

# democratic anⓧieties

## How the Taming of the Class Conflict Produced Authoritarian Populism

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A specter is haunting the liberal political order—the specter of authoritarian populism.<sup>1</sup> Antiliberal and antipluralist, authoritarian populist ideology questions individual and, especially, minority rights. It questions the rights of “others” to limit the “rights” of the majority culture. Part of this antiliberalism is founded on unconditional support for national sovereignty and the rejection of any political authority beyond national borders, in spite of externalities and interdependencies. Authoritarian populism is also “antipluralist” in the sense that it usually contains a deproceduralized and thus homogeneous notion of the majority. These sentiments are often linked to the “silent majority,” those who according to Richard Nixon<sup>2</sup>—do not express their opinions, but represent the will of the people. Authoritarian populism asserts that this collective will is known without public debate or other procedures to generate it. Authoritarian populists pit this supposed homogeneous will of the people against immoral, corrupt, and parasitic elites.<sup>3</sup>

Why did this specter emerge? Is it haunting Europe as part of the democratic process, or does it endanger democracy? It is of the utmost importance to understand the political dynamics that have brought many people to believe that the will of the majority does not count in Western democracies. I aim to provide a complementary explanation of the social and institutional origins of so-called silent majorities by arguing that the

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer the term authoritarian populism to right-wing populism. The term posits this political orientation deliberately on an axis that is orthogonal to the old right–left axis. Indeed, many of the right-wing populist parties have—in economic terms—by now established an agenda that is protectionist and state-interventionist, which puts them rather on the leftist side of the class cleavage. Moreover, the term authoritarian populism does capture both parties like the Nationalist Front (Front National, FN) in Western Europe as well as some authoritarian leaders in power such as Victor Orban.

<sup>2</sup> He invoked the term—“the great silent majority of my fellow Americans”—in his television address to the nation on the Vietnam War on November 3, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> See Jan-Werner Müller, *Was ist Populismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), 42.

class cleavage has given way to a new cleavage: one between cosmopolitans and communitarians.<sup>4</sup>

### *The new cleavage and authoritarian populism*

In ideational terms, cosmopolitanism stands for a political ideology that advocates open borders and a transfer of public authority to the global level and which prioritizes the protection of individual and minority rights. Communitarians, on the other hand, emphasize the constitutive role of communities and identities for the development of social attitudes. In their view, both distributional justice and democracy depend on social contexts that most often are territorially delimited. They emphasize democratic self-determination and are much less in favor of international institutions and regional integration processes than cosmopolitans. Finally, communitarians reject the notion of universal values and tend to subsume individual rights under the majority culture.

A new conflict line has formed, pitting cosmopolitan positions against communitarian ones. The main actors of the cosmopolitan coalition include mainstream political parties, state agents in the government, the judiciary, and the liberal media. The communitarian camp is dominated by authoritarian populists who advocate national protectionism on economic issues and antiglobalization.

### *How can we explain the rise of authoritarian populism?*

According to cleavage theory, cleavages are triggered by social revolutions that create socio-structural divisions. In the case of the new cleavage, the underlying social revolution is globalization, and one can expect that the winners of globalization are pitted against the losers. Two more-or-less competing explanations are well known.<sup>5</sup> The *economic insecurity perspective* emphasizes the distributive consequences of

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<sup>4</sup> I have chosen cosmopolitanism and communitarianism—terms with roots in recognized and respected political-philosophical traditions—in order to emphasize that current conflicts may not be temporary ones between modern and atavistic factions in society, but a much more permanent cleavage inspired by two opposing political ideologies.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash” (Faculty Research Working Paper series 16-026, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2016).

economic globalization and postindustrial transformation. According to this view, it is growing inequality and the rise of precarious working situations that lead to the rise of authoritarian populism. On the other hand, the *cultural backlash perspective* suggests that authoritarian populism is the result of a reaction against value changes indicated by terms like postmaterialism, feminism, and multiculturalism. Both of these explanations point to a relevant part of the current political dynamics. At the same time, they leave challenging questions unanswered.

The socioeconomic explanation raises an important question: Why do the losers of globalization support authoritarian populists instead of leftist parties, which often promise social protection much more clearly? Similarly, the sociocultural explanation of silent majorities leads to the question: Why are international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) the common target of all authoritarian populists, in spite of the fact that neither of them are the spearheads of postmaterial thinking, feminist theory, or multiculturalism? To answer these questions, I want to focus on the political and institutional dynamics that developed during the last decades. I submit that it is necessary to complement the existing explanations for authoritarian populism with a political explanation that points to the path-dependent effects of certain institutional decisions made after World War II.

### *The majoritarian-nonmajoritarian shift*

The core argument of the political explanation is simple. The communitarian emphasis on silent majorities is directed against the cosmopolitan bias of nonmajoritarian institutions. With the rise in importance of nonmajoritarian institutions that govern the contested issues of the new cleavage, the silent majority feels excluded from the political process and consider themselves suppressed, or at least forgotten, by cosmopolitan experts controlling institutions like central banks, constitutional courts, and international organizations. These so-called nonmajoritarian institutions outweigh majoritarian institutions like parties and parliaments, which are the sources of influence for majorities, allowing authoritarian populists to pit the notion of a silent majority against nonmajoritarian institutions. Despite being instrumentalized for

antiliberal and antipluralist purposes, this opposition is based on real institutional changes in Western democracies.

Since the nineteenth century, democratic political systems have been considered those in which parliaments—in connection with parties and the government—play the decisive role.<sup>6</sup> Parliaments are prototypical majoritarian institutions; they decide via majority by elected representatives. The representatives are elected on the basis of a competition between parties. Parliaments and parties thus are majoritarian institutions that embody the idea of popular sovereignty. Nonmajoritarian institutions, like courts and central banks, have always played an important role in democratic political systems as well. Nonmajoritarian institutions can be defined as governance entities “that (a) possess and exercise some grant of specialized public authority, separate from that of other institutions, but (b) are neither directly elected by the people, nor directly managed by elected officials.”<sup>7</sup> In democratic theory, one of their major tasks is to control and to limit the public’s powers so they do not violate individual and minority rights, and thus do not undermine the democratic process. In addition, they implement the norms set by the legislature.<sup>8</sup> International institutions are also nonmajoritarian institutions since they intrude into majoritarian politics based on similar, mostly technocratic justifications.<sup>9</sup> In this conception of democratic rule, parliaments are the norm setters, while nonmajoritarian institutions play a limiting role.

With this distinction in mind, I develop a political explanation of authoritarian populism by showing that recent decades saw a reversal in the relationship between majoritarian and nonmajoritarian institutions. Many nonmajoritarian institutions are now norm-setters. This reversal alienates silent majorities from liberal political systems and helps to explain authoritarian populism. This development can be captured as a result of a causal sequence that starts with the taming of the class conflict and ends with a cosmopolitan bias of nonmajoritarian institutions (NMIs).

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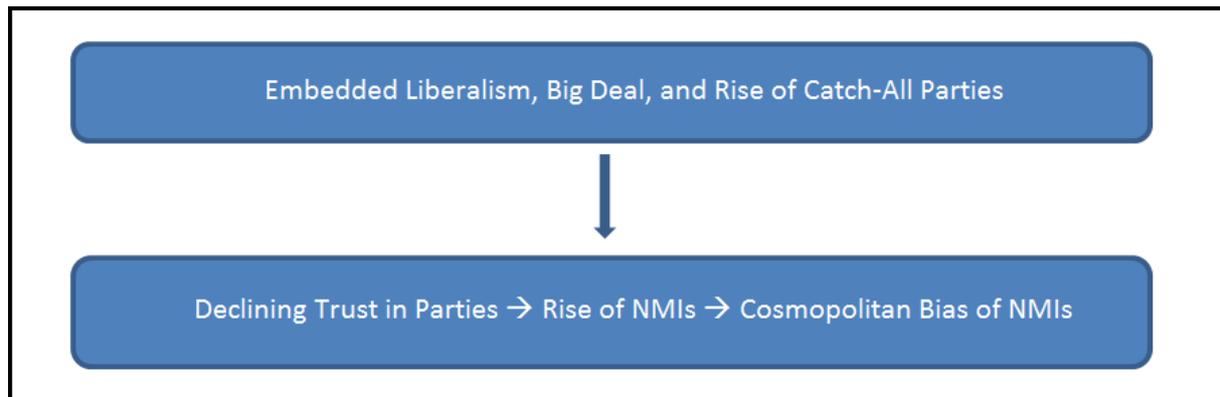
<sup>6</sup> See Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Thatcher and Alec S. Sweet, “Theory and Practice of Delegation to Non-Majoritarian Institutions,” *West European Politics* 25, no. 1 (2002): 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Bruce Ackerman, “The New Separation of Powers” *Harvard Law Review* 113, no. 3 (2000): 633.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert O. Keohane, Stephen Macedo, and Andrew Moravcsik, “Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism,” *International Organizations* 63, no. 1 (2009): 1–31.

Figure 1: The Big Deal and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism



*The new cleavage's effects on domestic politics*

In the very beginning (of this causal sequence), there was the industrial revolution and the rise of the class cleavage between capital and labor. It produced the turmoil and the “twenty years’ crisis” that in turn led to World War II. As a response to the disaster, *embedded liberalism* was established in the postwar years. It institutionalized free trade and open borders, but embedded national political systems that can cushion the shocks and inequalities of the global market.<sup>10</sup> This culminated in a historic compromise between capital and labor in which unions accepted open borders and ensuing economic insecurities, while the export-oriented business associations supported the building-up of the welfare state. This *big deal* changed the party landscape from the 1960s on: most parties weakened their class orientation and strengthened their leadership, and very close associations between ruling parties and the interest groups of capital and labor, called “corporatism,” developed.<sup>11</sup>

Two towering political science figures captured the new political constellation early on. Otto Kirchheimer coined the term “catch-all party” as part of an investigation into political party transformation in Britain and Germany.<sup>12</sup> A catch-all party aims to attract people with diverse political viewpoints, appealing to broad segments of the electorate.

<sup>10</sup> John G. Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” in *International Regimes*, ed. Stephen D. Krasner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 195–231.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Lehbruch, “Liberal Corporatism and Party Government,” *Comparative Political Studies* 10, no. 1 (1977): 91–126.

<sup>12</sup> Otto Kirchheimer, “Der Wandel des westeuropäischen Parteiensystems,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 6, no. 1 (1965): 20–41.

These catch-all parties (in German, ironically, “people’s parties”) got out of touch with the people. As a result, trust in core majoritarian institutions of democracies declined and nonmajoritarian institutions gained power. Nonmajoritarian institutions, however, display a cosmopolitan bias. Accordingly, the new cleavage triggered by globalization was translated in most Western democracies into one between cosmopolitans and nationalist communitarians. Social democratic catch-all parties (center-left) seem more substantially affected than the center-right catch-all parties, because their programs traditionally have both strongly cosmopolitan (internationalist) and communitarian (“people’s home”) roots.

While catch-all parties indicate the decline of class alignment and the need to win elections, they may confront problems of internal discipline, as more traditionally oriented party members and parliamentary representatives may rebel against some of the party leadership’s policy directions. Thus the centralization and strengthening of the party leadership took place. In this way, the *rise of catch-all parties* caused the *decline in traditional political participation*.<sup>13</sup>

As a consequence, party leaders and parties as a whole are increasingly seen as mechanisms to gain and maintain power rather than social organizations promoting a given social purpose. With the rise of catch-all parties, the alienation between parties and representatives and many voters was set on track.

Table 1: Confidence in Parliaments<sup>14</sup>

Confidence in parliament: A Great Deal + Quite a Lot						
Wave	1981–1984	1990–1994	1995–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014
<b>Countries</b>						
<b>Japan</b>	27.8%	28.3%	24.2%	19.7%	21.4%	19.8%
<b>Mexico</b>	27.6%	34.3%	43.2%	20.8%	25.0%	25.0%
<b>South Korea</b>	43.1%	33.9%	31.0%	10.2%	26.2%	25.5%
<b>US</b>	42.1%	-	28.2%	37.1%	19.5%	20.2%

<sup>13</sup> See Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013); Robert A. Dahl, “Reflections on Opposition in Western Democracies,” *Government and Opposition* 1, no. 1 (1965): 21–22.

<sup>14</sup> Source: Compiled from World Value Surveys.

Comparative research on democracy has diagnosed a decline in political participation, evidenced in the average Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country by a steady fall in voter turnout and a marked decrease in party membership since the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Low confidence in party politicians and parliaments followed (table 1). In contrast, constitutional courts, central banks, and other nonmajoritarian institutions were, for a long time, considered as much more trustworthy. In Germany, for example, the constitutional court outscores consistently all other national political institutions. More generally, in all 22 countries covered by the 2008 European Social Survey, people had greater confidence in the legal system than in parliament and parties.<sup>16</sup> International institutions are also grounded in a remarkable degree of positive recognition. In the consolidated democracies of the West, the United Nations enjoys greater political trust than national parties and parliaments (table 2).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Norwegian Social Science Data Services 2011, *European Social Survey Education Net*.

<sup>17</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 34.

Table 2: Confidence in Majoritarian and Nonmajoritarian Institutions<sup>18</sup>

Percent of respondents who have a great deal or quite a lot confidence in the courts, the national government, political parties, national parliament, the EU and the UN						
	Justice	National government	Political parties	National parliament	EU	UN
Italy	51.6	26.4	16.5	33.1	67.2	59.0
Spain	55.6	44.9	28.5	50.8	61.3	59.8
USA	58.2	38.6	15.4	20.3		33.4
Canada	65.6	38.4	23.1	36.5		61.4
Japan	82.0	31.0	18.3	23.2		64.1
Mexico	37.7	44.7	23.9	25.5		53.0
Australia	53.8	40.1	14.3	35.4		45.5
Norway	86.0	54.1	28.6	62.3	44.3	85.2
Sweden	74.2	42.3	33.4	54.9	36.6	78.2
Finland	81.8	64.5	29.1	56.2	36.8	63.7
Poland	32.9	18.2	07.1	12.5	46.2	49.5
Switzerland	76.8	69.3	27.6	57.4	43.5	52.8
Chile	30.0	48.2	19.1	26.2		45.4
Slovenia	32.9	24.0	09.0	16.4	35.9	32.6
Turkey	75.0	62.7	33.0	60.0	30.2	30.4
Germany	56.4	23.9	13.0	22.0	30.6	37.8

### *The rise of nonmajoritarian institutions*

This development translated into a growing relevance of nonmajoritarian institutions in the political process. Increasingly, nonmajoritarian institutions do not only provide a check on and implement decisions of majoritarian institutions, but are key in policymaking and normsetting. In the domestic realm, independent central banks are more important all over the world, becoming more autonomous and important at the same time (table 3).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, constitutional courts increased in importance in many countries.<sup>20</sup> In general, according to a quantitative study, “autonomous regulatory

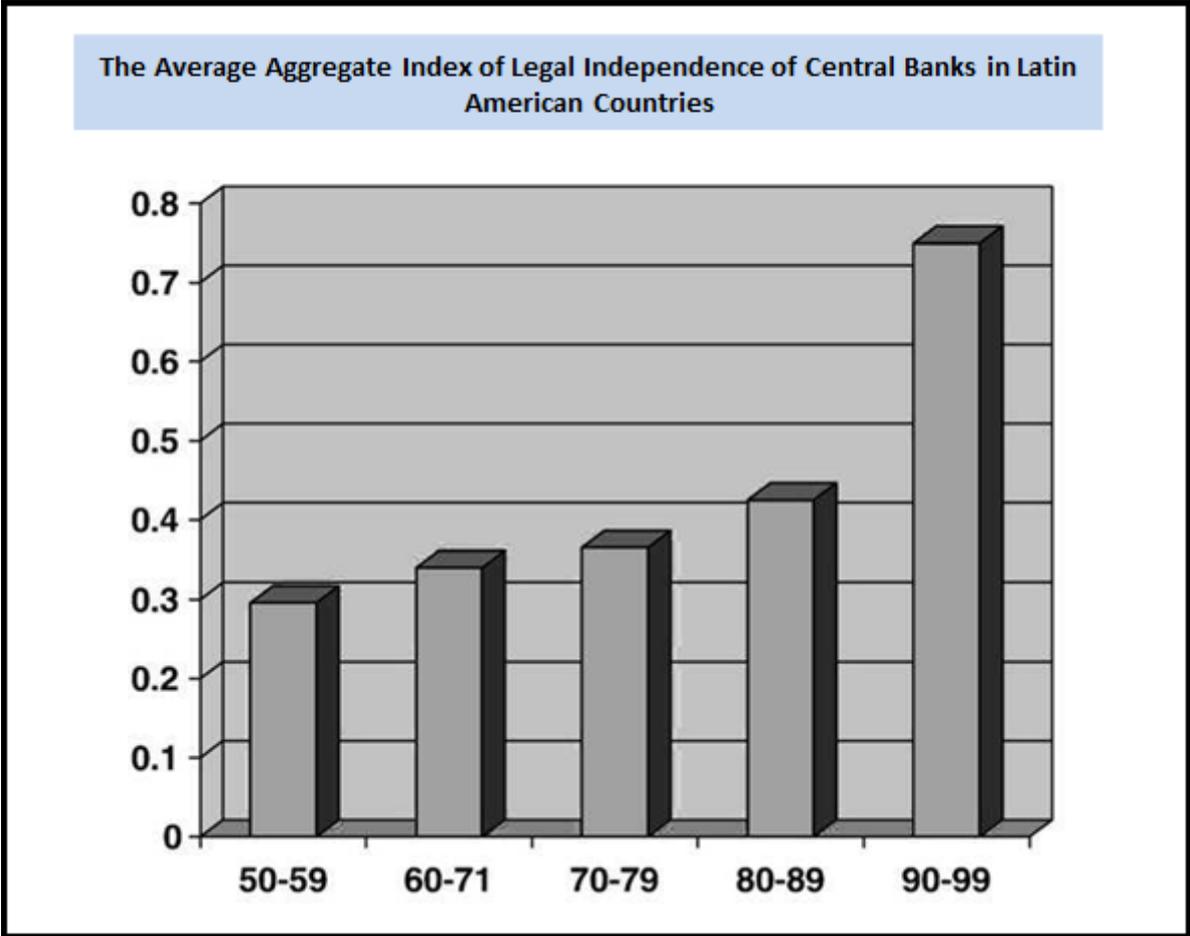
<sup>18</sup> Source: World Value Survey, Wave 5; data collected between 2005 and 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Orit Rapaport, David Levi-Faur, and Dan Miodownik, “The Puzzle of the Diffusion of Central- Bank Independence Reforms: Insights from an Agent-Based Simulation,” *The Policy Studies Journal* 37, no. 4 (2009): 695–716.

<sup>20</sup> Ran Hirschl, *Towards Juristocracy: The Origins and Consequences of the New Constitutionalism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

agencies” now play a role in 73 percent of all policy areas in the countries under investigation.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 2: Central Bank Independence<sup>22</sup>



In addition to these domestic developments, a dense network of international arrangements and organizations that differ in both quality and quantity from traditional international institutions has developed. The new international arrangements exercise authority over their constituent members and, at the same time, intervene profoundly in the internal affairs of countries, undermining the consensus principle of international politics and national sovereignty. The European Union is only the best-known example

<sup>21</sup> Jacint Jordana, David Levi-Faur, and Xavier Fernández i Marín, “The Global Diffusion of Regulatory Agencies: Channels of Transfer and Stages of Diffusion,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 10 (2011): 1–27.

<sup>22</sup> Source: Alex Cukierman, “Central Bank Independence and Monetary Policymaking Institutions – Past, Present and Future,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 21, no. 4 (2008): 722–36.

in this respect; yet it is no longer an exception in the international institutional landscape, but part of a general trend.<sup>23</sup>

The rise of international authority also transforms the role of government along the majoritarian–nonmajoritarian axis. Since governments are elected, they have traditionally been seen as majoritarian institutions. To the extent, however, that the more powerful Western governments are controlling international authorities, they can use international institutions to circumvent parliaments and party members. In fact, the rise of multilevel governance systems, including all the new space created for blame-shifting and creditclaiming, detaches the executive from the legislature and makes government a significant player in the world of nonmajoritarian institutions. The rise of international institutions empowers the executive and weakens parliaments.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, some domestic institutions within democracies, as well as international institutions, became more powerful relative to parliaments and parties in the last three decades. These nonmajoritarian institutions not only implement and control policies—as foreseen by the notion of democratic constitutionalism—they became strongly involved in setting norms and rules.

The *cosmopolitan bias of nonmajoritarian institutions* is the final and decisive step in the causal sequence. Nonmajoritarian institutions are based on expertise and the capacity to make arguments referring to a complex and globalized world, thus excluding people with less education and transnational contacts and thus establishing the cosmopolitan bias of nonmajoritarian and international institutions.<sup>25</sup> Cosmopolitan positions favor open borders, individual rights, and transferring authority to nonmajoritarian institutions.<sup>26</sup> The higher the distance of political actors from majoritarian institutions, the more accentuated the tendency to claim cosmopolitan positions.

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<sup>23</sup> See Michael Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy and Contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Zürn, “Über den Staat und die Demokratie im europäischen Mehrebenensystem,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 37, no. 1 (1996): 27–55.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Zürn, “The Politicization of World Politics and its Effects: Eight Propositions,” *European Political Science Review* 6, no. 1 (2014): 47–71.

<sup>26</sup> Pieter de Wilde et al., *Struggle About Borders: The Political Sociology of Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

While these findings are mainly about the cosmopolitan bias of international institutions, there are good arguments to believe that nonmajoritarian institutions take individual and minority rights as well as international concerns more into account than majoritarian institutions. This development underlies the division between masses and elites on issues like borders, authority transfer, and individual rights. Against this backdrop, slogans like, “They on the top, we on the bottom” become appealing. This division makes the plight of the silent majority attractive, since those who identify with it feel excluded and deprived of their voice. At the same time, the claim that they represent the majority comes across as antipluralistic, since the masses are divided on many issues. The policies of the silent majority in power, moreover, become necessarily illiberal, targeting those nonmajoritarian institutions, such as higher courts, which defend liberal rights against the temper of the majoritarian will. While globalization has triggered the new cleavage, it is the specific political taming of the old class cleavage that led to the idea of silent majorities as a central component in the battle against cosmopolitan elites. In this sense, the opportunity to abuse the notion of silent majorities by authoritarian populists has been endogenously produced by the big deal that domesticated the class cleavage.

What is needed? Nonmajoritarian institutions need to open up and reintroduce majoritarian procedures. Central banks must be moved back to the tasks they performed in the 1980s. Supreme courts may add participatory procedures to legal reasoning. Most importantly, international institutions that exercise public authority need to be opened up for societal participation and introduce sites for public and open-ended debates about policy choices. This is most urgent for the European Union, but applies to other international institutions as well.