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IS DEMOCRACY STILL THE BEST POLITICAL SYSTEM?

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1. INTRODUCTION

While taking the course "Challenges of Globalization", we have often discussed theories about political, financial and social structures, philosophized about how the world works, and tried to think through solutions that may bypass the extent of our existence. We have addressed topics that invite us to think further and to question whether the world we were born into corresponds to our ideas.

In this essay I will try to give the answer to a very interesting question that is probably asked by anyone who has been intensively involved with the topics of globalization, international forms of government, capitalism, global governance and similar issues for a longer period of time: Is democracy as we know it really the best political form of government or should we re-consider and maybe revolutionize politics in the future?

In this context, I will analyse German democracy, contextualize it historically, and show what criticism can be made towards the democratic system. I will take a closer look at populism and explain how it weakens and exploits the democratic system. After the analysis I will take a pro-active point of view to propose what one should do about it, before this work is brought to a conclusion with an outlook into the future.

2. DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY

i. DIFFERENT OPINIONS ON DEMOCRACY

In order to answer the initial question, I will at first refer to a current newspaper article of the German newspaper "Die Zeit".

According to a nationwide survey conducted in Germany on whether the democracy lived in Germany is the best form of government that citizens can imagine, there are significant differences between the opinions of East and West German citizens (East: 42% in favor, West: 77% in favor). But what is the reason for this? Why are especially those people sceptical about democracy who, from

the time after the Second World War until the reunification of Germany 30 years ago (the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989) had to live under the occupation of the victorious powers without true freedom, isolated from the West of Germany and the rest of the world? Why don't these very people support a system that would allow them to freely express their own opinions and individually contribute to the political well-being of society?

The main problem in Germany is that the idea of one nation is not yet fully anchored in everyone's minds. The young generation, born after the fall of the Berlin Wall, without any direct relationship to the world wars and the dark decades of German history, which for some citizens are not yet forgotten completely, can grow up in a new environment with new values such as liberty and equality. Nevertheless, some people still see themselves as a minority and do not really feel home and comfortable in the democratic system. Indicators such as the unemployment rate (East: 6.5%; West: 4.5%), average income (East: €2065 p.p.; West: €2559 p.p.) and level of education (population aged 15 and over with higher education qualification - East: 30%; West: 32%) also show a slight disadvantage for the East could give an idea of where this feeling in society comes from.

ii. THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY FOR GERMANY

85 years after Hitler seized power in January 1933, when Germany temporarily had a centralist dictatorship as its form of government, we can happily live in a democratic country with a flourishing economy and a strong position within the western world again. Germany managed to profit from the process of Industrialization, Globalization and Digitalization and brought itself back on track. The reason for this was the establishment of a welfare state in the end of the 19th century in the course of the industrialization, which reached its peak especially in the period of time after the 2nd world war. It created the basis of the social market economy and the representative democracy as we know it nowadays and has thus raised the general prosperity of society in Germany.

iii. HOW DEMOCRACY (SHOULD) WORK(S) IN GERMANY

Almost all countries of today's world claim to be democracies - hardly any political regime does not call itself democratic. Even authoritarian governmental systems in Asia, Africa and Latin America appeal to democracy just as much as traditional democratic countries in the western world.

Democracy principally relies on the citizens - they are the basis of state power. Through elections and referendums, through social and political commitment, and through their interest in governmental issues, they express their will and therefore lay the foundation for a functioning state.

The current form of government in Germany is a representative democracy, organised according to the principle of separation of powers and the principle of sovereignty. Citizens cannot directly represent their own opinions themselves, but elect representatives to represent their political position as the organ of many in higher instances. Thereby a distinction can be made between municipal, state and country level bottom-up.

3. CRITICISM ON DEMOCRACY

During the course of history, democracy has always been able to adapt to changing circumstances and to overcome its challenges and problems. Just like technologies and society, also politics naturally develop over time. Nevertheless, besides political polemics, there is also justified criticism today that identifies problems which are the result and effects of democracy. Explicitly the following points of criticism can be identified:

- **THE COMPLEXITY AND LACK OF TRANSPARENCY OF DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES:**

A problem that in representative democracy can be linked to the organization among several levels. Responsibility can hardly be precisely assigned to an individual or a single institution, since the system is divided into municipalities,

countries, states and unions each of them again split up in different layers and represented by several authorities. In this sense it is very difficult for outsiders to understand political processes and therefore they cannot control them.

- **DEMOCRACY IS DOMINATED BY TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES WHICH ARE NOT OR JUST POORLY JUSTIFIED DEMOCRATICALLY:**

Democracy reinforces the effects of capitalism and increases the divergence between the rich and the poor. A current example of this is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the US. Which favours the economy and improves sovereign cashflows but does only barely respect the citizens' will.

- **THE MEDIATION FUNCTION BETWEEN SOCIETY AND THE STATE IS LIMITED:**

Politicians and political institutions, which are ultimately also individuals or led by them, naturally also represent personal opinions that improve their own situation.

“The first duty of a man is to think for himself”

—

Jose Marti

(Cuban national hero and symbol of the country's struggle for independence)

- **Entertainment replaces information:**

Public media are no longer sufficiently fulfilling their role as educational channels, which turns national political education and individual political engagement into distrust and apathy.

4. HOW POPULISM WEAKENS DEMOCRACY

„Democracies may be broken from within by elected leaders, generally slowly and imperceptibly“ (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). This also refers to the problem of the unsatisfactory representation of the people by various individual political leaders and implies that people are generally power-driven and stubborn. But why should exactly Populisms be the problem?

It seems like democracy ultimately remains only a façade behind which rulers can behave as they please and behind which they can basically act freely thanks to the lack of transparency through to the bottom line. As a matter of fact, this reinforces the effect of populism very much and makes it easier for politicians with bad intentions to act.

i. POPULISM

Populism is a political style that aims to convince people to support someone's own opinion and to join his interest by choosing themes and rhetoric based on people's moods. Populism often thematizes an anti-elitist attitude supposedly as the voice of the people, and presents it as a unity, as a single folk. It polarizes, moralizes and seduces people to recognize its own truth as universal truth and furthermore criticizes representative politics and the party system in general, by accusing public parties of influencing opinions and excluding citizens.

ii. HOW TO RECOGNIZE POPULISTS

A populist can be recognized by the fact that he or more precisely he and his party claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the true nation. What is decisive here is not only that he questions the elitist system, but that he polarizes with his opinion and seduces "innocent" minorities. In order to present themselves as representatives of the entire nation, they claim that there is only one concrete national desire, which, until now, has been suppressed by the elites. In this sense they stage themselves as the saviours of the nation, those who have finally come to rebalance the state and also respect and represent the seemingly suppressed

opinions. They pretend not to have any personal intentions, to only do what the people want them to do and always refer to the “silent majority” that stands behind them. Currently there are plenty of prominent examples for this all around the world. The following two will give a slight idea how it is done:

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey, for example has not started as radically as we are accustomed to, by now. What he said and did in the beginning was not wrong. He modernised Turkey and made it competitive - and people love him for that. Recently he is using his political power in an incorrect way to, for example ensure his re-election. In last year's elections, Erdogan had a presidential candidate and several opposition supporters imprisoned in advance and rescheduled the election date by 17 months ahead without announcing it, so that there were no more serious competitors for the position as president and no more loud critics against him and his politics.

Same applies for **Donald Trump**, President of the United States. He continues to draw attention with inappropriate remarks like f.e. what he said during the elections: "*The only thing that matters is the unification of the people, and all the other people don't matter.*", and also his in general highly questionable political style, but, however, seemingly stays very close to the people and follows the scheme of masking populism just described. Thus, he polarizes with lunatic statements and creates an illusion for his supporters.

Usually, the entry of populism is a slow process, which does not happen overnight, but at some point, will occur. And at this point the codex will no longer be: "WE ALL" are the people, but instead: "ONLY WE" are the people. Society gets split up into pieces and the nation does not remain as one nation like it is initially pretended to be.

The problem with this is that hardly anyone will say: “The president of my trust, whom I have elected, was only my representative as long as he did not act populist.”, because of course, they also build a certain relationship of trust with their electors.

iii. WHAT WE CAN DO

Populism is a permanent danger for democracy and we will never get rid of it in a magical way. But its source is not an individual intuition or mood, rather than a non-functioning party system - a serious problem of representative democracy and unequivocal power relations. It does not come out of nowhere or just because one person understands it extremely well to manipulate people in his favour and afterwards it is going to be fine again. History has proven that it is not that easy. Of course, a single person cannot change the whole system from bottom up, but instead of ignoring or accepting the fact that it exists, we have to truly live pluralism and we have to practice how to deal with different opinions and actors in politics. We absolutely need people who do not always just agree, but question decisions and political actions. Do not close your eyes to reality, fight against injustice and never stop thinking for each other.

“Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it.”

—

Howard Zinn (political scientist)

5. WHAT MIGHT CHANGE IN THE FUTURE

What was already discussed at the beginning of the work was the divided opinion towards democracy. It is widely known that there are both, supporters and opponents of the current system. We should never forget how far this system has taken us, but on the other hand it is of course desirable to take a critical look at it, because it is certainly not yet the perfect system of government. The criticism put upon the system cannot be concealed and must certainly be taken into consideration. The question that must be asked, however, is what better alternatives are there that meet our requirements in a more up-to-date way?

Monarchies and dictatorships seem to be very far away from the current world view, although they are of course still practised in a few countries. Future forms of government must embody values such as freedom of expression, physical freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, security and sustainability, and will therefore probably be closely related to a republican approach. There have also been plenty of thoughts about a global government, but they seem hardly implementable at the present time, since individuality, nationality and pride of nationality are still very important after all. And even if we had already decided in favor of a global government, it would be unclear what values would be represented, how power and ownership would be regulated, and whether we could unite all the people of the world into a single nation, just under the premise that we are all the same race.

All in all, we can well admit that the current political system is not satisfying for the citizens, but since there are no decisively better alternatives, we cannot change it ad hoc. The future will show whether a decisive event will take place and, if so, how it will change the world as a whole.

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Class Notes