

RESEARCH NOTE

POLITICAL PERFECTIONISM AND THE
'ANTI-SYSTEM' PARTY*Michael Keren*

ABSTRACT

This study provides a 'positive' definition of the 'anti-system party' as a party seeking a standard of perfection derived from its commitment to an imaginary rather than real civil society. The example of Israel's 'New Force' party is then discussed.

KEY WORDS ■ anti-system party ■ civil society ■ New Force ■ political perfectionism ■ utopia

In a classical article on Germany, Otto Kirchheimer distinguished between two forms of opposition, the 'loyal opposition', which pursues its goals in harmony with the constitutional requirements of a given system, and the 'opposition of principle', which indicates 'the desire for a degree of goal displacement incompatible with the constitutional requirements of a given system' (Kirchheimer, 1966: 237). This distinction was called for by the European experience, in which fascist parties on the extreme right and communist parties on the extreme left, as well as some regional separatist parties, played the parliamentary game with the desire to destroy parliamentarism itself. The 'opposition of principle' included those parties and movements whose challenge to the political system exceeded conventional goal differences and threatened the very existence of the system.

This raised the question of how one measures such a threat. Principled opposition refers to the transformative nature of a party's ideology but, as explained by Gordon Smith (1987), there may be difficulties in agreeing just what the ideology is, especially when it consists of a hazy collection of contradictory ideas. There may also be a genuine ambivalence as to the degree

to which a party intends to abolish the existing political institutions along with the socio-economic system, or else just the one or the other.

The concept of 'anti-system party' was intended to provide a partial solution to these analytical problems by focusing not on an opposition party's ideology but on its success in undermining the legitimacy of the regime it opposes, on its 'delegitimizing impact' (Sartori, 1976: 132–3). However, such a measure of the anti-system party by a crisis of legitimacy it sparks is, of course, too demanding; the Nazi party was no less 'anti-system' before the crisis it sparked than after. This measure may reflect as much the initial strength of the regime as the nature of the anti-system party. It has therefore been generally agreed that 'the term "anti-system" is one of the less satisfactory ways of classifying parties' (Smith, 1987: 59).

Yet this term could not be abandoned, as political reality, especially in the 1980s, has given rise to an increasing number of political parties playing the democratic game while following transformative goals and strategies encouraging a crisis of legitimacy. In the European context, this was seen as no less than a 'silent counter-revolution' (Ignazi, 1992: 3), but the phenomenon exceeds the boundaries of Europe. Discussing the 'anti-political-establishment parties' of the 1980s, Andreas Schedler counted a variety of parties ranging from Jean Marie Le Pen's Front National and Franz Schönhuber's Republikaner in Germany to Preston Manning's Reform Party in Canada and Ross Perot's United We Stand America in the USA, characterized by their populist rhetoric which presents the party as champion of the people in their struggle against the ruling elites (Schedler, 1996).

This lumping together of fascist, populist and radical parties indicates that the 'anti-system' category, however renamed, is too broad, but it also brings to light a common denominator which points at the direction for its refinement – the disgust expressed by anti-system parties vis-a-vis politics. It is the attitude detected many years ago by Bernard Crick (1962) and manifested, in its updated version, in political parties taking an active part in the political process in pursuit of a wide variety of goals whose accomplishment would require the demise of politics itself.

Here I would like to propose a refinement of the 'anti-system party' category by considering not only what the anti-system party stands against but what it stands for. I shall discuss a 'positive' definition of the anti-system party, stressing its political perfectionism, and then apply it to the short yet fascinating experience of Israel's 'New Force' party.

Political Perfectionism

The anti-system party may be conceived as a party speaking in the name of an imaginary rather than real civil society. 'Civil society' refers to the plurality of social groups operating in relative autonomy from the state (Colas, 1997; Lehring, 1998). Traditionally, political parties were classified by the

social groups they represented (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The era of ‘new politics’ has seen the emergence of parties pursuing broad societal concerns, mainly environmental ones (Müller-Rommel, 1989; Dalton and Kuechler, 1990). However, the anti-system party constitutes a third category – a party catering to an imagined rather than real group or groups.

The distinction I propose between parties rooted in an imaginary versus real civil society, which draws heavily, of course, on Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991), provides a measure of anti-system behavior that alleviates some of the problems previously associated with this category. First, it goes beyond the ideology of the party in determining its anti-system behavior. A party may or may not have an explicit anti-system ideology, it may not even be conscious of anti-system consequences of its behavior, or it may change its attitudes towards the legitimacy of the system and its political institutions, and its policies regarding participation in those institutions, over time.

Second, this measure overcomes the difficulty of incorporating in the anti-system category parties that differ in every other way. Whether on the right or on the left, whether fascist, communist or liberal, whether catering to ‘the people’ or indulging in the memory of fallen comrades, whether big or small, whether following authoritarian or democratic modes of recruitment, mobilization and parliamentary behavior, the anti-system party is marked by its adherence to an imagined community obliging it, and the entire system, to a standard of perfection.

Perfectionism, the attempt to maximize human virtues (Hurka, 1993; Sher, 1997), has been applied to politics since Aristotle, who believed that politics does not encompass all spheres of life, and thus ought to have provision for the enhancement of inherently valuable human qualities. But such provisions became problematic in modern societies in which the intrinsic value of human qualities is less clear, and even when it is, cannot be easily incorporated as a political principle. In *A Theory of Justice*, for instance, John Rawls did not ignore the need ‘to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science and culture’ (Rawls, 1973: 325), but found no room for a perfectionist principle in his theory. Individuals negotiating the just society behind a veil of ignorance may agree about an index of primary goods as a basis of interpersonal comparisons, but not on restrictions on their liberty which derive from that index.

The difficulty of incorporating standards of perfection in modern democratic theory, however, did not prevent political parties with perfectionist agendas from pursuing them in democratic regimes, to the extent of jeopardizing the political principles underlying these regimes. The emergence of these parties has been mostly puzzling to students of political parties, but guidelines for a theory explaining their behavior may be found in Sartori’s discussion on ‘Perfectionism and Utopia’ in which he associated their perfectionism with ‘bad idealism’ (Sartori, 1987: 58); that is, the uncontrollable attendance to the maximization of ideals. Sartori’s theory deserves some elaboration.

Sartori's Theory

To Sartori, the misuse of idealism by the perfectionist is associated with what he calls 'the withering away of the sense of "the impossible"' (Sartori, 1987: 60), which differs from utopianism of the past in that it exceeds the sphere of contemplation and turns from intellectual perfectionism to 'perfectionistic activism' (p. 60). Relating this transformation mainly to Marx and his followers, Sartori laments the loss of the unrealizable and of the politically impossible. He regrets the change in the meaning of 'utopia' from a desire to change the world to a belief in its realization: 'Utopias are no longer utopias, that is, mental fictions located nowhere' (p. 61). Owing to scientific caution, he wrote, we have made a point of never saying 'impossible' and of speaking only of degrees of probability or improbability. And owing to scientific optimism, we have come to believe that, in principle, nothing is impossible.

Sartori thus updates the definition of 'utopia' to mean 'the contradictory claim of imagining an "impossible reality" for the purpose of realizing it' (p. 63). This definition reflects the fact that 'the twentieth-century utopian has become a man of action' (p. 63). But aren't there, in politics, as in daily life, impossibilities that remain unrealizable? Sartori believes there exist such impossibilities, despite the fact they are far more difficult to pin down, as it is common to hide them in political rhetoric.

By burying facts under verbal veils, false victories are easily made to seem real victories, and failure is easily vindicated as success. By incessantly repeating that history is a sequence of impossibilities that were made possible, or a cemetery of utopias that were realized, we have persuaded ourselves that this is truly the case. But I have yet to find an author who seriously spells out in which actual instances this has been so. Waiting for such probing, I am struck by how scarcely populated that cemetery remains.

(Sartori, 1987: 64)

Sartori points at practical contradictions that make the realization of certain utopias, such as Marx's self-government, impossible. 'Let us not wait for utopia-provoked disasters to occur in order to acknowledge that impossibles exist' (Sartori, 1987: 67). He then turns to the role of ideals and asks whether an ideal, defined as a 'desirable or desired state of affairs that never coincides – by definition – with an existent state of affairs' (p. 68) is realizable. His answer is: 'An ideal *can be* realized if we mean that ideals are realizable *in part*. Conversely, an ideal *cannot* be realized if we mean that ideals are realizable *in full*' (p. 68). Ideals, wrote Sartori, are not meant to become facts; they are literally destined not to succeed.

To be sure, from the vantage point of effectiveness the actor is required to perceive his ideals as if they were meant for realization. But from the vantage point of the observer the function of ideals is to challenge facts. And the truth of the matter is . . . that ideals better reality precisely when they are not meant as a reality.

(Sartori, 1987: 69)

For instance, while a democratic ideal serves its purpose when it serves as an adversary ideal in a non democratic setting, it cannot be safely maximized beyond measure. ‘When *within* a democracy, we retain the democratic ideal in its extreme form, it begins to work *against* the democracy it has generated; it produces inverted results’ (Sartori, 1987: 70). Thus, the democratic principle calling for all power to all the people is exercised in the representative state only in proximity. Sartori realizes the temptation to propose that principle in its purity, but warns that this implies the transformation of the ideal from a constructive force, helping to bring about representative government, to a destructive one. ‘The democratic principle was conceived as a battle cry, and the battle cry against absolute power is “all power to us”. But when that battle is over, if we stick to the letter of that principle, we lose the concrete benefits that it was truly intended to achieve” ’(p. 72).

And he concludes:

We endlessly hear talk of ideals being betrayed. If ideals are, by definition (in the definition given), destined not to succeed, then the perfectionist will always and easily discover in anybody else a traitor to ideals. However, the perfectionist too is, in this manner, a traitor to ideals. By sticking to their letter, the perfectionist betrays their intent. Ideals can be betrayed in many ways, and the most insidious one consists of ignoring that the meaning-function of ideals changes as their real-world environment changes. There are not only many ways of betraying ideals but also of being betrayed by ideals. One of them, and probably the surest one, is the way of the perfectionist.

(Sartori, 1987: 72)

The ‘New Force’ Example

New Force (NF) was a tiny party operating between 1965 and 1973 in Israel’s parliament, the Knesset. Founded by war veteran Uri Avnery, it was committed to the memory of ‘fallen soldiers’ (Mosse, 1990). In its entire communication and action, the party leaders sought a standard of perfection deserved by their fallen comrades who had given their life for the establishment of the state.

An observation of NF reveals all three building blocks of Sartori’s theory: perfectionist goals, a withering away of the sense of the impossible in the choice of strategies, and political behavior orientated at excessive realization of democratic ideals.

Goals

Avnery was born in 1923 to a Jewish middle-class family in Germany, which immigrated to Palestine after Hitler’s rise to power. Like other immigrants, he invented a new identity for himself, one intended to replace the narrow-minded attitudes of Jewish and Arab nationalists by a so called ‘Semitic’

national entity incorporating the entire inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent – especially Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. In a booklet published in October 1947, a month before the United Nations' decision to partition Palestine between Jews and Arabs, Avnery called upon both peoples, in a fashion reminiscent of Herder's cultural nationalism, to give up their history for the sake of a fresh historical model, in which they would become descendants of the glorious forces which operated in the region in ancient times, such as the Assyrians and Babylonians.

A month later, the partition resolution was passed and Avnery fought in Israel's war of independence. From now on, his entire career may be seen as anchored in the viewpoint of the soldier forced to fight for a state whose leadership, immersed in outdated nationalist notions, had corrupted it. As editor of an opposition newspaper and as founder of NF, his recurrent motive was the discrepancy between the pure wishes of young soldiers 'in the field, around campfires and between cactus hedges' (Avnery, 1968: 16) and the corrupt state emerging in the home front, with its failure to differentiate between state and church, its dependence on foreign aid, its party machines, its spoil system, and its helplessness vis-a-vis the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Here was an anti-system party which, unlike the European fascism that preceded it, was committed to democracy, and unlike the Greens that succeeded it, had a patriotic agenda. The first clause in the party's program pledged allegiance to the state's sovereignty, security and independence, and called for strengthening of the Israeli Defense Forces. As part of its patriotism, the party promised to unify the citizenry in an open democratic struggle to take over the government and build a perfect regime.

Strategy

NF was a utopian party in the fullest sense proposed by Sartori; it imagined an 'impossible reality' for the purpose of realizing it, and – most important – that reality was to be realized by sheer political means. In a country lacking a parliamentary tradition, NF became a model party, bringing to parliament a young, professional team extremely skilled in utilizing the procedural tools available to small parties in parliamentary systems. But the use of routine parliamentary strategies did not change the anti-system nature of the party, as NF never ceased to cater to an imaginary rather than real civil society.

The party initiated many legislative proposals in support of underprivileged families, minorities suffering from discrimination, women denied the right to an abortion by a domineering religious establishment, and so on. Yet it made no serious effort to establish a firm political base within these groups, which always remained more imaginary than real. When, for instance, NF proposed a bill obliging drivers to pick up soldier-hitchhikers, soldiers waiting on roadsides for a ride could, of course, benefit from it, but the proposal had little to do with actual soldiers. It was presented in the

name of an abstract group, 'the IDF's men and women soldiers', and justified by the debt of honor Avnery owed to 'comrades in the past, the present and the future' (Zichroni, 1969: 355).

Excessive Democracy

NF constituted a clear case of a party retaining the democratic ideal to such an extent that it threatens to undermine it. The most striking example was the stubborn presence of Avnery in every single parliamentary session, in a forceful demonstration of the negligence of those who were not present. The media image of the bearded, lonely man sitting for long hours in an empty chamber, listening to apparently boring speeches, became one of the most effective images ever created in Israeli journalism. Another example of the dialectical process in which democratic means were used in order to expose the imperfections of democracy can be found in a bill of 1968, phrased in accordance with all the formalities demanded of legislative proposals in modern democracies, calling for the establishment of a House of Lords in which the leadership of the state of Israel should be placed. However humorous it sounded, the bill raised fears among many that its very initiation might result not in a perfect democracy but in a loss of democracy. For democracy, as is well known, cannot survive the many challenges facing it without friends who, like true friends, are willing to accept its imperfections.

Conclusion

The study of 'anti-system' parties has understandably been affected by the 20th-century concern with anti-democratic parties operating within democratic regimes. The example of NF, however, provides an updated version of the 'anti-system' party. NF did not pursue fascist, communist or regional goals, did not object to politics as such and was fully committed to parliamentary democracy. Its anti-system effect stemmed from its application in a modern parliamentary setting of standards of perfection derived from its commitment to an imaginary constituency of 'fallen soldiers'.

NF's political perfectionism had deep roots in the political culture it opposed. Political discourse in Israel has often involved grand visions pursued with little concern for empirical reality and in the name of imagined constituencies. However, as rooted as NF was in Israel's political culture, one cannot avoid thinking that its political perfectionism represented a universal phenomenon developing in the world and which can be expected to develop further, as some of the conditions accounting for it in the Israeli case become commonplace elsewhere.

One of these conditions is the strong alliance between politics and the mass media. It was no coincidence that NF was founded and led by journalists. Its visions were literary, its decision to enter the parliamentary arena

was triggered by censorship laws, its electoral success in two election campaigns stemmed from its leaders' popularity as newspaper editors and, all along, the party made extraordinary use of the power of the media it owned. Weekly reports on the Knesset's deficiencies haunted every politician in the country, and sensational features on social strife and political corruption were an effective tool in the hands of a small perfectionist party engaged in a national clean-up operation.

With the increasing role of the mass media in modern politics, we may expect this kind of party to flourish. Today, big and small parties alike must appeal to large audiences rather than to specific segments of the civil society. The political game thus turns into a competition over the attention of large audiences whose portrayal as 'the people', 'the youth' or 'the oppressed' often refers to an invented rather than real identity. Moreover, nothing has ever been more effective in capturing the attention of large audiences than the promise of perfection. Therefore, it is hard to expect modern politicians to leave that promise to what seems to be their greatest competition: religious fundamentalism. While the defeat of fascism in the second world war and the demise of communism in the early 1990s raised hopes for the coming of a pragmatic age in which politics would follow the guidelines of the civil society, we seem to be headed towards a more complex political world in which imagined constituencies are as much a factor in political life as real ones.

Another variable associated with political perfectionism – the withering away of the sense of the impossible – may be strongly enhanced by the blurring of the distinction between real and virtual reality. Once virtual reality – on television, in the movies or on the internet – presents an unlimited amount of possibilities, there remains little patience towards political leaders promising blood, sweat and tears. Social problems are expected to wither away just as they do in television commercials, political systems are expected to be cleaned up just as they do in management know-how books, and economic troubles are expected to be solved by instant remedies just as they do in internet chat-rooms. Even political parties with serious agendas can hardly afford to confront their respective electorates with realistic assessments of the future, and the tendency by political parties to promise the impossible is indeed on the increase.

Finally, with popular culture rather than the family, the school or the civil group becoming the main agent of political education and socialization, a perfectionist model of democracy may replace the model set by Locke, Jefferson or de Tocqueville, who not only realized democracy's imperfections but considered them inevitable. They believed that since human needs and desires vary, no political structure could ever satisfy them in a perfect manner. They also did not expect democracy to generate ideal politicians but rather to institute the checks and balances that would tame the behavior of far-from-ideal ones. Yet in a popular culture, an image of the perfect public servant attending an empty parliament chamber is worth a thousand words written by the great thinkers. All over the world, a self-righteous

attitude towards democratic politics has developed, manifested in sensational anti-corruption or 'investigating the president' campaigns, which propose superficial solutions to fundamental problems and generate unrealistic expectations about democracy. It may thus be concluded that the danger to democracy may stem no less from political perfectionism than from the imperfections of democracy.

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