The German Left and Democracy: A Difficult Relationship

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Introduction

(1) Who is meant by ‘the German Left’? A lot of research has been done on the awkward relationship between socialism and democracy, focussing on socialism in the shape of parties or even political systems (such as the Soviet system) and on democracy in the shape of Western parliamentary systems (as a recent example see Jahn 2004). This is not what this paper intends to do. It will not give a survey of the ideas of social democratic authors from late 19th century until today; in fact it will not take recourse to organised socialism in Germany at all. Instead, it concentrates on the (rather amorphous) group of ‘neo-marxists’ which formed in the 1960s at German universities when theoretically-minded students, disenchanted with the restoration that had taken place in West Germany, started looking round for alternatives. In actual fact, though, they turned out to be less interested in designs for a new and better society than in pungent criticisms of bad reality; and although they soon entered into Marx exegesis and busied themselves with hurling Marx quotations at each other the first and strongest influence upon their way of thinking was that of Adorno and Marcuse. And that implied that more or less indirectly they were influenced by Kant and Hegel. Since most of these young academics were rather brilliant a number of them (such as Claus Offe, for instance) have themselves proved influential on later generations of (leftist) social scientists and scholars of political theory.

However new this neo-marxism appeared at the time, it yet formed an integral part of a long and continuous tradition of German socialist and leftist thought. This had always lacked the pragmatic touch so pronounced in its British counterpart. Nor did German leftists take much interest in the cumbersome task of devising in detail the organisation of a socialist society as some of their French comrades did. In trying to determine what made the capitalist world tick they aspired to the somewhat aloof status of political philosophers instead. Finally, German leftist tradition in most of its variants has always been marked by a deep distrust in those the respective authors allegedly spoke for and whose lot they meant to improve: the people.

(2) What is meant by ‘democracy’? The concept of democracy which serves as a backdrop for our subsequent analysis focuses on the idea of the self-determination of the individual which whenever collective decisions have to be taken implies the requirement of the individuals’ participation in them (see Abromeit 2002). With this object in view individuals may associate with others or not; hence a socialist predilection for ‘collectivities’ does not necessarily contradict the concept. The reality of established democratic systems may, however, fall lamentably short of the concept’s normative requirements which explains the disenchantment of ‘the German Left’ (as circumscribed above) with parliamentary and (even more pronounced) party democracy. Quite obviously they felt that this was not ‘true’ democracy’. Yet they were loth to define what ‘true’ democracy meant: notions about its features were hazy to a fault (to say the least).

(3) In its first part, the paper will elaborate on two traditions of thought started by Kant, Hegel and Marx: those of the ‘despotism of reason’ (Adam 1999) and of the ‘false consciousness’ of people. The second part will then demonstrate the effect these traditions had on the modern German Left and outline the problems the requirement of democratic participation pose for them until this day.
1. Socialism, Democracy, and the Promise of Liberalism

There is a widespread belief that socialism and democracy are basically incompatible and that socialist programmes and policies will, at best, lead to (autocratic) ‘pseudo-democracy’ (Jahn 2004: 105). This prejudice is based on the conviction that the prevalent model of liberal democracy is universalist, which is of course debatable. On the other hand, socialist theories originated in the attempt to take the promises of liberalism seriously: not to reserve the role of citizen (with all the rights and liberties implied in the concept) to the ‘bourgeois’ (the have) but to extend it to ‘the people’ (the have-nots). Insofar (as is corroborated by the writings of Marx) liberalism and socialism are more closely linked than many would care to believe.

Yet the promise of liberalism from the start took very different shapes in the Anglo-Saxon and in the German political philosophies. Both the British liberal philosophers and the German philosophers of the ‘enlightenment’ intended to set the individual free but the emancipation of the individual meant different things. The primary concern of British liberalism was the individual’s every-day life: he was to be freed economically and shielded from government guardianship and interference in all his dealings with his property. Property rights were (since Locke) the major human rights to be protected, and if leaving individuals to themselves as proprietors and economic subjects implied that they would follow selfish ends, so much the better. The egotism of the proprietor was considered legitimate, as was his natural desire to pursue his happiness. There was no need for a check on his ‘pursuit of happiness’ other than that of the – equally natural – market forces (Smith’s ‘invisible hand’): In his urge to increase his property he would, in the first place, develop all his faculties and put them to the best use which was a good thing in itself since it was the best way to augment the wealth of the nation as a whole. In the second, he would have to enter into interaction and exchange with other proprietors which inevitably implied that he could promote his own selfish ends only by dint of taking the ends of others into consideration, too (who if he did not would decline the exchange).

Of course there were exceptions to the ‘Non-Interference Principle’ (Mill) and existed tasks that only governments could fulfil, and this is where democracy and political participation came in. ‘Representative government’ (as well as political liberties bordering, even, on a right of resistance) was needed, first, because individuals (as proprietors) knew better than any official what was best for them; and, second, to provide a check on overbearing, corrupt, or incompetent politicians and bureaucrats.

Setting individuals free to pursue their selfish ends never was what philosophers of the German enlightenment had in mind, nor was the kind of liberalism just described ever a notable current in German political philosophy. Although the notion of Glückseligkeit figures prominently in the writings of Kant it was defined in a very specific way: happiness, basically, consisted in living and behaving in accordance with the rules of reason (Reason writ large, with a capital R!). The autonomy of the individual was considered less a fact than an end, for the individual was autonomous only when and insofar as he was capable of rational behaviour and able to hold his irrational desires in check. Paying tribute to the interests of others and to the common good did not come naturally or emerge quasi-automatically but would require an effort: the deliberate internalisation of the ‘categorical imperative’, for instance.

Consequently, democracy and participation (the ‘Republic’) had a very special meaning. The object of public deliberation (as democracy’s core) was not just to put a check on governments and even less to provide for policies which suited the interests of a majority.
Instead, public deliberation was the means to safeguard that the rules of reason govern the nation as a whole – and if they did so no additional check on monarchs and bureaucrats was necessary. Thus, in principle, democracy played a more important role and had a wider scope in the philosophy of German enlightenment than in British liberalism; the ‘republic’, however, would require (as Rousseau put it) ‘a people of gods’. It required, at any rate, a high amount of auto-paternalism while the object of liberalism was to free individuals from government paternalism.

So what is meant – what can be meant – by the assertion that socialism intended no more and no less than to take liberalism by its word? The most plausible reading is that the ‘pursuit of happiness’ ought to be the right of everybody; and if the privileges of some (such as private property) should stand in the way of achieving this end these barriers would have to be removed. Democracy at first sight looked a likely way to do so: since workers formed the great majority you would only have to extend suffrage to everybody. But what applied to proprietors – that they themselves were the best judges of their own interest – might not apply to the majority; they might not be able to see what was best for them in the long run. They might not be fit, either, to take part in public discussions over the common good and thus to achieve its adequate re-interpretation, nor eager to accept (and make use of) the rules of reason. Hence democracy might turn out a precarious project, in the socialist view – and the more so the more it was understood in the ‘republican’ way.

Another possible reading of the maxim ‘take them by their word’ could be: the rules of reason so far have been defined in a one-sided manner and have to be enriched according to our knowledge of the shortcomings of capitalism and the many pitfalls democratic politics in a complex world are liable to run into. But who is in full possession of this knowledge? Few have it at their fingertips, and the respective ‘laws’ (of development) are not easily understandable either. Hence relying upon auto-paternalism might not suffice to achieve socialist ends; and ‘republicanism’ might have to be replaced by guardianship.

2. The tradition of the ‘rule of reason’ and of ‘false consciousness’

The Rule of Reason

*Immanuel Kant* can be said to be the ‘founding father’ of a specific path within the German tradition of political and democratic thought which centres around the idea of the individual as ethically and intellectually autonomous subject (see Marcuse 1969: 168ff). The central feature of Kant’s philosophy is his conception of reason as the ultimate destination of human beings. As a reasonable being (and in mutually recognising all other reasonable beings as equals) man claims to be an end in itself and expects to be treated as such and not as a means to an end (Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte: 91). The potential of man to be reasonable forms the basis of human life as well as of society. It requires from individuals to develop the ability to ‘think by themselves’ (*Selbstdenken*) which means assessing every aspect of life by the (philosophical) method of criticism; this is the only way of freeing the individual from his ‘self-inflicted’ immaturity. But what is the meaning of reasonable: Reasonable is what follows rules which can become generalized as basic principles (Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren: 283).
Both Kant’s moral and political theory are based on this concept of reason. Concerning questions of individual life – in Kant’s term: What am I to do? - he makes a distinction between the individual’s freedom and his autonomy. Freedom means that individuals can act or behave independently from empirical restrictions; it refers to the scope within which empirical individual motivations and needs can be satisfied (Praktische Vernunft: 218). The notion of autonomy on the other hand, which constitutes the core of Kant’s moral theory, tells the individual how to use his freedom in the right way. It means living in compliance with universal moral laws, e.g. the ‘categorical imperative’ which Kant assumes to exist a priori (regardless of empirical motives) and which can be derived by deliberation (Reine Vernunft: 678). Reconciling both, autonomy and freedom, by ‘pursuing one’s happiness’ in accord with moral principles is the ultimate end of life: In other words the Kantian autonomy is ‘the freedom to act reasonably’ (Praktische Vernunft: 144). And to achieve this it is indispensable that the individual accepts and internalises the respective laws.

Kant’s political theory applies his moral theory to politics – and the right politics is ‘republicanism’. He distinguishes two forms of government (republicanism and despotism) and three forms of the state (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) (Zum ewigen Frieden: 206). Surprisingly (at first sight), Kant rejects the democracy as incompatible with republicanism since the constitutive attribute of the republic is the separation of legislative and executive power whereas democracies establish the rule of all and thus mixes both powers (Zum ewigen Frieden: 207).

The Kantian republic is grounded on three principles a priori (pure principles of reason): the principles of freedom, equality and autonomy (Gemeinspruch: 145). ‘Freedom’ (as human beings) guarantees that individuals can pursue their selfish ends according to their free will as long as they do not interfere with others. As subjects of the republic they are supposed to be equal but the notion of equality is restricted to equality before the law and does not even include political (let alone social) equality for not all individuals attain the status of ‘citizens’. According to the third principle, ‘autonomy’, the individual’s quality as a citizen and fellow legislator (‘citoyen’) is closely linked to two requirements. In the first place the individual has to be his own master (sein eigener Herr sein, Gemeinspruch: 151), that is economically independent. And in the second place he has to be morally autonomous which means (in politics) he must be able to reconsider his one desires and interests in the light of their generalisability, their compatibility with the common good (Verallgemeinerungsfähigkeit). It is this second requirement which mainly constitutes Kant’s political individual. Furthermore, if conceived as collective autonomy the principle implies that there be a constitution (the original contract) whose dignity rests on the assumption that all ‘political individuals’ could have assented to it (had they been asked). It thus rests on an ‘as if’ and this implies that the Kantian republic does not require a constitutional act proper (Gemeinspruch: 153). Rather, the original contract serves rather as an idea derived by reason which is supposed to guide the legislator.

This sheds a characteristic light on the role of political participation in Kant’s republicanism. On condition that a Kantian republic is established which meets the requirements of reason, no checks on the government to safeguard the prevalence of the rules of reason are needed other than a deliberate public: ‘The freedom of the pen is the only palladine of people’s rights.” (Die Freiheit der Feder ist der einzige Palladium der Volksrechte, Gemeinspruch: 161).
G.F.W. Hegel inherited reason as the central motive of his philosophy from Kant. But in transcending Kant’s conception of reason as the ultimate end of individual autonomy he considered reason to be the ultimate force of history, adopting the shape of the Weltgeist. Accordingly, the philosopher’s task is to identify reason as the driving force in given circumstances. Thus Hegel seeks to comprehend the state (the Prussian state of the early 19th century, in particular) as a result of reason and as reasonable in itself (Rechtsphilosophie, S. 17) The highest form of reason, Sittlichkeit (ethical form of life), embraces the two basic freedoms of individuals: the freedom of property (as ‘extrinsical’ freedom) and his morality (as ‘intrinsical’ freedom) (Rechtsphilosophie § 33). While the state is the ‘reality of the idea of an ethical form of life’ (die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee, § 257) and as such the realm of reason, that of the individual is the ‘civil society’ – which may as well be named the ‘bourgeois society’ since its decisive actors are proprietors. It is his property which distinguishes the free individual: he cannot experience, enjoy nor practice his freedom without it. At the same time, society is the sphere of work and toiling and dependency, the ‘system of needs’ (§ 189 pp.) and the ‘realm of necessity’. This is so because society is the place of (legitimate) particularisation: the place where individuals as ‘private persons’ pursue their selfish ends, and quite legitimately so. The moment they enter the sphere of the state (and of politics) they have to assume a different role and, more particularly, to transcend their own particularity: not (necessarily) by ignoring or suppressing those selfish ends but by ‘setting them in accordance with the general’ (interest; § 261). The ‘principle of particularity’ has to merge into that of ‘generality’ since only thus it will find its own truth and ‘the right of positive reality’ (§ 186).

In contrast, the realm of reason is wholly aloof from necessities and toiling and other such earthly things; it is the place where ideas, principles, general interests and the like emerge quasi-automatically and without an effort by anyone; that is why it can be named the true ‘realm of freedom’. It is the ‘ruse of reason’ which rules this place and which causes the continuous progress of both state and society to achieve ever higher levels of perfection.

The realm of reason (and freedom) and the common-place world of the real people (the society) have, apparently, little in common. Least of all are they inter-connected by democratic participation in whichever shape. If particularity and generality are considered to be in need of mediation, at all, not the people are mentioned but corporations (Stände) – probably because they are expected to have transgressed from sheer particularity and are closer to governments (§ 302). The people themselves are judged to be the part of the state ‘who do not know what they want’ (§ 301): to know this, and – even more so – to know what reason and the (abstract) ‘will as such’ want, would be the ‘product of deep insight and understanding’ which is not what the people are capable of. ‘The will’ as such is ‘the principle of the state’ (§ 258) – and the people are not supposed to meddle.

Although Kant’s and Hegel’s conceptualise the rule of reason in rather different ways what they have in common is that neither of them links it to the empirical individual. ‘Real’ individuals and their interests cannot be accepted as such but are to be domesticated in the interest of a higher – theoretically derived – ideal of reason: the Kantian postulate of generalisation on the one hand or the Hegelian ‘ethical form of life’ as impersonated by the state on the other hand. They may have a point in connecting the practice of individual freedom with the individuals’ readiness to behave reasonably as well as morally but they both overstretch it: the philosophical imperatives of reason narrow the scope of freedom somewhat drastically, the radicality of their ideas makes them lose the human beings out of sight, and thus the rule of reason becomes autocratic.
False consciousness

Marx intended to put Hegel’s philosophy ‘from its head to its feet’: In contrast to Hegel who interpreted the existing world in the light of philosophical ideals Marx focuses on the empirical individual and the social conditions of its existence. In his critique of Hegel’s constitutional law Marx argues that Hegel inverts the relationship between ideas as historical forces and their respective impacts by deducing the nature of civic society or of the family from the idea of the state (Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts: 209). Instead, society is - in Marx’s term – the driving force and in its turn shapes the nature of the state: Family and civic society constitute the state not the other way round (Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts: 206). The important conclusion from this simple consideration is that the state (which remains an abstract figure, anyway) cannot be sovereign but represents the basic sovereignty of the people merely as a symbol. It is ‘the people who are the Konkretum [...]’, the real state’ (Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts: 229).

Furthermore, Marx differs from the Hegelian philosophy with respect to the practical impact of theoretical considerations. He makes the point that philosophical ideas as theoretical criticisms, if they are worth their salt, ought to change empirical conditions; philosophical ideas are valuable insofar as they can be transferred into the empirical world. The implication of this ‘empirical turn’ of philosophy is twofold: the first is that historical progress cannot rely upon ‘ruses’ of reason or other mythical forces but requires actors; the second is that it is paramount to find out about the empirical (societal) conditions which the required actors have to deal and struggle with. With respect to the postulated ‘democratic revolution’ in which his critique of Hegel culminates he finds both actors and empirical (social) bases in the proletarian class (Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, Einleitung: 390).

Thus Marx focuses on real societies and on empirical individuals. As a political philosopher, he assumes in principle that, in conditions of economic crisis and poverty the antagonism of classes will show clearly enough for the proletariat to become radical and to transform into a revolutionary class, able to free itself from the conditions of oppression embodied in the capitalist economy and its henchman, the (capitalist) state (Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte: 593). This would imply, however, that empirical workers are capable of comprehending their own economic situation and the part they play in the social relationship between capital and labour. Unfortunately, as the empiricist Marx himself is convinced and even puts down as a kind of law, the economic and social conditions of life determine the individual’s consciousness (Deutsche Ideologie: 27). The hegemonic ideas of a given society are the consequence of the existing material and economic circumstances (Deutsche Ideologie: 46) and leave little space for the emergence of critique and revolutionary ideas. Since the individual’s consciousness is the product of the ‘ensemble of the social circumstances’ (Deutsche Ideologie: 6) people tend to develop the ‘wrong ideas about themselves’ (13) and succumb to the false appearance of market phenomena veiling the real laws of capitalist development, and most of all will they succumb to the illusion of the neutrality of the state. Hence the (more or less fictitious) revolutionary proletarian class will have to cope with the misguided individual workers (as is illustrated, for instance, by the reluctant French proletariat in Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich: 19). Their ‘false consciousness’ bars the way for the class ‘an sich’ (those objectively in the position of labour) to progress to the class ‘für sich’ which has developed the ‘right’ consciousness not only of its own position but of class authority and of the ways and means to get rid of it. For this, the
proletariat would require the enlightening help of a revolutionary avant-garde guiding them on the way to freedom.

As an empiricist, Marx was a keen observer of contemporary events and developments, too, and these (and especially the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) made him take a rather dim view of the chance of escaping the given conditions of oppression by democratic means. Democracy had come into the world as the invention of the bourgeoisie, emancipating itself from feudal regimes. As such, it certainly was a progressive achievement. However, after having risen from the subject of historical progress to the position of the (economically) ruling class it soon became obvious that the bourgeoisie would use the parliamentary democracy just won and hard fought for primarily to stabilise given (economic) circumstances and to shield their own economic power. In line with this object they would try to keep the subjugated classes from suffrage; furthermore, they would do their best to exploit (and, if possible, strengthen) the false consciousness of the petty bourgeoisie and of social democratic organisations which took ‘the revolutionary sting out of the social demands of the proletariat’ and gave them ‘a democratic turn’ (p. 141): they merely exhausted themselves in parliamentary debates and, consequently, could be deemed harmless. And this, by the way, was a stark reminder to would-be reformers that little could be won on the parliamentary route. However there was no guarantee that the parliamentary way was a safe one: ‘The parliamentary regime leaves all to the decision of majorities, why should the huge majorities outside parliament not wish to decide? When you on the summit of the state play the fiddle, what else expect than that they at the bottom want to dance?’ (p. 154). This would be the moment when the bourgeois parliament realise that ‘to maintain peace in the country it would have to pacify their bourgeois parliament, that to maintain their societal power their political power would have to be broken’ (ibid.) – and that were the end of democracy, as well as of the illusion that the state, democratic or not, can be neutral toward classes.

What do we learn from these rather different traditions? First and foremost this: that the individual – as we all believe firmly placed in the centre of democracy which aims at freeing him from oppression – is sadly deficient in itself. The common denominator of idealistic and materialistic political philosophy is the distrust of the empirical individuals: of their selfishness, their irrationality, their illusions. Furthermore, the three traditions are marked by a prevalence of the ends and objects of (democratic?) societal development: the rule of reason or of the highest ethical form of life here, the class-less – and in all three versions the ‘truly free’ – society there. To achieve these ends one cannot leave individuals to themselves; they need guidance, and must constantly be reminded of their duties; their selfish urges must be hedged in; they have to be cured of their illusions, etc. All this cannot but lead to the conclusion that democracy – from the societal, the political, the moral, the philosophical point of view – is an extremely risky project.
3. Democracy and the modern German Left

a. Government by the people and for the people

One of the common-places of modern democratic theory is that democracy aspires to a twofold end: individual self-determination as well as good government. It is ‘government by the people and for the people’ and thus always comprises procedures and results. It is equally common wisdom that it is extremely difficult to maximise both participation and good governance at the same time and in the same way. An overdose of participation can – or so the shared belief of most scholars of democratic theory –, as likely as not, stand in the way of problem-solving policies.

This belief is also shared by most authors of the German left. Surprisingly enough, authors are (all of them!) extremely reticent on the subject of ‘ends’: of what democracy is expected to achieve. But they have enough to say on the negative effects of what one might call the ‘unfiltered participation’ of rank-and-file people in politics. In the first place, authors take a dim view of the usefulness of merely ‘abstract’ forms of participation such as voting: useful for whom? Modern democracy has become formalised into a certain set of rules of the game which keep ‘the system running’ but are of little use for individuals; thus participation has grown into a ‘fetish’ which hinders their self-determination rather than promoting it (Habermas et al. 1961: 15). The value of participation therefore has to be linked – secondly – to its ‘democratic potential’ which is defined by its contribution to the emergence of ‘true’ democracy. Yet since German ‘critical theory’ has been concerned more with the critique of given circumstances than with designing alternatives we do not learn much about the features of a democracy which has progressed from the merely formal and liberal one to one that is ‘material’ as well as social - not much beyond its qualification as a system of government which applies societal resources to satisfy the needs of all instead of the interests of the few (op.cit.: 55), that is. Nor can the adequate participatory contributions to further such an end be specified: when there is ‘no real life within the wrong one’ (Adorno 1951: 42) and when, consequently, no ‘right’ participation within the ‘wrong’ democracy is imaginable, how then can one devise the right contributions beforehand ...? In this line of argument, there is no place for the assessment of the subjective value of participation of the individual itself.

Thirdly, leftist scepticism meets conservative distrust where the competence of citizens is concerned. Even when realistic enough not to expect too much of them one will still be sadly disappointed by their lack of information as well as of normative foundations of judgment. Worst of all: citizens do not spare a thought for the consequences of their decisions. All this renders the legitimatory effect of their participation in decisions aimed at the promotion of the common good extremely dubious (Offe 1984: 162). It follows that citizen participation does not even serve the ends of day-to-day politics: that decisions provide effective solutions for society’s problems. If they did it were by sheer accident, but more likely they would be detrimental for the good of all.

b. The faulty individual

Individual autonomy

Taken as the potential subject of true democracy the individual is lamentably deficient theoretically as well as empirically. More object than subject he has ‘lost his autonomy’
Adorno (1951: 39 p.): ‘In many people is already an impudence merely to say ‘I’.’ (op. cit.: 57).

Autonomy ‘presupposes the ability to determine one’s own life: that one is capable of deciding what to do and what not to do, what to suffer and what not to suffer’ (Marcuse 1967: 98). Furthermore, with respect to democratic participation the individual has to be able ‘to consider and to choose on the basis of knowledge’; he must have ‘access to truthful informations’ the assessment of which must rest ‘on autonomous thought’ (op. cit.: 106). The modern individual lacks all these qualities because he is the object of institutional and other restraints and of manipulation and advertising; because he is mediated by political parties and other organisations; and, most of all, because as a voter and as a consumer he is nonetheless isolated and as such not in a position to comprehend the true nature of class society. Anyway, ‘the subject of autonomy never is the contingent, private individual ...; instead it is the individual as the human being that is capable of being free in accord with others’ (op. cit.: 98). This sounds as if the lack of autonomy in the empirical individual does not necessarily matter so much, after all. It remains dubious who or what could take his place as the ‘subject of autonomy’, then.

Of course, the deficiencies detected in the great majority of people are no fault of their own but have to be laid at the door of the circumstances they live in. This implies that the defects cannot be remedied individually (op. cit.: 105). Yet minorities exist who are believed to be capable of self-enlightenment – such as social scientists (!) or the ‘student avantgarde’ who in 1967, apparently, grew into the role of the (collective) ‘revolutionary individual’ (Brückner 1967: 108). Some time later, Habermas found another surrogate ‘subject of autonomy’ when he filled the space emptied by the discerning ‘public of deliberating private persons’ (Habermas 1962) of bygone days with ‘a higher form of the inter-subjectivity of communication processes’ in the shape of the ‘subject-less communications’ in the various arenas in which public opinion is formed (Habermas 1994: 362 p.). While, in theory, every citizen has access to such arenas, the results of those communications confront him as a ‘subject-less subject’ and thus as alien to himself, all the same: the ‘subject-less communications’ constitute a sphere of reason, aloof and separated from empirical individuals.

Right and wrong preferences

The empirical individual is not only lacking in competence and autonomy. Furthermore, the preferences he articulates are not of the kind to be taken seriously. They are flawed in a twofold way: by missing the ‘general interest’ and by originating in ‘false consciousness’. Unfortunately it is impossible to determine, beforehand, what the general interests in a specific situation are – not least because (eg) class interests become manifest only in the context of actual class struggles and that means post festum (Offe 1972: 90). If one cannot judge upon the ‘true’ or ‘wrong’ of interests nor upon their coincidence with the general interest the moment when they are actually propagated, the obvious conclusion would be to accept them at their face value for the time being instead of treating them as irrelevant at once. But the path to this conclusion is barred by the sweeping suspicion of ‘false consciousness’. We know (don’t we) that the prevalent lack of freedom is mirrored, very specifically, in people’s wants: Usually addressed to the spheres of distribution and consumption their satisfaction will invariably stabilise the existing conditions of oppression; not autonomously but heteronomously formed they can be instrumentalised in the interest of class authority any time.
Majority decisions based on such wrong preferences lack the legitimatory force democratic rule allegedly builds upon (Offe 1984). What is more, majorities ‘forced into line’ in this fashion cannot be considered legitimate themselves (Marcuse 1967: 105). The assumption of legitimacy is reserved for enlightened and, if need be, revolutionary minorities who – in contrast to outward appearances - do not ‘lack the population in whose interest they act when they defend a better conception of society against an ... unreasonable status quo; instead, the population lacks the consciousness of itself’ (Brückner 1967: 108). Put less radically, this line of argument leads to the notion of the ‘advocatory role of critical social theory’ which, by dint of a ‘vicariously simulated discourse’ between various groups, will find out what the ‘generalisable interests’ are (Habermas 1973: 161).

For not the ideal of a democratic reconciliation of interests is wrong: wrong are the interests which are distorted ‘by manipulation, intimidation, incapacitation, and misleading’ (Offe 1972: 133); while, on the other hand, the truly generalisable interests are frequently suppressed (Habermas 1973: 153 pp.). The only conclusion to be drawn from this sad state of affairs is that interests had better legitimise themselves before they are admitted to processes of negotiation and reconciliation. Only as generalisable ones are they legitimately brought to the fore in a true democracy. This stipulation runs counter the current model of ‘bottom-up aggregation of individual preferences through voting and referendums’ (Offe 1995: 118) and deeply discredits it. Its results cannot be accepted, least of all in cases when ‘interests of citizens are positively or negatively affected in such a way that one cannot sufficiently rely upon citizens’ capability of weighing them in a distanced manner’ (Offe 1992: 140). When citizens are ‘beset by passions’ (Offe 1995: 118) they will not be ready nor able ‘to place themselves under an ‘auto-paternalistic” reservation’; and when the ‘interest of reason’ is thus neglected democratic participation will become ‘extremely risky’ (Offe 1992: 141).

c. The futility of democracy

Most of this sounds like a case for re-education. Can people be trained to be ‘auto-paternalistic’, to develop enlightened preferences, to shed heteronomy? Self-enlightenment is deemed to be improbable next to impossible, particularly in the case of workers who do not, any longer, on the basis of their own experience develop a proper consciousness of the antagonisms of capitalist society; for this, they need to be taken by the hand by enlightened elites (Müller/Neusüß 1970: 27 p.). Whatever the estimates on the likely success of such a project – the question is whether is does indeed make sense: can the re-education of citizens transform capitalist society into a better and freer one?

As we have seen above Marx was sceptical. Any attempt to establish a ‘true’ democracy, governed by reason as well as the legitimate interests of the masses, instead of by economic powers, would have the inevitable result of leading the capitalist class into battle even against their own (and merely formal) bourgeois democracy; they would not stand by and dispassionately watch how their power was wrenched from their hands. Democracy, so his verdict, can only exist as a sham, or it will cease to exist altogether. Hence democracy (as well as the ‘social state’) is an illusion, really.

What is the choice?

The reality of modern mass democracy corroborates Marx’ analysis – or so the conviction of the German left – to a high degree. Its existence is not endangered but only because none of its actors endanger the supreme power of capital. Social democracy and petty bourgeois
organisations (in Marx’ terms) merely put up mock battles with the bourgeoisie. Consequently, political parties do not substantially differ in their programmes but lead the alleged meaning of party competition ad absurdum; least of all are designs for an alternative society on offer. In the 1960s, the SPD was made a prime object of criticism because it had, step by step, renounced its proper role as a ‘true’ (and socialist) opposition and adapted to the ruling Volkspartei CDU, a process which was described to result in consensus in the ‘norm-less notion of stability’ (Narr 1966: 237). As Marx had foreseen, the parliamentarisation of the left thus had once more proved to be one of the major causes for the survival of capitalism (Agnoli 1967: 75). But all parliamentary parties taken together had transformed into ‘etatist associations’ and now operated as ‘(class) agents of ‘conservation” since they pretended to know no classes but merely ‘people’” (op.cit.: 34). Political participation had become ‘neutralised’ for parties were interchangeable; they formed the ‘plural version of the single party’ (as found in totalitarian regimes) and thus provided a guarantee that whoever won an election would not undertake major alterations in the existing set-up (op.cit.: 39 p.).

Obviously, little choice was left for voters. The conclusion was the more daunting since most of the relevant authors had, at the time, read Downs whose Economic Theory of Democracy described as a law what one was just experiencing; the ‘plural version of the one-party system’, then, was not an aberration but the logical consequence of party competition itself. One would have to go on living with the fact that party competition had degenerated into the mere contest between ‘heads and emotions’ and between marketing strategies in which the best advertising campaign would win the day (Abromeit 1972: 33-43). The more successful these campaigns the more heteronomous was the ‘democratic formation of opinion’ stipulated in the German constitutional system: the ‘formation of will’ was other-directed and therefore pseudo-democratic. It liberated politicians from control, too: instead of being obliged to justify their actions at the end of the parliamentary term they would just embark on a new advertising campaign. Thus the major function of the act of voting was reduced to the ‘calming effect’ which consisted in the outward appearance that ‘the people themselves had expressed a will’ which, however, was ‘not one of their own”; and in expressing it they merely demonstrated how pointless any alteration in the allocation of political power really was (Offe 1984: 161).

Voting and pseudo-legitimation

Considering what has been said above on behalf of the false consciousness of citizens in the throngs of ‘consumer culture’ the degeneration of party competition might be deemed not so very harmful, after all. If the ‘popular will’ is fallible, error-prone, and likely to be manipulated, anyway, and if political decisions based on this will are more than likely to be wrong and detrimental – why moan about circumstances in which the ‘experts’ at the top of parties and bureaucracies take their decisions without being restrained by it?

Yet the point made was that the observed mal-functioning of party democracy did not offer even the smallest chance for voters to decide other than ‘wrongly’, with respect to their preferences which by sheer accident might just for once be ‘true’ ones. Any election result was devoid of substantial meaning and legitimising effect: the winners coming into office might as well have been brought there by tossing the dice (Offe 1984: 161). Empirical voter majorities were no more than ‘numerical indicators’ for the firmness of the grip of political elites over their supporters (ibid.). Consequently, decisions taken by these elites and by parliamentary majorities wholly lacked ‘political authority’ (op.cit.: 157); not even in the purely formal sense could these be deemed legitimate. Irrespective of whether or not the electorate saw through the deceit the political system as such had run into a state of objective
and permanent (if latent) legitimatory crisis. The ‘minimum of manifest assent and loyalty’ indispensable for system stability no longer was reliably generated by legitimatory mechanisms thus reduced to their barest minimum (Offe 1972: 60).

The conclusion reads quite dramatic – the more so when considering that even in its reduced shape democracy is still a double-edged thing. Although political participation by the masses does not, by a long chalk, guarantee that the interests of the masses find their way into public policies, the parliamentary system does offer the (however unlikely) opportunity ‘to transfer the basic conflict onto the level of government and to fight the class struggle with the means of the state’ (Agnoli 1967: 27). The only requirement was that the masses vote in the right way. In that case they would try and push redistribution, the ‘social state’ and other such nice achievements.

But the ‘social state’ is an illusion (Müller/Neusüß 1970). It rests on the illusion of equality of all ‘owners of sources of revenue’, in general, and on the illusion that equivalents are exchanged between workers and capital owners, in particular. Basically, it is marked by the erroneous belief that governments intervene in economic processes because citizens demand them to do so, instead of doing so because of the specific part they are obliged to play in the protection of processes of capital exploitation. The laws and necessities ruling these processes are none of their making and therefore taboo; and that is why the ‘social state’ has not at its disposal the resources that might be redistributed between classes. On the other hand, in order to attend to its duties towards capital the state needs resources of its own; in particular, and both in the interest of its own survival and of that of the capitalist class (and as mentioned above) it is in need of the ‘generation of legitimacy’ (Abromeit 1976: 18). Democracy’s raison d’etre, in the days of late capitalism, boils down to the preservation of mass loyalty which is the major reason why democracy (contrary to Marx’ expectations) is still deemed worth maintaining. Only because of this specific value of democracy capital as well as the (capitalist) state put up with it and feel obliged, ‘however partially and selectively, to react to the manifest wants of the masses’ and to keep up ‘the semblance of democratically legitimised government’ (Hirsch 1974: 119). And this is why democracy even now may still prove double-edged: in offering the chance that by dint of political participation and of voting in the proper way (as well as by perseverance) the working classes might for once succeed in slackening the grip of capital on governments and in loosening the restraints under which they labour. They may, in fact, bring about a ‘relative autonomy’ of democratic politics.

This goes to show how important it is for the masses to develop the right preferences and to arrive at the right voting decisions. But opinions as to the likelihood of success differed and pessimistic views prevailed. One of its preconditions would be that the masses stopped being primarily interested in material benefits which was unlikely to occur except in periods of continuous growth and wealth, and these are not exactly the times when the class antagonism becomes so real and painful an experience for (nearly) everyone that dire class struggles are just round the corner (Abromeit 1976). Furthermore, even if mass interests underwent a long-term change pointing in the right direction bourgeois politics still possessed sufficient means to take the sting out of democratically articulated demands for reforms fit to endanger the basic ‘capital relationship’. The capitalist state had done its best (for instance) firmly to establish the conviction – formally protected by the judiciary – that property rights are sacrosanct and not to be tampered with and thus built up barriers to shield a legal space safe from interference by democratic politics (Offe 1972: 79). Consequently, the ‘democratic will’ could refer only ‘to the societal areas not ruled by the autonomous laws of the economy’ (Blanke 1977: 128).
To cut a long argument short: whichever way, there is little hope much to extend the state’s ‘relative autonomy’. Governments’ capacity to act on behalf of the masses will very soon bump into the unsurmountable borderline marked by the social relationship between capital and labour (Blanke et al. 1975: 41). ‘When the state interferes with the sources of the surplus product’ the critical point will be reached where the precarious ‘legitimatory balance’ breaks down and where bourgeois democracy comes to its end (Blanke 1977: 156 pp.), finally to be unmasked, once and for all, as futile and as a sham.

4. An old way out of a new dilemma? The ‘deliberative turn’

Under prevailing circumstances ‘true’ democracy is impossible to achieve – or is it? It cannot be achieved by foul means or fair: not by the revolutionary act (unlikely because of the false consciousness of the deluded masses) nor by voting for reform (impossible because of the ‘illusion of the social state’). For the authors of the German left of the 1960s and 70s democracy therefore is connected either by bygone days, something irretrievably lost, or with a utopia which finds no place in reality. Both stances explain why the picture of a truly free ‘society of emancipated citizens’ has never been painted in vivid colours but remained in the haze. They are in line, too, with the German socialist tradition to refrain from describing in too much detail (if at all) how the future socialist society might be democratically shaped. The existing capitalist socialist society was so much nearer at hand, its bad features were so much easier to criticise. In this one respect one might say that empiricism prevailed over ‘grand designs’.

But there is the other, the Kantian tradition of the ‘rule of reason’ which is not empiricist at all. It is debatable whether a continuous, never extinct undercurrent of leftist thought was merely revivified or whether resignation prompted the ‘deliberative turn’ which those of the authors or our sample took who, instead of emigrating into the realms of policy analysis (to prove in more detail how Marx was right?) or even embarking on the long ‘march through the (political) institutions’, stuck to social and democratic theory. Surprisingly enough, even this latter group began to arrange themselves with the given circumstances now no longer named ‘conditions of oppression’. They made it their business to track down, in the midst of the prevailing structures of society, those elements which might be expected to carry the semen of the better and truly democratic one. According to this new approach, not the given circumstances will have to be altered but to some part the institutions and, most of all, the individuals (or, in other words, with the help of Kant Marx was turned round from his feet to his head). With the individuals it is of course the preferences which must be worked upon: they cannot be accepted as given and as exogeneous but need to be purified in public discursive processes until they attain the status of generalisable ones. The institutions, in their turn, ought to be re-shaped in a way to make them allow the greatest possible space for the kind of deliberation which promotes such purification. Of course not all individuals will have the required discursive faculties at their disposal, in the same way; not all of them will find in their surroundings the same ideal preconditions which make them fit for deliberation. Hence the necessity that those who do find their way into the ‘deliberative arenas’ vicariously pass judgments about whether or not all those affected by a norm (but not present) might have assented to it had they had the chance adequately to purify their interests. Once one has got so far it is easy to detect the nucleus of true democracy in existing institutions and processes of negotiation – an idea Hegel might have been proud of. The real individuals, however, once more get lost on the way.
Yet, this is the snag which makes some authors waver. Systematically to distinguish between ‘ill-considered and well-considered preferences’ is liable to endanger both freedom and equality. However truly discursive in practice, the deliberative model is ‘vulnerable to the charge of moralizing elitism’ (Offe 1997: 94 p., 97). But how else is one to conceptualise ‘good’ democracy, empirical preferences being as short-sighted, anti-social, even amoral as they are? Extended participation, or so it seems, is no solution either. Whichever way, democracy will amount to nothing more than ‘symbolic gratification’ (Offe 1972: 132); it will never reach the state of ‘true’ democracy; and to cite the ‘popular will’ will forever be a mere ‘metaphor as sublime as it is risky’ (Offe 1992: 129).

Philosophically inspired democratic thought on the part of the German left – or so it seems – nowadays either returns to the (more or less) autocratic rule of reason, or makes its peace with powers that be. Both ways it renounces self-determination and reverts to vicarious action. Or else it sinks into the deep depression of democratic pessimism.

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