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Klaus von Beyme

From Post-Democracy to Neo-Democracy

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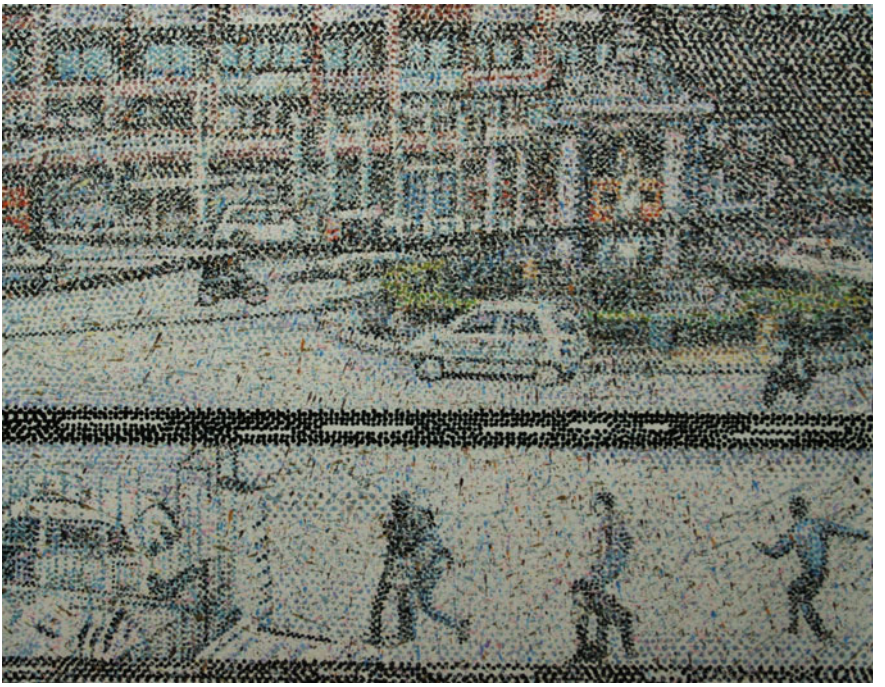

Max Beyme painting: “1 Sec.”, Acrylic on oil painting paper, 2016, 50 × 64 cm; *Source* Photo by © Max Beyme, reprinted with his permission. A carousel with cars and passers-by. An apparently everyday scene in any town. Only at second glace do several inconsistencies emerge. The black bar that divides the picture indicates that it refers to a distorted recording from a video camera. Perhaps the restless movements of several passers-by are also noticeable. In fact, the pictures show a recording of a surveillance camera which captures the view of a square in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Only a second later a heavy earthquake will destroy the temple complex in the background. The disintegration of the supposedly safe world from one second to the next is always a recurring motif in the paintings of Max Beyme

Chapter 1
The Debate on *Post-Democracy* and the Traditions of Scenarios of Decline

1.1 Scenarios of Decline in Democratic Theory

According to many critics the notion of democracy is frequently falsified by confounding two versions: democracy as *constitution of the political system* and *the practice of administration* in democratic regimes. According to Agamben (2012: 9) the second version is prevailing. Frequently it was taken for granted that the centre of "the machine" is empty and there is hardly any conciliation between the two notions of democracy. That various sciences discuss democracy with different theoretical approaches is normal in a pluralistic scientific world. This plurality of democratic theories is acceptable as long as there is a general normative theory of democracy and not just strange scenarios about the decline of various policy areas in "post-democracy" (cf. Chap. 5). The plurality of approaches in postmodern criticism of society is frequently criticised for its vagueness. Equality of facts is postulated and creates constructions of reality, "but no coherent world is visible" (Badiou 2012: 13). This kind of critique of democracy is frequently based on Plato's criticism of democracy in *Politeia* (§§ 558cff), in which democracy is classified as a "charming colourful constitution without government which distributes to equal and unequal citizens a certain equality". Plato differentiated between *geometric equality*—proportional to merits—and *absolute arithmetic equality*. For Plato—who did not know about representative democracy—democracy was founded on arithmetical equality. Degenerated liberty for Plato (§ 562a) was the foundation of a "tyrannical regime". Sometimes theoretical backward glances led to absurd conclusions concerning discretionary conceptions of postmodernity, such as the hypothesis that "we can only be true democrats when we turn back to communism" (Badiou 2012: 22).

The history of democratic notions is a history of combinations of democracy with additional notions such as:

- *New forms of states*, such as republican, liberal, socialist or "people's democracy",

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- or *specification of traditional forms of government* with notions such as representative, plebiscitarian, defect or leaded,
- or *normative notions* such as "true democracy" or "deliberative democracy".

The most widespread combination in the Western World is "representative democracy". By radicals it is criticised as "oligarchic". For the French thinker Rancière (2011: 58f, 97ff) representation is even the opposite of democracy. Democracy was frequently considered to be the rule of socially uniform people. The unity was sometimes artificially constructed by the degradation in power of the aristocracy or later of the wealthy bourgeoisie—with dangers of authoritarian developments. Representation should be recognised as a necessary concession to the heterogeneous elements of society and the great number of political ideologies, social movements and parties. In the perception of some critics this degrades democracy to the character of "an insipid dish whose flavour depends on some added spice" (Rosanvallon 2011: 225). For some observers democracy is not founded on one institutional form and historical inevitability. This insight may engender hatred in those who want to exercise power over the thoughts of citizens. But it can also augment courage among those who are ready to share the power of political intellectuals with every citizen.

Political theory for modern times included the notion of democracy in its theories only step by step. Histories of political notions show that the term "democracy" permanently underwent semantic transformations by including positivistic approaches and normative ideas about the future:

- The notion of democracy since antiquity was combined with negative attributes. Only since Spinoza and Rousseau have positive elements been added.
- Including ideas about the future of democracy was also a rather late event.
- The third adaptation was combined with rationalisation of democratic notions.

Rationalisation created, however, a certain gap between democratic participation and a rational output of democratic decisions, so that participation was frequently no longer as much praised as in normative democratic theories (Buchstein 2011: 55f). *Output of decisions* became more important than the *input of participation*. But also the rationalisation of "output democracy" was not free from doubts. Some theories were not sure that democracies are capable of harmonising all the social demands of democratic citizens. The internationalisation of democratic systems leads to a kind of "democratic overload" and for some authors even to "ungovernability" (Blühdorn 2009: 18ff).

Most democratic theories rely on the fiction of a consistent identity of individuals and social groups which can be rationally classified (Inglehart and Welzel 2005: 299). This assumption of a clearly discernable identity of citizens and groups has been challenged by postmodern thinkers. The modern ideal of democracy is withering away. Post-subjective strategies of legitimation were developed. The *inputdimension* for postmodern political scientists (Blühdorn 2009: 41, 43) cannot be analysed with scientific objectivity. The *output dimension* among modern theorists seemed to be legitimised on "formal efficiency of political processes".

Compared to this image "post-modern change" is demanded. For quite some time only a minority of social scientists believed in Luhmann's theory that in "late modernity"—he did not yet overload the debate on "postmodernity"—a central perspective on society is no longer possible since the central institutions and behaviours are drifting apart (Nassehi 2012: 50).

In light of these debates, it is almost a miracle that democracy remained a basic notion even among semi- and fully authoritarian movements. Among the "defective democracies" which have been discerned there are a number of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems which stick to the notion of democracy. In some cases it is not clear whether the democratic structures are merely empty abstractions. Some transitional systems—from Turkey to Brasilia, and recently also Putin's Russia—were called "democracies at risk". It was not always clear whether they stagnated in democratic development or already suffered from "bad government" (Diamond 2008: 292, 296). This is one of the reasons why the "legal state" (*Rechtsstaat*) was considered as an equal value to the aspects of participation in so-called democracies. Pejorative connotations are frequently added to the notion of democracy in postmodern discourses. Compared to the time between the two World Wars, however, the new democratic systems, despite a number of faults, have continued to play a part in the democratic debate by using the term of "post-democracy".

As frequently occurs in the history of pejorative notions, the decline is opposed by optimists like this author, who speak in many cases of "neo-democracy". This notion was constructed by analogy with terminological developments in the history of art. Art history offers many examples of the term for a "post-movement" frequently being converted into a "phase of a neo-movement", as in the cases of Neo-Impressionism or Neo-Dadaism (Tomkins 1988: 7, 39). Changes in artistic taste– as in the case of "abstract expressionism", which dominated in the 1950s in the USA—to a new dominant movement such as Pop Art were sometimes attributed to a "conspiracy of art intepretations", since they tried to save established standards of the modern vanguards. In the history of political ideas there were rarely such conspiracies, but there are theoretical factions which are promoted by the semi-scientific world of media. This author (v. Beyme 2007) noted that similar developments have taken place even after the alleged "end of the grand debates". "Neo-democracy" has so far been rarely used and is, in some respects, no less vague than "post-democracy". But it has the merit of overcoming the ideological pessimism of many post-democrats and opens the constructive search for new notions and models (cf. Chap. 5).

Starting with Tocqueville (1805–59), scenarios of decline have prevailed since theories of democracy began. Tocqueville (1961: 12ff) saw two dangers for democracy: the submission of parliaments to the electors, and the concentration of all the other political powers in the legislature which might lead to a *gouvernement d'assemblée.* But Tocqueville was arguing in a more differentiated way than many later critics of democracy. He advocated scientific analysis without normative bias. He did not want to praise any single form of government. He was not even ready to decide whether the actual political development went in a positive or negative

direction. A theory of decline was, however, implicit in his book on America when he saw liberty threatened by the increasing equality of citizens. In a famous review in the *Edinburgh Review* 1840 (1859: 620) Mill criticised a failure in the methodology of many theoreticians of historical decline of regimes: "Tocqueville apparently confounded the effects of democracy with the development of civilization". For Mill, the overall name of "democracy" in the work of Tocqueville was not acceptable. Similar differences are common in the case of promoters of the notion "post-democracy".

After the Second World War the widespread sentiment of progress created many scenarios in which democracies were associated with positive development. The "rising democracy" (*Aufstiegsdemokratie*) after 1945 was frequently considered to be "the model of democracy per se", though under Adenauer in Germany the development of democracy was characterised by moderate authoritarian elements. Some theoreticians fixed the peak of democracy at a later stage of post-war development—when "Postfordism" was praised for creating compromises between the interests of capitalist economy and the working class. For researchers like Crouch (2008: 15), who came from studies of trade unions and the theory of corporatism, the climax of democracy was identified with the victory of *Keynesianism.* When the Keynesian steering of demands increasingly came under pressure from neoliberal strategies, democracy was identified with "decline". Public goods were converted into private goods and economic enterprises sometimes became public responsibility. Sometimes even soldiers were recruited on a free market.

Some criticism of democracy was created by the assumption that the processes of democratic decision consisted of "boring routine"—an attitude which fails to acknowledge that economic and political crises might be integral aspects of the functioning of the regime. The critique of the protesting generation of 1968 also contributed to theories of decline. In the work of Beck (1993: 292) postmodernism is no longer identified with a kind of "rule of cynicism", frequently seen in late democratic regimes. In the 1980s the paradigm of "non-governability" was launched by conservative thinkers. Barber (1994: 11, 13, 33) had some problems with this view and asked how can democrats expect to be able to self-govern if the general trend leads to non-governability? Non-governability was thus considered by counter-theories to be an excuse used by leading statesmen who were unable or unwilling to govern. The survival of democracy for critics of the non-governability-hypothesis depended on fighting liberal theories—whether they proclaimed an anarchist, a realist or a minimalist variation of a post-modernised liberal theory.

The development of Post-democracy was mostly stated in an additive way by individual criteria such as:

- *Oligarchisation* of liberal democracy (Buchstein),
- *Presidentialisation* undermining the division of powers (Körösenyi),
- the development of *populism* instead of democratic participation in an electoral democracy,

- the dominance of *corporatism* in the process of democratic decision. Crouch (2008: 93f) developed a new trinity by expanding the circles of political advisors and lobbyists in the surrounding of the political elite. Berlusconi's network of "ad hoc created political structures" and the interference of economic actors has been considered a classical example for this post-democratic development.

The decay of classes and the rise of experts are weakening democratic parties in a classic example of this post-democratic trend development. A new "culture of amateurs" in neo-populist movements and "liquid democracy" have become functional equivalents. Central competences have been criticised for moving out of the democratic centre of decision-making. The use of consultation bodies with specific competences and economic knowledge by political parties is changing in "post-democracy", but this has largely been overlooked. In many countries the substitution of conventional interest groups is barely perceptible, even if some of them—especially the trade unions—lose members. But so do political parties. The new citizens' groups, NGOs and lobbies of privileged and underprivileged citizens are mostly weak in membership development. But they possess the virtue of participation in specialised themes which do not require wholesale adherence to party policies. Parties are experimenting with special contact courses and inviting non-members to the debate in special fields—but the success is moderate. However, "network democracy" is still more successful than traditional big organisations at mobilising of specialised interests (Crouch 2008: 148). Feminism and ecological movements have been criticised for abusing network democracy. But both movements are good examples of giving up "demagogic staging" after the initial phase and the establishment of big organisations which are accepted in their programme by other established organisations.

The new examples of network democracy do not yet provide evidence that a completely new type of post-democracy is developing. Some of the constructions of a scheme of development for democracies are even criticised as "Eurocentric defamation" of evolutionary processes which claim that the Western world is entering a new stage of development, whereas the Third World is approaching the example of Western developments (Richter 2006: 26f). The classification of regimes as "post-democratic" sometimes remains vague and normative, as in the claim to turn back to "true democracy" in the work of Guéhenno (1993), and sometimes remains scientifically insufficient because it restricts the analysis to only a few general indicators, such as participation in elections. The first version became evident in 2012 when populism seemed to substitute normal citizens' participation. The group which called itself "pirates" installed new ubiquitous and liquid forms of participation and criticised the traditional notion of democracy when trying to create a new type of "better democracy" with the help of new media.

To Leftists, such as Wagenknecht (2012: 10f, 42), the political situation is reminiscent of the final phase of the German Democratic Republic. The post-democratic and post-socialist society which we are allegedly trying to create is, to a leading member of the "post-communist" Party (*Die Linke*), "pure capitalism". The greater the chorus of prophets of decline, the more the prophecies develop over

the years into "self-destroying prophecies". Negative developments and positive counter-reactions should be analysed in an empirical way. Even Wagenknecht (2012: 236f), in the "international crisis of debts", tried to develop some counter-strategies, such as the elimination of older debts in the EU and nationalisation of great financial enterprises, higher taxes on big fortunes and radical redistribution of fortunes among rich and poor citizens. The first two proposals are accepted even by many groups outside the "leftist" Party. But the third and fourth propositions evoke opposition even among promoters of "*creative socialism*" because these aims cannot realistically be implemented in an era of "Europeanisation" and globalisation.

Max Beyme, painting: "20th Century Mess", Acrylic on oil painting paper, 2014, 50 × 64 cm. *Source* Photo by © Max Beyme, reprinted with his permission. The original image, a press photo from a daily newspaper, shows a roadblock of Serbian nationalists in Kosovo who are demonstrating against the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The painting focuses on an extract of those press photos and works like a zoom in a film, which condenses the scenery and simultaneously offers an abstraction. Due to the disappearance of important information from the image, the original content of the photo is nearly concealed. This effect is enhanced by enlarging the pixels of the scan. The manipulation of medial image contents by changing the level of detail is another central theme in the paintings of Max Beyme. This is, however, less about disinformation in times of fake news. Instead, the roadblock is turned into a general barricade metaphor, and thus open to new meanings and interpretations. At the same time, the boundary between figuration and abstraction is being explored through visual compaction