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Andrej LUKŠIČ\*

# ASSOCIATIONAL PLURALISM – IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD ON THIS CONCEPTUAL HERITAGE? \*\*

**Abstract.** *The article reflects on a key category introduced by Adolf Bibič in his 1990 theoretical work Civil Society and Political Pluralism; namely, association pluralism. Bibič introduced this concept into Slovenian political thought to grasp the diverse social and political developments of the 1980s and to open up a new view of political pluralism that moves beyond party pluralism. The author therefore asks whether the notion of associational pluralism still holds sufficient explanatory potential and is worth preserving and developing further, or whether it can be used to deal with a new social and political reality, i.e., political pluralism, which is also strongly marked by multifaceted environmental issues.*

**Keywords:** *associational pluralism, political pluralism, party pluralism, civil society, state.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, the end of the period of self-governing socialism was condensed into two concepts: “civil society” and “political pluralism”. Each concept was the subject of fierce political and scientific controversies, both heralded major social and political changes and acted as a prism via which the contours of the Slovenian future could be seen (Kardelj 1977).

Adolf Bibič’s 1990 theoretical work *Civilno društvo i politički pluralizam* (Civil Society and Political Pluralism) summarises this diverse social and political developments in a precise political science way and opens up a new vantage point to view political pluralism, which was re-emerging on the historical stage in a new guise. Bibič does not conflate political pluralism only with party pluralism, which is an important, even substantive, element of contemporary pluralism. In fact, he argues that the notion of political pluralism is not worn out by party pluralism. To grasp the tectonic shifts in civil society, its fragmentation and pluralisation, along with all the dimensions of political pluralism, he had to introduce a new concept that he labelled “associational pluralism”.

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\* Andrej Lukšič, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

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It is important to note here that in the 1960s Bibič had already been dealing with the question of civil society and political pluralism, from both historical-philosophical and theoretical points of view, and that this problem was his central preoccupation following his doctoral thesis (Pikalo 2009 and 2022). In 1972, he published *Zasebništvo in skupnost* (Private Property and Community), translated into Serbo-Croatian in 1983 under the title *Građansko društvo i politička država kod Hegela i Marxa*, and again in an updated edition in 1984. In the mid-1980s, when the debate on ‘socialist civil society’ in Slovenia was heating up, he entered the debate to remind those attributing a “bourgeois” provenance to civil society that Gramsci had also written about civil society, as reflected in the proceedings *Gramsci, civilna družba in država* Gramsci (Civil Society and the State) published in 1987 under his editorship.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Bibič’s engagement with civil society raised another canonical thesis: that of the withering away of the state. His experience and in-depth research of liberalism led him to conclude that the dialectic between civil society and the state will continue to be a subject of political science and to determine political practice for a long time to come. The withering away of the state can hence only be understood in the light of the diminishing coercion and violence in contemporary society and politics (Močnik 2003).

Thirty-three years later, the question naturally arises: to what extent is his understanding of civil society and political pluralism still relevant for understanding political practice in Slovenia, and to what extent does it still hold democratising potential in itself given that during this period of time the political practice in Slovenia was primarily built on the basis of party pluralism (partitocracy) and within the framework of the globally recognised neoliberal understanding of the relationship between civil society and the state? And, of course, to what extent can associational pluralism as a democratic strategy be linked to the question of ecological democracy, which reconceptualises the question of democracy by extending it to the growing social and environmental problems and the looming global ecological catastrophe? There is no doubt that the question of the relationship between civil society and political pluralism is a recurrent moment in history when it is necessary to reflect on the way forward; responding to the challenges of history in the same old manner, that is, within existing institutions and dominant frameworks of thought, will not suffice. We address the extent to which we can rely on Bibič’s legacy to respond to the historical challenges of the present by first tracing the internal structure and line of thought that Bibič develops in *Civilno društvo i politički pluralizam* (Civil Society and Political Pluralism), then by pointing to the basic contours of the development of civil society in Slovenia after 1990, which was shaped by the underlying

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the overall context of the state–civil society theme in Bibič, see Lukšič, Igor: *Heglovstvo v politologiji Adolfa Bibič* (2023) where the author shows that associational pluralism, as Bibič develops it in *Civilno društvo i politički pluralizam* (Civil Society and Political Pluralism), has deep Hegelian roots and lies at the core of Bibič’s understanding of politics and political science.

neoliberal understanding of the state–civil society relationship and, finally, we highlight the turning point of 2019, marked by introduction of the concept of ecological modernisation in the EU. This refers to a development concept that relies on the participation of ‘green’ civil society in solving environmental problems and defines a new relationship between civil society and the state also in Slovenia.

## **RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FRAMEWORK**

In his book *Civilno društvo i politički pluralizam* (Civil Society and Political Pluralism), Bibič approaches political pluralism from two perspectives, that is, from the position of civil society and developments within it, and from the position of the transitional movement from monism to pluralism, in order to more deeply understand the social and political processes underway in Slovenia and Yugoslavia in the 1980s.

In the first eight-chapter part of the book, Bibič provides a concise overview on civil society, while in the second seven-chapter part of the book he focuses on the transition from monism to pluralism.

### **Civil Society**

In the first chapter on civil society, Bibič initially introduces his own way of thinking by noting that civil society had become a megatrend since it had come to be conceptualised relative to the state by those who were thinking in terms of the ‘neoliberal revolution’, especially in the West, with its beginnings in the late 1970s, and those who were thinking of the re-democratisation of various parts of the world, from Latin America to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and not least Yugoslavia, also in the late 1970s.

In the second chapter, Bibič first answers the question: why has the thematisation of the relationship between civil society and the state reappeared on the historical stage with such vehemence. He seeks an answer in the protests against social tendencies that could be called the Leviathanisation of the contemporary world or the étatisation of society. No matter where protests are taking place in the world, be they against military juntas, traditional-authoritarian regimes or liberal democratic systems, the demand for the empowerment of civil society is always at the forefront; a new constitution of the relationship between civil society and the state, greater autonomy for civil society, shifts towards greater rationalisation, democratisation, and transforming the traditional state are being demanded, and so on. Therefore, under the label of civil society anti-statist forces are grouped together demanding de- or post-étatisation.

While various civil society actors are united in their diagnosis, they vary when it comes to strategies for how to resist these tendencies. Bibič here refers to the neoliberal strategy, which depends on reprivatization in general, as well as various left-wing strategies, which rely on socialisation, self-management, participation, co-determination, industrial democracy, partial privatisation, a

plurality of ownership etc. What all these strategies have in common is that they want to limit the state – whether in liberal democratic regimes to limit the ‘secret’ state or in real socialist countries to limit the political monopoly – and to find new ways of its legitimation. The demands for civil society are therefore moving in the direction of the demonopolisation of political life and introduction of new forms of political participation and political control by means of the introduction of human rights and new concepts of democracy and an autonomous economy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Perspective**

Another question that Bibič addressed and answered in Chapters III, IV and V concerned the essential aspects dealt with by the three different traditions of thought: the pre-Marxist, the Marxist, and contemporary social sciences. In this part, Bibič draws attention to different traditions of thought, each with its own way of thinking about the historically specific relationship between civil society and the state, and the political pluralism that had been developed and practised up to that point. This insight into the history of political thought allows Bibič to reconceptualise the relationship between civil society and the state through a redefinition of political pluralism, and not to fall into the temptation of merely justifying and defending a dominant concept that maintains the status quo, instead of looking for internal transformative tendencies in the civil society–state relationship itself. On the other hand, the reader is given an insight into the genesis of the problem of civil society, a historical perspective that even today prevents a generalised and ideological understanding of the problem – e.g., between the neoliberal and the ‘democratising’ tendency that is imposed on us daily through public and political debates; nevertheless, it is possible to grasp the problem in a historical perspective in a more complex, multilayered and, most importantly, transformative way.

### **Debates on Civil Society and the Affirmation of Pluralism as a Fundamental Aspect of Contemporary Democracy**

The third question Bibič addresses in Part I of the book and is dealt with in Chapters VI, VII and VIII concerns a reflection on the worldwide debates on civil society in the 1980s in the light of the affirmation of pluralism, which Bibič regards as a fundamental aspect of contemporary democracy, including democracy under socialism. He first reflects on civil society as a concept that was very much in the media’s focus during the 1980s in Yugoslavia, then retreats into the

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<sup>2</sup> The tendency towards the étatisation of society has not changed, it has only taken the form of “post-democracy”, which means the strengthening of executive power on one hand, and “partitocracy”, which means the strengthening of party pluralism on the other; all of this is played out on neoliberal demands for a lean state, the introduction of a third (non-governmental yet market-oriented) sector and the strengthening of the repressive apparatuses of the state, and the limited participation of NGOs with executive public power and the hollowing out of the public sphere.

field where he reflects on deliberations of civil society in the context of political pluralism, before turning in Part VIII to the elements and characteristics of civil society and (political) pluralism.

The breadth of Bibič's conception of civil society is captured in his definition of the individual elements and characteristics of civil society, which we briefly describe here because they are relevant for our further considerations.

In civil society, Bibič includes: the overall economic and social structure of society (ownership, market, exchange relations, class-social differentiation etc.); free association or associationism, namely, the free association of citizens in a wide variety of associations, including political ones; and the sphere of classical and new rights and freedoms of man and citizen, including the right to privacy, the right to political determination as well as economic and other related rights etc. For him, civil society implies: the key role of direct elections where the citizen as voter enjoys full recognition; citizens' spontaneous initiatives and social movements; the sphere of the public, or non-state actors that shape and affirm autonomous public opinion, including autonomous publishing, newspapers etc.; the everyday life and political culture, along with its beliefs, customs, traditions, moral norms etc. that influence the consciousness and actions of individuals and collective actors; the sphere of the family and intergenerational relations; autonomous international contacts (non-state contacts, NGOs etc.); and socio-political organisations, albeit only in so far as they are independent of the state and relatively independent in their relations with each other.

Such a structure of civil society, Bibič argues, is a condition and constitutive part of a pluralist civil society; "pluralism arises from civil society as a necessity of the modern age, which requires the recognition of the subjectivity of the individual and of the actors of collective action" (Bibič 1990, 95).

As long as there is a detachment between civil society and the state, the question of mediation between the two will remain relevant. During this period, the autonomy of the individual and the association as a vehicle for articulating and integrating interests in civil society is necessary; moreover, influence and participation of civil society in the management of public affairs, including economic affairs. Of course, this also applies to a specific spectrum of interests: political ones. These are articulated and mediated via political associations where Bibič also includes political parties; that is to say, political parties are not the only political associations that are called upon to manage economic and other public affairs. For Bibič, the need for political pluralism derives from the very structure of modern civil society, "from the very nature of modern civil society" (Bibič 1990, 9) and its dialectic with the state; the need for political pluralism also includes participation in politics and in control of the state's repressive institutions. Bibič understands those demands, in short, as demands for the introduction of modern democracy.

### **From Monism to Pluralism**

In the second part of the book *Civilno društvo i politički pluralizam* (Civil Society and Political Pluralism), Bibič thus quite logically addresses the issue of pluralism, which he places in the title as one end of a continuum, while on the other end he places monism, to which he no longer attributes any significant historical role. The question of democracy and pluralism is not self-evident; in the 1980s, Bibič argued, it was possible to defend democracy without also defending pluralism. This link was rejected especially in the countries of real socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, while elsewhere in the developed world the understanding of this relationship appeared in various thought derivations: from liberal, to Eurocommunist, to the Yugoslav equation of self-governing pluralism. Gradually, however, pluralism made its way from liberal democratic countries and academia into the political practice and academia of socialist countries. Bibič notes hesitantly that “the fundamental law of socialism is not socio-political monism, but pluralism, including political pluralism” (Bibič 1990, 100).

Since it is clear from historical insight that there is no single political pluralism, Bibič quite rightly asks: what kind of political pluralism is most appropriate if political life and the political system are to be seriously reformed? Bibič builds an answer to this question by defining pluralism as an essential condition and key aspect of modern democracy, without which it is impossible to imagine versatile creativity. He establishes a causal chain, namely when claiming “without free (including political) creativity there can be no democratisation of public life, and without it there can be no way out of the crisis and to enter the developed world” (Bibič 1990, 100).

The issue of pluralism is a vast one with a long (not only liberal) history, causing Bibič to limit himself to discussing just a few aspects of three-faced pluralism (ibid., 100) by highlighting aspects of political pluralism. In Chapter I, he examines the genesis and development of different approaches to pluralism in the world. In Chapter II, he focuses on the relationship between pluralism and socialism, which should be read in closer detail by those concerned with ecosocialism these days, while in Chapter III he discusses the specifics of this relationship in Yugoslavia. He then turns to the scientific community before in Chapter IV giving an overview of some understandings and types of pluralism in political science. Chapter V discusses those experiences of party pluralism that can be usefully incorporated into democratic pluralism, whereas in the next chapter on “associational pluralism” Bibič argues the case for it and, finally, in Chapter VII addresses the problems that the debate on political pluralism and democracy has brought to the surface.

In this paper, we are not interested in Bibič’s reception, which today belongs to the historical part. We instead focus mainly on the last two chapters and try to find in them ‘emancipatory’ settings that would be useful while considering the transformation of public and political life in Slovenia today.

Pluralisation, states Bibič, establishes not only a political sphere, but a social

and economic sphere as well; the principle of autonomy introduces autonomous enterprises into the economic marketplace, competing with each other, with no form of ownership taking precedence (e.g., social property); while a “political marketplace” is introduced into political life, where several autonomous political entities compete to take over the governance of public affairs. In this definition of pluralism, Bibič does not subscribe to the liberal distinction between political and economic spheres and based on the discussion underway at that time he concludes that the economy can be reformed and market initiative introduced only if political pluralism is introduced: “the pluralism of forms of ownership... must be adequately echoed in the pluralism of political life; the abolition of the monopoly of ownership is followed by the abolition of monopolism...” (Bibič 1990, 194).

Contemporary political pluralism, as mentioned, cannot be entirely bounded to political parties, to party pluralism; it must also include other forms of civil society integration. If we were to accept a narrower definition of political pluralism, Bibič argues, democracy could only be defined as a “partitocracy”, and politics would be reduced to a power struggle between parties. This leads him to argue for a broader definition to avoid the mentioned pitfalls. The broader meaning is an order in which several entities compete to participate in the governance of public affairs, which includes participation in political government. This term includes the power struggle, although it is not only this power struggle in the classical organs of the state that is driving politics (parliament, government etc.). Namely, politics is also “the governance of economic, expert, and communicative resources, and above all the governance and disposition of extended reproduction in society or national institutions” (Bibič 1990, 196).

For our discussion, it is important to note that “non-partisan pluralism” is a partial hypothesis of the development of political pluralism, as Bibič puts it, which assumes that the power struggle in human society will become less and less important, but this does not mean that it will not exist. This is confirmed by certain empirical tendencies given that non-partisan associationism is playing an increasing role in certain societies, including Slovenia, and appearing in various forms such as: the establishment of various associations and their federations as a result of general technological, cultural and social development; various professional associations whose primary concern is the development of their own disciplines, and the consolidation of the role of science in society and politics; and cultural and writers’ societies which, alongside their activities, also engage in debate on the most pressing political and developmental issues. New social movements, ad hoc groups or grassroots committees are also emerging as a factor in the self-regulation of society; policy networks are being established to promote different partial interests and various professional perspectives (e.g., interdisciplinary) in the making of single public policies instead of lobbying; the role of scientific institutions in the making of political agendas is being ever more emphasised as well, and so on.



On this basis, Bibič rejects both those who reject any discussion of the elements of non-partisan pluralism and those who offer “non-partisan political pluralism” as a comprehensive strategy of political pluralisation. Bibič is hence no longer able to insist on the label “non-partisan pluralism” as a strategic category against “party pluralism” and is forced to find a new concept. He believes that a comprehensive strategy of political pluralism must be formulated in such a way that it can be accepted as credible by the democratic public and that it must therefore be treated in the context of the democratisation of society.

To this end, Bibič proposes the notion of associational pluralism, which is the most appropriate term for a positive definition of a strategy for the political pluralisation of society, referring to the autonomous functioning of organisations.

### **Associational Pluralism**

The political theory of any pluralism (including political pluralism) recognises the centrality of the notion of “association”, it is a fundamental category or one of them, Bibič notes while claiming that this can be justified on historico-genetic, politico-theoretical as well as politico-strategic grounds.

The historico-genetic arguments Bibič adduces fall into four traditions of thought: the political theory of pluralism (Althusius, Gierke, Figgis, Maitland, Barker, Durkheim etc.) put the category of association in the foreground or it had a significant role to play; the socialist theory of pluralism (founded by Harold Laski) placed autonomous associations as the basis of its theory; the liberal-democratic theory (from Tocqueville onwards) has also located autonomous associations at the core of its thinking; and Gramscianism (with Gramsci at the centre) attached great importance to associationism.

The politico-theoretical arguments developed in political sciences and other social science disciplines are above all present in the thought tradition of pluralist theories of politics. Here, autonomous associations (organisations) are understood as an essential element of pluralism and a specific feature of the modern era. Bibič does not equate an association with an organised interest group. He views an association as being more than that; in this respect, he joins David Truman (who also includes political parties), Max Weber (who thinks of a wide range of subjects: from cobblers’ clubs, political parties to religious groups, art circles, literary sections etc.), Albert Meister (who defines an association as a group that is voluntarily recruited and combines the knowledge of its members or their activities so as to achieve some objective other than the acquisition of profit), Robert A. Dahl (who uses associations very broadly, speaking of organisational pluralism), John E. Chapman (a political scientist who put voluntary associations at the heart of his work *Voluntary Associations and the Political Theory of Pluralism*; for him, association is a key civilisational category); and Karl Marx (who introduces the concept of association in the sphere of economic democracy, which the concept of pluralism cannot bypass). On the basis of these currents of thought, Bibič concludes that association is an umbrella term that encompasses all “forms



of voluntary association” (Bibič 1990, 202); namely, interest groups, political unions, political parties, self-governing associations in economic life, i.e., also political associations, therefore, which include political parties as well as specific interest associations that perform certain functions of political parties (e.g., at the time of elections, referenda etc.) – in short, everything that falls within the field of associationism.

The politico-strategic argument for the introduction of associational pluralism is derived from Bibič’s assessment that it underlines the importance of a strong and mixed associational infrastructure for the justification of the process of political pluralisation “in the conditions of contemporary civil society and political democracy”. Associational pluralism as a political strategy is important, Bibič argues, because it prevents “a reductionist understanding of political pluralism and directs practical action towards a positive goal” (Bibič 1990, 203); associational pluralism directs activity to the heart of the matter by suggesting that the autonomisation of the old and the creation of new associations (including political associations) and their involvement in the process of forming, making and implementing political decisions is the way in which the political pluralisation of society must move. This notion, of course, relies on the potential of associations, i.e., the “independent and creative role of autonomous political organisations” (Bibič 1990, 203), which is of paramount importance, Bibič states, in order to consolidate political democracy.

Bibič regards associational pluralism as an expression of the laws of the modern era, which is no longer an era of atomised and isolated individuals (which is the liberal assumption), but an era in which people are increasingly working together to solve communal problems (which is the communitarian assumption); associational pluralism is hence not something to be imposed as a postulate from the outside, but grows out of the “nature of human beings”, who are ennobled by civilisation precisely by coming together as associated individuals and their efforts to pursue their personal and common interests as well as their collective goals through free association.

In this process of interconnection and highlighting human sociability, individuality is not abolished; the individual remains at the core of the matter. The individual here should not be understood as a person who only engages with others as a political citizen but as a bearer of his concrete interests, as a co-creator of the association and not simply as a formal member or member of it. This means its internal dynamics are far from an idealised model and are linked to real communicative relations (from opposition to support, from conflicts to alliances etc.). Associations are accordingly something that is by intention linked to the individual, to their needs, interests and aspirations, but also to their social being, which is not only essentially selfish, yet also community-oriented; it is oriented towards concrete and authentic interests, which in the association are also subject to the pathologies of the organisation, which must be faced (e.g., leadership-membership split). On the other hand, historical experiences remind

us that associations can work in different directions – conservative, civilisation retrograde, anti-humane etc., and should thus also be reflected upon in the light of broader social interests.

Associations, as associations of specific interests, not only have a social dimension, but a political one as well. This is not solely about helping to create human capacity to act in the collective for community interests, but also about socialising individuals to take responsibility in the governance of community affairs. It is this '*transcendence*' of the individual into the collective that is the political process in the broadest sense of the word. Bibič argues that if, simultaneously, community ties are formed in such a way that the individuality of what passes into the community is preserved, then we are talking about a democratic political process (Bibič 1990, 204). The community in this case is a concretely articulated whole that recognises the autonomy of labour and of the human being and derives its power and legitimacy from recognition of the individual and associations.

Bibič distinguishes political associations from other specific interest associations according to the degree of generality of the interests the political associations stand for. Of course, specific interest associations also have a political function, yet their view on community interests is via the prism of their given interests, with Bibič saying this is crucial because it is through this perspective of particular interest that the general interest can be rationally defined at all. For example, if farmers do not connect into associations and there is thus no autonomous articulation of the interests of private farmers, it is possible that errors will exist in the formulation of general political interests, according to which an 'inadequate' policy on agriculture is created.

In a heterogeneous society, political associations can emerge in different forms (political organisations, political federations, political parties, clubs etc.), with all being an important and even necessary part of a democratic political structure. Their basic task is to aggregate and select the interests of various segments of civil society, to give these interests the form of political interests (synthesised interests) to be pursued in the political system, especially in representative organs of the state, and in the wider social system. In this sense, political associations must be understood as a fundamental factor in any contemporary political democracy.

At first glance, it would seem entirely reasonable if there were only one political association for the whole of society, synthesising competing interests into a single common political interest. This is the logic on which one-party systems and one-party states are based, yet its assumptions have not historically been borne out in practice, declares Bibič (1990, 205), which means the monistic, monopolistic formation of political interest must be transcended by recognising the "rationality of political pluralism" as, on the one hand, a civilisational form of governance of society's public affairs and, on the other, as an essential precondition for, and a constitutive part of, political democracy.

The governance of complex social issues (which more recently include environmental and ecological issues) can only occur by way of political pluralism operating through several general political associations (or at least two) since this is the only way of ensuring the degree of rationality of politics required by the contemporary governance of society. A political system that does not have embedded possibilities to effectively control political government and the turnover of political elites cannot avoid major strategic errors in the formulation of political interests, as is perhaps most evident in the formulating of political interests linked to addressing environmental and ecological issues. Opposition is thus a technique that has no adequate substitute in a modern democratic state, albeit it can be expressed in various forms in both civil society and the state, and it is to be expected to evolve in the light of the new means of subjugation. Bibič argues that political opposition, whose structural precondition is the existence of multiple political associations, is a “necessary politico-technical instrument” allowing those who hold political power to be constantly exposed to criticism, scrutiny and alternatives, and to be confronted with competent arguments and counter-arguments on the one hand and that, on the other hand, behind all of this there is an organisation of expert and professional resources, as well as real organisational potential that can be harnessed to challenge the established ruling elites and actually replace them. This is the essence of power struggles. Liberalism has acknowledged the rationality of this struggle, which makes sense in modern societies where the governance of public affairs is also indirect, through elected representatives who occupy important positions. The question of the procedure for selecting those who assume the mandate of civil society to govern the state is accordingly an important question of political pluralism and political democracy.

However, with associational pluralism Bibič assumes a broader concept of politics than power struggle, and a broader concept of democracy than electoral democracy. Associational pluralism, in addition to competition between political elites, calls for the participation of the widest possible range of people in politics, organised in different political associations; it is precisely political associations that allow democracy to develop, with participation on the largest possible scale. Such pluralism therefore does not reject the principle of representation (in a complex society, this must remain one of the basic principles in the governance of society), nor does it reject the principle of direct participation in political life, or participation on the basis of the functional-interest articulation of society, or participation in the regulation of socio-economic relations. In order to define the general relationship between associational pluralism and democracy, Bibič turned to Eisfeld who defined this relationship through the ultimate goal of introducing “as much direct democracy as possible and as much representative democracy as necessary” (Bibič 1990, 210).

In this sense, associational pluralism could be said to derive from the fact that it recognises: basic human rights and freedoms (with the right to free political

association); the plurality of voluntary associations as the fundamental form in which people express their social, economic, cultural, political, existential etc. interests; the large number of political associations which play an important role in defining political interests (interests that express in a synthetic way – after aggregation and selection – the various aspects of politics that form part of the basic strategy of social development); specific interest associations, which have a political role in both the governance of social affairs and the articulation, aggregation and selection of interests in civil society and their transfer to the state (Bibič even argues that these associations will grow in importance relative to general political associations); and that ‘non-partisan’ forms of pluralism will play a role in the development of political pluralism, and general political associations (parties, unions, clubs etc.) will not lose their specific role in associational pluralism.

Finally, we emphasise a further thought relevant for our perception of present politics. Associational pluralism, Bibič writes, is a critique of politics that relies on bipolar confrontations, a critique of politics as a “friend–enemy” relationship, and a critique of politics that negates the meaning of the political citizen; instead of bipolar polarisation, it relies on a new synthesis (not eclecticism) that requires the recognition of a multiplicity of contradictions and conflicts through which social and political life appears much more colourful, but the search for solutions to which is much more complex and complicated. Rather than “friend–enemy” politics that generate ever more enemies, for existential reasons it is essential to strive for new alliances and connections (discursive coalitions) whereby the enemy will be recognised as an adversary that has its place in both civil society and the public sphere and where, in principle, the way is open to the structures of the state.

By linking historical developments and simultaneously actualising a theoretical concept that is supposed to help with understanding these historical developments, Bibič inscribes himself in that tradition of thinking which believes that thought has arisen as a necessity of practice and that practice needs a corresponding thought (Vodovnik 2022 in Toplak 2022) in order to be able to assert itself as something else as an alternative to the existing one. Moreover, he believes that it is vital to stand on the side of that alternative thought that democratises the existing democracy. This is a tradition of thought shared by the author of this paper as well, who approaches the problem from the existential need to survive on this planet.

### **THE POTENTIAL OF THE NOTION OF ASSOCIATIONAL PLURALISM**

Let us recall just a few thoughts or theses that come to mind while considering the relevance of the notion of associational pluralism as developed by Bibič, with the ambition that they might become the subject of another article.

1. The discussion on the autonomy of civil society, with its emphasis on human rights and freedoms and the importance of autonomous associations as

specific interest and general political associations, which are a needed part of the infrastructure of contemporary pluralism, has shown that this is where the potential for ‘democratisation’ should be sought when it comes to the transition from a liberal democratic state to a ‘green’ state, which Eckersley (2019) develops as a state that ‘both maintains and transcends’ the liberal-democratic pledge.

2. The field of political pluralism must not end within the confines of the state apparatus, but must extend to civil society itself, to the distribution of social power within it, and to the effects of this distribution on political government. Such an understanding allows moving beyond the two extremes of “party” and “non-partisan” pluralism; only by looking at the overall dialectic of the relationship between civil society and the state, and at the role of associations (political and specific interest) in transmitting the interests of particular groups in civil society to the state, and at the role of associations in civil society itself and in the state, can one go beyond the unproductive bipolarity of conflict, and of course open up new complex questions such as political power and the legitimacy that those who govern have/do not have; political power and the social power in which it is rooted etc.

3. It is also important to bear in mind the transformation of civil society brought about by the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s, which began to replace the public sector with a “third sector” in which NGOs played a central role, with the task of replacing the public services that had been lost and underfunded by the public sector up until that point. NGOs, independent of the state yet financially linked partly to it and partly to the sale of their services on the market, became the dominant form of association in civil society, and were sometimes equated with the whole of civil society by the ruling discourse; reduced the whole spectrum of pluralism to them and to political parties.

4. The non-partisan component of public life in Slovenia is growing and elements of non-partisan democracy and non-partisan pluralism are increasingly present, but it would be wrong to conclude that political party pluralism is receding from the political scene despite the ongoing crisis. These elements of a non-partisan form of collective life and non-partisan political pluralism are the subjective expression of the current stage of development of the social structure, the degree of social conflict and the need for the existence of a political power which, through its policies, seeks to regulate all of these contradictions. Here, one must agree with Bibič when he argues that the strategy of the political pluralisation of society has to be understood in the context of the democratisation of society.

5. If we agree with those who claim that in the last three decades – also thanks to the neoliberal principle of the ‘lean state’ – civil society in Slovenia has become even more pluralised and institutionalised, and that the public sphere – also thanks to the development of information and communication technology – has also become more pluralised and simultaneously more inward-looking, then it is also reasonable to ask whether the concept of “associational pluralism”

still holds enough explanatory potential and is worth preserving and developing further, and whether it can be used to deal with the new social and political reality, i.e., political plurality, which is also strongly marked by the multifaceted environmental issues, which calls for different policy arenas that are more open to civil society. After all, this is also called for by the concept of ecological modernisation, which represents the EU's development framework from 2019 onwards.

6. In the 1990s, environmental and ecological issues, which are even more complex and global, were added to the public agenda and that cannot be left to the parties alone. Nonetheless, when it comes to environmental policymaking in Slovenia it seems that 'partitocracy' has been reinforced above all; this situation needs a thorough correction by the various civil society associations and the 2021 water referendum may be seen as a conflict between political party pluralism and non-political pluralism, which represents a break with 'partitocracy' in the field of environmental policymaking (Kuzmanić 1996). This, of course, raises the question of how to institutionally reorganise the entry of civil society associations into the processes of environmental policymaking, i.e., how to introduce an ecological democracy based on deliberative principles of communication. Some new institutional solutions have already emerged: the creation of the Centre for Sustainable Construction and Renovation of Buildings (*Stičišča za trajnostno gradnjo in obnovo stavb*), which should bring all the actors involved together (professionals, the public, civil society, investors, public authorities) in order to minimise the implementation deficit; the Eco-Chamber (*Eko-zbornica*) that should, among others, solve the problem of market-based environmental impact assessments; a new concept of river basin management that, on the basis of an understanding of the hydro-social territory, should solve the problem of the systemic involvement of the most affected people in the management of river basins etc..

7. More recently, plurality has emerged on the level of environmental discourses, which have experienced different modes of institutionalisation (from global to national, from economic to civil society and NGOs, from various movements to spontaneous grassroots and initiatives etc.) and various articulations in public spheres (Pinter 2005 in Splichal 2020); these institutionalised discourses are in themselves a problem as they are often contradictory "in thought, word and deed", and together they oppose other institutionalised discourses that minimise or even ignore environmental issues.

## CONCLUSION

In the last three decades civil society – also thanks to the neoliberal principle of the "lean state" – has become even more pluralised and institutionalised, and that the public sphere – also thanks to the development of information and communication technology – has become pluralised as well and at the same time segmented in on itself. The new political pluralism is even more complex and raises a whole new set of theoretical and practical problems which go in the direction

of rethinking both the different conceptualisations and institutionalisation of deliberative democracy and the transformation of the liberal-democratic state into the green state.

These can all serve as a framework in which complex environmental issues have a special place, which will need to be thoroughly thought through politically from the perspective of associative pluralism. Bibič launched associational pluralism as a concept for re-establishing the institutional relationship between civil society and the state at a historical moment of a divided society that raised the question of new actors from civil society entering the communication and decision-making processes controlled by the public authorities.

Today we are once again living in a moment of a divided society, and the concept of associational pluralism can help us to rethink a new institutional arrangement that allows new civil society actors to enter into communication and decision-making processes in order to participate in decisions that are this time of even more existential importance (environmental issues as a precondition for life in general). The concept of associational pluralism thus functions as an emancipatory concept that will only be emptied as such once its premise, i.e., the separation of the state from civil society, is abolished; until then, it will continue to function as a frame of reference for the search for new institutional solutions linking civil society and the state.

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▪ Andrej LUKŠIČ

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