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Michal Kubát

Political Opposition in Theory and Central European Practice



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Herausgegeben von Michal Reimann,
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To Giovanni Sartori, the most classic scholar of politics.

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Preface

The work *Political Opposition in Theory and Central European Practice* represents an attempt at a systematic analysis of political opposition – an important phenomenon of modern politics – from the perspective of political theory as well as in relation to political practice. The work has three principal goals. The first is an analysis comprised of an expansion on, and modification of, existing theories. One aim of the work is to supplement existing theory with my own analytical observations, many of a polemic nature, and to propose solutions to selected relevant theoretical problems. The second is application. Evident within the work is an attempt at an application of the analyzed political theories to political practice in the Central European nations. The third is description. Namely, the goal of the work is to introduce the most important existing approaches and conceptions of political opposition.

The three central goals have shaped the structure of this work, which is divided into two basic sections. The first section is predominantly theoretical, while the second is primarily dedicated to political practice. The theoretical section revolves around a presentation of the key concepts of political opposition offered by modern political science. At the outset, the delineation of the concepts of political opposition will be addressed, followed by an assessment of the position of political opposition in relation to the fundamental differentiation between democratic and non-democratic political systems. In the case of non-democracy, I am primarily considering the question of institutionalized political opposition, its recognition, its forms, and its types. However, the main focus is on democracy. Here the central themes are the development of political opposition, its legal (constitutional) grounding, and its functions, as well as typologies and models of political opposition. Considerable space in the theoretical section is dedicated to anti-system and extreme political opposition.

The section devoted to political practice is aimed at an examination of political opposition in Central Europe, understood ‘economically’ as the so-called Visegrád Group, composed of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. This selection of nations is not a reflection of any specific perspective or opinion of the issue at hand. On the contrary, it is actually the ‘classical’ configuration of states that together have been the subject of many comparative studies of similar styles (though not subject matters). The analysis in the second part of the work is focused primarily on models of political opposition of the relevant nations. Here, again, significant attention

is paid to the issue of Central European anti-system and extreme political opposition.

This simple description of the structure of the work, however, does not fully do justice to the issues at hand, thereby making it necessary to add the following explanatory notes. Most important is the focus on content in this work with respect to the utilized approach. That is to say, the phenomenon of opposition is considerably broad and one can consider it from a multitude of angles. This work stems from the now classic tradition of the study of political parties and party systems of Duverger and Sartori. Political parties and party systems, therefore, provide the pivotal framework for analysis. Consequently, this work does not approach the question of political opposition from the perspective of other possible theoretical frameworks, such as political thought, ideology, political behavior, civil disobedience, extremism and terrorism, minority subcultures, the European Union (Euroskepticism), international politics, etc. If any of these other factors are touched upon in the work, it is mainly in a peripheral sense, as a complement to the central line of analysis – the classical approach of political parties and party systems.

The second crucial supplementary explanation relates to the distributions of the individual chapters and the depth of analysis of specific phenomena. Even a cursory examination of the contents of the work reveals that it is disproportionately devoted to the issues of anti-system and extreme political opposition, which many readers may regard as excessive or exaggerated in comparison to the remainder of the work. The emphasis placed on this issue is deliberate and has its reasons. Firstly, the theory of anti-system and extreme political opposition, as opposed to certain other concepts within political opposition, is still ‘alive’ in the sense that discussions on the matter are ongoing, and primarily its new conceptions presented. Secondly, Sartori’s conceptualization of anti-system political opposition in particular is, to a certain extent, controversial and a subject of criticism. In my opinion, such criticism is not always justified, as I will show in the relevant chapters of this work. In any case, both circumstances directly invite one to enter into these theoretical debates and polemics. Thirdly, conceptions of anti-system and extreme political opposition are ‘alive’ today not only in theory but also, and primarily, in political practice (again in direct contrast to certain other topics or issues), especially in Central Europe. Central European politics therefore represent an appropriate ‘laboratory’ for the analysis of this theory, which can lead to new findings and conclusions. Fourthly and finally, the disproportionate focus on anti-system and extreme political opposition is a consequence of Weberian value-reference (*Wertbeziehung*), due to which I

frankly consider this phenomenon sufficiently important and interesting that I have subjectively decided to preferentially devote my attention to it.

The third explanation primarily concerns the first section of the work, which, although chiefly theoretical, does not entirely avoid the integration or incorporation of practice with theory. In other words, examples from, and connections with, practice are already presented here. However, even in this section the chief focus is on Central Europe, evident from two basic perspectives. These include examples taken from Central European politics, along with the attempt to emphasize the use of the theories and conceptualizations of Central European authors, of which, however, excepting Poland, there are very few. This last phenomenon does not only apply to the Central European region. Although it may seem surprising, there is a dearth of pertinent, relevant, verifiable theories even in 'Western' political science. That is to say, classical theories, with origins dating back to the 1960's, have not been surmounted, or, at most, have only been partially augmented or expanded. Currently, then, descriptive studies far outweigh analyses, and in most cases such descriptions are only case studies as opposed to being of a comparative nature.

The fourth clarification relates to an asymmetry in the text, comprised of the fact that political opposition in non-democratic regimes is analyzed, albeit to a lesser extent, in the first, theoretical section of the work while its application is missing from the second section of the work, since that section only engages with the period after 1989. The phenomenon of modern political opposition in all its breadth, (while, naturally, within the framework of political parties and party systems), concomitantly pertains to both democratic and non-democratic politics. Omitting one of them would, from my point of view, lead to an inappropriate constraint on the description and analysis attempted in this work, specifically the neglect of their mutual connections.

On the other hand, the focus on the application of theory to Central European political practice post-1989 in the second part of the work is intended as an attempt to maintain both a scientific approach and the above-mentioned analytical framework of political parties and party systems. Inclusion of the pre-1989 period (or even the more distant past, before the world wars) would necessarily require the utilization of historiographic approaches, which would methodologically and meritoriously obfuscate and disproportionally broaden this work. Moreover, the phenomenon of political opposition prior to 1989, as opposed to the post-1989 period, has been comprehensively and deftly analyzed (albeit not theoretically) in the new collection of editors Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgoths (/eds./ 2004). Taking such

considerations into account leads to justifiable doubt regarding whether at this time a similar, necessarily concise synthesis focused on political practice of the same period would contribute anything new.

This, however, is rather a rare situation. A reflection on the noteworthy scarcity of literature dedicated to political opposition, as mentioned many times in the preceding paragraphs, is absolutely appropriate. A comprehensive publication dealing with the theory and current Central European practice of political opposition does not exist in the Czech Republic. At the most, we can find texts that remain within the limits of the journal format, or more specifically, chapters in a monograph (see Novák 1995, 1997, and Hlaváček, Holzer 2007). The remainder comprise only small fragments within the framework of other works (for instance, Klíma 1998, Kubát 2006c, Pink 2006) or they are narrowly specialized texts focused on a particular fractional phenomenon related to political opposition (for example, Blažek 2003, 2005, Kubát 2007c, Strmiska 1998). The situations in Hungary and Slovakia are similar (although I must admit that, in the case of Hungary, the language barrier has precluded me from making a categorical judgement in this instance). The richest and most extensive literature can be found in Poland, where, in addition to numerous journal studies and studies in collections, a number of specialized book publications were published, including both monographs (see Bożyk 2005, Machelski 2001) and specialized collections (see Łabędź, Mikołajczyk /eds./ 2001, Zwierchowski /ed./ 2000).

The situation, however, is not significantly better in the 'West'. Even in the specialized journal *Government and Opposition* we find an incomparably higher number of articles dedicated to 'government' than to 'opposition'. Beginning in the 1960's, when the modern study of political opposition was established, only a few relevant book publications appeared. Moreover, these were mainly comparative works or case studies (found in collections) rather than theoretical treatises (see the bibliography at the end of the work).

Before moving on to the body of the text, I will dedicate a few words to methodology. If I have admitted to a subjective position in the sense of Weberian value-reference, then I simultaneously do not profess to the similarly Weberian value judgement (*Werturteil*). The work is written in the spirit of the empirical-analytical, and not normative, traditions of contemporary political science. It is a comparative text of political science, the aim of which is not to judge or evaluate the studied phenomena. Even more strongly, the aim here is not to politically delineate or orient myself in relation to them. Instead, as much as possible the aim is to analyze them on the basis of relevant and verifiable theories and documented bodies of fact (valid until the closing date of this text at the beginning of 2009) in an unbiased manner.

Before I launch into the core of the matter, I would like to thank those individuals who directly contributed to the significant improvement of this work with their valuable guidance and advice. First and foremost among those individuals are the official book reviewers of this text: Marek Bankowicz from the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the Jagellonian University in Cracow, Vít Hloušek of the Faculty of Social Studies of the Masaryk University in Brno, and Jan Kysela from the Faculty of Law of Charles University in Prague. Fervent thanks also goes to Lubomír Kopeček of the Faculty of Social Studies of the Masaryk University in Brno as the informal reviewer of the text. I equally extend my thanks to Ivo Šlosarčík of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Charles University in Prague, with whom I consulted matters pertaining to the European Union. I further thank my wife Gabriela, not solely for reading the manuscript and contributing a number of suggestions. I would also like to express my thanks to Jiří Vykoukal of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague for his help in collaborating with the representatives of Peter Lang Publishing Group. Finally, I would like to thank very much Jana Jarolímová for translating the entire text into English.

I. Introduction to the theory of political opposition

1. What is opposition?

In the first chapter of his monumental, and today quite classic, work on democracy, the legendary Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1987: 7) writes, “If the term democracy can be used to signify antithetical entities and dignify antithetical practices, then it is a meaningless term. What are we talking about? The answer lies, to begin with, in definition.” Likewise, such an approach must necessarily be adopted towards the concept of opposition, which itself has various meanings leading to important theoretical consequences as well as equally significant practical consequences in Central Europe and beyond.

1.1 General foundations

The term opposition stems from the Latin word *oppositus*, which means positioned against, opposite. However, many other general definitions of this word exist: opposite, resistance against something, necessarily publicly expressed (against opinions, acts, politics, etc.), parties or their parts, societal groups standing against the majority, against the ruling party or group, against dominant beliefs. Here the political connotations of the concept are already evident, albeit very generally. Basic encyclopedias define opposition in essentially the same manner.

From these very vague definitions, we can infer the true degree of variability in ways of perceiving opposition, and we also see that opposition can have a general meaning, applicable to almost anything.¹ In the introduction to their classic work on political opposition, well known political scientists Ghita Ionescu and Isabel de Madariaga (1972: 14) open their analysis with the assertion that opposition is an instinct “rooted in human nature, more or less controlled or repressed according to the degrees to which the society we live in allows its open manifestation.”

Within the framework of political analysis we are understandably concerned with the purely political meaning of opposition, or, more precisely, its use in politics. However, even within the political context, considerable ambiguity still reigns over the concept of opposition. Various approaches to

1 For instance, the term opposition is used in astronomy and anatomy.

the definition and study of opposition, as well as various conceptions of the term, exist.

When considering these approaches, one confronts two basic methods of defining opposition: *universal* definitions and *analytical* definitions (Machelski 2001: 10). Universal definitions are applicable in any political environment, therefore, in modern politics, chiefly in democratic and non-democratic political systems. A typical example of the universal approach is found in the foundations of the work of Robert Alan Dahl, the great classic of modern political science to whom we will return many times in conjunction with our discussion of political opposition. His basic method of deduction is the following: we assume that in a given yet unspecified ‘historical’ time, A rules and therefore has predominant influence on the running of the state. At the same time, B does not rule and positions itself against the rule of A. This means that B is the ‘opposition’. This, however, does not preclude that in a different time, B comes to power and A becomes the ‘opposition’. “Thus it is the role of opposition that we are interested in; we are concerned with A and B only insofar as they perform that role in different ways” (Dahl 1968b: xviii). As Dahl himself adds (*ibid*: xix), even this preliminary definition of opposition is considerably abstract and can be applied in any political system.²

Conversely, analytical definitions of opposition pertain solely to specific cases of political opposition within the political systems of particular states in a given time period. Appropriate examples of the analytical approach are, among others, the typologies of Czech, Hungarian, Polish, or German historians, who named and classified opposition in Communist regimes between 1944 and 1989. These typologies incorporate the specifics of individual ‘national Communisms’ and of changing eras, as written about, for example, by historian Petr Blažek (2003, 2005) in the Czech context. We will briefly return to these typologies later.

At this point it is fitting to mention that, although we may be able to say – albeit with a measure of caution – that universal definitions are more useful in political science while analytical definitions are rather the domain of historians, in reality the boundary between these two approaches is not impenetrable and, in fact, the two intersect.

2 This is, naturally, purely a basic starting point. Dahl himself (1986b: xix) points out that this is not a rigorous definition of opposition; it is only a “pointer”.