THE PARTICIPATORY STATE
REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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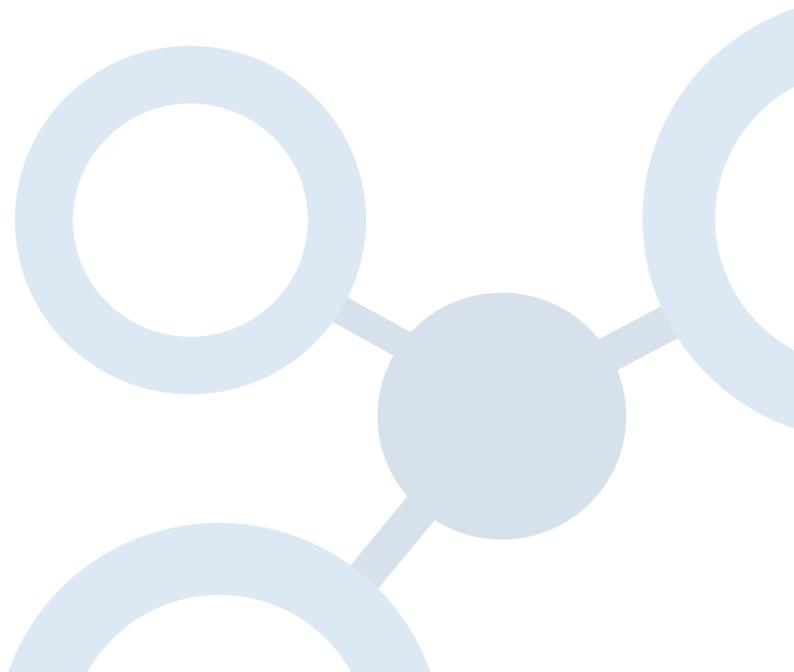
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REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The institutions in our representative democracy have lost their power to shape developments. Greater participation through public engagement and participation in direct democratic processes are perceived by some to be an additional threat. Greater participation is certainly an appropriate way to future-proof our representative democracy and to make it more robust.

Societies change. Modern society has emerged due to a radical break with tradition. According to the French social scientist Alain Touraine, the momentum fuelled by technical progress and economic growth since the Industrial Revolution created a permanent 'self-production of society' (Touraine 1972). The crucial point to consider is whether the development of technical and economic productive forces and their effects (rationalisation, differentiation, division of labour and globalisation) set out a political framework which shapes the economy and society in social (and currently also ecological) terms (Berger 1986).

In previous decades, social security schemes introduced through the welfare state helped to form the basis of a stable and strong democracy. Nowadays, in light of the globalisation of markets, the digitalisation of the world and ecological limits to growth, this form of democracy, which functions at nation-state level, has reached it limit. The domain influenced by economic forces is always expanding further, whilst democracy runs into ideological and institutional barriers, and barriers associated with the nation-state.

Whether democratic communities or autocratic dictatorships, they had very rarely remained unchanged over many generations. The opposite usually proves to be the case: all too often, stagnation usually means the beginning of the end. Time after time, societies that have not permitted any change to happen over a long period became instable, were delegitimised by countermovements and swept away by social upheavals that were revolutionary in nature.

DEMOCRACY — A MODEL FOR SUCCESS: YOUNG, SUCCESSFUL AND UNDER THREAT

From a historical perspective, our social model of representative democracy is relatively young. One of its antecedents was Athenian democracy which evolved during the 5th century BC. This was the era in which Athens developed an enormous amount of power. Athenian democracy was a political system built on the principle of popular sovereignty. This type of constitution was a direct democratic model which actually only gave a portion of the population of Attica the right to participate in political decisions.

Although in the last two generations, representative democracy was generally regarded as the most attractive model in its varied and subtly different forms, it is also a model which has discernible limitations. At first sight, it appears to be paradoxical to talk about signs of a decline in classical western democracy because the number of countries in which democratic elections take place has significantly increased since the watershed year of 1989 which saw the collapse of a world that had been divided in two.

However, it is important to ascertain that an increase in democratic systems can unquestionably be connected to a delegitimisation of democratic decision making and authoritarian populism. Wolfgang Merkel, Director of the Berlin Social Science Center, speaks of 'defective democracy' (Merkel et al. 2003). In many democratic societies, we are currently witnessing retrograde steps in what are supposed to be democratic standards such as fair elections, opposition rights, transparency, press freedom, legal certainty and the separation of powers. The Bertelsmann Foundation has been analysing and comparing global democratic developments in its Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Foundation 2016) since 2003. Democratic culture appears to have been veering towards a decline over the last five years.

Even in Germany, we are seeing a widening schism between parliamentary representative democracy and citizenship for a variety of reasons. The traditional popular parties are losing their ability to retain voter loyalty, voter turnout is declining and the electorate is losing its faith in the effectiveness of regulatory policy. Whilst representative systems are the focus of criticism, the voices calling for forms of direct democracy and plebiscitarian elements are becoming louder (Kleinert 2012). Furthermore, there is a rise in new authoritarian nationalist movements which are forming political parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD). By fuelling prejudice and marginalisation and by denying inconvenient facts, these parties are creating an atmosphere in which it is difficult to form a well-informed opinion. The media describes this approach as populism, however, it could be more accurately described as an attack on the principles of democracy.

POLITICAL AUTISM

The findings are the same in most European countries: it is becoming more difficult everywhere to reach a solid consensus and to gain lasting trust. This destabilises important fundamental social principles such as discourse and the ability and willingness to compromise which are critical factors in a vibrant democracy.

Subsequently, the central role of politics is severely hampered, in particular in terms of developing a perspective for the future that is orientated towards the common good. However, the parties also adapt to this short-termist approach and nationalistic atmosphere. Politics becomes increasingly reactive instead of developing and promoting political projects. Anything that

weakens politics in any way leads to greater levels of disillusionment in politics. Commentators speak of political autism. This refers to a developmental disturbance in democracy that develops over the long term when the individual is released from social ties, when it becomes difficult for individuals to orientate themselves and when collective responsibility is weakened.

In the opinion of the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (in his study 'Life Chances'), modern societies are characterised by an increase in options (i.e. opportunities) and a simultaneous loss of ligatures (i.e. ties). However, life within a society is not possible without social and cultural ties. Ligatures are described as 'deep cultural ties which enable people to navigate their way through a world of different options.' Without them, 'eventually nothing would work and everything would be equally valid and thus unexceptional.' There are several causes that lead to what has been termed political autism.

- Perceptions in society and politics are increasingly being reduced to a particular event and not perceived in relation to causes and other interdependencies. Political autism has a tendency to veer towards negative delimitation, to selectively elevate certain subjects in an extreme way and to use expressive symbolism.

- The marketisation/commercialisation of all areas of society only makes the world appear more diverse and colourful, however, it actually becomes more uniform, more commercial and faster paced which means that the ability to exploit different options is heavily dependent on financial status.

- The corrective power of the public sector and traditional redistribution policies, which aim to achieve equal opportunities for all, has reached its limit in view of the impact of open markets.

- The freedom of the individual has been subjugated in accordance with his or her ability to meet the requirements that are needed to access the consumer world. The dominant trends are primarily orientated towards the upper middle class. Consequently, standards are created in the consumer goods sector, cultural sphere and in architecture which are specified by laws set by high-revenue markets (Koolhaas 1995). Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has stated that the modern world has become like a modern airport where everything is the same and is only defined by a small number of trendsetters.

- Another phenomenon is the kind of 'permanent presence' in which people are increasingly living. As a result, people lose the ability to recognises causes, to capitalise on their experiences and to develop longer-term perspectives (Hobsbawm 1995).

- A further cause can be seen in what American social scientist Quentin Skinner describes as a 'cordon of rights' which the individual sets up around himself thereby positioning himself

chiefly at the centre of society. An individual's personal interests are placed above the common good. He goes onto describe this as a 'paradox of a liberalism that has been falsely understood' or an 'absence democracy' (Skinner 1998).

Political autism undermines cohesion, the development of trust and the capacity to shape developments in our society. A functioning democracy particularly needs to be able to understand interrelationships and to be able to assume social responsibility. Discourse, communication and building trust are prerequisites for this. Only then will collective action be possible.

HOW REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY HAS UNDERGONE FUNCTIONAL LOSS

It is clear that the democratic model as described by Joseph Schumpeter (1950) has reached its limit in terms of its ability to shape developments. Schumpeter believed that democratic participation centres solely on the holding of elections. In addition to the election of the best possible candidates, he primarily understood this factor as a control function whose power lay in the potential threat of being voted out. According to Schumpeter, the level of voter turnout is therefore no longer relevant and other forms of participation are redundant because the best possible elected people would also make the best possible decisions. Reducing democratic culture down to the issue of elections is being increasingly viewed in a critical light both in the scientific community and in society.

According to Ralf Dahrendorf's conclusion on the threats to democracy, which he outlines in ten points (Dahrendorf 2002, p. 8), he concludes that, 'Even free elections are no longer able to offer satisfactory and long-term solutions.' The most important point to note is the fact that, 'Many relevant decisions have migrated to other political spheres and have shifted in proportions which go beyond the nation-state' (Dahrendorf 2002, p. 113)

Two explanations are of primary importance: the first concerns the partial loss of sovereignty in democracies based on the nation-state structure due to globalisation and Europeanisation which have weakened the ability of representative institutions to assert control (Habermaß 1998). Secondly, growing problems concerning legitimacy due to the fact that the public sphere has changed in structure, especially as a result of 'mediocrity' (Meyer 2001).

Against this background, faith in the effectiveness of representative democracy is falling. This viewpoint is supported by numerous studies. Generally speaking, parliaments are losing the respect of the electorate and voter approval ratings for political parties are falling. An erosion process in the political domain can be discerned in the decline in voter turnout and the fall in the number of members of popular political parties. In general, the level of political mistrust is growing both in terms of the deadlocks that are caused and the promises that are made (Scheer 1995, pp. 91-112).

Commentators are already talking about a turning point in parliamentary representative democracy. The English political scientist Colin Crouch has coined the term 'post democracy' because we are to become 'witnesses of a radical change during which many great achievements of the 20th century could be reversed' (Crouch 2008). Although the representative system would work perfectly well on a technical level, it would have long since relinquished its power to supranational institutions and other agents. In other words, the domain that is influenced by economic forces continuously expands, whilst politics loses its power to shape developments. It is obvious that political institutions have lost their legitimacy and no longer have much room for manoeuvre.

RELUCTANCE ON THE PART OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

The political elite have so far found it difficult to adjust to these new challenges, even though this is the key to securing a future-proofed form of politics that is widely accepted by society. The quality of democracy and consensus within society are both interconnected. Long-serving member of the Bundestag for the Social Democratic Party, Hermann Scheer, has thus pointed out that, 'the crisis among the political parties is a crisis for politics.'

Many members of the political elite still continue to express an understanding of democracy that is inspired by Schumpeter. During the coalition negotiations in 2013, which the SPD and CSU parties both entered with calls for more direct democracy, vice party whip of the Union, Günter Krings, energetically announced, 'We are against these sorts of national popular votes. We will not agree to this proposal. This will therefore not be introduced by the next coalition.' As we know, he was proved to be right.

CITIZENS AS A RISK FACTOR

Especially in the context of growing demands for more direct democracy and the current societal upsurge that has brought about political parties with nationalist and far right leanings, and different movements and points of view, this understanding of democracy, which has been passed down from one generation to another, is leading to dangerous political reasoning which is based on quickly jumping to conclusions. Large sections of the political elite believe that more political participation essentially poses a risk or is potentially an instrument that could be wielded by populists and Wutbürger (enraged citizens).

Members of the public are often regarded as political risk factors who do not have enough democratic maturity and who, after the elections, have to more or less accept the things that those who have been elected come up with as a result of their strength, competence, wisdom or through political compromise.

To this day in Germany, according the German constitution (the Basic Law), a direct decision by the public can only be provided for in law when the government plans to redefine state borders. The last time this

happened was in 1996 when the citizens of Brandenburg and Berlin were asked whether they agreed with the amalgamation of their two states. The citizens of Berlin supported the plan and their neighbours in Brandenburg did not. This event is often readily cited as proof of the 'irrationality of the people' when discussing the subject of more direct democracy.

Politics in Germany seems to have functioned well for a long time in a universe governed by Schumpeter-inspired rules. It has not really managed to deal with the many current social and ecological challenges that are on the agenda, however, it has kept the political systems stable for many years. It can possibly be explained by the fact that even renowned experts of political participation (e.g. the DIALOGIK Institute at the University of Stuttgart) formulate serious arguments, which have gone unchallenged, that reveal a deep-seated fear of the uncontrollable general public: 'A high degree of participation can also be an indication of mindless mass mobilisation.' (Vetter/Ulmer 2013)

The disaccord between expectations and reality, between the desire for greater acceptance and concerns about the Wutbürger, has an impact on the way that the different options are currently engaged with which can revitalise our democratic culture. On the one hand, the political class repeatedly complains about the levels of apathy demonstrated by the public in relation to voting and democracy. On the other hand, they greet demands for more participation and direct democracy with either a high

degree of scepticism or obvious hostility. Interesting approaches regularly found in election manifestos, government programmes or even legislative measures do not manage to achieve anything.

FROM 'WHETHER' TO 'HOW'

This debate has been futile for a long time. It is no longer a theoretical question whether the political elite want to offer citizens greater participation, depending on the degree to which these citizens are viewed as being politically responsible or not. Many examples from recent years demonstrate that it is not sufficient to have large projects legitimised if representatives elected by a majority are making majority decisions in public committees. Growing sections of the population want to be directly involved and do not want to just have to agree with constraints that seemingly have no alternatives. They want to have an opportunity to be included right from the start and to be aware of all the important costs and risks.

The demand for greater participation is being increasingly voiced and these demands become particularly more insistent when expensive investment and infrastructure measures are imminent which directly affect the lives of the general public. The Stuttgart 21 citizens' movement was the first warning shot which was followed by further disputes. The expansion of the energy grid required for the Energiewende (a radical policy shift in Germany from nuclear and fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy) is unthinkable without smart, timely

and comprehensive offers to participate in decision making. The search for a suitable location for a nuclear waste disposal site has just recently been restarted using a historically unparalleled and comprehensive participation concept. In practice and particularly at municipal level, numerous participatory approaches are being incorporated into our established representative structures. These have been tested for a while now and are often being successfully put into practice.

They are also being called for in the election manifestos. However, no real progress has been made in terms of ensuring that central government takes responsibility for continuing this process and for making certain that it is enshrined in law. This 'participatory schizophrenia' has had an impact on the current state of the political culture in Germany, as well as the deep-seated mistrust (culminating in huge levels of anxiety about competition) held by many political decision makers regarding the democratic competence of the public. The current success of nationalist far-right movements in Germany and abroad does nothing to allay these fears.

The latter is actually more the result of political stagnation than an argument for the rejection of new forms. Democratic culture is not simply passed on from one generation to another; it is not rooted in our human DNA; it does not fall from the sky and it is not a natural law. On a daily basis, democracy needs to be re-developed, practised, defended, but also refined. It is possible to teach and learn democracy and

it needs to be attempted and strengthened afresh in each generation.

THE COOPERATIVE STATE

To achieve this end 'a "cooperative state" is needed which binds political action more tightly to regulations that have been negotiated through communication instead of to traditional forms of hierarchical governance' (Zürn 2008). For 'without the revitalisation of the political, it will not be possible to find a way out of the many dead end roads that branch out in all directions' (Scheer 1995, p. 191). The goal is to revitalise politics and democracy.

Greater and more direct participation will make an important contribution towards this goal. A study conducted by the University of Dortmund concluded that in public participation 'the central elements of the republican identity pattern — community and civic virtue' still have the highest importance. The willingness to get involved in public affairs for the good of the community is still the most important issue concerning the self-conception of those that choose to participate (Vogt 2005, p. 263). This would encourage public participation: it would not work against representative democracy, but would strengthen it.

LEARN DEMOCRACY TOGETHER

The development demonstrates: whoever reduces democracy down to elections alone, is happy to see it gradually become undermined. Democracy thrives on diversity, controversy and on uncomfortable, painful, protracted and even inefficient discourse

processes. We should therefore stop regarding participation processes, direct democratic decisions, campaigns, discussions and debates as a necessary evil, but should rather see it as collective democratic training.

An active civil society is an important prerequisite for the 'preservation and restoration of a viable future' (Rolf Kreibich, Kreibich 2002, p. 20). The more extensively and emphatically we 'train' our democracy, the more trust the political elite can have in the democratic competence of its citizens.

This is by no means a subject that just affects individual nations. The Club of Rome international think tank also sees that a strong 'civil society' provides the conditions which can strengthen the democratic decision-making process and end the weaknesses in democracy which have been observed in many countries which can result in the state and politics having to surrender their power (King/Bertrand 1991).

THE DIALECTICS OF PARTICIPATION

Representative democracy and participation (such as direct democratic structures and public participation) still appear to be diametrically opposed to many people. They fear that greater participation could have a delegitimising effect on our representative institutions.

There is no doubt that this is paradoxical to some degree, however, they are actually dialectical in nature. Representative and participatory structures challenge each other, but also support each other too.

They need to be viewed as complementary. Direct democracy strengthens the representative system and representative democracy also creates room for democratic participation. Only consistent penetration of our representative structures using the spirit of participation will ensure that their results improve and that they become more acceptable to the public.

If society resolves to become more open to participating more readily in political activities, there is a chance that narrow perspectives and the pursuit of selfish organisational interests will be transcended and that the imagination and expertise of the people will be used to achieve constructive solutions. This actually involves the extension, and not the replacement, of parliamentary rights and principles.

Greater public participation can ensure that the German parliament remains the epicentre of social debate, that participation continues, once again gaining acceptance so that general public interest remains at the heart of the decision making process. Even decisions requiring the weighing of different interests, which do not achieve an optimum outcome for all those affected, require representative institutions to act courageously during this process.

They also need a political culture which has learned how to engage with these types of opposing interests in a participatory, respectful and, ultimately, tolerant way.

However, a modern democracy which is orientated towards political participation is inconceivable without a certain shift

in values. Social consensus, among other factors, is a part of this new participatory canon of values which means:

- in modern democracies people with a different canon of values live and make decisions together;

- political problems can be evaluated from different perspectives and it is rarely possible to objectively determine which is the best possible decision;

- social problems are often more complex than they used to be and it has become more difficult to find appropriate solutions;

- decisions are always made within a historical context and are only proven to be incorrect or unsustainable a few generations or years later.

Representative and participatory structures can work together if they build on this canon of values. Only through the synthesis between representative and participatory processes can foundations be successfully put into place and processes put into action which create decisions that are sustainable and shape the future.

In the final analysis, processes involved in social transformation, which we will inevitably be faced with in future generations, are inconceivable without a successful synthesis and a new form of participatory democracy. We should therefore dare to embrace more democracy. ■

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