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**Tom Schimmek**

**The Grapes of Wrath:  
What the Trump »revolution«  
shares with Europe**

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**The Sellout of American Democracy:  
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**Wolfgang Merkel**

**Trump, the Right-Wing Populists,  
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INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY EDITION

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Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election, a total surprise to Europeans, has provoked three inter-related debates on this Continent that have persisted even after his January inauguration and subsequent clarification of his intentions. To begin with, everyone is wondering how a candidate like Trump could be elected in the USA, the one-time »model democracy,« given that he embodies everything antithetical to a democratic culture. Moreover, people now speculate about whether his triumph is a favorable omen for right-wing, authoritarian populism in Europe. Representative figures of the far-right in important »core countries« of Europe, such as France, the Netherlands, and Germany, waxed euphoric over events in America and claimed that his victory portended the triumph of their own causes. Finally, there is growing concern that the Administration's newly proclaimed »America First« policy might mean that the erstwhile standard-bearer and sheriff of the formerly liberal world order will withdraw from the dicey game of global politics, exposing the latter to hitherto unimagined risks. These concerns over U.S. foreign policy have also raised doubts about whether the EU, itself beset by a host of crises, could fill the gap left by an isolationist America by becoming the new global normative ordering power. And, if not the EU, then who else could play that role?



Today, after we have observed several months of Trump's style of governing, it is still not clear what, exactly, we are witnessing. Is it a new type of authoritarian rule, the true nature of which will be revealed only in stages? Or is it an as-yet unknown variety of government-by-media that combines symbolic showbiz-style politics with highly adept exploitation of the potentialities of social media, turning them against classical journalistic outlets such as TV and newspapers? The latter would not be a difficult maneuver, since the mass media already suffer from declining influence across broad swaths of the public. If the second interpretation is correct, then the »tweeter-in-chief's« spontaneous inspirations and moods will continue to define his relations with the public, eventually piling up contradictions, confusion, and even chaos rather in the Berlusconi mold – an untenable style in the long run.

But Europe – at least the portions of it devoted to democracy, the rule of law, and open societies – is celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> year of its founding by seeking new ways to bolster its capabilities and trying to redefine its role in an unstable world. And it is seeking new partners for an open free-trade regime without which its economic well-being would be seriously jeopardized. Meanwhile, the EU will make every effort to salvage what it can of its once-excellent relations with the United States and carry on a constructive trans-Atlantic dialogue. At this point, no one has any idea how far that will lead. As we know, hope dies last.

*Thomas Meyer*

Thomas Meyer  
Editor-in-Chief and Co-Publisher

*A Conversation with Karsten D. Voigt*

## »Checks and Balances will no longer work«

### The election of Donald Trump is the outcome of a long development and will have far-reaching consequences

*Karsten D. Voigt was elected to the German Federal Parliament in 1976 and assumed a variety of responsibilities there until his departure in 1998, including as an expert on foreign policy. From 1999 until 2010 he served as the federal government's coordinator of German-American cooperation. In an interview with the journal »Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte« he speculates on the reasons for Donald Trump's victory in the November elections, cultural changes in the United States, and the implications for transatlantic relations. Thomas Meyer conducted the interview.*

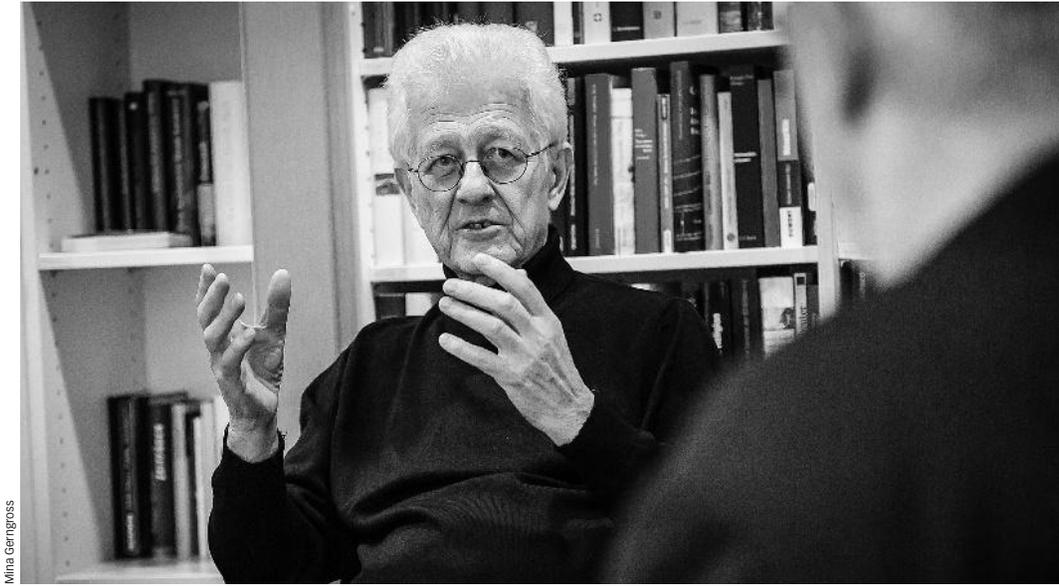
**NG/FH:** Earlier in the election cycle a lot of people said that, although Donald Trump certainly is making quite a stir, someone like him could never be elected in the United States. Did you ever think it was possible?

**Karsten D. Voigt:** From the very beginning I thought it was possible that the Republican Party might nominate him. I considered it unlikely, but not out of the question, that he would be elected. The reason for that assessment is that I spent many years dealing with the Republicans. The party's character has changed over the last couple of decades. After racial segregation was outlawed under Lyndon B. Johnson, many conservative southerners who had never voted for a Republican since the Civil War gradually drifted over to the Republicans. Anti-intellectual and Evangelical elements gained influence. And the demands of a white, poorly educated middle class that felt threatened in its identity and social position also grew more significant. The »Grand Old Party« (GOP), which once attracted the affluent liberal-conservative East Coast elite, has changed over time and for the long run. This change has manifested itself in different ways. The symbols of its new identity include the Tea Party Movement, the prominence of Sarah Palin as the most familiar face of right-wing populism, and the rise of the Evangelicals. Trump succeeded in mobilizing these disparate groups.

**NG/FH:** But then again, Trump is of a different caliber than the conservative Republicans. For one thing, he basically had to be ruthless in shunting aside the party establishment.

**Voigt:** That is true, but the party had been moving in that direction already. Many people who had long supported the Democrats became so-called Reagan Democrats in the 80s and started voting for Republican candidates.

Trump just put the icing on the cake by integrating all these diverse strands into a single campaign against the establishment. In a sense Barack Obama, too, ran and won an anti-establishment campaign against Hillary Clinton in the 2008 primaries. There are right-wing and left-wing versions of the anti-establishment strategy. This



time around, Hillary Clinton symbolized the Washington establishment. And the billionaire Trump cast himself as a fighter against that very establishment.

**NG/FH:** I was surprised to read that there was so much animosity against Clinton all across the country.

**Voigt:** Hillary Clinton not only has opponents; she also has supporters. But many of Trump's backers genuinely hated her. Even a lot of Democrats did not like her and could not bring themselves to cast their votes for her.

Hillary Clinton also had trouble persuading voters who favored Bernie Sanders to turn out and vote for her. She was not able to mobilize the African American population and younger voters to quite the same degree as Obama. If she had, the outcome of the election would have been different.

**NG/FH:** In your view, what was the decisive factor that enabled Trump ultimately to win the election? A lot of people think that his victory signifies the triumph of trash TV over politics, a trend that began with the ex-actor, Ronald Reagan, and now has been ratcheted up a notch.

**Voigt:** I would not see it that way. Obama won on the basis of hope, Trump by capitalizing on fear: the Reagan Democrats' fear that they might lose their jobs in the coal or steel industries; the fear harbored by whites, especially white males, that they are losing their influence in a changing society; the Evangelicals' fear that the Supreme Court will hand down liberal verdicts, especially when it comes to abortion and homosexuality; conservatives' fear that the USA's international position is

eroding. America really is losing power compared to other countries in the world. However, that is not because Obama's policies weakened the United States, but rather because other powers, such as China, have grown stronger.

**NG/FH:** So then what made Trump seem credible?

**Voigt:** Trump lied; he led a dissolute lifestyle that, under normal circumstances, would have deterred an Evangelical from voting for him; he juggled large sums of money on the margins of legality and perhaps shading into illegality. In spite of those negatives, the majority of voters considered him a more credible candidate than Hillary Clinton. That is quite a feat. He pulled off this sleight of hand by exhibiting his own weaknesses as they really are. He did not apologize for them, nor did he try to hide anything. There is an old American tradition: when a person gets caught in some sort of peccadillo, especially when it is of a moral nature, s/he has to go before the public contritely, confess, and then be rehabilitated. Trump completely disregarded this traditional norm. He admitted his weaknesses, but capitalized on them publicly for his own benefit. Many voters respected the way in which Trump stage-managed his own weaknesses in public, seeing it as a proof of his identity, credibility, personality, and anti-establishment behavior.

We have to realize that politics and society in the USA have been polarized in the last few decades. When I meet Democrats and ask about their friends and acquaintances, I notice that the majority of the people they know are also Democrats. Conversely, Republicans have very few Democratic acquaintances. Studies at the local level show that the number of counties with either clear Republican or Democratic majorities has increased during the last ten or twenty years. What this means is that many Americans know only those of their fellow citizens whose attitudes, media preferences, etc. resemble their own. They are absolutely convinced that the number of people who think as they do is much greater than the media report. This is a crucial reason for their anger at the media.

**NG/FH:** During the 60s and 70s much thought was given to the reasons for the failure of democracy in Europe. Scholars often seized upon the famous study by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (*The Civic Culture*), which had concluded that a political culture of democracy had become well established in Great Britain and even more so in the United States. One of the key questions in the study was the following. A Republican might be asked, for example: would it bother you if your daughter brought home a Democrat as her fiancé? In the United States most respondents said that it would not bother them, but the result was quite different in Italy and Germany. So the political culture predisposed Americans to see themselves in a certain light: Yes, we have political differences and debates, but those differences do not stop us from valuing one another as human beings. Now we have the complete opposite, don't we?

**Voigt:** That's true. The political culture of the United States has evolved in the direction of greater polarization, while in Germany it has moved toward greater consensus.

**NG|FH:** Why? What is going on?

**Voigt:** For some years now there has been much less polarization in the broad middle of German politics than there was in the era of the student movement and the conflicts over policy toward the East. But that is changing now: At this time there are signs that a renewed polarization is beginning to take place on the left and right fringes of German politics. This holds true for some elements in the support base of the Party of the Left in respect to issues of foreign and European policy. It is also true across the board of the »Alternative for Germany« party (AfD), which has called into question fundamental, widely accepted democratic norms – above all those of tolerance and the rejection of xenophobia and authoritarianism. In the USA by contrast, the consensus of earlier decades has been replaced by a growing polarization between Republicans and Democrats. The less partisan members of Congress who would not necessarily follow the party line on votes in their respective chambers have lost influence in Congress or have retired. Votes on bills in Congress more and more reflect partisan divisions, in contrast to the way things used to be. And this is true of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This transformation of American political culture is not just something that Donald Trump has brought about; it has been in the works for decades. Increasing polarization makes it much harder for the American system to function properly.

Yet some substantive shifts have occurred as well. For example, when I was a young deputy in the German Bundestag I went to the United States to teach at a Methodist college. There, they denounced me, as a representative of Germany, for the way in which our government was dealing with the Red Army Faction. They claimed to see in this a revival of German authoritarianism. Anyone who has followed the liberal press in the USA during the past few years would have read that Germany still may be so traumatized by its own past that it can't bring itself to take harsh but necessary measures against terrorism. After 9/11 in America, the balance between liberty and security has shifted in favor of security.

But something has changed in our country as well. The majority of Germans in the 50s and 60s identified with American conservatives. Some people probably suspected that there would be fewer prejudices against Germans among the conservatives. On the other hand, people feared that American Jews would harbor negative prejudices. For example, Helmut Kohl still spoke of the »East Coast press,« which was nothing but a code term for the Jewish-influenced press. When you ask Germans today where they feel most comfortable in the USA, the answers include cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Miami, i.e., centers of liberalism and Judaism. Hardly anyone ever mentions the middle of the country unless they are referring to the beauty of the landscapes.

When it comes to the electoral contests in America over the past few decades (except in the case of George H. W. Bush), Germans have preferred the Democratic candidate by a 70 % margin. In the Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton matchup, more than 80 % of Germans wanted Clinton to win. Thus, interestingly, the Ger-

mans' choice was closely aligned with that made by African Americans and American Jews in the actual election. All would have voted (or did vote) for the more liberal candidate in each case.

Thus, it is not only the Americans who have changed. We have changed too. But in our case these changes are often overlooked, because German political culture is evolving slowly.

**NG/FH:** What is in store for the USA? One has the impression that something like a cultural civil war is going to break out eventually. Polarization is growing apace. And now a kind of extremist represents the government and the system of government.

**Voigt:** Even now the Americans talk a lot about cultural wars. These are not battles fought with weapons. Nevertheless, despite all the lip service paid to bipartisan consensus, there are broad differences in American society about the nature of American values (which both sides cite, of course) and how the rival camps imagine America's future.

Here is one example. There are talk shows in the USA just as there are here. The extremes are overrepresented in such broadcasts. So, let us say, here in Germany you might have prostitutes and nuns on the same show. In the United States, by contrast, you have Fox News and MSNBC: in effect one TV channel for the prostitutes and another one for the nuns. What this symbolizes is not only that Republicans and Democrats seldom talk to one another, but that there are fewer polemics in the private sphere. Even in residential areas contacts between the two sides are becoming less frequent.

**NG/FH:** So is there a kind of cultural segregation?

**Voigt:** Yes, and in addition to racial and residential segregation, which still has not been eliminated in many areas, there is segregation between the blue Democratic and red Republican Americas.

**NG/FH:** So what is going to happen next? Will Trump be an opportunist and govern the country in a more or less normal fashion after having tossed a few bones to his voter base – maybe the wall at the Mexican border or something like that?

**Voigt:** I can't predict that. What we can say is that the people we are counting on in the Republican Party to exercise a moderating influence on Trump are exactly the ones who would have been perceived as extreme conservatives and ideologues just two or three years ago.

**NG/FH:** And they have not changed their stripes...

**Voigt:** ...yes, but compared to the Republicans who are dominant today those figures in the meantime have begun to seem relatively moderate and reasonable. The crite-

ria keep shifting. I would conclude from an analysis of Trump's first personnel choices that the elections will lead to a profound break with the past in the United States. The oft-cited checks and balances will no longer work. Congress has Republican majorities in both chambers. The Supreme Court will again lean toward the GOP. And the President is a right-wing populist who is attracted to radical policy schemes. Where are the balances going to come from? One might wish they were there, but it is more likely that there will be a clear rightward shift in policy, and that Trump will define »America First« in a way that downplays or ignores America's commitments to multilateral policymaking.

Of course, »America First« might mean representing American interests in such a way that any country unwilling to yield to them would be at cross-purposes with the USA. By contrast, Obama stood for a policy that, while representing American interests, showed an awareness that American self-interest rightly understood means taking one's partners and their ideas into account as well. To be sure, that did not lead to a multilateral policy of the kind that Germany likes and practices. But Obama's policies did at least pay heed to international legal norms to a greater extent than I expect to see from Trump.

I expect Trump to try to advance American interests in a narrow sense, taking less account of allies and evincing less understanding of the need for international order, at least in comparison with Obama. That is worrisome because Americans continue to be needed as an international ordering power, for example in agreements to limit climate change and weapons proliferation, and in acting as a constructive mediator to defuse numerous crises all around the globe.

**NG/FH:** So this is a turning point that the entire world will feel?

**Voigt:** Absolutely. For instance, the question of whether or not Trump gets along with Vladimir Putin misses the point. That very well might be a positive step. But not every meeting of the minds between Russians and Americans is a positive thing. The crucial questions are these: If there is a Russian-American entente, will the interests of small and medium-sized states go down the drain? And will Russia and the USA agree on the mutual acceptance of spheres of influence in Europe and beyond? Such a deal would run counter to Germany's foreign-policy principles.

**NG/FH:** Still, one cannot expect Trump to deliver on everything that he promised his voters. There are too many contradictions there, and besides, many items will not be feasible for financial or other reasons. Disappointment already seems to have been baked into the cake. Or can Trump distract from those disappointments through a kind of symbolic politics?

**Voigt:** Foreign policy did not play much of a role in Trump's election campaign. Nevertheless, an American president can do many things in foreign and security policy without paying much attention to the mood in Congress or the country. The latitude he enjoys in foreign policy is extraordinarily wide. On the other hand, the

gap between his promises and what he can actually deliver will be particularly wide when it comes to economic policy.

It may also be the case that he can engineer greater approval for himself and his policies by conjuring up negative, emotionally-laden images of »the enemy.« In a way that is similar to the tactics of the AfD, he could try to propose pseudo-solutions to social problems by mobilizing national prejudices. He might call for »jobs for all Americans« instead of »jobs for all.« The outcome of such a strategy might be that he would want to seal off the American labor market by canceling trade agreements, building a wall at the Mexican border, and deporting illegal aliens. I consider it very likely that Trump will try to redefine social problems as ones that require national solutions.

**NG/FH:** How will the resistance against all this be organized?

**Voigt:** One faction among the Democrats will say: We have to set a clear course along the lines proposed by Bernie Sanders. Another faction will retort: We have failed to reach certain people in the middle; therefore, we must redefine ourselves so as to appeal to that group. This is the quarrel that will animate the Democrats in the coming weeks and months. Back in 1982, when the SPD left the government as a result of a realignment that brought the FDP into a different governing coalition, we had this debate inside our own party. This is a typical sequence of events. When reformist or essentially social democratic parties lose power, then there is traditionally sharp disagreement about what changes to make in the party's program. In this respect there is no difference between us and the United States.

**NG/FH:** Are there social movements that will not put up with a rightward drift?

**Voigt:** Yes, there will be movements of that kind. The question is, how long will it take them to become active, and how broadly will they be set up. The first thing that happens following an electoral defeat is a weakening of political self-confidence. After a lost election there will always be people who promise faithfully that they are determined to fight even more tenaciously for progressive ideas. But as a rule defeats bring discouragement and a loss of motivation. That is the reason I believe that the resistance of broad social groups will take shape only gradually.

**NG/FH:** So the outlook is not rosy. After Trump was elected, Jakob Augstein commented that his presidency marked the »end of the West.« The common foundations have been destroyed.

**Voigt:** Heinrich August Winkler would respond to that statement by saying that the West has always been defined by certain norms, standards, ideas, and values, and that there have been recurrent phases throughout its history in which such values were discredited and betrayed. Nevertheless, those values have served as a lodestar. But the election of Trump certainly constitutes a caesura. Unfortunately, develop-

ments in the USA will have a negative influence on the evolution of European domestic policy.

**NG/FH:** Is the United States again anticipating trends that will be felt in Europe somewhat later?

**Voigt:** There are already many trends of that kind in our country. Comments on the election of Trump and its implications have varied widely. One school of thought says: Europe must stick together and defend the values of the West, i.e., democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and humanitarian internationalism. Another faction replies that German politicians have not understood voters correctly. The electoral outcome in the USA, they say, now should signal that a course correction towards the right is needed, partly so that good transatlantic relations can be maintained.

**NG/FH:** Was Trump able to win only because his opponent, Hillary Clinton, was so disliked?

**Voigt:** That is an argument with which I would agree. We should not forget that she already lost one election, against Barack Obama, because he embodied the wish for renewal, while she did not.

*Tom Schimmek*

## **The Grapes of Wrath**

### **What the Trump »revolution« shares with Europe**

It was a shock. Donald John Trump – the unscrupulous one, the inciter of hatred, the enemy of women, the »troll in chief« – was elected the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States in November of 2016. After taking the oath of office at noon on January 20, 2017, he moved into the White House, while his wife, Melania, and their young son, Barron (whom his mother calls »mini-Donald«) returned to New York. Big Donald will assume the supreme command of over 1.2 million soldiers as well as the codes for over 7,000 nuclear warheads. Lots of people would like to dig a very deep hole and jump in headfirst.

But why was Trump's victory such a great shock? Observations, data, and analyses have been available for quite some time. They describe an accelerating process of erosion fueled by strong moods that seems disturbingly familiar to us in broad swaths of Europe. That is why Trump makes us twice as nervous: he is the handwriting on the wall for Europeans.

On both sides of the Atlantic, new-right advocates channel the yearnings of anxious, indignant, and disappointed people into a crescendo of opinion. They are creating a novel world view, a new we, that lives by drawing lines of exclusion: against

»foreigners,« especially Muslims, against tolerance, feminism, »starry-eyed idealism,« and »political correctness,« against global responsibility and all the complicated challenges of modernity, which can simply be denied if the need arises (viz. global climate change). These new-right upsurges are nourished and multiplied in the echo chambers of the new media.

The exact mixing proportions vary, but the basic recipe for their swivet cocktail remains amazingly consistent. Economic reality constitutes the main ingredient, although it may be perceived as more (in the South) or less (in the North) threatening. In either case it changes the self-perception of broad strata of the populace concerning the social structure and their place in it. Now they seek to distance themselves from the supposed elites, politicians, managers, bankers, opinion leaders, and »experts,« who they believe have lied to, deceived, and swindled ordinary people.

This process did not happen overnight. In Austria, for example, Jörg Haider and his successors in the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) fomented and continue to foment anger against the EU, the media, and pretty much everything foreign. They try tirelessly to drive a wedge between the people (always glorified as good, upstanding, and hard-working) and the evil, corrupt »politicians in the governing parties« (assuming of course that they are out of government). And since the 80s the Swiss People's Party deliberately and successfully has pushed public discourse to the right, while continually broadening its electoral base. By 2015 it had become the strongest party in the country. In Italy, the construction magnate and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi has been prime minister four times since 1994. Viktor Orbán, leader of the Fidesz party, was first elected as the Hungarian President in 1998. Even in societies once known for their tolerance, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, the grapes of wrath are thriving. Poland's answer to neo-liberal experiments is the anti-modern, nationalist PiS (»Law and Justice«) party.

Everywhere, one can discern a loss of trust, consensus, empathy, and direction. Everywhere, there are shrewd new leaders whose crude »realities« and simple nostrums are perfectly suited to the contradictory emotional worlds of their confused and growing public.

### **Emotions and French fries**

The Trump disaster in the United States seemed to us like a sudden bolt from the blue, an earth tremor. But in point of fact, the soil along the road to Trump had been vigorously tended and thoroughly plowed for many years. In the United States the decline of the public sphere has been noticeable for over two decades – i.e., since about 1994 when Newt Gingrich (now a close crony of the red baseball cap-wearing Trump) proclaimed the Republican Revolution. Long before right-wing rhetoric discovered Facebook, blogs, and online portals as their new mass media, archconservative talk radio and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News television network ran endless loops of carefully crafted zingers and emotional stories that the army of the outraged consumed every day just as though they were eating their burgers and fries.

All studies show that, in the eyes of many citizens in the United States, the promise of a good life and better future has been broken by elites colluding with

one another. That is one reason why trust in institutions, government, the state, the media, and »the system« is waning rapidly, especially among a growing number of poor Americans who regard the state as a kind of operating system that enriches those who are already privileged. Since the 80s researchers in the United States have noticed that confidence suffers when incomes are stagnating or declining. A majority of Americans today believes that their children will not have better lives than they did.

This assessment is certainly bolstered by economic data. Since 1973 remuneration for labor in the U.S. has become de-linked from increases in productivity. Since the 80s the income of the middle class has stagnated, while that of lower-income Americans has declined. The Obama administration's eight years in office did not make a dent in the trend toward the concentration of prosperity in fewer and fewer hands. A glance at the list of institutions that Americans trust shows that the majority of citizens have, at best, reasonably high levels of confidence only in small business people and public servants who have guns – that is, the military and the police. In this instance the fear of terrorism and crime – another factor that is helping the right wing – outweighs rage against the state. Many people have even grown skeptical about the churches. Below them on the list of trusted institutions, things drop off very quickly. Only around one-third trust the presidency, the health care system, and the Supreme Court; barely a quarter trust banks, the media, and big business, while Congress cannot even muster the confidence of 10 % of the population.

Although this discourse may be the specialty of the right, it is no longer dominated by arch conservatives and Evangelicals. The Tea Party Movement, founded in 2009, was intended as social protest from the very outset – ironically making use of some easily-repurposed components of the libertarian glorification of the market. Their anger is directed less against business corporations than against the political establishment, against »big government.« It demands still lower taxes and an even smaller state. That is the reason why billionaires like Charles and David Koch generously supported this supposedly grass roots movement right from the start.

Here we encounter one of the peculiarities of the United States: The power of big money over opinion formation has by now gotten completely out of hand. Not only do the moneymen pump billions into politics; they have also created an imposing network of think tanks and lobbying groups, including organizations like Americans for Prosperity, that are designed to enter the political fray and act much like parties, but ultimately to serve the interests of their financial backers. Recruitment begins as early as the high school and college level, where wealthy donors also wield great influence.

But there is another unusual feature of American society: It has been more severely traumatized than European societies, mainly due to the many wars it has fought since Korea, most of them regarded as pointless after the fact. There are 18.8 million veterans living in the United States, and violent encounters play a major role in everyday life. One sees this not only in Hollywood movies, but also in the extremely high numbers of prisoners in America (693 per 100,000 inhabitants versus only 78 in Germany).

The third difference is that, with Donald Trump's election, political style in the United States has taken on crude and vulgar overtones of a kind that, in Europe, only openly fascist groups – if even they – would use. Trump is the embodiment of calculated coarseness: brazen, overbearing, vengeful, and highly aggressive. He cares nothing for the rules of decency and agreements; he puts himself forward as the wrecking ball of the establishment. As they might say in Silicon Valley, he is disruptive. In other words, he negates all conventions and accords and smashes their structures, so that he can build something new that he controls.

To cite an example of how the decay of discourse has gotten internationalized, let us note that, in his campaign speeches, Donald Trump lashed out at the way the Germans dealt with refugees («crazy») and foretold insurrections and «radical Islamic terrorism» for that country. Shortly before the U.S. elections a video surfaced on the Internet that had been made by the conservative lobby Secure America Now. It portrayed the future in a so-called ISOG, the imagined «Islamic State of Germany»: Jihadists stroll past the Brandenburg Gate, spend the night in Neuschwanstein Castle, and bow toward Mecca in the Cologne Cathedral. Beer and pork are no longer served at the Oktoberfest, and the Black Forest is full of explosives. »Book your ticket now!«

This vulgar short film was produced by the Texas agency Harris Media, which has clients that include Sarah Palin, Ted Cruz, and the fracking industry, not to mention Benjamin Netanyahu and the British UKIP. Vincent Harris, the young, far-right conservative and Bible-quoting CEO, announces that the trick is to »package special moments well.« The absurdity of the film demonstrates how daunting the challenge is: how does one deal with these far-right cheerleaders who regard fidelity to the facts as a weakness, and to whom humanity and urbanity are anathema.

The American right ranges from the Republican blogger to the Ku Klux Klan, from an elegant big city Republican to a heavily armed militiaman who likes to hunt Mexicans. Trump selected Stephen Bannon, previously chief of the »alt-right« online portal Breitbart News, as the Counselor to the President, his highest-ranking advisor. Because of his elevation, the right-wing fringe will gain VIP access to the White House. Breitbart News, which is also active in Great Britain, announced that it would expand to France and Germany after Trump won the election.

Our nightmares are becoming more and more lurid. We are haunted by images of a new Atlantic Alliance – a NATO consisting of old and new nationalists, right-wing populists, and fascists. The European right was uniformly ecstatic about the trend. Marine Le Pen exclaimed jubilantly that »Brexit and Donald Trump's victory bury the old order. They are the stones from which the morrow will be built.« Frauke Petry, head of Germany's anti-immigrant AfD party, was also delighted («a turning point in history»), as were Viktor Orbán («magnificent»), Heinz-Christian Strache, and Nigel Farage. Geert Wilders remarked in – to no one's surprise – Breitbart News: »On both sides of the Atlantic we are experiencing the same rebellion.«

### **Stuck on the defensive**

By contrast, the left and liberals in the USA have been forced onto the defensive even under Obama. One-time Presidential candidate and Hillary Clinton opponent

Bernie Sanders recently calculated that the Democrats had lost about 900 seats in elections for state legislatures during the previous eight years. This may have occurred because they are now seen less as pioneers than as traitors: as »corporate Democrats,« friends of Wall Street and other influential power brokers, who are no longer able to present any scheme that offers new perspectives and promises real change. Sanders, who is often falsely written off in this country as a left-wing populist, was the only candidate during the overly long U.S. presidential election campaign to have created a sense of excitement about a possibly progressive future. He did so by offering proposals that, seen through a German lens, are classically social democratic: economic reform in the interest of the have-nots; stricter rules to rein in campaign spending, a reform of the justice system aimed at reducing the number of people incarcerated; tougher environmental standards in the fight against climate change. It is sobering to think that a package of measures like these should count today as a »revolution.«

One will encounter a comparably depressing picture in many countries in Europe as well as the institution of the EU itself: The progressive side shows little fighting spirit and has been discredited in the eyes of the voters. On the other hand the new right has created a paradox: It is profiting from anxiety about the depredations of untrammelled markets, while it fuses the neo-liberal credo (which created those very unregulated markets) with the promise of national self-determination and prosperity. That is more absurd than ever, but it is a trap that catches the unwary.

Trump was a shock; let's not let him turn into an agony.



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*Josef Braml*

## **The Sellout of American Democracy**

### **The case for a regulated market economy**

Ever since the real estate bubble burst in 2007-08, unleashing a global economic and financial crisis, the American dream of a society of homeownership and social advancement has faded. The realities of life in the USA today include growing social inequality, dwindling social mobility, a government that consists mostly of millionaires who enact laissez-faire policies that serve the economic interests of their even more well-heeled campaign contributors, and the political impotence of the majority of the population.

The property owning class has long set the tone in the »land of the free.« Even the wealthy founding fathers, the architects of the American constitution, built cer-

tain clauses into that document that would assure them control of their property and deny most Americans the opportunity to participate in politics (especially blacks and women). Industrialization culminated in the concentration of economic and political power. As early as 100 years ago, in the Gilded Age, the United States was already in the grip of the »robber barons.« The power of the »trusts,« the monopolies created by Rockefeller, Carnegie, and other titans of industry, was not broken until the progressive movement set to work cleansing politics of corruption. Economic activities were taxed and regulated.

Today we need a new progressive movement more than ever. Politics and the economy in the USA are again dominated by oil tycoons, the military-industrial complex, real estate and financial empires, and by the giants of the media and information technology sectors. The rulers of Google and Apple, the nouveau riche »silicon sultans,« have now joined the old-school robber barons at the top. »Today's tech billionaires have a lot in common with a previous generation of capitalist titans – perhaps too much for their own good,« writes the *Economist* in a report well worth reading on America's new »supermen.«

Things are again getting exciting in American democracy. Louis Brandeis, a Supreme Court Justice from 1916 to 1939, supported the progressive movement and opposed powerful corporations, monopolies, and corruption. He became convinced that democracy could not survive if so much wealth and political power were concentrated in so few hands. Most of his successors on the Supreme Court have had far fewer worries in this regard. For example, their decisions in cases involving campaign finance have bestowed upon political entrepreneurs unlimited scope to spend billions exercising their right to free expression and thus to influence politics in their own interest.

Thanks to the Supreme Court's constitutional interpretations, interest groups and wealthy individuals can now make their voices heard before a wider audience. Even the voices of the political parties are drowned out by the crescendo. In this way, parties – which are in any case little more than machines designed to contest elections – are losing even this residual function to interest groups. In consequence, when it comes to the business of governing, the so-called representatives of the people are not subject to party discipline. As individual political entrepreneurs, they represent mainly the interests of their campaign donors. Thus, in the American political system there are no parties as we understand them: i.e., organizations that might also heed and aggregate the voices of the socially disadvantaged, and integrate them into the political process. In the United States, politics is carried on by like-minded people brought together in issue-specific networks of politicians, lobbyists, media representatives, and experts.

The Tea Party, a so-called grass roots movement, furnishes one example. Although the movement's name may conjure up politically romantic images of local-level democracy reaching back to frontier days, in fact we are dealing with artificial turf here, which has been tended by, among others, the oil billionaires Charles and David Koch. The Tea Party did not emerge from local activism, as one would expect of grass roots movements; instead, it was financed by economic interests, cultivated

by lobbyists, and given enough of the limelight by political media that it could grow – all to achieve radical objectives. Even though it might not be possible to abolish the state overnight, the Tea Party and its backers did manage to create gridlock in the political process, which was probably what they intended all along.

Anyone who, like the Koch brothers, wants to do everything possible to prevent having his business interests taxed or regulated would also be well-advised to invest in Congressional elections, since both chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate, often can block whatever the president might choose to do. And powerful campaign donors will make sure this continues to be the case, since their financial blessing will help decide whether 535 individual political entrepreneurs win or lose their elections to Congress. Of course, money alone cannot guarantee that anyone will win a seat in Congress, but it certainly enhances the probability of success. The Center for Responsive Politics calculates that, in recent years, nine out of ten races for the House of Representatives have been won by the candidate who was able to spend the most money. In the Senate, the top spenders win 80 % of the time. Thus, it takes at least two million dollars to defend one of the 435 seats in the House every two years. To become or remain one of the 100 Senators, a candidate must spend on average more than ten million dollars every six years. Congresspersons elected to the House on the strength of their Tea Party affiliations have been especially likely to engage in blockades of the system and intransigent opposition. They refuse to compromise because doing so could amount to political suicide. The gridlock that has endured since the 2010 midterm elections between Congress and President Barack Obama will continue even under Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, politics will have to be more pro-active to get the U.S. economy back on track and keep it in high gear. By printing money, the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank so far has been able to avert economic collapse and stimulate moderate growth. The Fed's balance sheet has ballooned to a total of 4.5 trillion dollars. In this manner it has pumped enormous sums of cheap money into the economy, more than many experts would have imagined possible. But all it has accomplished is to buy time or, in the worst case scenario, ensure the formation of more financial bubbles. It is remarkable – indeed alarming – that in spite of the low interest rates set by the Federal Reserve and the indirect economic stimulus provided by low energy prices, the U.S. economy still hasn't quite moved into high gear.

To boost the feeble real economy, policymakers will have to act very quickly by investing in infrastructure and education as well as reforming the tax code. Such moves should help ensure that inequality of income and wealth do not continue increasing, a trend that would overburden the economy still more. If one examines the distribution of income and wealth in the United States more closely, it becomes obvious that the gap between haves and have-nots has widened. Not only does such drastic inequality have explosive implications for American society; it also directly hampers efforts to get the economy back in gear.

Today it is already becoming apparent that Europe can no longer rely on the purchasing power of an American populace beset by such serious social and economic problems. European economies will have to abandon the fantasy that, someday soon,

a credit-driven American consumer locomotive will pull the global economy out of its doldrums. The economies of Europe, tremendously dependent on exports, should figure out more realistic ways of stimulating their internal consumption such that sustainability and generational justice are respected and the political systems stabilized.

When states are no longer able to generate material security for the great majority of their inhabitants, established orders begin to totter. Anyone who really understands the »interdependence of the orders« (a term coined by Walter Eucken, the leading thinker of the social market economy) recognizes that democracies even today are not immune to the loss of freedom. Illicit economic power can be traced back to the failure of the state to preserve competition by inserting it into a framework of laws and regulations. Conversely, powerful business enterprises and their associated interest groups can influence politics – indeed the very rules of the game that govern political contests – for their own purposes, i.e., deregulation and the maintenance of their own privileges. Unsurprisingly then, there already has been a worrying concentration of economic and political power in the United States, above all in the areas of media, information technology, financial services, and the armaments and oil industries. These actors want to obtain still more of the society's total wealth by influencing politics, especially by weakening legal rules and corraling tax breaks and subsidies for themselves.

To prevent the state from becoming the political football of special interests, economic and political power must be supervised and thus kept within limits. To some extent, that checking function will be exercised by the state under the rule of law and subject to the separation of powers. But an additional check should be provided by competition duly constituted and regulated by the state. When markets are kept open, private property made secure, the freedom of contract respected, and the liability principle validated, the power of economic institutions is lessened and, when it does occur, it is not as deeply entrenched. By contrast, a so-called free market economy left to its own devices and governed by the laissez-faire principle leads unerringly to the concentration of economic and political power – to an entrenched, uncompetitive market economy in which interest groups control politics.



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*Astrid Franke*

## **Racism in the USA and the Inertia of Social Orders**

So now we will not have a chance to witness the first woman to preside over the White House; instead, in an equally evocative turn of events, the first man without prior political experience in public office will take over. A woman, a populist, and,

eight years earlier, the first African American to serve as President of the United States: In each case, many observers regard the election of an individual to an important leadership position endowed with political and symbolic power as a historical turning point, in isolation from the processes that ordinarily define the life of a nation. Accordingly, there were many, including Barack Obama himself, who interpreted his presidency as a symptom of a post-racial society – an assessment that today would be shared by very few people. Still, if Hillary Clinton had won the election, there undoubtedly would have been someone who likewise would have proclaimed the arrival of a post-feminist and even gender-neutral age. We have a tendency to extract particular events from the flow of history and identify them with specific individuals; thus, we subject complex relationships and the sequence of events within them to a twofold reduction.

A glance at race and racism in the United States may modify that point of view. The point here is not just to move beyond the oft-discussed tension between the system and the individual's power to act. Rather we wish to highlight the perhaps surprising continuity of social orders perceived to be unjust and undemocratic – ones that many people thought had been overcome. So in this case we will reflect upon the most recent history of the relationship between two groups, recognizing how important it is to avoid getting infatuated with snapshots. Instead we need to bear in mind the process character of social relationships and the durability of power structures. This insight may enter into the analysis of current events; it also may sharpen our awareness of trends taking place outside of the United States. In the following essay I will show that the events surrounding the shootings of black men as well as the growing strength of a »new« social movement have led to a revision of standard social interpretations. These revisions have occurred both in respect to the order that prevails between the races and (in a second phase) in respect to the history of resistance against it.

The past few years have witnessed a series of cases in which black men lost their lives at the hands of the police. Of these, two stand out especially for having sown doubts about whether Obama's presidency really represented a turning point in race relations and whether the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement were and are as durable as we sometimes imagine: namely, the deaths of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida, and of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Even though there had been previous indications that racial conflicts persisted, these two events raised public awareness of the continuity between past and present. To understand why this was so – to »decode« the events as it were – we need to place the circumstances of the killings as well as their symbolic significance in a historical context. In the case of Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African American, outward appearances became a crucial aspect of the events and the discussion they provoked. On the evening that he seemed suspicious to George Zimmerman, the coordinator of a neighborhood watch, Martin was wearing a hoodie (a sweatshirt with a hood). In the public debate about Zimmerman's actions, this fact was cited to make it seem as though the young African American somehow were partially responsible for his own death: After all, hadn't he dressed in

»gangsta style« like a criminal? The fact that a young man made himself look suspicious simply by wearing a hoodie paradoxically reveals the significance of skin color. It is not so much the article of clothing itself that evokes associations with criminality, since when whites wear hoodies they symbolize athletics, casualness, and leisure. But when worn by a black youth, the same type of sweatshirt gives rise to actions and statements that, if they were accompanied by references to skin color, would readily be identified as racist. But now those same actions and statements take a more circuitous route, via references to clothing. A person now can fall under suspicion of being a criminal simply because of the way he is dressed.

The deep symbolic significance of this article of clothing was repeatedly brought up during Zimmerman's trial and, not least, by the Million Hoodie March that took place in New York in March, 2012 as a protest against racism and in favor of greater justice, and which, incidentally, was supported by members of the Occupy Movement as well. The name of that demonstration was an allusion to the Million Man March of October 16, 1995, in Washington D.C., by means of which black men wanted to express their resistance against the humiliations inflicted on them by racism. This protest too, along with its symbolism, had precedents: most notably the strike by black Memphis sanitation workers on February 11, 1968, during which the latter carried signs saying »I am a man.« It was in the context of this strike that Martin Luther King came to Memphis and was assassinated. The Memphis garbage strike and its themes of protest and resistance display certain parallels with the case of Trayvon Martin on another level: A jury acquitted Zimmerman of the charge of second-degree murder in July of 2013. That, in turn, precipitated the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which carries on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

Let it be noted that it was not just the shooting of this African American teenager, but also the absence of a guilty verdict and thus of any legal punishment for the deed, that moved people in the fullest sense of that word. The indignation, rage, and grief – but also the affirmation of identity and solidarity that were expressed in social media under the relevant hashtag in the aftermath of Zimmerman's acquittal – are not reactions to the racism of an individual person, but rather a response to the inherent racism of the institutions of the law. To a great extent the legal system itself, as well as the ways in which it is interpreted and administered, seems to treat African Americans differently, on one hand punishing them more harshly than others, while on the other being more lenient when they are the victims of deadly force. It is these circumstances that create the impression that black lives are valued less highly than white lives. A specific detail of the events surrounding Michael Brown's death in Ferguson reinforced that impression in a quite striking way: Once again an unarmed black youth was shot by a policeman following an altercation; again the African American's appearance was cited as a justification for the shooting; and again it was hinted that the victim was somehow complicit in his own death. The one detail that demonstrated the power of the white authorities most forcibly was the decision to leave Brown's corpse lying on the pavement for hours – an act of negligence that reminded Europeans of the days when dead bodies were pub-

licly exhibited as a deterrent and signified that the dead man was to be humiliated. When we consider the Ferguson case in tandem with the story of Trayvon Martin, it becomes absolutely clear that these are not just unfortunate, isolated events, whether in respect to the perpetrator or to the victim. Instead, they point to a systemic problem, the essence of which is the lesser value assigned to black lives.

This undervaluation was codified in law during the age of slavery, in which black people counted only as property and as such had only an exchange value. Once slavery was abolished, black people were gradually granted civil rights, only to have them taken away again. Whatever rights the law may have entitled them to, the relevant point is that African Americans were deterred by a reign of terror from exercising or laying legal claim to those rights. That terror acquired a permanent organizational form in the Ku Klux Klan, but even in its absence ad hoc groups would assemble, ranging in size from relatively small ones to mobs numbering in the thousands, with the express purpose of tormenting and killing black men, often in the cruelest possible ways. Local authorities often turned a blind eye to these acts of mob violence, while over and over again the perpetrators were acquitted, as happened most notoriously in the case of the 1955 murder of Emmett Till.

### **Complicity of the legal system with forms of racism**

Nowadays, the legal system's complicity with forms of racism is being discussed mainly in terms of the above-average rate of incarceration of African Americans. Michelle Alexander, a law professor, and the sociologist Loïc Wacquant have identified a new form of segregation and control centered on the prison. In this context it is also worth noting the role played by the more frequent imposition of the death penalty on African Americans. Furthermore, the persistence of analogous racist structures in many sectors of society has been recognized and discussed for some time now. The sociologist Thomas Shapiro has pointed out that, while the income gap between whites and blacks may be closing, inequalities of wealth are actually on the rise. Using the example of Nashville, the urban historian Benjamin Houston has shown how residential segregation has changed due to city planning but not actually decreased since the 60s. Finally, the sociologist Joe Feagin has for some years conceptualized systematic racism and the mental framing that underlies it. There are some indications that the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, especially those in the area of voting rights, represent nothing more than one small victory in the broader struggle for greater justice. It appears that many forms of racism can persist in slightly altered and perhaps more subtle forms.

But there also has been continuity in the resistance against continuing injustice. The events depicted here show that the Civil Rights Movement is not a finished project that began with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott and ended with the assassination of Martin Luther King. A point of view that focuses less on individual personalities and more on ramified networks and organizational forms can offer a longer-term perspective on resistance to the racism of the existing order. The historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who calls this phenomenon »the long Civil Rights Movement,« traces protests against segregation (e.g., public transportation boycotts)

back at least to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even at the (alleged) end of the Civil Rights Movement it becomes clear that social movements can and do survive in altered forms, sometimes retreating to the local level, but then returning to the public arena with renewed vigor. Many groups, including the »Dream Defenders« (whose name alludes to King's »I have a dream« speech of August 28, 1963) and of course Black Lives Matter do appropriate the forms of protest and the symbolism of the Civil Rights Movement, while also diverging from it for various reasons. For Black Lives Matter the core issue is not just civil rights, but rather human rights and dignity for all. In respect to organization they reject the model of charismatic leadership and instead prefer grass-roots structures, in which women, especially, now play a significant role. And of course new forms of communication offer a menu of options for networking between traditional organizational structures and new media – at least that is the optimistic vision shared by many activist groups. It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to maintain a decentralized organization while still planning coordinated actions, and whether a coherent protest movement can be forged from these elements. In any event, the significance of Donald Trump for the long-term outlook on black-white relations among Americans may be less pronounced than many people fear.



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*Wolfgang Merkel*

## **Trump, the Right-Wing Populists, and Democracy**

When asked not long ago whom he would vote for on November 8, 2016, if he were an American, he replied unhesitatingly: »Trump. I am just horrified about him, but Hillary is the true danger.« »He« in this case is not just anybody; he is Slavoj Žižek, the neo-Marxist philosopher of the last decade, and a pop star of the Internet. We can assume that Žižek could only have been horrified by his own bold endorsement the morning after the election.

In the meantime the unspeakable has happened: Donald Trump was elected as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The New York billionaire, serial declarer of bankruptcy, chauvinist, sexist, the man with the baseball cap and the bad manners, a bigmouthed »Me Inc.« is now the most important politician of the (Western) world. Will he change the world in such disastrous ways as his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, did during his presidency? What lessons can we learn about the state of democracy in America from the campaign, the elections, and Trump's political program? Is Trump a uniquely American phenomenon, or is the United States once again holding up a mirror to the Europeans, showing them what their future

will look like, as Alexis de Tocqueville put it in his classic, *Democracy in America*? Is Trump's electoral victory the revolt of those who have long felt unrepresented by the establishment, the »political class,« the media, public discourses, and an economic system that constantly generates more inequality? Is right-wing populism now arcing across the Atlantic, too?

Prominent theorists of post-democracy from Colin Crouch to Jacques Rancière offer, among others, one crucial argument: in the post-democratic age, elections have deteriorated into an empty ritual. They simulate democracy rather than constituting its core element. Substantive matters play no role, or – if they do – the programs put forth by the putative political »rivals« have become indistinguishable. Like so many of the arguments advanced by theorists of post-democracy, this one is only half true. Indeed, neither the political programs presented in pre-election speeches nor those reported by the media carried much weight. What dominated the 2016 presidential campaign was mudslinging, i.e., personal attacks by one candidate against the other. »Crooked Hillary,« corrupt Hillary; she doesn't belong in the White House; she should be locked up in prison; she lies, she deceives; she and her husband are enriching themselves, earning millions by mixing up the activities of their charitable foundation with personal speaking engagements by Bill Clinton in Qatar or by Hillary to representatives of Wall Street. The Democratic candidate gave as good as she got: »Donald« was/is a sexist, racist, and chauvinist who harasses women, insults Muslims, makes fun of handicapped people, calls Latin American immigrants rapists, discriminates against African Americans »just like his father,« and chronically evades taxes. There is little doubt that the American political campaigns of 2016 did indeed mark a historic nadir for democratic elections.

Where the post-democratic speculation misses the mark is in its claim that there are no differences between the programs on offer. In point of fact, the platforms of Clinton and Trump did differ substantially. Trump adopted old neo-liberal formulas: cut taxes so that the investors will invest; get the economy growing and then jobs will come back from Mexico, China, Japan, or Europe. His proposals echo the famous napkin sketch drawn by Ronald Reagan's chief economist, Arthur Laffer, early in Reagan's first term, to convince the late president that tax cuts not only would boost investment and GDP, but would also bring more revenue into government coffers. George W. Bush, another economic layman, followed the same seductive recipe a decade later. In both cases, those policies led to the largest increases in public debt that American democracy has seen to date. And now comes Donald Trump. A tragedy of fiscal policy looks as though it will be followed by a farce. In this instance Trump will be adopting plans that presumably collide with the economic interests of the (white) working class that he »discovered.« In this respect, at least for now, he is not following the more recent trend among European right-wing populists, who have frequently moved away from their neo-liberal origins and gradually embraced social-nationalist programs.

Trump's proposals on foreign trade will elicit confusion even if they do not provoke a trade war. In President Trump's simplistic, Republican-populist view of the world, it is China, Europe, and the »disastrous« NAFTA treaty that have been steal-

ing American jobs. Free trade agreements should be rolled back and punitive tariffs should be slapped on products from Asia and Europe if they don't conform to the economic ideas of the USA. It is this bizarre mishmash of neo-liberal tax-cutting and deregulation at home coupled with protectionist threats aimed at foreign countries that the billionaire is offering to his countrymen and threatening to impose on the rest of the world. Trump's plans for economic policymaking are squarely in accord with the national-protectionist programs of most right-wing populist parties.

In the United States the social welfare state is underdeveloped. There are historical reasons for this fact: the sanctity of private property, the ideology of the minimal state, the weakness of labor unions, the absence of a workers' party, and the dominance of an especially crude, untrammelled version of capitalism. So it was considered one of the great successes of Barack Obama's first term in office that – despite the rabidly obstructionist policy of the Republican opposition – the President was able to offer health insurance even to low-income Americans through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010). By contrast, to Trump the Affordable Care Act (aka »Obamacare«) is nothing but a disaster. Consequently, backed by his supporters, Trump and the Congressional Republicans are now attempting to roll back even this modest effort at social-welfare-state reform. Thus, he is again showing his true colors as a neo-liberal resister of the social welfare state.

The biggest question marks concern foreign policy. Initially, Trump said little about what his policies would be, partly because he was a novice, and partly because he probably did not want to give away his negotiating positions in advance. But now, after several months in office, he has made his priority clear: »America first.« Trump sees international relations as a zero sum game. Hence, he wants to use American power to intimidate and outmaneuver other countries, especially in trade deals which he regards as his area of expertise. He has little use for notions of international cooperation, compromise, and »win-win« policies. Instead, he believes that if the United States is tough enough, it will get what it wants by sheer bullying. After all, he assumes, other countries need the USA more than it needs them. That is the reason why he has already jettisoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, threatened to tear up the Paris Climate Accord, and opined that NATO may be »obsolete.« Likewise, he has undermined the United States' bilateral relationships with key allies and friends. He insulted and humiliated Mexico, shocked the Australians by threatening to renege on an agreement to take some refugees from them, and alienated many Arab countries by promising to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

### **Imperial Overstretch**

Things could get uncomfortable for China and Europe. The United States already has asked Europe to contribute more toward NATO financing, arms procurement, and military operations. Moreover, Trump may double down on another favorite trick of American industrial policy: initiating lawsuits against European (German) firms. Likewise, it remains to be seen whether Trump will try to fight back against China's authoritarian-statist policies on merchandise and capital exports. Even before taking office, Trump appeared to question the »one China« policy, a move

that does not bode well for the stability of international relations. And, in a quite undiplomatic way, he has opened several new fronts in foreign policy. Amid all this the USA might learn what imperial overstretch means.

Donald Trump won the election, at least in the sense that he won a majority in the Electoral College. In addition, the Republicans now have majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Finally they control governorships in a majority of states and both chambers of 31 state legislatures (a key issue since governors and state legislatures draw electoral district boundaries). What enabled Trump and the GOP to win were the semi-democratic »winner takes all« or »first-past-the-post« electoral system combined with the archaic Electoral College, in which state-by-state electoral votes rather than the overall national popular vote determine the outcome. Like Al Gore against George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton received a slim majority of the popular vote (a margin of 2.7 million votes), but her victory was transformed into a defeat by the Electoral College system, in which she won only 232 electoral votes versus Trump's 306. Voter participation in the Presidential elections was 59.8 % of eligible voters over 18 years of age (a statistic that excludes many otherwise eligible felons who are barred from voting – in some states for life): not impressive but much higher than the voter participation rate usually is in midterm Congressional elections (e.g., 2014), when 35 % is considered a good turnout.

Pippa Norris, a renowned scholar at Harvard who studies democracy and voting, has been investigating the integrity of elections in democracies and autocracies for many years. Of 153 countries studied, the United States ranks only 52<sup>nd</sup>, an extremely poor outcome. Germany is in seventh place, while countries such as Croatia, Greece, Argentina, Mongolia, and South Africa all rank ahead of the USA. There are several reasons for the questionable integrity of American elections: the enormous influence of wealthy private donors upon campaigns and electoral programs, the frequent use of »gerrymandering« (the manipulative redrawing of electoral district boundaries to favor one party), a system of voter registration that effectively discriminates against African Americans and lower-class citizens, extremely low turnout for Congressional elections, the first-past-the-post-system itself, and the shamefully inadequate number of polling places given America's level of technology and economic power. Long lines outside polling places, much as one might see in a country like Bangladesh, now define the familiar public image of American elections.

American democracy is known for its elaborate checks and balances. Controls exercised by one branch of government over the powers of the others are especially well developed: Congress and the executive branch (the Presidency) may be controlled by different parties; the American federal government has a relatively weak position vis-à-vis the states within the federal system itself; and the Supreme Court possesses broad powers of constitutional interpretation. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful such bodies in the world. However, for the time being Congress's ability to check the executive branch will be fairly limited if Trump manages to mend fences with the Republican establishment and unite the GOP behind him. Still, the Republican majority in the Senate is a relatively slim 52-48, so that chamber may not always

support his initiatives. But when it comes to making appointments to the federal courts, including one vacancy on the Supreme Court, Trump made it clear during the campaign that he would nominate a hand-picked conservative Justice, which he has done by choosing Neal Gorsuch of Colorado. The Senate Republican majority will not want to pass up a chance to shape the Court in a conservative direction for years to come. Yet Supreme Court nominees have to be confirmed by a qualified majority of 60 Senators, which means that at least eight Democrats would have to vote for Trump's pick or that the GOP leadership will have to change the rules of the Senate such that a simple majority would suffice to confirm Gorsuch and any other future Supreme Court nominees (this is called the «nuclear option»). The current alignment of political forces places fewer limits on President Trump than were intended by the Constitution. Indeed, he may have a freer hand than any Republican President has enjoyed since the 20s. The «mainstream media» (as Trump calls them) and watchdogs in civil society will have to take on a vital checking function. But no one should expect to see a push toward greater democratization or tolerance in American democracy over the next few years.

### **Trump: a right-wing populist?**

Is Trump really a right-wing ideologue or is merely a demagogic, populist seducer who can be tamed by institutions, his advisors, and public opinion once he is in office? During the campaign, Trump often was portrayed as relatively immune to the influence of his advisors. But this perception has changed now that Steve Bannon, the white nationalist ex-director of the «alt-right» website Breitbart News, seems to have become Trump's alter ego, having gotten access even to all meetings of the National Security Council, which even the Director of National Intelligence and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are not always invited to attend. Meanwhile, the available institutional checks on Trump will not work as well as «pure» Constitutional theory teaches in an age of ascendant populism and with a majority in Congress willing to support the President. Trump's appointments to important cabinet posts, however, suggest a tilt toward crude, neo-liberal big business policies rather than a social-populist agenda. Thus, the more important question is: Who are the voters behind Trump? What do they signify for democracy? Preliminary voting studies indicate that he peeled away a majority of the white working class from the Democrats. In the final analysis, the voters who propelled Trump to victory seem to have been older, less-educated white males in the rust belt, rural areas, and the suburbs of metropolitan areas. They have been the losers in economic globalization and fall into the bottom half of the American economic hierarchy. Their real wages have stagnated for two decades, and nothing President Obama's Democratic administration did was able to change that. They belong to an element of the American population that feels demographically, culturally, and economically threatened and has turned its back on Democratic policies perceived to favor the middle and even upper strata. But we might very well doubt whether their economic situation was the factor that drove their voting choices. To revise one of Bill Clinton's famous slogans: It's *not* the economy, stupid! The white workers and less educated voters didn't

refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because they failed to hear her message. They voted against her because they did hear it. Clinton waged a campaign focused on issues of identity: for women, African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, homosexuals and transsexuals. But she had no message for the white workers and lower classes. In plain words: Policies toward minorities play an important role in a democracy. In the aloof debates carried on by the cultural and political establishment and amid the omnipresent moral indignation about even minor offenses against carefully monitored rules of correct speech, cosmopolitan Democrats came to represent moral arrogance, and that is why they lost contact with the less educated classes in the country.

There are parallels between the outcome of the U.S. election and the reciprocal interactions currently taking place between social democratic parties in Western and Eastern Europe and their right-wing populist counterparts. Social democrats are by now thoroughly pervaded by the middle class and its values, and have redesigned their programs to appeal to that group. Established political forces, the media, progressives, the better-off, and the chorus of »rational« people are frequently satisfied with representing their own interests and their own version of cultural modernity. And when they hear conservative fears about »the loss of home,« of a certain urban neighborhood, of a familiar culture, the nation and its sovereignty, the meaning of borders, or the redefinition of marriage, they often do not respond with persuasive arguments. Instead, they lecture to and, not infrequently, exclude from the sphere of public discourse all those who have expressed such »politically incorrect« ideas. Discourses have been dominated by a cosmopolitan and excessively moralistic spirit. For example, supporters of Brexit were written off as relics of yesteryear who do not understand the brave new world of cosmopolitanism and supra-nationalism. By the same token, those who vote for right-wing populist parties are dismissed as the moral, cognitive, and cultural troglodytes of our societies. In Western Europe, political entrepreneurs have cultivated these »left-behind« elements, winning the allegiance of anywhere between 10 and 30 % of eligible voters for their cause or party. In Poland and especially in Hungary, right-wing populism has already given evidence of its ability to win majority support. And now it's the turn of the United States, the pre-eminent power of the democratic West. But not all Trump voters are anti-democratic racists, sexists, and chauvinists. What should arouse concern is the fact that it helped rather than hindered Trump when he was still a candidate to go before the public spouting intolerant slogans against the establishment, the »political class in Washington,« and »those at the top,« and in favor of »change.« A symptom of this disconnect was the final rally that the Democrats held just before the election, on November 7, 2016 in Philadelphia. It featured Barack and Michelle Obama, former President Bill Clinton, Bruce Springsteen and Jon Bon Jovi, an impressive »A-list« of establishment figures to have on stage. But a majority of Pennsylvania voters opted for Donald Trump, the outsider.

The better off and established members of our civil and political society have grown placid, smug, and deaf to the voices of those who are »at the bottom« whether in an economic or cultural sense. They are defending things as they are, including

their own privileges. The right has taken over the erstwhile battle cries of the left: the critique of elites and the privileged, the challenge to the status quo, and the call for change. The working class has gone over to the right-wing populists on both sides of the Atlantic. That is one reason why Donald Trump's victory should be regarded as a warning shot. A representative democracy needs to represent everyone, or as close to it as possible. It has to allow for even reactionary or conservative criticism outside the bounds of political correctness. Once again, it must take seriously issues of economic and cultural distribution. Moreover, if social democrats want to be understood by the lower classes again, they will have to rein in their schoolmasterly language with its stock of politically correct ideas that have ever shorter half-lives. None of this implies that they have to stop fighting for freedom, equality, and cultural modernizations of the last few decades. Nor must they abandon important aspects of cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, those rights do have to be defended. But they are not the be-all and end-all of policymaking. Lectures from above, moral intransigence, or the discursive exclusion of »unrepresentable« and »irrational« people and opinions destroy the bond between social democrats and the less privileged members of our society. And that does nothing but play into the hands of right-wing populists.



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*Michael Bröning*

## **What is Left of the European Left?**

All signs point to stormy days ahead for Europe's center-left parties. Last year, parties of that persuasion in Spain, Croatia, and Ireland endured a series of defeats. The year before that, center-left parties suffered further losses in Great Britain and about a dozen other European countries. The cumulative result of these setbacks is that, by this time, very few countries are still governed by the center-left. And in those cases where such parties still have a share of power, their prospects of keeping it now look rather dim. Thus, France's Parti Socialiste appears headed for a historic defeat just at a time when the Dutch right-wing populist, Geert Wilders, looks set to win a major victory. Even in Sweden, the traditional heartland of European social democracy, the right wing-populist Sweden Democrats are now polling at around 25 %. And we have not even mentioned Eastern Europe. In broad swaths of that region, support for center-left parties has long since dwindled to single digits. In Poland, social democrats are not even represented in Parliament anymore.

Although the reasons for this historic collapse are complex, voting studies paint a surprisingly clear picture of what has happened. It is increasingly being recognized

that European center-left parties are finally paying a price for having drifted away from their voter bases on two crucial clusters of issues: economic policy and identity politics. Studies done in the excruciating aftermath of Trump's election have provided solid evidence that both policy areas – as well as the positions on them taken by center-left parties – have become code for globalization among many traditional supporters of those parties, and globalization is something that many of them view negatively. Thus, for example, a study by the Bertelsmann Foundation published in December 2016 indicates that, in all of the nine countries investigated, there is a linkage between anxiety over globalization and skepticism that migration represents a global challenge.

### **Implications of a course correction**

One of the main reasons that workers are deserting the (former) workers' parties has to do with the strategic course correction made by European center-left parties toward the end of the 90s, a time when broad sections of European social democracy were trying to reinvent themselves as »New Labour,« the »third way,« and the »new center.« Such parties abandoned their traditional positions on regulation and became more open to the liberalization of markets, deregulation, and free trade. In its initial phases, this path appeared to have borne fruit. It is certainly true that this new approach helped center-left parties to win a series of decisive electoral victories, not least in Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany. But in the long run the fruit harvested by the center-left began to spoil. This was the case because their lurch toward the center caused a deep ideological chasm to open up between center-left parties and their traditional base of support. In many places, largely as a consequence of the center-left's ideological repositioning – new leftist parties arose that were able to cast themselves as the guardians of doctrinal purity.

In numerous European parties these programmatic shifts on economic issues often were supplemented by increasingly progressive positions on socio-cultural matters, including questions of migration and integration policy. It is almost as though they thought their questionable pragmatism on socio-economic principles could be offset by an ideological profession of faith in progressive positions in the realm of identity politics. Across the board, center-left parties relaxed limits on immigration, liberalized citizenship rights, and wagered on a progressive identity policy – for example in respect to the complete equalization of homosexual lifestyles – as badges of the ideological self-image they wished to cultivate and, increasingly, as the core element of what, now as before, could be considered a progressive outlook. On the social level this policy brought about some very positive effects. In many cases it eased the integration of minorities and benefitted many societies. But the cumulative effect of this crosswise repositioning has been to mortgage the parties' futures.

As progressive and consistent as this policy shift may seem, it turns out in some respects to be incompatible with the hierarchy of problems to which the traditional voter base of the center-left currently responds. Especially toward the lower end of the social spectrum, voters both male and female are normatively rather conserva-

tive people. Moreover, both the economic trends triggered by globalization and changes in the socio-cultural milieu have left them feeling insecure and abandoned. And even when these sensitivities do not give way to frustration, many of the socio-economic advances trumpeted as path-breaking evoke at best an indifferent shoulder-shrug in the left's traditional voter milieu.

But what will come of a politics that does not empathize with the sensitivities of broad sectors of the electorate, but instead treats them with habitual mistrust and skeptical silence, or offers them little but patronizing lectures? It will create a window of opportunity for its rivals. Understandably, all too many of social democracy's classic supporter groups have turned to new political forces. The latter do not turn up their nose at the feelings of insecurity many voters have experienced yet concealed; rather, they respond to those worries and – to be sure – intensify and instrumentalize them for their own ends. In the most recent elections in Austria and Great Britain, populist parties won the support of up to 80 % of working class voters.

### **Self-destructive political infighting**

In light of this burgeoning existential crisis, political infighting within Europe's center-left parties in some places has begun to display the self-destructiveness characteristic of a civil war. In Great Britain the re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party dramatically deepened the chasm between the party leadership and the majority of society. In Spain the defeat of the Socialists last year unleashed the biggest leadership crisis in 40 years. A similar donnybrook looms in France, where François Hollande recently declined to run for a second term. And in Germany the Social Democrats are fighting to make up lost ground by concentrating on topics such as social justice and equality.

For many interested progressive observers, these clashes are a painful but necessary step. For them, a political course correction toward the left is the signal for a long-overdue return to the core competencies of the center-left and for the long-desired liberation from the Babylonian captivity of neo-liberalism. Of course, this diagnosis may very well be accurate. Nevertheless, however sensible the leftward swing might seem, it is no panacea. Its long-term success is far from assured, because a return to old-left principles would address only one of the two issues that the center-left parties of Europe are guilty of having neglected: namely, that of the economy. The voters' discontent with aspects of a progressive identity politics is obvious, especially when it comes to the question of migration, which became more acute last year as the refugee crisis unfolded. But social democratic parties have focused so one-sidedly on economic issues, that questions of identity have pretty much been sidelined.

The problem is that the economic malaise is not simply one part of the total picture; indeed it is evidently not even the most important part. At least that is the finding of the European Commission's annual, Europe-wide polling. Eurobarometer polls taken in 34 European countries and regions show that the two most important topics in the eyes of Europeans right now are immigration and terrorist violence, not the economy or unemployment. The Clinton slogan, »It's the economy, stupid,«

doesn't apply in Europe, even though the center-left parties like to think it does.

It has almost become a truism by now: If center-left parties in Europe wish to win back broad support among the European public, they must address the real concerns and core interests of that public, not just the issues they think they are best qualified and equipped to address on the basis of their traditional ideological commitments. Otherwise, the will of the voters will continue to find other outlets, and stormy days ahead will continue to be in the forecast for Europe's center-left parties.



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## **Why Do We Still Need Catch-all Parties?**

What's wrong with the parties? They once played a starring role in democratic politics; have they now been demoted to the status of bit players? They once represented important societal interests; do they now represent less those interests than the functional imperatives of the political system? Do they make a show of presenting (pseudo-) alternatives in waging their campaigns without really being able to shape policy? One thing is obvious: The contexts in which we speak of parties today usually involve scenarios of crisis, decline, and downfall. They are said to be organizations suffering from cultural sclerosis. Critics like to point to significant shortfalls in everything from the number of their members and voters as well as to their shrinking reservoirs of trust and diminished representational capacities.

Three basic trends are responsible for the parties' difficulties. First, political processes have become more complex, which hampers problem-solving and blurs the lines of political accountability. Second, society has become more individualized and pluralistic, which renders it far more difficult for parties to make group-based appeals. Finally, de-nationalization and globalization pose challenges to the steering capacity of national policymaking. The end result of these trends is that it has become harder to articulate interests while participation via representation falls far short of what it should be in a »typical« democratic regime. Above all, the political sphere has struggled to control liberalized markets and achieve desirable outcomes for society. In this context, the parties have become attractive scapegoats for many things that are referred to under the rubric of »being badly governed« (Pierre Rosanvallon).

On the one hand – and in contrast to the Imperial Constitution of the Weimar Republic – Article 21 of Germany's Basic Law assigns the parties a positive role in shaping political processes. On the other hand, the executive, the expert-ocracy, and non-majoritarian institutions such as the Federal Constitutional Court dominate the political sphere. At the same time, the approval ratings of the parties have reached

new lows, exceeded only by the still lower ratings of career »politicians.« So are the parties really a moribund element of the political system, one that has outlived its historical mission and no longer can meet its constitutionally mandated obligations?

In reality, the situation is not quite as unambiguous as the doom-and-gloom discourses would make us believe. The party critics' outstanding virtue is their ability accurately to identify the weak points and dysfunctionalities of the status quo. Unfortunately, it usually proves difficult to deduce any clear directives for remedial action from their criticisms. Nevertheless, without calling into question the dominant system of representative parliamentary democracy, we will neither be able to understand its relevance and appropriateness, nor appreciate the need for reform processes in it. At any rate, the parties' position in respect to the challenges currently facing them is hardly cause for optimism. It is telling that the democratic parties in Germany have not been able to prevent the upsurge of right-wing populism, although they did manage to fend it off longer than their counterparts in other European countries. Still, it is not clear whether they failed to stymie the far right because they were unequal to the task or because they were unwilling to take it on. There is evidence in support of either interpretation. Furthermore, the impending integration of the AfD into the party system demonstrates that the latter is still able to respond to changes in the social landscape and to fill specific gaps in the spectrum of representation.

Where did the idea actually originate that parties could ever function as representative entities and establish trustworthy ties to the electorate? Belief in their ability to fulfill those roles can be traced back to the social and moral environment shaped by conflicts that arose in the wake of industrialization, the formation of national states, and the secularization of the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this environment emerged ties and social prospects in which the parties assumed a mediating role between segmented social milieus and the state, one that was built upon party-political competition among left-wing, Catholic-conservative, and liberal ideas. Those circumstances exist today only in a rudimentary form, in trace elements. At any rate the relationships that crystallized around them have not survived either in the form of stage-management or in genuine party competition that can be taken seriously as a means of representing civic interests. Even if it is incorrect to say that there are »no alternatives« to the parties or that they are »indestructible« (Ulrich von Alemann), their adaptability and transformational capabilities cannot be denied. The parties have undergone constant change in respect to their organizational form, programs, and functions. These shifts are evident, among other things, in the remarkable transformation of the party system itself, which (in ideal-typical form) has been described under various rubrics: parties of notables, parties of mass integration, catch-all parties, professionalized parties of parliamentary delegations (»fractions«), and voter parties. Thus, they have proven capable of modifying their own functions. Is that enough?

### **What might replace catch-all parties?**

One thing is certain: old-fashioned catch-all parties are history. But what might replace them? Who is going to perform the necessary mediating work between soci-

ety and the state? When we think about alternatives to parties, we usually have in mind either civil society with its numerous initiatives, both old and new, or organizations. The former relieve the state of some of its burdens while acting as an early warning system for newly emergent conflicts, interests, and needs; thus, they are responsive in the best sense of the word. They are faster, more fluid, and less hierarchically organized than parties. They winnow out authentic responses from conflict-laden situations and are thus an expression of vital societal engagement. But does that put them in a position to replace party competition and play a permanent, constitutive role in politics? Aren't these forms of politics too intermittent, particularistic, socially selective, and thus non-political reliably to represent society as a whole and forge real bonds between citizens and the state? If one looks at who actually gets involved in the activities of civil society, it is remarkable that, in many cases, the participants are a cross-section of the academic middle classes. The concerns of the lower strata are often overlooked.

Another frequently cited alternative is interest groups, i.e., formal associations. Isn't it conceivable that they could replace the parties, given that they are powerful actors that formulate the primary interests of society? Historically, such considerations have played a role, for example, in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The latter advocated a corporatist order in which committees from each profession would constitute the political process through their own organizations. Also, the corporatism theorist Philippe C. Schmitter occasionally lobs a theory of democracy-by-associations into the debate. What is wrong with that approach? Mostly it is the interest groups' diminished competence to act politically, which finds expression in their declining membership numbers, and lessened capacity to represent and make agreements binding upon their members. But they also suffer from a reduced integrative capacity; i.e., they seem more and more interested in lobbying in behalf of their own partial interests and less concerned with pursuing broader, integrative societal goals. In short, it is beginning to seem unrealistic to expect these associations to mediate between particular and universal interests.

Finally, the idea of an enhanced version of direct democracy plays an important role as a conceptual antipode to the mediating role of parties in representative democracy. Its significance has increased enormously in the past few years, and not only in public discourses. Particularly at the local government level, it already has enjoyed wide acclaim. Enthusiasm for taking the next step toward a more encompassing commitment to direct democracy has waned, primarily due to three trends. First, it has become clear that the instrument of direct democracy can as easily bring about social and democratic regression as it can spur progress (cf. educational policy in Hamburg). Second, its procedures are set up to favor majority rule; hence they are not very sensitive to minority concerns. In addition, participation in the procedures of direct democracy tends to be socially selective. People from lower social strata participate less often in such balloting than they do in general elections. Third, demands for more direct-democratic procedures are favored in right-wing populist policies, because advocates of the latter sense an opportunity to emotionalize their concerns and reduce the complexity behind political decisions. To sum up: plebi-

scitary, direct-democratic elements, especially deliberative procedures carried out at grass-roots levels, unquestionably can complement other kinds of opinion-formation and decision-making. However, because of their intermittent character and – above all – their socially selective dimension, they do not pose a true alternative to the parties and their ability to present more encompassing visions of the political and social order.

All of the alternatives noted above are pseudo-alternatives. If they were to become the measure of all things, that would radically alter and diminish democracy. They tend to reduce participation, emotionalize serious debates on complex problematics, and generate more social inequality. Nevertheless, the parties must make greater and more professional use of these actors and instruments in their own work, because the latter do have distinct advantages. Even though all of these pseudo-alternatives lack the ability to think of society as one grand totality and see how particular interests fit into it, given the proper embedding they can help enable the parties better to fulfill their universal ordering function. In this respect it is not so much a matter of replacing parties but of redefining their roles in a new, more precise and up-to-date manner. Part and parcel of this redefinition is the recognition that the parties' influence will be less than it was in their heyday. To acknowledge that fact honestly is to clear the way for new steps. And their operational capacities can be improved only if they attend to further reforms in order to reinforce the logic of interest-driven politics on their own terms. There are a number of changes that would contribute to that improvement, such as instituting direct primary elections, finding different ways of recruiting personnel, and seeking better methods of social embedding, etc. The latter would include initiating a dialogue with the most innovative social forces. Nor should actors be ignored who observe the political system with a critical eye, hoping to reshape the democratic rules of the game to make the latter serve the interests of society more effectively. When parties take greater account of society's interests and needs and enhance their function as sources of orientation, they have a chance to stay in the game. In this sense the procedures and actors mentioned already do not pose alternatives to the parties; however, parties can make use of certain aspects of those actors to reinforce their own vital linkages to their respective societies.



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