Translated excerpt

Stephan Lessenich
Grenzen der Demokratie. Teilhabe als Verteilungsproblem

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The Limits of Democracy. Participation as a problem of distribution

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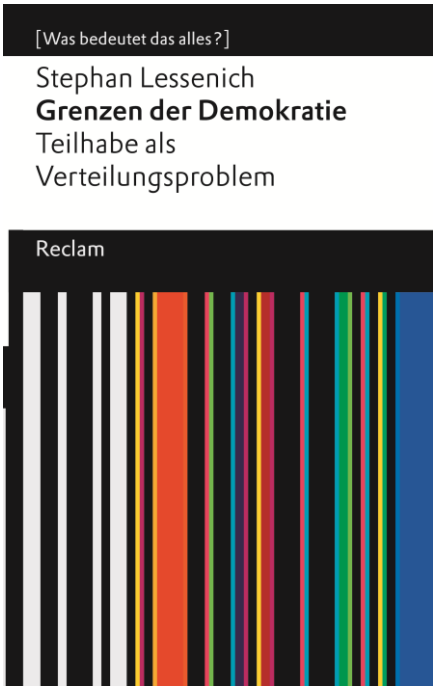

1 Post-democracy?

Democracy—how could anyone not be in favour? ‘Democracy’ is a universally acknowledged high-value term, possibly *the* high-value buzzword linked to Western modernity. Modern societies are democratic societies: this seemingly simple equation is in fact a fundamental component of modern self-understanding. Only the advance of social democratisation has enabled us to universally achieve other basic values such as freedom and equality. Only democratisation has truly made ‘modern’ societies *modern* in the sense of their historically seasonable constitution.

Integration despite difference, unity in diversity, self-determination within the community: all these seemingly contradictory guiding principles of modern socialisation are tied to the ‘invention’ and existence of democratic institutions and processes. Winston Churchill’s famous remark in the House of Commons in 1947 that democracy was the worst form among the known forms of political government[1] is a fairly accurate assessment in its sober pointedness that avoids any kind of idealisation: it is democracy that makes the otherwise highly unlikely fact of social governability of societal complexity possible in the first place.

The fact that democracy continues to be in good repute, normatively speaking, despite the repeated criticism of its functionality, is evidenced not least by the reality that hardly anyone wants to be regarded as undemocratic, let alone anti-democratic. It is no coincidence that even infamous autocrats claim this quality seal for themselves and their intentions. ‘Guided’ or ‘managed democracy’, today represented by Russia under the ‘impeccable democrat’ Putin—but in fact already practised by erstwhile Indonesian president Sukarno in the late 1950s—is only one of the numerous attempts by governments around the world to adapt (read: undermine) democratic principles to national customs or the alleged peculiarities of the respective ‘national character’. Even General Augusto Pinochet, who, with the active support of one of the mother countries of democracy, removed Salvador Allende and his popular democracy from power through a bloody coup d’état and was subsequently responsible for the death of thousands of people, did not shy away from describing his form of government as ‘*dictablanda*’, that is to say, as a moderate political dictatorship purportedly serving to protect, or rather restore, civil rights.

[1] During a speech in the House of Commons on 11 November 1947 the British prime minister stated: ‘No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’

Hence, when democracy today appears to be under threat, including in a country like Germany, when there is constant talk of a crisis, even of a decline and collapse of liberal democracy, then society's alarm bells ought to go off—this is where things get serious, because what is at stake is the very essence of modernity.

Political Apathy

The possibility that people might be getting a bit exasperated with the least-worst form among the various forms of government is certainly not a new topic of public debate. On the contrary: the debate about citizens' political apathy has long accompanied the political process. In Germany, the issue has been the subject of public debate since the late 1980s—in other words, long before there was any indication of post-unification disillusionment. In 1992, the Society for the German Language in fact declared the German term '*Politikverdrossenheit*' ('disenchantment with politics') the 'word of the year', and two years later it was included in the Duden, the standard spelling dictionary for the German language. Conceptually associated with emotions like frustration, reluctance and dissatisfaction, the diagnosis captured by the term disenchantment ('*Verdrossenheit*') suggests a proximity to synonymous, albeit more aggressive sentiments such as bitterness, resentment and anger. And yet, the academic-political assertion that people were disenchanted with 'politics' has somehow generally remained at the surface of the matter for a long time. In political discourse, the disenchantment with *politics* frequently turned into the personalisable disenchantment with *politicians*, for which everyone could quickly come up with an example. Or it morphed into the topos of disenchantment with *political parties*, which could be dealt with through politicians' feigned closeness to real life which they achieved by drawing on universally accessible stereotypes of community life or their 'arduous struggle' up the party ladder, and which could ultimately be countered with a wink and a shrug, with no consequences whatsoever.

Consequently, the distancing from the political process, though apparently already quite popular back then, was not linked to the inclination of broad swathes of the population toward populist impulses for many years. It was rather seen as an expression of a kind of affluence-induced apathy of a population preoccupied with other concerns such as parenthood and consumerism. Or it was attributed to each new 'young generation', who simply took the existing democratic conditions for granted and who therefore, in contrast to their own parents, turned a blind eye to politics. The less comforting interpretation, then, went largely unmentioned: that

the advancing depoliticization—lamented with crocodile tears time and again on election nights in front of the TV cameras following each new record low in voter turnout (and subsequently brushed under the carpet)—just might signify a fundamental, for the time being tacit, critique of the political system.

Things are certainly different now: public concern for the democratic process runs a lot deeper these days. Indeed, at times, just about *everything* seems to be at stake. Historical parallels with the 1920s and the failure of the Weimar Republic—a 'democracy without democrats'—are frequently invoked. The rise of the New Right in Germany and Europe, the proliferation of authoritarian democracies in post-socialist societies and right-wing populist government policies in Austria and Italy, the public emergence of the self-proclaimed or designated 'enraged citizens' (*Wutbürger*, incidentally the Duden's Word of the Year in 2010), the outbursts of contempt and hatred in social media, the transmedia machinery designed to stimulate excitement ultimately running dry, the irreconcilable tone of the political debate, and, finally, the abandonment of communication between seemingly incompatible opinions extending even into the private domain. All this might be an eery reminder of 'the past' even (or perhaps precisely) for those who have only ever heard rumours about politically tumultuous times.

'Post-democracy'

British sociologist Colin Crouch in a sense wrote the tie-in book for the movie playing in the mind's eye of those who worry about post-war democracy. His work, *Post-Democracy*, originally published in 2004[2] (with the German translation published four years later), proves that he quite evidently had his finger on the pulse. The book introduced a term which not only triggered a host of follow-up literature, but which has in fact become common currency in the political and media debate. Wherever there are two or three people gathered in the name of concern for democracy today, Crouch's *Post-Democracy* is not far away.

Crouch describes actually existing contemporary democracy as having outlived its substance, given that what is really occurring behind the scenes of a functioning democratic order—and all that this entails: the separation of powers, change of government, parliamentary prerogative—is essentially a gradual hollowing out and devaluation of political processes of opinion formation and decision-making. The main reason for this, according to Crouch, is the

[2] Crouch 2004.

increasingly unbridled dominance of economic interests, which is manifested in at least two ways. Firstly, it appears in the form of a media-industrial complex with the sole function of creating ephemeral excitement. Secondly, it is expressed in the form of an army of business lobbyists who operate backstage of the political sphere and behind closed doors. The 'real' decisions, so the essence of the argument runs, are not made by the representatives democratically elected by citizens, but by representatives of powerful interests with direct access to office-holders and administrative officials, expert panels and regulatory authorities. This state of affairs is hidden from the public audience behind a political spectacle, which is less about substantial matters so much as about all too human behaviour: lucrative appointments and influence-expanding *posts* instead of substantive positions, competing for the most attention instead of the best solutions. In short: not politics, but politainment.

Regardless of how accurate this analysis may or may not be—and notwithstanding the concept's compatibility with both critical-progressive and antidemocratic-conspiracist interpretations—what matters here is the counter-horizon against which Crouch's image of post-democratic conditions has its menacing, sinister impact. What he constructs as the *Other* of the post-democratic present is a none-too-distant past in which perhaps not everything was better, but at least the democratic world was still in good shape. Crouch condenses his narrative about the rise and fall of democracy in Western industrial societies into the image of a parabola: while these societies had steadily expanded democratic forms for decades, the 1970s marked an historical turning point. Ever since, the democratic quality of the Western European and North American polities, Crouch asserts, has been steadily declining.

The counter-image of post-democracy is thus the romanticising of some 'golden age' in which—allegedly—broad, generally even universal democratic participation was guaranteed for the long term. It was an era of democracy based on major parties and large, homogeneous social milieus; a time in which not only voter turnout was high and votes were by and large cast for the political representatives of the middle and working classes of the 'centre'—for Christian and Social Democrats, for the Tories and the Labour Party—but in which capital and labour were highly, if not centrally, organised and, in the name of such organised interests, participated in the process of democratic negotiations. And this not only applied to their internal relations, regarding the social partnership-based structuring of production and working conditions. It went beyond this, encompassing a triangular relationship with state institutions, who, in turn, pursued important political projects only after consultations and, if possible, in agreement with the major stakeholders in society—that is to say, in 'corporatist' coordination with trade unions and employer associations.

In the light of all we know today, this narrative of the brief summer of democracy, which can only be recounted in slightly exaggerated form here, seems at the very least questionable. That is not to say that it is completely far-fetched—it is not. Yet in its excessive amplification of the effective participation and inclusion of the 'productive core' of industrial post-war society in the control rooms and in the benedictions of corporatist democracy it blanks out at least some essential social realities of the time. The shadowy democratic existence of women, migrants or non-wage earners features—if at all—only marginally in the retrospective mythifications of the 'good old days'. Even persuasive studies documenting the socio-structural gap in electoral participation between socially privileged and disadvantaged milieus often suggest that the de facto exclusion of the poorer classes from political participation only began with the triumph of 'neoliberalism'.[3]

Yet the disconcerting idealisation of corporatism in particular, which—at least if we go by an empirically not yet systematically corroborated impression—can be found mainly in the writings of older, male, social scientists with social democratic political leanings, also has consequences when it comes to the question of desirable processes of repoliticization and democratisation. Considering the rather depressing state of the present, extending the past appears to be the best chance of a better future. The restoration of the industrial-capitalist configuration of national Keynesianism becomes the bailout package for democracy. The safety net for the 'imagined democracy envisaged for the post-post-democratic world in many ways resembles the corporatist democracy that was lost in the 1980s'.[4]

The dialectics of democracy

Rather than painting a black and white picture of the history of democracy, the task at hand should be to embrace more analytical ambiguity. And that is precisely the objective of this volume. Instead of an increasingly widespread democratic melancholy, in the dim light of which the Euro-Atlantic post-war era is the glistening peak of democratic evolution, the argument put forward here is that democracy is—and always has been—a double-edged sword. After all, democratic polities invariably restrict the social space of entitlement. The social historical movement towards 'more democracy' simultaneously entails a counter-movement, an opposing movement to limit and restrict democratic participation. I refer to this circumstance

[3] This also applies to the otherwise outstanding study by Schafer 2015.
[4] Nullmeier 2017. Translation amended.

as the dialectics of democracy. While Crouch's parabola insinuates a general tendency of growth, followed by decline of democracy, a closer look suggests that the notion of a spiral-shaped democratic development is closer to the truth. The level of democratic entitlement is gradually heightened—yet, on its allegedly collectively inclusive ascent, democracy time and again leaves entire collectives behind.

Like hardly any other historiography, that of democracy is a narrative of victors. Those disadvantaged by democracy, who are short-changed when it comes to entitlement, are usually not considered worth mentioning. The common reconstruction of Germany's path towards the West may be the best example of this. The journey starts with the authoritarian, yet in some ways proto-democratic Empire, followed by the first, albeit ill-fated, democracy on German soil. Democracy's path then travels, briefly interrupted by the Nazis and temporarily accompanied by the illegitimate state of the East German SED dictatorship, to the war-chastened Bonn Republic, contained by Europe. And on it marches, ultimately manifesting itself as a reunified, self-confident Berlin Republic in which German democracy finally reaches its full bloom. If only it were not for those old-school GDR nostalgics in the East. If only this peak of democratic history had not coincided with the triumph of neoliberalism. And if only those suffering from the new free-market radicalism did not increasingly turn out to be such backward-looking right-wing populists, disappointed by democracy.

This could be one way of looking at it. Admittedly, hardly anyone really takes such a one-sided, simplistic view of things. Recounting the modern history of democracy as the history of a long, turbulent river—the course of which appears to have followed a long, winding bend and, since the 1970s, seems to be moving in the opposite direction again—is, however, most definitely, and in the truest sense of the word, narrative mainstream. The counter-narrative presented here, then, focuses on those who were not carried along on this current even before it allegedly changed direction, those who were washed ashore on the rapids of democratic development and left to fend for themselves. The survivors of democratic progress—to extend this pathos-laden imagery—are the heroes of this counter-narrative.

This points to more than the 'ambivalence of modernity', which historical sociology has so often—and rightfully so—referred to, more than just modernity's equivocation, more than just the coexistence of modern and pre-modern, the simultaneousness of freedom and coercion. It is rather the *intrinsic interrelation* of opposites, the *equiprimordiality* of opposites—the structural link between the expansion and limitation of democracy, the dynamic interplay of processes of entitlement and non-entitlement or even disenfranchisement, that this counter-narrative is about. More precisely, it is about freedom and coercion, entitlement and

disenfranchisement, participation and exclusion as issues of *social distribution*. It is about how the freedom of one group has frequently entailed the constraints of others throughout the history of modern democracy, how the entitlement of one group has always relied on the disenfranchisement of others. More simply put: the history of democratisation is a history of *participation through exclusion*. And that remains true to this day.

A counter-narrative of democracy as a dialectical process, which corrects—or at least contrasts with—the common self-interpretations in or of society, aims to shed light on the contradictoriness which has been inherent in modern democracy from the outset. In so doing, it strives to place an emphasis on the structural conflict proneness of democratic development, which is anything but coincidental. The focus selected here reveals the downsides of the 'rich democracies', while the poor relatives of prosperous Western democracies take the limelight. Moreover, it underscores the fact that 'democracy' is more than just a form of government.

Democracy, complete with all its social preconditions and implications, is a type of society, a social way of life—just as Alexis de Tocqueville, the great classical pioneer of the sociological conception of democracy, established as long ago as the 1830s with regard to American (that is, US-American) democracy.[5] Its key element, and this is another of Tocqueville's lasting insights, is the principle of equality: the concept of equal living conditions—for 'all'. This conception is the starting point for this essay. 'Democracy', in a preliminary definition, is understood as the equal right of all citizens to partake in the collective shaping of the social circumstances which affect them all equally. *Equal participation in the political configuration of one's own life circumstances*. What may appear as a merely formal notion of democracy at first glance, in fact, truly gets to the heart of the matter.

[5] See Tocqueville [1835/1840] 2000.