that Marx’s thesis on the state as a committee of bourgeoisie “is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind ‘the forms of democracy’… but… it is declared the truth by which our governments acquire legitimization” (Ranciere, 1999, 113).

Therefore, it occurs that post-democracy is not just phenomena of our time. Neither can post-democracy be reduced to the actual crisis of representative democracy in our postmodern era. It has much deeper roots which have always been connected with attempts to abolish the belonging of all to the public sphere.

Still in the trap of post-democracy?

Given that of all the presented variants of the understanding of post-democracy the agreement about this concept quickly cease to exist on some quite important points. As I said at the beginning we have to deal with the definition of democracy because there is a disagreement on how much democracy is optimal for the conception of liberal democracy, or moreover, is liberal democracy at all democracy? And last but not least, the problem is whether post-democracy is exclusively a contemporary phenomenon?
To solve this last issue we should try to historize democracy. If we do it, we can conclude that post-democracy happened as soon as the first representative democracy was established. For example, there were a lot of significant areas of conflict between the people and the oligarchy in Pennsylvania at the end of 18 century. In that sense it can be useful to turn to Terry Bouton and his book *Taming democracy* where he analyzed these points of friction. The people of that American state had never been particularly satisfied with their oligarchs. The people tried to confront them using different forms of civil disobedience, protests and petitions. However, their idea that “politics was not just about voting... but 365 days a year” was defeated (261). It had a tremendous effect because the concept of democracy was changed and served more as an incentive for amassing a fortune then equality. In that way, the concept of democracy was no longer a treat but a resource of the elites.

Secondly, post-democracy is a relatively new concept which partially covers a long-standing narrative on the crises of democracy. We can refer to Kelsen’s book *A Defence of Democracy* in which he draws attention to some authors who were writing about the crisis of democracy during the 1940s. According to Kelsen, that crisis was caused by the economic evolution of capitalism which democracy couldn’t tame. Moreover, the political rights became basically irrelevant at that time. Different authors and political groups tried to find a solution by “the reinterpretation of the democratic ideal of ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’ based mainly on economic foundations” and “to assure the efficiency of political rights which surpass economic power” (see, Carr, H. L., *Conditions of Peace*, quoted according Kelsen, 2012, 358).

The basic problem with today’s post-democracy is that many of the previously mentioned authors simply repeat the same, bygone political patterns. Instead of today’s the ‘end of politics’, they would like to introduce more politics or more ‘pure democracy’ but following the same, mainly obsolete and predictable tracks. For example, Rorty, who fears for civil liberties which are under pressure of the new authoritarianism, invites the citizens to have more courage if they want to save the socio-political institutions of liberalism. Crouch is far more articulate in his holding the nostalgic perspective of liberal-democratic consensus whose roots go back to the
middle of the last century. He finds the solution in a stronger democracy which should be heavily supported by the new civil society and more responsible corporations. Wollin mainly manages to avoid this trap of post-democracy because of his concept of fugitive democracy. He claims that democracy is not even a form of government in which people rule but just the answer those who don’t have any other way to solve their problems but to collectivize their power (see, Wollin, 2007 [2004], 758). However it occurs to me that he would like to always have the same subject of democracy, the relatively poor citizens.

I suppose that post-democracy could be more efficiently fought if we accept that the guarantee of permanent democracy is rather “its capacity to shift the sites and forms of participation” (Rancière, 2007, 61). In his book On the Shores of Politics Rancière emphasizes that democracy doesn’t exist to strictly fill up of “all the dead times and empty places by forms of participation or of counter-power” (61). It is rather about of the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject” (Rancière, 2007, 61). According to the actual political experience of the so-called street democracy, it is still the only way to exit from the trap of post-democracy.

Literature


