

РОЗДІЛ II

Методологія соціологічних досліджень

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Ambivalent Nature of Political Markets: Does It Undermine a Democracy?

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This article is an attempt to analyze the contradictions of political marketing as a theory and technology. Various aspects of scholarly debate analyzed and various problems associated with application of political marketing are highlighted.

Key words: political process, political marketing, political market, democracy.

Безносів М. А. Двойственная природа политических рынков: подрывает ли это демократию?

В данной статье анализируется противоречивая природа политического маркетинга как теории и технологии. Также рассмотрены различные нюансы этих противоречий и различные проблемы, связанные с применением политического маркетинга.

Ключевые слова: политический процесс, политический рынок, политический маркетинг, демократия.

Безносів М. А. Подвійна природа політичних ринків: чи підриває це демократію?

У статті проаналізовано суперечливу природу політичного маркетингу як теорії та технології. Також розглянуто різні аспекти цих суперечностей і різні проблеми, пов'язані із застосуванням політичного маркетингу.

Ключові слова: політичний процес, політичний ринок, політичний маркетинг, демократія.

Statement of the research problem. Modern politics were labeled by some observers as «postmodern» or «antipolitics» [1]. In contemporary social sciences there is a perception of crisis in politics. Political dissatisfaction is often named as one of the reasons for this phenomenon. As Western electorates exhibit increasing cynicism towards their political elites and are less tending to vote, there has been widespread concern about the character of contemporary democracy and suggestions of its decline.

Underlying all this, however, has been a profound shift in the way politics is both conceived of and practiced. Politics, as both elite-level activity and the dissemination of this to the public, has predominantly become a process of marketing. The central argument of this article is that this use of marketing has played a key role in contributing to the existence of a political «malaise» as marketing both subverts the democratic process and disconnects the public from politics.

Our **goal** in this article is to analyze the essence of modern electoral democracy and show the contradiction between modernization of politics in contemporary world and challenges that this modernization poses to the democratic legitimacy.

Analysis of recent research. Many scholars noticed that political parties and political elites are currently losing so much credibility and trust among the population, not only in old and established Western polities but also in post-socialist societies.

Comparative research of democracies encounters a multiplicity of critical, apathetic or even anomic attitudes, which all suggest the conclusion that democracies in general have to fight with a growing lack of support. This has been evident from a broad range of different indicators during last 20 years. Until now,

general and plausible reasons for this development have not been found. The often used «normalization» thesis, according to which democracies will – after all – adapt to American standards, can not be applied to the post-socialist polities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the democratization process in these countries has not been accompanied by adequate levels of satisfaction with emerging democratic institutions. We are observing here the «global divergence of democracies» described in L. Diamond's and M. F. Plattner's seminal work as the fact that «democracies increasingly diverge among themselves, not only in the nature of their institutional structures, but in the quality and depth of their democracy, and hence in their progress toward consolidation» [2].

Summary of the basic material. On the other hand, many scholars are talking about the global convergence of democracies warning about the spread of American electoral campaign techniques and the negative impact these techniques have on emerging and evolving democracies. Under the conditions of democracy, elections as a major mean of regime legitimization are seemingly free from coercive components. Citizens get the possibility of «free» choice. First of all, they can choose to participate in elections or abstain them. The question regarding to what leads to such decisions is one of the unsolved in political science. Even more difficult is defining why citizens vote in certain fashion.

The system of political representation existing in the West, based on social and ideological groups, undertakes evolutionary transformation gradually creating a more complex context of pluralistic social and political environment. The socialist social and political environment disintegrated rapidly and left the ideological and institutional vacuum that was rapidly filled with the new ideas and institutions. The assumption is that the citizens of modern post-industrial societies are gradually abandoning their sense of certain social and ideological identity, which used to be the main regulator of political behavior. As a result of this «release» and destruction of former social links, individuals today have either multiple identities or are being left one-to-one with the society as a whole. These multi-identity or «no-identity» individuals become the «free buyers» acting at the political market.

The capitalization of the sphere of «politics» comes naturally in the process of the development of the capitalism, markets, and «capitalization» of all spheres of public being. The process of weakening of class and ideological identifications, and the formation of mass free electoral market are the most important prerequisites for the formation of political markets in democracies. The market itself is becoming a main mechanism, which links the rulers and the ruled, pushing out the traditional components that fill the space between them. As a result of this, passive, apathetic «consumers» of politics engage in consumption that symbolizes their frustration with political matters.

Political marketing in itself is not particularly new. As a practice and set of strategies originating in the US, its historical antecedents can also be seen in Britain, where the techniques of marketing have been used throughout the last century. However, it is within the last two decades that its usage has noticeably spread, and what is qualitatively different and is profoundly reshaping politics is the extent to which it has moved beyond a set of practices and techniques and become an overriding philosophy. The prevalence of marketing as a guiding principle of the activity of politics has become so well-established that, as Bruce Newman observes, the question now becomes whether it is conceivable for a candidate not to adopt a marketing perspective in contemporary politics [3].

The question of whether to consider political marketing as a technology or as a theory of political process is debatable. Perhaps this is related to the relatively new nature of this process¹. Being aware of the limitations of conceptual scheme, we, nevertheless, have to interpret social reality in adequate terms. Even if our analysis tends to uncover just parts of this reality, this could eventually help us to understand its holistic nature.

While existing separately from the normative political theory, the marketing approach in politics has become very popular. Perhaps it can be attributed to the popularity of rational choice, which was the first attempt to introduce the methods of the analysis of economic markets into a social and political sphere. However, as suggested by rational choice theory, a model of rational behavior of political subjects in a political market raises more questions than gives answers.

«The seller» and «the buyer» behave according to the rules of political market. They are looking for a benefit. Even the most «civilized» political market requires a complex² mechanism of balancing the interests

¹ The political sphere of democratic societies is being rapidly transformed and requires certain re-thinking, therefore we have to be careful not to make this theory absolute.

² Much more complex than in case of the market of other products and services.

of sellers and buyers. This harmonization of different interests appears to be one of the most important problems that is being faced by modern democracy. Institutionalization of free competition is one of the pre-conditions of its solution. In post-socialist countries traditional «antimonopoly» structures of political market in the form of mass parties, publicly owned mass media, etc. are either absent, or exist as imitations of Western blueprints. In the West the situation is better, but there is also a trend toward the transformation of public sphere, changes in party systems and means of political communications, commodification of politics, etc. Some scholars raise an issue regarding the status of mass media in political system. The need for an equal access of political agents to the channels of political communication is currently one of the most important conditions of the free competition on political market. According to J. Habermas «mass media like judiciary power have to keep their independence from the participants of political process» [4]. There is a structural contradiction between the freedom of communication and unregulated freedom of the market. In this case market competition creates a market censorship. According to Arato «we have to pay special attention to the activities of the organizations responsible for large scale communications not ruled by the logic of commodification or administration» [5].

However, the question regarding the rationality of the subjects of political market is not an easy to answer. When the number of choices is too big, the choice becomes impossible. That is the choice based on reasonable consideration. Under the conditions of excessive supply we turn on the mechanisms of random choice¹.

In case of newly developed political market without the political products with good reputation, the customer is dealing with the described situation. When the electorate is aligned and behaves according to its class and ideological preferences, it can easily recognize the parties that supply acceptable political products. But we are observing now the situation when «catch all» parties in the West are losing their structuring function. They have become or are gradually becoming the electoral mechanisms for promoting their leaders on the market. Most of post-socialist parties perform this function since their emergence even if they are not aware of this.

However, both in the West and in Post-Socialist countries, the fact that ideology does not work as the main attraction for the electorate, becomes more and more evident. Meanwhile, a professionally made image of the leader can win elections. Of course, in such case, we cannot talk about the prevalence of rational elements in mass behavior of political customers. The emerging infrastructures of political markets are not providing the evidence of increasing rationality in the political behavior of the electorate.

The relations between the agents of political markets are very similar to those of regular products and services. The means of influence are virtually the same. The first and most widespread mechanism of influence is political advertisement. As marketization of political sphere advances advertisement campaigns play more and more profound role in electorate «orientation» in political environment. The organization of electoral campaigns is being performed by special political consulting firms. Thus, political consultants become one of the most important players responsible for creating political demand as well as for the political product delivery. Despite their great role political consulting firms are still «hiding» behind traditional actors, parties and leaders; although from the functional point of view the parties are not needed anymore. In «old» democracies political parties are an important part of democratic tradition, while in «new «democracies» they reflect the pattern of institutional mimicry from the West.

The situation when the sellers find potential buyers on the political market with the help of political advertisement requires the creation of symbolic forms for politicians or policies. In contemporary secular societies market symbols are very different compared to ritual symbols of non-secular societies. In modern societies the process of de-sacralization of the power goes along with the separation of real person from, both, power symbols and his/her virtual image. Market mechanisms of power reproduction require symbols-brands and images-labels that are, being virtual, going to replace traditions, rituals, and myths as guiding lines in political environment. They replace the real subjects of power interaction in the process of political communication [6].

What is then the relationship between *Consumer Culture and Political Participation*? Concerns about how consumer culture may be undermining civic culture have not been central to empirical studies in the sociology of political communication. Indeed, radical critics of American society have long condemned its materialistic and consumerist tendencies and warned of the potential consequences of this dynamic for civic

¹ In the best case we choose based on expert opinion, while in the worst case we choose something more or less familiar. The same situation exists when we cannot find the difference between suggested alternatives.

and political life [7; 8; 9]. Similarly, R. Bellah and colleagues drew attention to the challenges confronting American society due to its inability to reconcile the liberal economic philosophy of the markets with the «expressive individualism» and «moral intuitions» of the public sphere [10]. These classic sociological works share an underlying sentiment that the pressures of the commercial market often undermine the basic institutions of democracy, including, implicitly, the mass media.

Scholars and intellectuals have long criticized American consumerism. One of the earliest criticisms comes from Tocqueville who discusses the paradox between democratic responsibility and materialistic, pleasure-seeking activity [11]. While democracy and its resulting freedom of action are necessary to facilitate the procuring of material enjoyments, he argues, overindulgence in materialism could be harmful to democracy in the long run. Other critiques of consumer culture focus on two related concerns: «conspicuous consumption» for status competition within social groups [12] and consumption practices for maintaining the basic structures of power¹ [13].

Adopting these perspectives, Schor talks about «the new consumerism,» characterized by «an upscaling of lifestyle norms, the pervasiveness of conspicuous, status goods and of competition for acquiring them» [14, 7]. To her, hyper-consumerism has changed relevant reference groups. Comparisons are no longer likely to take place among those of similar means; rather, the wealthy have become the point of comparison.

Such competitive consumption is considered to have negative effects on public goods and civic engagement [15]. Based on their analyses of American society, Bellah and colleagues contend that a culture of self-interest limits community action: «Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority; ‘being good’ becomes ‘feeling good’» [10, 77]. This implies that a consumption orientation discourages public-mindedness in favor of personal interest and, ultimately, undermines civil society.

In today’s Western societies, people are confronted with a symbiotic alliance of hierarchy and individualism, of bureaucracies and markets that form the «system» [16]. Hierarchy and individualism form a functional and mutually supportive relationship because, in liberal democracy, hierarchies need individualism for necessary innovations within their stratified and ritualized organization, whereas individualists need hierarchies to provide them with stable, legally structured settings in order to minimize insecurities. The transition from socialist to post-socialist regimes brought a change in institutional structure, but – more fundamentally – a process of individualization. With respect to politics, this led to the opportunity to decide not only between a growing number of political parties, but also to choose certain ways of understanding of what politics generally is, how it should work, and who should participate in which agenda and by what means. Democratization allowed for very subjective and often ambivalent practices of shaping individual political affiliations and activities that need not be homogeneous, or even consistent with internal logic or ideology. Individualization released people from «embedded» arrangements of penetrating party structures. Today people tend to refuse to think in functional categories with respect to political system since they no longer see themselves as part of it.

In the 1960s the Frankfurt School diagnosed the emergence of the phenomenon of cultural industry as a product of democratization of culture and communication. In 1962 Habermas came up with a concept that described the activity of the participant of the electoral campaign as a sort of activity for selling goods and services. This concept has gained even more actuality in the countries of «new democracy» [16]. Here we can observe the process of the transformation of all social matters into a commodity and rapid marketization of all spheres of human being that is paralleled by the crisis of the economy. The paradox is in the fact that the political market in post-socialist societies has been formed too rapidly – much faster than the market of consumer goods and services. And this led to the situation when we can observe all consequences of the process of «commodification» of political sphere (negative more often than positive) more clearly than in the West. In the West the secularization and marketization of political sphere are not as rapid as in transformational societies, because political sphere here still keeps non-market elements that are intended to fill the «vacuum» between the government and the governed. In transformational societies these non-market elements are present unequally – in some countries more than in other. In most of post-socialist countries these elements are almost nonexistent after the disappearance of the symbolic system of power.

¹ The first critique argues that consumption divides citizens as they engage in a competitive status game. The second supposes that consumption creates class fractions in society by highlighting differences in cultural taste and social status between groups. Both views implicitly recognize and are nonetheless critical of the relationship between social capital manifest in acts of participation and cultural capital resulting from acts of consumption.

There is a wide gap between the political activity of post-socialist citizens and its political results. This gap is empty. It is filled with neither traditions, nor rituals, nor behavioral stereotypes. The relationship between the political power and individuals are being rapidly marketized. The market essence of post-socialist political relations is more evident and transparent because of the absence of democratic traditions and structures.

The acceleration of market trends in political life in Western countries led to attempts by scholars to come up with new ways of its conceptualizing. P. Bourdieu suggested describing it as a logic of supply and demand in the political field [17]; he speaks about politics as a specific social reality. The political field in it is the market where the «production» of such products as «political parties, political programs, positions» takes place. There is also fluctuation between the demand and supply in it. Based on the concept of the structure and functioning of the social field, P. Bourdieu pays especially great attention to the analysis of the specific positions: who govern and who may be governed. Moreover, he investigates the distribution of a political power, legitimate coercion and the mechanism of the distribution of political power.

According to Bourdieu, the political field is not the only condition of the investigation of political activities. It is also the result of a constant change and institutionalization. The monopoly of political opinions, the establishment and distribution of resolutions is more important in a political field than the monopoly of objective sources of a political power, such as finance, law, and army forces.

The normative political theory and literature on market nature of political relations exists in a kind of «parallel worlds» without mutual interaction and even mutually ignoring each other. The reason for that is, perhaps, in the fact that the market character of political relations (evident for political scientists engaged in applied research) is not being accepted by political theory scholars unconditionally. Moreover, in a marketing approach to politics they see the danger for the fundamentals of democracy. According to A. Arato, who is one of the most consistent advocates of the concept of civil society, elections based on political marketing technologies will lead to the disappearance of the vital link between the parliamentary and social spheres. If the candidate can be sold using these technologies without looking at his/her political position on important issues, it would be absurd to still assume that the discussions in the parliament are rational. A. Arato says that «neither public control of executive power, nor rhetoric of new political movements and civic initiatives is capable of giving additional impulse to the political life especially if mass media are «poisoned» with the all penetrating logic of «commodification» [5].

J. Habermas observed this phenomenon as part of his «Transformation of the Public Sphere's Political Function» discussion. The transformation involved private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state. On the other hand, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere [4]. Hence, Habermas describes a transition from the liberal public sphere, which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions to a media-dominated public sphere in the current era of what he calls «welfare state capitalism and mass democracy.» This historical transformation is a process in which giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. In this transformation, «public opinion» shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. Rational debate and consensus has thus been replaced by managed discussion and manipulation by the machinations of advertising and political consulting agencies: «Publicity loses its critical function in favor of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only by identifying with them» [4, 206].

In most post-socialist countries, because of a lack of democratic traditions, marketization of political sphere goes much faster than in the West. Political markets functioning in Eastern Europe and FSU are much more cynical. The only thing that prevents those political markets from taking its complete form is the above noted institutional mimicry trying to resemble Western blueprints. Perhaps, it would be more reasonable for the scholars and politicians to pay more attention to the newest trends and dangers for socio-political development of post-socialist countries instead of trying to reproduce in many ways unique Western models.

Virtually all electoral campaigns in post-socialist countries showed enormous capabilities of «new electoral technologies.» The selling of the political product to the electorate based on political marketing strategies brings incredible results almost independently from the quality of the «raw» material and societal context. Indeed, errors in marketing practice lead usually to serious failures. The leaders attempting to create a «civic political party» according to the classical pattern inevitably loose the competition with more

pragmatic politicians. In fact, in Russia and Ukraine only communists can afford to be mass parties minimally engaged in political marketing practice. But they also risk their future in doing this. A. Maksimov writes that «a small group of professional political consultants is capable of turning the direction of campaign upside down, and turn the leader into outsider, while making the underdog the leader of public opinion. Everything depends on their resources: experience, time and money» [18].

Conclusion. The difference between what was promised to the customer-voter in symbolic sense and what he gets in the sense of actual policy depends on the socio-political context of the particular country, including its historical legacy. But the modern political marketing techniques allow creating a big difference between the image of the political power (especially during the elections) and its real appearance. To prevent the erosion of the image of democracy one would have to think about the mechanisms of the minimization of the negative effects of modern conditions of power functioning.

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