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The Loss of (Democratic) Visions and the Unequal Future

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Democratic Anxieties Paper 5/2017*

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Social inequality is marked by a paradox. On the one hand, after two centuries, the seemingly unbridgeable prosperity gap between the “global North” and the so-called developing countries has shrunk. The real incomes of a majority of the middle class, especially in Asia, rose by 40 percent, which corresponds in part to a doubling of incomes.¹ On the other hand, real incomes fell for parts of the middle classes in wealthy countries—the United States, Japan and European countries. They are the clear losers of globalization. What does this mean for social integration in our societies and what does it mean for democratic politics? To answer this question, we have to delve into three different forms of inequality—economic, political, and cultural—and how they are related.

Economic cleavage

This shrinking of the middle class is already having an impact on social and political developments in Europe and the United States. The decline in support for publicly funded social services—particularly education, healthcare, and social security—is matched by corresponding dramatic increases in spending on private security services, because this is the preferred strategy of the wealthy for ensuring stability.² This increasing divergence between levels of prosperity is also reflected in the supply of consumer goods³: commodity production has shifted to luxury goods and the housing markets in large and medium-sized cities are dominated by offers of upmarket housing, though the promises of luxury are not always matched by the reality. Mobility between social classes has also declined in the OECD countries. Although opportunities for advancement still outweigh the risks of social decline for the middle classes, this does

¹ Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 32ff.

² Since the 1970s, more people have been employed in the area of security in the United States than in any other country, with this sector representing two per cent of the workforce in 2000. In 2010, almost 4,000 German security companies already employed 170,000 workers, reflecting an upward trend that is set to continue.

³ Milanovic, *Global Inequality*.

not apply to those in the bottom two-thirds of the income scale; on the contrary, their risk of experiencing social decline is high.⁴ Therefore, the lower middle class's fear of a loss of social status from which they will never be able to recover is well founded.

Political segregation

This persistent *economic split* is also leading to diminishing political influence by the middle classes. Democracy still works in the formal sense of free elections and freedom of expression; but it is glaringly obvious that our societies are evolving into plutocracies dominated, as Karl Marx would say, by the "dictatorship of the propertied class." This constitutes a problem for democracy. Capitalism can get by without democracy and, indeed, undermines it. That capitalism and democracy stand in a relationship of tension is nothing new, but the friction between them has intensified.

Because the democratic process means that the lower and middle classes could put a stop to the process of economic globalization, at least in theory, globalization's rich beneficiaries have an interest in constraining democracy. In the United States, for example, 80 percent of Americans among the highest income group vote, whereas among the lowest decile this is true of only 40 percent.⁵ Evidently, the low-income portion of the population is already resigned or expresses its discontentment at not being represented by staying away from the polls, while the wealthy are more conscious of their duty to vote and expect greater benefits from doing so. Things are quite similar in Germany where, according to one study, as many as 90 percent of the upper third of society stated that they vote on a regular basis, whereas in some neglected districts in Germany's bigger cities, like Cologne or Leipzig, participation in elections is hardly more than 40 percent.⁶

Of course, political representation is *never* comprehensive. Those who claim to represent "the people" can never actually do so. Whoever says "we the people" must

⁴ OECD, *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008), 169-79.

⁵ Milanovic, *Global Inequality*, 210.

⁶ Armin Schäfer, "Die Folgen sozialer Ungleichheit für die Demokratie," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 4 (2010): 131-156.

be aware that there are always the others, those who are not represented.⁷ At the same time, it does not follow that those who were elected by a majority of the population, and were thereby authorized and become functionaries for a certain time, are the exclusive embodiments of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty—that is, political self-regulation—always involves an element that remains untransferable. Nevertheless, we have reached a point where an ever-increasing portion of the population is no longer represented. In addition, a part of “the people,” which has also been left behind economically, remains deeply if not permanently separated from the elected. Economic segregation tracks political segregation.

Cultural invisibility

No matter how clear the connection between political and economic inequality may be, this mutual reinforcement cannot be understood properly unless we also keep the cultural aspect in mind. In his book *Returning to Reims*,⁸ Didier Eribon describes why his working-class family, which traditionally voted for the Communists, turned to Le Pen. His family not only felt that they were being treated unjustly and were not being properly represented by the traditional parties. They also had the impression that there was a mutual “disagreement”—i.e., there was no shared language to communicate with the political class. The working class and the lower middle class have disappeared completely from the self-understanding of the established political parties, which selectively serve the interests of their own economically secure and more highly educated clientele. The underclass is not only economically weak and politically marginalized; it is also culturally invisible.

According to the political theorist Nancy Fraser, left-wing politics in particular has downplayed the critique of capitalism and devoted its attention to notions of self-realization and the good life, something, she argues, provides real impetus to “[progressive neoliberalism](#).” Vigorous debates continue over such issues as feminism, transgender rights, and antiracism, while precarious working conditions, over-

⁷ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 41.

⁸ Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

indebtedness, unaffordable dental care, and the shame at publicly addressing such problems are, for the most part, shrouded in silence. These tend to go along with differences in taste: while some members of society are experimenting with the latest fusion cuisine, others struggle through life virtually unnoticed with precarious zero-hour contracts and are ridiculed in the media for their bad fashion and behavior. With the rejection of a petty-bourgeois lifestyle and of certain nonliberal values, the Left also abandoned the struggle to recognize parts of the population, and to improve, for example, the living conditions of precarious workers and paved the way for the supposed ideal of the flexible, permanently available, self-responsible entrepreneur.

Right wing populism and the loss of a future

Fraser's critique of the Left resonates strongly but misses key aspects of the current moment. It underestimates the real driving forces of neoliberalism, namely, the political, economic and financial elites who have created a libertarian world in which the state is no longer even able to exercise its controlling function over global market players and banks.⁹ And, Fraser's inference obscures our view of how populist right-wing movements are using cultural membership for their own purposes and are "occupying" this field—highlighting aspects that are unsettling for a liberal Left.

The right-wing populists address all three forms of inequality. In the first place, they address the "social question," though in ways that maintains it entirely within the framework of existing neoliberal economic policy—with the exception of some media-savvy, protectionist slogans of Donald Trump. Secondly, they insist they know better what the "people" is and wants, using referendums and other democratic instruments in purely instrumental ways to confer power on their anti-democratic interests.¹⁰ And, finally, they try to redefine cultural guidelines. They reconfigure national sovereignty, whose economic and political substance has been undermined by globalization, as ethno-nationalism.¹¹ If the states have already lost their economic sovereignty, then

⁹ Josef Vogl, *Der Souveränitätseffekt* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015).

¹⁰ Claudia Landwehr, "Democratic Meta-Deliberation: Towards Reflective Institutional Design," in "Governance, Trust and Democracy," supplement, *Political Studies* 63, no. S1 (2015): 38-54.

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue," in *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger (Polity, 2017).

the right-wing strategy is evidently to create at least something resembling cultural self-determination. The positive revaluation of cultural sovereignty is part of the political platforms of the European right-wing populist parties and has already been realized at the level of the state in the plutocratic tendencies of Trump, Orban, Putin, Erdogan and Modi.

All of these programs are united by a return to what is represented as “our own,” where this idea is fleshed out in terms of ethnic-national origin or, in Germany, the “Völkisch,” notions of cultural homogeneity and the devaluation and suppression of all those who do not fit into this scheme. The Alternative for Germany party (AfD) provided a blatantly clichéd example of this when at a public event it constructed its party logo out of sausages draped over a heap of ground pork. The inbuilt message: We are neither vegetarians nor vegans, we eat pork, uphold tradition and know what “the people” wants! Inequality finds expression not only in the struggle over the distribution of economic goods but also in the struggle for cultural hegemony. What does this triangularity of economic, political, and cultural inequality mean for democracy?

Against the backdrop of these inexorable inequalities, a sense of unease is spreading. For a growing portion of the population, the only promise the future seems to hold is that their living conditions are deteriorating, their cultural esteem is dwindling and their political influence is diminishing. We are witnessing a loss of a sense for the future.¹² We seem to lack a vision of how we can shape our social life so that people can coexist in peace, freedom, and equality in the face of massive inequalities. Utopian, often technologically-based, notions of creating new, groundbreaking alternatives to the current political and economic status quo have been reduced to the development of a new iPhone or a more tolerable body implant. Instead of “No Alternatives,” we have witnessed appeals to all sorts of “Change”; but the talk of change is itself an integral part of neoliberal power.

Emancipatory politics will certainly not be able to find its way out of the impasse of economic, political, and cultural inequality outlined above through small-scale electoral promises of tax cuts, a wish list of environmental protection measures, or tinkering with

¹² Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2014).

neoliberal labor market reforms. What is required is a debate over fundamentally new economic systems: producer cooperatives, employee acquisitions of companies, new forms of profit-sharing, and new forms of lending by states (instead of borrowing from banks). A wealth tax would have to be reintroduced to finance educational programs, affordable housing, and a unified health insurance system. In this way, something like political solidarity across social boundaries and European borders could develop.

Communicative power

We also need to adopt new paths when it comes to democracy. The idea of “communicative power” provides important starting points for democratic participation beyond established institutions.¹³ We can interpret communicative power as a capacity for processing of reasons freely in order to create shared beliefs and trigger will-formation, but without it being focused exclusively on a lawmaking. Even though communicative power in the reading of Jürgen Habermas of Hannah Arendt is directed toward the production of legitimized law at some point, it would be mistaken to reduce it to this role. A lot can happen before laws are enacted. Communicative power arises when a population committed to passive resistance opposes foreign tanks with just their bodies; when the citizens of the former German Democratic Republic oxymoronicly sounded the death knell for a suppressive regime with silent protests; when the protests in Madrid started after someone sat down in the Plaza del Sol and claimed to be too exhausted from the hardships of making a living that he could not go on; when minorities dispute existing law and engage in civil disobedience; and when the sheer exhilaration of action breaks through political movements. However, a simple formal notion of communicative power beyond institutions may not be sufficient—at least not sufficient to counter approaches that adhere to a very specific notion of equality (equality of all “cultures” externally, but homogeneity internally), and even criticize harmful market effects, but which are nevertheless inhumane.

Democracy needs to be expanded *institutionally* in different ways as well. The system of political codetermination in companies, institutions, and at the European level is also

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contribution to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

in need of reform or reactivation. The power to innovate in politics is a function of experimental trial and error by creative individuals—John Stuart Mill spoke in this context of “eccentric” individuals—who develop ideas in cooperation with others and who are not excluded and silenced by administrative apparatuses and efficiency-oriented expert committees, which are generally detached from the lives of ordinary citizens.

Only collective political action can generate the confidence required for all to accept short-term restrictions in their long-term self-interest. In this process, the well-founded interests of the various minorities must not be played off against economically underprivileged sections of the “white” population. It should be permissible to express in public any form of criticism of insufficient cultural representation; however, not every claim is legitimate, not every political vision is necessarily an emancipatory vision.

In the final analysis, however, the loss of the future can be averted only through experimental, political action in the here and now. We have no time to wait for political ideas to be realized in the distant future.

This essay was translated by Ciaran Cronin