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Exhausted democracy

- please do not quote -

If one looks at the political science book market of recent years, one notices a clear increase in titles that deal with, a “retreat” (Kurlantzick 2013), “decline” (Allan 2014; Diamond and Plattner 2015), "regression" (Schäfer and Zürn 2021), "crisis" (Przeworski 2019; Howell and Moe 2020), “threat” (Galston 2018) or even signs of a process of "dying" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) of democracy, or the fear that "our freedom is in danger" (Mounk 2018), that “authoritarian populism” (Norris and Inglehart 2019) or even “fascism” (Albright 2018; Stanley 2018) is spreading. Indeed, there are good reasons to be concerned. The latest report by *Freedom House*, for example, notes that democratic decline has now lasted 19 years. „Elected leaders in democracies are increasingly seeking to undermine checks on their power, focusing their assaults on the media, anticorruption authorities, and the courts. These attacks endanger both democracy and basic freedoms.“ (Freedom House 2025: 13) The *Varieties of Democracy* dataset also comes to a sobering conclusion: „Democracy across the world is in decline. All metrics used below show a rollback of democratic rights and institutions.“ (V-Dem 2024: 9)

For Levintsky and Ziblatt, writing in the context of Donald Trump's first presidency, for example, there are „reasons for alarm“ about the future of democracy with regard to the United States of America and they understand their book as a contribution to the development of „strategies“ for its defence (2018: 9-10). To this end, they end with the proposal to adopt „policies to address social and economic inequality“, admitting, however, that this is „politically difficult“ (ibid.: 229).

Colin Crouch, whose diagnosis of post-democracy (2005) 20 years ago was the starting point of the current crisis debate, also shares this assessment of the causes of the current crisis in his new work *Post-Democracy After The Crisis* (2020). Crouch refers not least to the European financial crisis and the measures adopted to contain it, which have led to a considerable increase in the power of the executive and the non-majoritarian institutions such as the European Commission and the European Stability Mechanism. At the same time, he makes no secret of his aversion to a „politicised pessimistic nostalgia" (2020: 67). Similar judgements about „right-wing populist" or even „right-wing radical" parties can be found in a large number of current political science publications, such as Levitsky and Ziblatt or the contributions by Jan-Werner Müller (2021) and Yascha Mounk (2018).

In Germany, too, political scientists such as Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn (2024), are now noting a *Democratic Regression*. They attribute the rise of 'authoritarian populism' to the increase in power of non-majoritarian institutions, not least at the global and supranational levels, as well as the emergence of a „new line of conflict" between „communitarian" and „cosmopolitan" oriented population groups.

Yet, in much of the recent crisis literature, there is not only agreement on the normative condemnation of contemporary right-wing populism. It is also remarkable that the corresponding books usually conclude with a moral appeal to the reader, typically on the last page. For example, in *The People vs. Democracy,* Mounk writes „Thankfully, there is a lot that those of us who want liberal democracy to survive the dawning age of populism can do." For example, „we can take to the streets to stand up to the populists" or „We can remind our fellow citizens of the virtues of both freedom and self-government" (Mounk 2018: 265-6). Jan-Werner Müller follows the same line when he states at the end of his latest book that only „mobilised citizens" can „save" democracy: „The paths are there; the rest is up to us. Democracy, after all, is not about trust (be it in individuals or institutions); it's about effort." (Müller 2021: 226).

Levitsky and Ziblatt also end with a raised finger: „Democracy is a shared enterprise. Its fate depends on all of us“ (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 230). Crouch joins the moral appeal to citizens at the end of his book as well and places his hope in the „young and educated“ who are involved in social movements: „Provided they exist, continue to reproduce themselves, and receive from millions of others what they need to flourish - money, demonstrators in the street, active volunteers - democracy will revive...“ (Crouch 2020: 111). Last but not least, Schäfer and Zürn, after previously offering a series of reform proposals such as internal party reforms, more political education and stronger „public control over non-majoritarian institutions“, show themselves in the last sentence simply convinced that the „defence of democracy requires more democracy“ (Schäfer and Zürn 2024: 178). Well, who can say no to that?

The list of such formulas of concluding pathos could go on, and one gets the impression that their frequency increases as their plausibility diminishes. In short, from my point of view, this genre of literature is not very convincing. Therefore, in this paper I try to take a more detached view of the current situation, a view that leads me to the sobering conclusion that democracy is not so much in crisis as it is eroding. The thesis I develop is that we are currently dealing with a fundamental change in the social, spatial and temporal conditions of Western societies that has successively undermined and continues to undermine the preconditions of democracy. In other words, the semantics of crisis is always associated with the expectation that the crisis represents the culmination of an illness and that, once the fever has subsided, there will be a return to the status quo ante - the good old liberal democracy with its strong parties in the centre and only small "extreme" parties on the fringes - or, if the cathartic function of the crisis is emphasised more strongly, a breakthrough to something better, precisely the "more" democracy conjured up by Schäfer and Zürn.

What such contributions fail to address, however, is the possibility that there may be neither a return to the status quo ante nor a breakthrough to something better, but that after the crisis

comes death; that we may be dealing with the end of democracy. The crisis studies outlined above either completely avoid or rhetorically downplay the structural changes in modern societies that may not be conducive to democracy. This is understandable, given the close links between political science and democracy, but not very convincing from a somewhat distanced perspective. Contrary to such whitewashed narratives, I argue that democracy and the process of modernisation are antithetical, and that we have now reached a state in which the last pre-modern preconditions for democracy have largely eroded. In my interpretation, the crisis literature cited and its concluding formulas are above all expressions of phantom pain.

I would like to follow this path in three steps. First, I will briefly recall theoretical considerations that assert a positive relationship between the process of modernisation and democracy. However, it seems to me that the optimism associated with this has been exhausted (1). Therefore, in a second step, following mainly Michael Th. Greven and Hartmut Rosa, I will argue that modernisation and democracy are not mutually supportive, but that modernisation undermines the foundations of democracy, at least beyond a certain threshold (2). This leads to the conclusion that we are no longer dealing with positive but increasingly with negative "ratchet effects" (3).

1. Modernisation and democracy: a process without end?

When it comes to the relationship between modernisation and democracy, it should be made clear at the outset what is meant by both. In recent years, 'democracy' in particular has increasingly become an empty term for something 'good' to which we all (must) feel committed. Democracy, like freedom, is an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956). At the same time, the historical mutability of the concept of democracy should not lead us to associate it with almost arbitrary content, for example by ennobling the decision-making processes of the European Commission as deliberative and thus democratic (Joerges and Neyer 1997), or to

interpret the mere existence of transnational media such as CNN or even Facebook as harbingers of a global public sphere in cooperation with international organisations such as the UN. Such an understanding departs from what Greven (2009: 188) calls the Sartori criterion: „While democracy is more intricate than any other political form, paradoxically enough it may not survive if its principles and mechanisms are not within the intellectual reach of the average citizen.“ (Sartori 1987: 13)

The failure to take Sartori's criterion into account in both scientific and elite discourses thus leads to an increasing distance from the everyday understanding of democracy held by large sections of the population. The discrepancy between the scientific theories of democracy and the common sense theories of democracy can lead to an intensification of the "crisis" of democracy, for example when large parts of the population no longer find themselves represented in elite discourses. In this context, an observation by Przeworski is instructive: „While elites see democracy in institutional terms, several surveys indicate that mass publics often conceive it in terms of 'social and economic equality'.“ (2019: 102)[1] I would therefore propose to understand modern democracy not in terms of an institutional framework or specific norms, but in terms of two central promises: [2]

1. First, democracy holds the promise of being able to collectively and equally shape the destiny of one's political community. This means that the mere existence of general elections, for example, does not say anything about the quality of democracy. It may be that the elected representatives do not have the power to fulfil the expectations of those they represent. And these expectations include those of a substantive nature, such as who may belong to the demos and, more centrally, the desire for greater social equality.

1 This link between democracy and social equality can look back on a long tradition in the history of ideas; see Jörke 2019: 31-40; for a critique of elite-oriented conceptions of democracy that ignore the dimension of social equality cf. Doorenspleet 2015.
2 On the promise dimension of democracy, cf. Bobbio 1987, who lists several unkept promises of democracy and yet concludes that it makes sense to call the political systems of the West democracies; for a critique of Bobbio, cf. Jörke 2005.

2. The second central promise of democracy is to achieve an improvement in social conditions, such as greater social equality (not necessarily only in the material sense), by means of democratic procedures.

If large sections of the population gain the impression that both promises are not (or hardly) being kept, we can expect to see symptoms of crisis, for example in the form of falling voter turnout or the election of parties commonly referred to as 'populist'. Both trends have been observed in Western societies for a good 30 years (Kostelka and Blais 2021; Baro and Jenssen 2025). My central thesis is that accelerated modernisation is responsible for the failure to deliver on these democratic promises. This is because modernisation processes are increasingly undermining the basic requirements of democracy. In other words. Contrary to popular belief, I argue that democracy and modernisation are opposing logics.

The term 'modernisation' refers to a processual development that „can be described in structural terms as (functional) differentiation, in cultural terms as rationalisation, in terms of the relationship with nature as instrumentalisation, commodification or even domestication, and in terms of the change in the dominant personality type as individualisation" (Rosa 2012: 185).[3] These processes are the central themes of the classical sociological theories of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Parsons. It is a process of 'disenchantment' and 'desecration' of class structures and religious value systems that is closely linked to the emergence and development of capitalist economies, first in Western Europe and later in North America. It is important to emphasise that this is a procedural logic, i.e. a dynamic process. There is probably no better literary illustration of this process of modernisation than the famous passage by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels from the *Communist Manifesto*:

> „Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.

3 Throughout this paper translations of German quotes are by the author.

> All xed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.“ (Marx and Engels [1848] 2018: 10)

Admittedly, this quotation also expresses a left-Hegelian hope for the overcoming of capitalism (the „bourgeois epoch“), namely that people would be „at last compelled“ to look at their social position soberly. The expectation of Marx and Engels was that this sociological self-enlightenment and the consequent politicisation of the working class would, in the medium term, lead to the overcoming of capitalist conditions and, in a sense, to the halting of historical dynamics. As we all know, this has not happened, especially in the advanced capitalist societies. Instead, the process of the „uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions“ described by Marx and Engels continues to progress; current sociologists still diagnose a „continuous dynamic of increase and cultural discontinuity“ (Rosa 2012: 185).

While Marx and Engels saw the overcoming of capitalism as the decisive step towards democracy, as „the resolved mystery of all constitutions“ (Marx 1843/44 [1970]: 30), for modernisation theory, which was significantly influenced by Talcott Parsons, there was no question that the very existence of capitalist - or, in their idiom, market economy - structures was a necessary precondition for the development of democratic conditions.

Modernisation theory, which flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s, sought to answer not only the question of the causes of, but also the obstacles to, the development of liberal democracy. Writers such as Daniel Lerners, Seymour Martin Lipset, Karl W. Deutsch and Sidney Verba understood modernisation as a process towards capitalism and democracy, and asked what social, technical and cultural factors promoted and hindered this development. The basic thesis was that there is a connection between a capitalist economic system on the one hand and liberal

democracy on the other, and that the best and most stable form of society is one in which both institutional principles reinforce each other. An advanced level of economic development would lead to liberal democratic structures, which in turn would have a positive effect on economic dynamics, so that above a certain threshold the market economy and democracy would stabilise each other. As Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl (2004: 433) point out, modernisation theory was politically useful. It was an alternative theory to Marxist approaches in the context of the Cold War that could be used politically to contain the influence of the Soviet Union in the Third World. The hope was to gain a kind of political toolbox for promoting the move towards liberal democracy and market economies. Five assumptions were central:[4]

1. Modernisation is a global process which, starting in Europe and North America, is increasingly affecting all societies and consists essentially in the differentiation of functional social systems, such as the strict separation between politics, economics and religion.

2. The historical development from traditional to modern societies is irreversible.

3. Specific obstacles to modernisation nonetheless existed in traditional societies. These were mainly cultural factors such as role patterns and individual attitudes, but also traditional practices such as corruption.

4. In contrast, modern societies are characterised by individualism and the overcoming of particularistic moral concepts in favour of universal values. A special feature is the development of functionally specific role patterns, i.e., the fact that „modern“ people can experience themselves as powerful managers during the day, but as loving family fathers in the evenings and at weekends.

5. Finally, modernisation theorists assumed that social change in all societies would be „relatively uniform and linear“ (ibid.: 431).

4 Cf. on the following Joas and Knöbl 2004: 431.

Empirical research was conducted to identify the traditional structures - such as role expectations and worldviews - that blocked the development of liberal democracy, and practical policy questions were asked about how to overcome these obstacles to development. The focus was on economic prosperity, but at the same time efforts were made to introduce cultural, Western modern attitudes, morals and institutions. This applied not only to the so-called developing countries, but also to the liberal democracies of the West. Indeed, there was a danger of obstacles to development, not least among the lower classes, to whom Lipset (195) attributed an affinity for authoritarian behaviour.

This is not the place to discuss the assumptions of modernity and modernisation theory.[5] What is important, however, is that by the end of the 1960s few social scientists found it convincing; the ideological components were too obvious, the normative distinction between backward traditional societies on the one hand and modern liberal democracies on the other too problematic. A closer look has also shown that the strict distinction between traditional and modern societies is not tenable; after all, there are many traditional structures even in societies classified as modern, such as the widespread religiosity in the US or the rigid gender hierarchies that characterised all Western democracies in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, despite this widely articulated critique, the basic assumptions of modernisation theory continue to be prevalent in social science theories. A prominent example of this is the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019), who argue that a shift from materialist to post-materialist values has been taking place in Western democracies since the 1970s and will continue despite the current authoritarian revolt. This is based on the assumption that the materialist and related authoritarian orientations, which they regard as regressive, are dominant among older citizens, while younger citizens are becoming increasingly post-materialist. From this perspective, Western societies are currently experiencing only a temporary revolt, but in

5 For an overview see Knöbl 2017.

the medium and long term there will be a triumph of post-material values and thus of values that are conducive to democracy. Norris and Inglehart thus assume a connection between modernisation, in the sense of the spread of universal values, and the existence of democratic systems, if not their further democratisation. But this hope could be deceptive: on the one hand, and modern liberal democracies, on the other. A closer look has also shown that the strict distinction between traditional and modern societies is not tenable; after all, there are many traditional structures even in societies classified as modern, such as the widespread religiosity in the US or the rigid gender hierarchies that characterised all Western democracies in the 1950s and 1960s.

2. Social, spatial and temporal erosion processes

The thesis I will develop in this section is that the theories outlined above, which claim a positive, if not lockstep, relationship between modernisation and democratisation, are no longer convincing. Rather, it seems more plausible to assume an inverse relationship between democracy and the modernisation process. Certainly, one can agree that democracy requires citizens who do not unquestioningly submit to traditions and authorities, and who are willing and able to question - but not necessarily abandon - their own convictions. And there is no denying that these post-traditional forms of morality are an achievement of the European Enlightenment, at least as far as the Western world is concerned. In this respect, there is a strong link between modernisation and liberal democracy. At the same time, however, the process of modernisation has a dynamic that increasingly undermines the social preconditions for democratic coexistence and decision-making.

More than 30 years ago, the Italian legal philosopher Noberto Bobbio, in an article on the future of democracy that is still worth reading today, listed a total of six „broken promises“ of democracy and came to the conclusion that „the project of political democracy was conceived

for a society much less complex than the one that exists today“ (Bobbio 1987: 37). However, Bobbio - not unlike the crisis literature cited above - shied away from the obvious consequences of his diagnosis and ended by insisting on the appropriateness of the self-description of Western systems as 'democratic', since basic freedoms, party competition, periodic elections, and collective decision-making, either by consensus or by majorities, continued to exist (ibid: 40). But if these are the core institutional elements of liberal democracy, Bobbio adds that this institutional order can only function sustainably if the society in question also possesses a corresponding degree of democratic morality: „In no country in the world can the democratic method last without becoming a habit“ (ibid.: 42). Here, we again have the moralistic appeal to the citizens to behave like good democrats. However, at least at present, they do not do so to the extent that would be required for democracy to function normally, especially not in a situation of multiple crisis. They are less and less likely to be members of a party (Whiteley 2011), they participate less in elections (Elsässer/Schäfer 2023) and if they do go to the polling station, they have for some time increasingly been voting for „populist“ parties (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Finally, the state of the public sphere, especially in the so-called social media, is characterised more by accusations, *hate speech* and the „formation of self-supporting echo chambers […] – through their rejection of dissonant and the inclusion of consonant voices into their own limited, identity-preserving horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, ‘knowledge’“ (Habermas 2022: 166) than by deliberative interaction. In short, the political systems of the West are currently far from a particularly high degree of democratic attitudes. And this is due to the increase in complexity mentioned by Bobbio.

Bobios assertion of an increase in complexity is initially no more than a commonplace. Nevertheless, it describes a central aspect. Democracy presupposes a certain clarity (in the sense of simplicity), which is gradually being lost as a result of the modernisation processes. I understand the growth of complexity as a loss of social, spatial, and temporal clarity. In order to explain what this means, I now turn to Michael Th. Greven’s essay *War die Demokratie*

jemals modern - oder des Kaisers neue Kleider (Was democracy ever modern - or the emperor's new clothes). In this essay he dealt in particular with the social preconditions of democracy and argued that modernisation and democracy are characterised by opposing logics. According to Greven, the process of modernisation erodes „the residual metaphysical *apriori* of a democracy that has declared itself 'modern' since the epochal threshold of the saddle period“ (2009: 181). Among these „residual metaphysical *apriori*“, Greven lists three „foundational moments“ of democracy:

1. a „*demos* preceding democracy and its relative homogeneity“.

2. „the assumption of significant autonomy of the collective will-forming process“.

3. the „differentiation between private and social inequality and political and legal equality in collective self-rule“ (ibid.).

According to Greven, it can be shown for all three preconditions that they are increasingly becoming fictions as a result of the process of modernisation and the resulting increase in complexity. In view of the heterogenisation of the population that can be observed in all Western democracies, a homogeneous citizenry can no longer be assumed. As a result, „political societies have emerged that first have to politically solve the problem of creating a functionally sufficient unity“ (ibid.: 185). This is not the place to recapitulate the controversial debate on democracy and difference in the literature. However, Greven's assumption that democracy requires at least a certain degree of shared beliefs and culture has been confirmed in empirical studies (Putnam 2007; Miller 2017). These empirical findings may be unsatisfactory in terms of normative democratic theory, but they should not be ignored on normative grounds alone.

Added to this is the increasing individualisation that can be observed in all modern societies. As early as 30 years ago, communitarian authors drew attention to the growing tension between the republican imperatives of democracy and the individualistic-consumerist orientations of

ever larger sections of the population (Walzer 1990, Sandel 1996). Ingolfur Blühdorn (2022: 28-29) even argues that „that in contemporary capitalist consumer societies the Enlightenment norms of autonomy and subjectivity that had once been the foundation of the emancipatory project have been comprehensively reframed“. In the sense that autonomy and emancipation are increasingly understood as liberation from impositions such as solidarity and the willingness to make sacrifices for the community. As a result, modern society is a "society of singularities" (Reckwitz 2020).

The second prerequisite, the autonomy of the collective decision-making process, is also „increasingly proving to be an illusion“ (Greven 2009: 185). This is due in particular to the spatial transformation of governance, i.e. processes that have been negotiated over the past 30 years under the banners of globalisation, transnationalisation and supranationalisation. With Greven, I assume that it has not been possible to develop a convincing theory of the democratisation of these processes and the relevant institutional orders, let alone to „democratise“ them in any significant way. Whole libraries have been written about this over the past decades, and the production of relevant literature on the theory of democracy continues apace. But the „elections“ to the European Parliament do not create a European democracy any more than supposedly „deliberative“ decision-making spaces or the fact of liberal constitutionalism. On the contrary, it is precisely the latter two strategies for remedying the European „democratic deficit“ that de facto exacerbate it, while a vertical transfer of nation-state institutions of democratic governance is bound to fail because the corresponding demoi are unwilling or even - for example due to language barriers - simply unable to merge into a supranational or even global demos (cf. Jörke 2019: 132-177). According to Greven, models of democratic theory that assume multi-level governance or multiple demoi in view of these facts fail because of the above-mentioned Sartori criterion (Greven 2009: 187 f.).

What about the third prerequisite, political and legal equality, despite considerable economic differences in some cases? Greven refers here to the increase in power of private actors within the framework of „public-private policy networks“ (ibid.: 186; cf. Greven 2005). In addition, the growing power of international financial markets (Streeck 2017) and the *loss of political equality* (Gilens 2014; Elsässer/Schäfer 2023) as a result of the decline in voter turnout can be pointed out. However, the aforementioned developments are presented in empirical detail, it seems indisputable that a kind of oligarchisation of democracy has occurred, probably with an increasing tendency (cf. Winters 2013; Piketty 2020). This in turn, following Greven, can be attributed to the erosion of the social democratic welfare and redistributive state through the spatial transformation not only of governance but also of many economic processes.

All three processes of erosion of the a priori of democracy are essentially related to the dissolution of the boundaries of democracy and can be understood as an effect of progressive modernisation and growing complexity. According to Greven, social and spatial aspects are thus intertwined and mutually reinforcing. But what about the temporal dimension? To answer this question, two aspects can be distinguished. On the one hand, it is becoming increasingly clear that majoritarian democratic decisions have a potentially negative impact on future generations. On the other hand, democratic decision-making processes tend to take time, especially when they take place in deliberative fora.

The ability of democratic systems to adequately take into account the interests of future generations and the non-human environment has been debated long before the public sensitivity to climate change. As early as the early 1980s, in the context of the debate on nuclear power, it was discussed whether we were reaching the limits of majority democracy (Guggenberger and Offe 1984). This was because decisions taken today, for example on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, would have a significant impact on future generations, who would have to bear the costs of irreversible decisions. The discussion about the possibility of taking future interests into

account through democratic procedures remains controversial. On the one hand, it is argued that democratic systems would have a better overall environmental record than authoritarian societies (Ward 2008), and there are numerous contributions that promise a turn towards environmental sustainability precisely through „more“ democracy (for many, see Smith 2003). On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the decisions of democratic majorities continue to externalise the costs of a highly consumerist lifestyle. Ingolfur Blühdorn accordingly speaks of a *Sustainable Non-Sustainability* (2020). But even if the optimistic assumption of a self-limiting capacity of democratic societies is correct, a lasting stabilisation of democratic capitalism, i.e., the social formation that underlies the modernisation-theoretical assumptions outlined above, is doubtful. For it was not least the economic growth brought about by the exploitation of natural resources as well as the global South during the three decades after the Second World War that led to a temporary pacification of class conflict in the industrialised nations. In the words of Greven:

> „In view of the growth of an unleashed capitalist economic system, which proved to be seemingly infinite, combined with the global relations of exploitation referred to, there was always still enough to redistribute from 'above' to 'below' in order to secure the acceptance of the given conditions to a reasonably sufficient degree.“ (Greven 1993: 71)

But the times of a consumer capitalism pacifying class conflict seem to belong irrevocably to the past, not only because of the ecological limits of growth, but also because of the looming loss of power of the Western industrial nations. In any case, it is currently not foreseeable to what extent capitalist societies can permanently do without the pacifying effect of redistributive policies. Yet, the increase in temporal complexity is not only a serious challenge in ecological terms, it also affects democratic processes themselves.

It is certainly not appropriate to glorify the past - the 1960s or 1970s, for example - as a golden age of modern democracy. But the various "crises" of the last decade - the euro crisis, the

migration crisis, the COVID crisis, and now the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine - have led to a clear shift of power from the legislature to the executive. Even before these "crises", political scientists spoke of a move towards "post-parliamentarism" (Benz 1998) and "executive federalism" (Dann 2004). On the one hand, the growing importance of the executive can be attributed to increasing supranational integration or to the fact that, for example, pandemics do not stop at national borders. On the other hand, more and more political issues require quick decisions, i.e. the avoidance of lengthy deliberation processes. This was particularly evident when the financial markets threatened to collapse following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, and far-reaching decisions had to be taken within hours. Similarly, during the COVID pandemic, the need to act quickly meant that parliaments were only able to give retrospective approval to the measures taken, which not only entailed a very considerable encroachment on individual freedoms but also placed entire societies in a state of emergency overnight. Admittedly, these developments pose less of a challenge to thin models of democracy in the mould of Schumpeter (1942) than to normatively demanding conceptions of democracy that rely more on a deliberative mode. But even supposedly "realistic" theories of democracy are no longer convincing when elected leaders can hardly make a difference and have to follow a logic For Hartmut Rosa, however, these phenomena are only the tip of the iceberg. He sees a fundamental trend in modernity towards the "acceleration" of social processes, as well as the relationship between people and the living world. The latter can be seen, for example, in the communication between absent people, which, thanks to digital media, now takes place in milliseconds, even over great distances. As a result, according to Rosa, modern man feels constantly rushed and empty. In his view, democracy and acceleration have an ambivalent relationship. Democracy requires social change:

> „Democratic self-determination thus seems to be a central promise of modernity and social acceleration the decisive means for overcoming the inertia of traditions and customs and for

eliminating both material scarcity and social barriers, thus ensuring the conditions for the realisation of human freedom.“ (Rosa 2012: 362)

In other words, if everything remains the same, there is no social progress - recall the second promise of modern democracy mentioned above - nor any significant need for democratic decision-making processes at all, as the first promise of democracy presupposes. However, Rosa continues, social change must be "slow enough for democratic and deliberative processes of will formation and decision-making to actually become effective" (ibid.: 363). This is less and less the case today, with the result that democratic politics 'loses its pacifying role', or at least can no longer credibly claim it (ibid.: 364). It is not difficult to find a number of examples for this diagnosis, such as the largely futile attempts to regulate digital corporations, the fight against tax havens and other tax avoidance strategies, a humanitarian approach to migration processes and, above all, the containment of climate change. In all these areas, it increasingly appears that political action is reactive and far too slow, if it is taken at all, and above all that the scope for democratic action is shrinking. However, Rosa also points to a paradoxical effect, namely that democratisation processes have increased the need for temporal negotiation compared to pre-modern societies, because "modern acceleration societies tend to become simultaneously more pluralistic and more post-conventional" (ibid.: 365). From a normative perspective, both aspects should be seen as positive, but at the same time democratic processes of understanding become increasingly time-consuming because the reservoir of shared beliefs is smaller than in pre-modern or even early modern societies.

However, Rosa does not quite trust the fatalistic consequences of his diagnosis. In any case, he leaves a loophole open at the end of his essay: "The temporal structures of a globalised world seem to have become irrevocably desynchronised with those of democracy" (ibid: 373). There may be similar motives for this as for the closing formulas of the crisis theory literature cited

above. Nevertheless, the argument that the temporal preconditions of democracy have been 'irrevocably' lost should be taken seriously.

Conclusion: Negative ratchet effects and the transformation of democracy

The term 'ratchet effects' expresses that progress has been made in the process of social evolution and that this progress cannot be reversed. In the work of Jürgen Habermas, in particular, one finds what Helmut Dubiel (1989: 509) describes as a fundamentally optimistic view of history, namely the conviction that normative as well as institutional standards have been established in Western societies that "provide a certain guarantee that a democratically developed society will not fall back to a pre-democratic level". Habermas sees the formation of cosmopolitan institutions and forms of consciousness that would prevent a relapse into nationalist patterns of action as such a ratchet effect, sometimes also referred to as a "learning process".: „A mobilisation of the masses through religious, ethnic or nationalist agitation will gradually become less likely the more the expectations of tolerance inherent in a liberal civic ethos permeate political culture also at a national level.“ (Habermas 2008: 327) With these assumptions, Habermas follows in the wake of left-wing Hegelian motifs and also shows the remarkable proximity of his ideas to the assumptions of modernisation theory. However, if one follows the argumentation presented here, one would have to ask whether there might not also be "negative" ratchet effects. Examples of such "negative ratchet effects" are the progressive supranationalisation of political decision-making, the establishment of a common currency area within the framework of the European Union and, last but not least, climate change. The first two can only be described as democratic with considerable conceptual contortions (Jörke 2019). However, the reversal of these supranationalisations would entail very considerable costs and would meet with broad resistance from not inconsiderable sections of the populations concerned (Offe 2016). Moreover, it can be assumed that despite all efforts to generate sustainable growth,

the material scope for distribution in the future is likely to be rather smaller than during the Trente Glorieuses, not least because of the environmental costs of growth.

The question, then, is whether the left-wing Hegelian and modernisationist narratives of progress should be revised inasmuch as the process of modernisation has led not only to the formation of a post-traditional conception of morality and democratic institutions, but also to the exhaustion of those moral, institutional and, not least, material resources on which the process of democratisation rests. Moreover, these processes of individualisation, pluralisation, acceleration, exploitation of nature, and the spatial expansion of economic and political processes have now reached a level that could only be reversed by very considerable social upheaval, and certainly not by "democratic" means. However, such considerations are usually brusquely dismissed in the public debate, which is also largely based on democratic theory.

Instead, to return to the point at which this essay began, "crises" of democracy are identified in ever new loops, but these are regarded as merely temporary blockages in the further progress of democracy. In this way, the possibility that we have for some time been experiencing the "transformation of democracy into something new, something that can only be inadequately described" (Greven 2009: 181, emphasis added) is collectively suppressed, not least by the edifying formulae that usually conclude these contributions.

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