

## Jakub Napoleon Gajdziński

Independent researcher

# The Age of Counter-Democracy

### Abstract

The study is an analysis of the counter-democracy nature and phenomena, Author tries to show why it's so present in our reality and what new challenges it makes us face. He claims, the most important question is the one about the democracy falling and counter-democracy rising. Why the counter-democracy seems to replace traditional model? Why people seems to look for urgently a new form of organization, political activity and control? Are the mechanism of liberal democracy no longer valid, unable to face the challenges of our reality? Or maybe people no longer trust the formal ways? Does the counter-democracy sunrise mean the sunset of liberal democracy model known today or they may coexist?

**Key words:** counter-democracy, democracy, democratic institutions, political activity.

### Era kontrademokracji

### Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza natury i fenomenu kontrademokracji. Autor próbuje wskazać dlaczego się pojawiła, co przyniesie i jakie nowe wyzwania stawia przed światem. Zdaniem autora najważniejszym problemem, z którym musimy się zmierzyć jest to czy demokracja upada i kontrademokracja rośnie? Dlaczego kontrademokracja w ogóle zaistniała? Dlaczego ludzie sięgają po nowe formy organizacji, działalności politycznej i kontroli? Czy mechanizmy demokracji liberalnej nie mogą stawić czoła wyzwaniom naszych czasów? A może dlatego, że ludzie nie ufają już formalnym sposobom udziału, choćby pośredniego, w rządach? Czy pojawienie się jej oznacza początek końca demokracji liberalnej, jaką dziś znamy? Lub czy są to dwa nierozłączne części tworzące jedną całość?

**Słowa kluczowe:** kontrademokracja, demokracja, instytucje demokratyczne, aktywność polityczna.

## Introduction

*“In all likelihood the indispensable radical reconstruction of the US Congress, the House of Commons and House of Lords of Great Britain, the French parliament, the Bundestag of Germany, the Russian Duma, the huge ministries and stuffy clerical systems of different Nations, will happen. The change of Constitution and Pomology, will be, in short, a radical transformation of increasingly sterile system that formed contemporary governments (...) ALL structures need to be completely replaced”*

(Toffler, Tofler 1996: 111-112)

Counter-democracy can be explained in two ways. Firstly as the sum of all the citizens political activities and the way of involving them within the typical instruments of democracy such as elections, parties or the ongoing debate. Secondly as an idea that tells us the time of long expired, but still used, institutions of liberal democracy has passed. The remnants of old liberal democracy are to be changed – totally and without exceptions, if the democracy itself is to survive.

The idea we are talking about is not a theory that one would or not put to practice. Counter-democracy is a common practice of everyday life of our power system. Facing recent processes as Brexit, election of Donald Trump or the fall of liberal narrative in Poland are one huge sign for those who want to both see and hear it.

It's a cry of peoples along the so-called “Western World”. If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that we are entering the era of counter-democracy. What a man in the half of 20<sup>th</sup> century could perceive as a freedom, a power to choose, a right to speak his mind, now seems to be understood otherwise.

National parliaments, the very core of democratic system, are no longer seen as a guarantee of freedom and right to choose. Constitution is not that as well, nor it is the case with media as a way to express different sets of views in nationwide debate. The same goes for many other institutions: political parties, polls, voting system or even, one would dare to say, the institution of referendum itself.

Counter-democracy is not unknown to you or me. Perhaps you even took part in it, without knowing you are involved in. So what it is? It's all of the things happening around us: Standing Rock Protest, *Indignados*, a petition to local authorities, a decision not to vote, a march, a gathering, a civil disobedience, a political debate with friends.

Why is it happening? If the system of governance is so corrupted and no longer answers its sovereigns call and the only way to change is the way one makes for himself, outside of the known “democratic” ways and tools? Make no mistake: the instruments of counter democracy are well

known, have been used before and their purpose is always the same: a political change of system that no longer works for the citizens, but rather against them. It should be described as a conflict, an ongoing war between the elite and society. This war took many forms during the ages and today it struggles to create a new form, as society faces new threats from those in power.

## **Democracy and counter-democracy**

*“We are free because we lack the very language to articulate our enslavement”.*

Slavoj Žižek

First of all we need to declare what we understand as democracy, for the purpose of this paper. For that we need a definition that will help us understand the meaning of its counterpart. It is obvious that democracy can be explained as a relation between those who are being elected with those who elect them. As Charles Tilly states: “(...) the system is as much democratic as the political relations between state and citizens are a reflection of wide, equal and mutually obliging consultations” (2008: 27). However it doesn't erase the main problem of democracy, its flawed core, which is the difference between those in authority and those with power to elect them. In the end, as we can observe the different parties getting to governance, it actually strengthens it and by doing so endangers the whole idea of democracy. Giovanni Sartori would argue that the democratic process that blurs the dividing line between the ruling and the ruled does not eventually mean there is no such line. There is and it's a ground on which the counter-democracy thrives (cf. 1998: 115).

Democracy, in general, is influenced by two processes. Democratization, understood as “move towards wider consultation, more equal and more mutually obliging” (Tilly 2008: 27). And the de-democratization which ultimately means the move in opposite direction.

What is also worth mentioning is Sartori's division of the most important components of democracy. Those would be: a) definitive values, such as freedom and equality which form the system of views; b) rules of the game and procedures; c) specific governments and their policies” (cf. 1998: 115-116).

If there is no consensus about the first component, the system cannot function. Also, as the thinker point out, the second component must be recognized by everyone and agreed upon. Without it there is a possibility of downfall and civil war as the consequence of the lack of consensus. In order to “agree that we disagree” there is a need for a level of understanding that allows us disagree in a civilized matter and look for a solution to our problems.

And finally, possibly most importantly for the purpose of this paper, democracy is understood as its institutions. Those shape the system from inside. The parliament, the law, the elections, the political

parties, the pluralism, the media and, as Sartori stated before, the agreement between us how much power should those institutions have and what they can do with it.

This is where the counter-democracy takes over.

## **The fall of democracy or the rise of counter-democracy?**

*“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.”*

K. Marx

As the new events like Trumps victory or Brexit keep popping up the enthusiast of liberal democracy are pointing out that democracy is either in the era of huge crises or it is at least, shaken. Poland would be the best example. After the fall of liberal narrative, the defeated liberal forces formed KOD, a committee in defense of democracy, in order to defend the democracy from... those, who won in elections. On the other hand, the same party, that won in elections is being accused of “non-liberal” political moves.

For the purpose of this paper it is not important to judge who is right (maybe both parts, maybe none), but what’s important in this conflict is the agreed upon definitive values and rules of ruling in liberal democratic system.

It seems they both decided to “transcendent” the forms of democracy and reach further. The marches, the rallies, the protests – used by KOD, are forms of counter-democracy. The law acts introduced by new government, such as the law about public gatherings or the changes of the organization of public media – those also seem to “transcendent” the old and well known forms of democracy and certainly will have an impact on political outcome of new elections.

The question however remains: are we observe the final and ultimate fall of democracy? Or are we rather entering the age of counter-democracy?

First of all, before I will reach for Pierre Rosanvallon’s analysis, I would like to make a point about counter-democracy which I personally deem very important.

The idea we are talking about is more of a tool than any kind of set of views. One can protest, decide not to vote or even vandalize public space for many reasons. The tools which counter-democracy brings to us can be used by a person of nationalist views in order to get rid of immigrants from his country. Meanwhile, the same tools can be used by different person in order to do exactly the opposite.

As Rosanvallon once stated during the interview for “Newsweek Polska”: “An unbelievable amount of analysis of modern democracy emphasizes the idea of decline. This conclusion is based on only one indicator – the statistics of participation in elections”. He argues that judging the state of democracy only by the statistics of participation is inaccurate at best. I support his opinion. For the past 20 or 30 years we could observe a general fall of number of people who vote. There is also no doubt from time to time number of votes spikes. Is that the sign that democracy is recovering?

Democracy is not only about voting, although many commentators of political life would like to see it that way. While the numbers of participants in elections are falling, the number of people involved with different forms of counter-democracy is still rising.

Political involvement is more than just elections. It’s also the negation of political system, protest, social control or any kind of involvement in public disputes (cf. Baranowski 2013).

If the democracy is based on trust – we vote for a person or party because we trust they will fulfill their promises when they would be elected. We do not revolt every single time we were being deceived, because we trust at the next elections we will vote somebody else.

So, the counter-democracy is based on the lack of that trust or even mistrust. As Rosanvallon points out, it is a situation when we give somebody a power to make decisions but we also want to control that person. He argues the number of people involved with a full spectrum of political activities from outside the system is growing. “The passive citizen is a myth” – Rosanvallon claims (Nowicki 2008).

The obvious conclusion would be that this form of democracy is somehow exhausted or even depleted. People can no longer see the system as a thing working for their benefit. It is hardly the time of political apathy or withdrawal.

“Society feels worse represented. But this feeling of mistrust can’t be reduced to a simple opposition between the people and the elites. Besides, a lack of confidence is not everything. Another factor is the increase in the level of education, which makes demands become greater. Improved ability to judge means greater potential for disappointment. Finally, we have flourished counter-democracy, or negative forms of governance by the community ... Michel Foucault pointed out that moving towards a surveillance society, where power is more closely supervised by the people. Of course, this dimension exists, which reflect even a debate on the ubiquity of CCTV

cameras in the cities or dispute as to the extent to which profiling electronic deprives us of the remnants of privacy. But at the same time we have more and more means by which society can control power” (Nowicki 2008).

What Rosanvallon misses to mention is also the role of technology in counter-democracy or in political system, in general. After the first presidential debate between Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump I have heard former polish prime minister, Mr. Leszek Miler, saying something which makes a good point about the counter-democracy. It was a moment when the victory of Mrs. Clinton seemed the only possible outcome of elections, all the media claimed victory in debate for her, all the polls were showing her advantage over Mr. Trump. In this moment Mr. Miller said we have to put aside those facts and look up the Internet. If the “Internet” claims Mr. Trump won – it’s probably what is going to happen. He couldn’t be more right about it.

Also, today all the demonstrations are based on Online World. It is where the outrage, organization and the ideas behind it start. The power of communication is enormous. In my opinion out of all tools in the counter-democracy arsenal, this one is the most powerful one. Its range of possibilities is yet to be discovered, but one thing remains as a fact: if you see Internet as a part of counter-democracy, there is absolutely no doubt that the passive citizen is a myth.

### **Counter democracy in practice: Precariat**

Political involvement should not be only measured from a citizen point of view and rights he has. It is more important to look on the political involvement also from class war perspective. Economic vector, hidden behind the number of divisions running throughout the society, seems to be the most important one.

The depoliticizing of economy and politics, which we could observe for decades, has brought, among the other reasons, a new class forth. Neoliberal propaganda claimed that the history is over and there is only one way to build the society or to deal with tensions between the state and the society. Policies, like cutting the social benefits or total privatization weren’t debatable, they were the “only solutions”. The rare voices of opposition were ignored as a threat of collapsing public finances was being raised at every occasion. “The central plank of their ‘neo-liberal’ model was that growth and development depended on market competitiveness; everything should be done to maximize competition and competitiveness, and to allow market principles to permeate all aspects of life” (Standing 2011: 1).

The emergence of new class – Precariat (or more traditionally – lumpenproletaryat) is happening right now. Although the class is still in its early period of creation, its potential seems to be *revolutionary*. “(...) the Precariat could be described as a neologism that combines an adjective

‘precarious’ and a related noun ‘proletariat’. In this book, the term is often used in this sense, though it has limitations. We may claim that the precariat is a class-in-the-making, if not yet a class-for-itself, in the Marxian sense of that term” (Standing 2011: 7).

Professor says that the era of neoliberal globalization and flexibility of working relationship led to far-reaching fragmentation of class structure in a global perspective. What distinguished the proletariat, in the second half of the twentieth century was the job security, blocks of time for which he shared a day of each worker, determined the identity of the proletarian and social security guaranteed by the state. Standing argues that all this belongs to the past. He says that “the hidden reality of globalization saw the light of day with the outbreak of the financial shock of 2008” (ibidem).

More flexible labor market, the transfer of risk and uncertainty to employees and taking place at the same time the processes of globalization have led to a situation in which masses of people remain in a constant state of stress and uncertainty. They have no protection at work, they spend more time doing unpaid work for work and because of that they lose control over their own life. They are becoming poorer and angrier every day.

Industrial citizenship, the thing that Precariat misses, consists of seven, most important types of a worker security. Mentioned citizenship was a goal of social democratic parties and labor unions after the second World War. Precariat, however not everybody would appreciate all of the securities labeled in the box, is missing all of them.

### **Forms of labour security under industrial citizenship**

*Labour market security* – Adequate income-earning opportunities; at the macro-level, this is epitomised by a government commitment to ‘full employment’.

*Employment security* – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on.

*Job security* – Ability and opportunity to retain in employment, plus barriers to skill dilution, and opportunities for ‘upward’ mobility in terms of status and income.

*Work security* – Protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, as well as compensation for mishaps.

*Skill reproduction security* – Opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunity to make use of competencies.

*Income security* – Assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes.

*Representation security* – Possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike (Standing 2011: 10).

This "hidden reality" is nothing but a process of precariatization, the second method proposed by the professor from London to describe the phenomenon of precarity. "Another way of looking at the Precariat is in terms of process, the way in which people are 'precariatized'. This ungainly word is analogous to 'proletarianised', describing the forces leading to proletarianisation of workers in the nineteenth century. To be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle" (Standing 2011: 16).

Precariat is suffering from four states: anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. It is they who determine its status and prospect, influence the attitudes and behavior of members of the new class. Anger, is perhaps the most important and potentially most influential. It comes with frustration caused by permanently blocked possibilities of promotion, a life without importance and exclusion. The worst is probably, however, the lack of any prospects for any improvement of the situation – the lack of relationships based on trust, uncertainty, fixed income, lack of networks based on truth and meaning which could eventually create the foundations of identity. This leads to the phenomenon of auto-exploitation, or cost of work-for-work, continuing to invest in yourself, in the hope that one of the lessons learned will finally get a permanent job and thus start a stable life.

The problem is it is a fiction. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, we can say that job security is exploited in a different way than before the proletariat. Former working class characterized in that function blocks in the respective periods (especially in the second half of the twentieth century). After his work in the manufactory or factory worker returned home and indulged in other activities. Member of precariat does not know that luxury. It is locked in a constant rush of investing in himself, to acquire new skills, language learning, sending resumes and cover letters, participation in training and so on. This is a phenomenon called work-for-work, but the most important is that job security is actually all the time included in the process of performing this or that work in the hope of permanent employment.

Blessed moment still delayed, and he begins to understand that it may never come. His state is on the one hand the growing bitterness, depression, closing in on itself, the feeling of social uselessness, the decline in self-esteem. On the other hand, it is a growing anger and rage.

But security, trust and meaning are not the only needs that precariat misses. The most important one is the political representation. This blocks the new class from acquiring any of mentioned before 'goods'. The only way for precariat to state its existence is nothing else than counter-democracy.



Without it, they would not ever emerge from the depths of neoliberal society ladder.

The first emergence of precariat on huge, global scale, was the Spanish Indignados. The movement started, which is not really known, as a “1000 euro movement” – a voice of those who had been precariatized. The Occupy movements, the Anonymous, the riots in London and Paris – all of this are a manifestation of precariat.

The lack of political representation is a weakness of representative democracy. Governments over the years fought to bring the job security down, as low as possible, in order to attract foreign investors. But those, in general, offer insecure jobs with low salaries. The wheel keeps spinning on.

As the precariat grows, the most commonly used tool to fight back the decisions of representative democracy is the so-called “power to obstruction”. The good example of it working would be the ACTA protests that flood Poland few years ago. It was a protests of commons, who left aside their differences and came together to make their voice heard. And it actually worked. “In the shadow of ‘positive democracy’ – the one in which voters have a voice and legal institutions – gradually a new thing was shaped and it may be called the ‘negative social sovereignty’” (Rosanvallon 2008: 15).

The other power that lies in hands of precariat, was used by it and surely will be used is the power of oversight. (...) the power to vote periodically and thus bestow legitimacy on an elected government was almost always accompanied by a wish to exercise a more permanent form over the proceed on a certain course left ultimate success at the mercy of future imponderables and the vagaries of execution. The democracy of imperative mandates sought only to enforce general promises or commitments, but negative democracy aimed at specific results (Rosanvallon 2008: 14).

The third power at the disposal of precariat is the power of courts. As trust towards political parties and their leaders’ declines, the courts are the institutions that people look up to. However, courts operate only within the law and that law is made by those who won elections.

The problem that precariat is facing is not only about the democracy itself. The democracy, which did not change much for past two centuries, is based on economic system. It is here where precariat should look for changes. During the time of Occupy movements Noam Chomsky urged protestors that sitting on squares, marching and talking about new world is not going to help much. In fact, it didn’t. What Chomsky proposed is to occupy your work place – only there one might be able to change the economic relations that stand behind the democratic facade.

### **The forecast**

The real question is if the rising power of counter-democracy is able to fix the issues that liberal democracy, or in other words, the formal democracy, failed to conquer. However naive it sounds, can counter-democracy make world a better place?

There is no doubt it certainly will try, or more accurately, it is already trying. It is popularity raise new questions, brings new challenges and forces us to rethink our traditional political system. There is also a need to rethink the function of citizen, state and how much power of control shall be there. Mechanisms of authority and critique made politicians in power somewhat careful with any kind of change. The voters are way much more sensitive about worsening the level of their life, than they hope for a upgrading it. This legacy of decades of liberal system will be hard to overcome, but there is a chance for it.

What we are really observing here is the rise of democracy thru the counter-democracy tools. So many people decided to lose their faith in their representatives that they would rather take things in their own hands. In a way, the process of democratization is happening thru counter-democracy. It might still be inaccurate, it might still look naive compared to the bureaucratic power of governments or international forces such as EU, it might look small compared to the ultimate power that corporations hold over billions, but it is young, energetic and it can be decisive.

The Indignados, the Occupy, the Standing Rock, the other countless marches and other forms of political activity around the “Western World” are clearly not a sign of falling democracy. They are the prophets of things to come, as the tools brought by counter democracy become more and more popular. The Toffler’s could not be more right – the formal political system has to adapt or it will perish into some form of authoritarian power.

The world is not only changing. It demands the change.

## **Bibliography**

- Baranowski M. (2013). *Between Social Control and Conflict: An Analytical Framework for Social Movements*. “Acta Universitatis Lodzianis. Folia Sociologica” 47, 5-16.
- Dryzek J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- della Porta D. (2003). *Social Movements and Democracy at the Turn of the Millenium*. [W:] P. Ibarra (red.), *Social Movements and Democracy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press.
- Gamson Wiliam A., 2004. *Bystanders, Public Opinion and the Media*. [w:] Snow D. A., Soule S. H., Kriesi H. (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Oxford: Blackwell, 242-261.
- Marx K. (2016). *The German Ideology, Part I: Feuerbach, Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook, B. The Illusion of the Epoch*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm> [04.12.2016].
- Munck R. (2005). *Neoliberalism and Politics, and the Politics of Neoliberalism*. [w:] Saad-Filho A., Johnston D. *Neoliberalism – A Critical Reader*. London: Pluto Press.

- Nowicki M. (2016). *Wchodzimy w erę kontrdemokracji*, „Newsweek”, <http://www.newsweek.pl/Europa/wchodzimy-w-ere-kontrdemokracji,44288,2,1.html/> [04.12.2016].
- Rohrschneider R. (1993). *Impact of Social Movements on the European Party System*. “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences”, Vol. 528 (Jul.), 157-170.
- Rosanvallon P. (2008). *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Standing G. (2011). *Precariat the new dangerous class*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Schumaker P. D. (1975). *Policy Responsivness to Protest Demands*. “The Journal of Politics”, 37, 488-521.
- Toffler A., Toffler H. (1996). *Budowa Nowej Cywilizacji*. Warszawa: Zysk i S-ka.
- Žižek S. (2016). Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates, [http://rebels-library.org/files/zizek\\_welcome.pdf](http://rebels-library.org/files/zizek_welcome.pdf) [04.12.2016].