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# DISCUSSION PAPER

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## Shifting Frames

Six Thoughts on Innovating Liberal Democracy

**The existential trust crisis in Western democracies is catalysed by decades of lacking adaptation to changing societal environments in a transformed world. In six perspectives, this paper calls for a debate on the mental models, architectures and processes of liberal democracy. In order to revitalise the liberal model of democracy, we need to start discussions that do not replicate but instead create something new by experimenting with a higher frequency, and, more importantly, cultivate a mindset that cherishes the imperfect. The aim of this first paper of the recently launched Democracy Lab of Das Progressive Zentrum<sup>1</sup> is kicking off a process of co-creation that challenges and improves democratic reform.**

### The Doubt from Within

After decades of spreading throughout the world, liberal democracy seems threatened at its core.

The European Union is existentially challenged by illiberal and anti-pluralistic regimes in its own ranks. Governments like the current ones in Hungary and Poland contradict the values the Union was once founded upon.

1. *The Democracy Lab of Das Progressive Zentrum* offers a new space for a creative, interdisciplinary and international exchange of questions on democratic innovation. The Lab operates as a platform, accommodating various interdisciplinary projects with the aim of developing concrete ideas and practical proposals for the future of democracy. Within the Lab we will analyse and research, discuss, experiment as well as publish together with (young) experts, practitioners and activists. This policy brief has been produced in cooperation with the *Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)*.

In many countries, parties and politicians with an illiberal agenda come close to governing, for instance those in Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, and the Netherlands.

Europe's most important neighbours, most noticeably the governments in Turkey and Russia, frontally attack liberal democracy and rebuild their states in an illiberal, autocratic fashion, in part by utilising democratic "tools" for these efforts.

The increasingly sclerotic state of US democracy has found its ultimate embodiment in the election of Donald Trump as President. His anti-etatist, anti-politics, and anti-pluralist government works to undermine the democratic values the US has promoted for many decades.



Instead of responding with bold, optimistic, and mobilising visions to these challenges, liberal democracy and its agents seem caught in self-consciousness. There is wide-spread doubt if liberal democracy can uphold the promises it once stood for, fuelled by the financial crisis, the polarisation of wealth, and the decrease of social mobility. Adding to that, climate change and mass migration show the incapability of our existing political systems to find meaningful and sustainable responses to self-created existential challenges. Citizens do not trust governments, parliaments, and parties in their capability to find the right answers to the challenges of today and tomorrow and thus doubt their political system's ability overall.

In many parts of the world, people still see the liberal democratic model of Western democracy as a role model. From the inside, though, liberal democracies feel increasingly hollowed out by distrust and deep-seated frustration of growing parts of their population.

Political disenchantment permeates the very centre of Western societies, going way beyond those parts of society who are left behind in the current economic and political model - citizens whose life situation, from an outside perspective, seem fine also worry about the future. In the face of complex societal, economical, and political challenges, people express dissatisfaction not only with the outcomes of the political process, but the very way this process is organised. An ever-growing part of the societal centre is willing to discuss new economic and political paradigms.

Established political forces have a hard time responding to this situation. They are incapable, and in large parts unwilling, to articulate new visions for our societies, whilst, at the same time, they are hurt and frightened by the intense contempt, anger and frustration they face day by day. It is easy for new political forces to gather public support in this situation. New parties arise from the right, left, and the political centre. In many cases, they enjoy massive popularity despite – or because – of their preliminary programmes, improvised organisation, and eclectic personnel.

Illiberal forces gain a lot of support largely because they offer alternative narratives, and pretend to know how to regain control over a fragile world. Some of their appeal stems from their willingness to rebuild the democratic system – a system which many citizens consider to be broken.

The rise of these illiberal counter-models is a fundamental threat to liberal democracy – and yet, at the same time, a real opportunity to revitalise liberal democracy. As unpleasant and unsettling as the pressure on liberal democracy may be, it fuels the willingness to consider serious change. The illiberal threat heightens decision-makers' willingness to listen to the many ideas on democratic innovation that are out there. There is increasing understanding that the need for permanent transformation lies at the very core of a strong democracy.

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### **Illiberal forces pretend to know how to regain control over a fragile world.**

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We must embrace the ambiguity of the current situation if we want to build a better democracy. The contest between liberal and illiberal democratic models is real. Whoever wants the liberal side to win needs to start working on innovating democracy now. Defending the status quo is not an option, especially not for those who consider themselves progressive.

## **Shifting Paradigms And Their Differing Realities**

Over recent decades, new paradigms have emerged in the West. They challenge existing worldviews on a fundamental level. The resulting antagonisms are at the core of many of the societal and political fights we experience today. Only if we acknowledge this, we will be able to start a meaningful dialogue that transcends the binary debates of polarisation.

### **PARADIGM SHIFT I : OBJECTIVISM AGAINST CONSTRUCTIVISM // THE TRUTH AGAINST TAKING PERSPECTIVE<sup>2</sup>**

Enlightenment and modernity have brought us the scientific paradigm. The belief in objectivism, rational thinking, and the possibility to uncover “the truth” has fundamentally shaped the modern political discourse.

2. The following points were partly inspired by conversations within the Berlin Co-Creation Loft's international network, namely those initiatives by Tomas Björkman, which met in Berlin in February 2017.



Today, we are increasingly realising there are as many realities as there are people - it is socially constructed. The systems we build society upon – power, rules, money, etc. are man-made, and thus highly fallible. Reality is something we re-create every day, which gives agency to the individual – and gives us the liberty to work for the reality we think is right. This bears huge potential, for instance for the redefinition of fluid concepts like nationality, how we think and live the concept of community, and how we can re-introduce alternatives into political decision-making. At the same time, the disappearance of commonly accepted facts as reference point for societal debates threatens the formation of democratic society in its core.

**PARADIGM SHIFT II:  
MACHINIST THINKING AGAINST SYSTEMS THINKING //  
COMPLICATED AGAINST COMPLEX**

Modernity was led by the belief that things can be understood and controlled. Systems, be they technical or social, were considered to be predictable and thus controllable: Operation A produces output B once your expertise is refined enough to understand the interdependency of each system's parts. This linear mental model still dominates the mainstream perspective on how societies, organisations and people can be steered.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the insight that social systems are complex and can never be fully controlled, even if we know every single part they are constituted of, is on the rise. Humans are unpredictable, irrational beings, and such are the social systems that are constituted by humans. The dynamics between interdependent factors in complex systems can be predicted approximately, at best.

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When complexity increases, as it does in our world today, unintended and unpredicted change occurs with rising frequency. This has profound consequences for how we define (political) leadership and its potentials, as well as the systemic awareness of the (intended and unintended) consequences of political decision-making.

**PARADIGM SHIFT III:  
CHANGE AS THE EXCEPTION AGAINST CHANGE AS  
EVERLASTING PROCESS // STAGNATION AGAINST FLUIDITY**

In the historical period after World War II, millions of citizens in Western societies were in the position of choosing whether they wanted to change or not. Organisational and societal systems were characterised by a very high degree of stability – which, in historical comparison, were a crass exception. Nevertheless, a mainstream mind-set established itself, one which regarded change as the anomaly. If you did not want change, you could choose a stable job position and a stable income, in social environments that regarded concepts like “life-long learning” as ideas, not as one of the basic necessities of life. Today, we realise that change is everlasting. Indeed, not changing is abnormal in an environment that constantly transforms and re-organizes. Many scientific findings, from how our physical self gets constantly renewed to how we can rewire our neuronal networks until we die, underline the fluidity of life.<sup>4</sup> In the outside world, accelerating climate change and an increasing number of shock events go hand in hand with our increasing understanding that we are not separated from each other, but that everything is one. Change as an everlasting process in a complex world, for a rising number of citizens, is the new normal.

**PARADIGM SHIFT IV:  
MATERIALISM AGAINST POST-MATERIALISM //  
SECURITY AGAINST WELL-BEING**

Since modern times, our societies have a strong focus on the objective world. This results in the belief that the accumulation of material wealth and happiness correlate. Accordingly, politics focus strongly on providing a framework for material security, with a tendency to centre political debates around the redistribution of material wealth. An increasing number of voices believe this focus to fall short. Even though there is a correlation of well-being and material wealth, material wealth is only one of several dimensions humans need to build a good, full life.<sup>5</sup> Relatedness and growth are equally important, and yet not nearly as relevant for the decision-making of and in political and public institutions. Consequently,

3. Capra, Fritjof/Luisi, Pier Luigi: The Systems View of Life. A Unifying Vision, Cambridge 2014, esp. Introduction and Part I.

4. Capra/Luisi (2014), Part II.

5. Bucher, Anton: Psychologie des Glücks. Ein Handbuch, Basel 2009, pp. 84-88.



many ask how politics and society can transcend the dominating paradigm, which means to incorporate its baseline benefits and move purpose and focus to the next level. What could a democracy look like that gives equal attention to the dimensions of relatedness, individual growth, and material well-being?<sup>6</sup>

**PARADIGM SHIFT V:  
NATIONALISM AGAINST INTERNATIONALISM //  
COMMUNITARIAN AGAINST COSMOPOLITAN**

The nation state, with its focus on identity and thus exclusion, was often brutally created. Still today, it defines and shapes who millions believe to “be”. Many of them experience globalisation and internationalisation as a threat to their identity, and sometimes burden in everyday life. They loathe the politics of open borders, disagree with the politics of diversity, and prefer traditional lifestyles with a high sense of security and belonging. And yet, growing parts of society, especially younger generations, enjoy a cosmopolitan life, coined by a high degree of diversity in lifestyle, culture and background. For parts of the young generation in Europe, primary loyalty lies with their European identity, not with the national one.<sup>7</sup> Globalisation may be cause for heated debates. Still, many see the cosmopolitan lifestyles and perspectives it has catalysed as tremendous benefit of the late 20th and early 21st century.

**PARADIGM SHIFT VI:  
FORDIST-VERTICAL AGAINST COLLABORATIVE-  
HORIZONTAL // BOTTLENECK AGAINST AGILE**

In the world of organisations, a silent revolution is taking place. Top-down structures, with their bottlenecks and the detachment of deciding and doing, are increasingly contested by network organisations that work with a collaborative-horizontal paradigm, based on a high degree of self-organisation. This shift is driven by the basic mechanisms of the Internet, which have shaped the younger generations in different ways than the older ones. Collaboration, high agility, and flat hierarchies turn the paradigms of leadership and self-leadership upside-down.<sup>8</sup>

6. See, for instance, Daniel Pink's trias of Purpose, Mastery, and Autonomy, which foos on research finding in self determination theory and evolutionary psychology: Pink, Daniel: Drive. The surprising truth about what motivates us, New York City 2009.

7. See Standard Eurobarometer 86, Fall 2016, p. 17.

8. See, for instance: Laloux, Frédéric: Reinventing Organizations. A Guide to creating Organizations inspired by the next Stage of Human Consciousness, Brussels 2014

We are entering a phase where significant parts of societies shift from the former to the latter paradigms.<sup>9</sup> People are going from the Fordist organisational model to more collaborative models, from Materialism to Post-Materialism, from focusing on solving complicated challenges to handling complexity, etc. These shifts are contested by prior/conflicting paradigms. It is essential for us to realise and make explicit that these conflicting paradigms are at the core of most political debates we experience today. The world changes, whether we like it or not, and it is the way we look at and respond to this change which divides us.

This makes it important to consciously reflect the various models our societies are driven and organised by today. After all, different sets of values and mental models make individuals and groups think, feel, speak, and act from starkly different inner places. An individual who believes that reality can be objectified, who thinks that political challenges can be solved with isolated measures, who is convinced that only powerful authority can solve problems, has a very distinct way to look at current events. An individual who considers permanent change as reality, who believes that everything is interdependent and impossible to control, and who feels that complex challenges need to be handled collectively will come up with very different solution strategies.

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The conflicts that result from the different paradigms and mind-sets have implications for how we evolve as a democratic society, and how we evaluate the challenges we face. Citizens who deal with the current trust crisis as a technical challenge assume that it is possible to “fix” processes and structures, without addressing the mind-sets and habits they are founded upon, to win back trust and thus legitimacy. People who see the current situation as an adaptive challenge think that solving our problems can be done – if those who constitute the systems in question are willing to change

9. For individual and collective value and consciousness shifts see human developmental models like those of Psychologist Robert Kegan or evolutionary biologist Clare Graves.



themselves, while transforming structure and process. This equals the willingness to change individually, in the process of learning and adapting to a new situation. Also, it points to the need to evaluate and adapt the logic and principles that set the parameters for how our systems work.<sup>10</sup>

## The Need for New Architectures

It can be argued that the renaissance of illiberal regimes and parties, and the distrust in democratic institutions, are mere symptoms of the crisis of liberal democracy. The core problem lies in today's democracies' incapability to effectively respond to changes in the political environment. The way politics and administrations work hinders the effective response to the fundamental challenges we face, instead of catalysing it. Today's adaptive challenges require adaptive institutions and processes. And yet, we are stuck with state bodies that follow the paradigm of technical problem-solving.

The world, and our everyday lives, have changed tremendously over the last decades, also due to political decisions. If we compare a usual workday in the 21st century with one in the 1980s or 1990s, we see that many fundamentals have shifted since then. For an increasing part of society, everyday life is dominated by international collaboration, a high responsiveness to changing market environments, and starkly different ways of organising decision-making and communication. Even the basic organisational paradigms, like hierarchical structures, are increasingly contested and replaced with different models.

Against this backdrop, it is astonishing to see how little political decision-making and administrating have changed in the same time bracket. While society is developing at an ever increasing speed, politics and administration seem stuck in an incremental logic of policy-making. Certainly, governments, parliaments, parties, and administrations have implemented some organisational reforms over recent decades. And yet, their paradigms and

structures, rooted in the late 19th (ministries) and mid-20th century (parties), have changed to a far lesser degree than the society they serve.<sup>11</sup> Or, to speak on a meta-level: the basic concepts of how politics can further the good life of citizens; what purpose parties have; how administration serves society best, have remained unchanged. Consequently, the way parties organise their assemblies, how ministries work, and how parliaments deliberate, resembles the 1960s rather than the year 2017. It comes as no surprise that all these institutions find it hard to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, and thus overstretch political processes and competencies.

As the complexity and volatility of politics are expected to further increase over the coming years, we need, now more than ever, a debate on how we can design adaptive and thus more resilient democratic institutions. Since they have remained largely untouched since their creation<sup>12</sup>, they lack mind-set, structure, and competence to create a successful impact in an environment that has changed fundamentally since the end of World War II. This goes not only for supranational challenges like climate change, migration, or the creation of a social digital economy, but also for the smaller tasks of policy-making, governing, and administrating.

## The way parties organise their assemblies, how ministries work, and how parliaments deliberate, resembles the 1960s rather than the year 2017.

Changing means un-learning, and accepting uncertainty. And yet, to not change bears many more risks than proactive transformation. Take political parties, and how they organise. By not adapting to today's diverse societies, their engagement needs and preferences, they knowingly create a vacuum that can easily be filled by new players who organise their work in accordance with the paradigms of the 21st century. As the successes of the pirate parties, Podemos, Alternativet, and others show, experimental and digitalised organisational paradigms of self-organisation

10. Current debates on theses like David van Reybrouck's "Against Elections" or Jason Brennan's "Against Democracy" show that there is an increasing willingness to go beyond incremental process reform in public debate, and include and discuss the mental models that are the basis for our democracies' structures and processes. There is a need to intensify this kind of debate, as it arguably creates more substantial results than discussing singular amendments to the existing democratic process.

11. For executive bodies and democratic processes: Smith (2009); For political parties: Jun, Uwe/Niedermayer, Oskar/Wiesendahl, Elmar (eds.): *Zukunft der Mitgliederparteien*, Opladen 2009; Burmester, Hanno/Pfaff, Isabella (eds.): *Politik mit Zukunft. Zehn Thesen für eine bessere Bundespolitik*, Wiesbaden 2013.

12. The most remarkable exception is the creation of the ESM at European level after the financial collapse in 2008 and the following debt crisis.



attract and mobilise. Established parties need to learn from these examples, even if not all of them may endure – it is only a matter of time until political players emerge who find the sweet spot of organisational capability and a political programme, which attracts the masses. The longer established parties leave this space open for potential contenders, the higher the risk for disruptive contestants. Who guarantees that they will be liberal democrats, especially in times of crisis?

Unlike parties, state organisations do not need to fear direct competition by new players due to their monopoly on the legitimate use of force. And yet, their unwillingness to adapt to a changed environment creates a vacuum that can be filled and used by mobile, transnational agents, like global corporations, the financial markets, and digital super players. More importantly, the slow-motion evolution of liberal democracy sends a message of weakness and fatigue, which, in return, increases distrust and decreases legitimacy.

We need to rethink mental models, structures, and processes of our democratic institutions:

- Which political institutions do we need in an era of unprecedented global interdependency and interconnectedness, and how can we guarantee their efficient collaboration, both within nation states as well as amongst them?
- How can we re-define the purpose of vital institutions like political parties and Parliaments, to match their activity to the needs of today's societies?
- Which architecture do democratic institutions need in times of complexity and volatility, in order to be responsive, adaptive, and “anti-fragile”?<sup>13</sup>
- How can paradigms of self-organisation and agility be translated for political organisations?
- How can democratic institutions be designed in a way that they attract and retain the very best talent our democracies have? How can political and state institutions create best practices for the transformation of the workplace, providing an excellent work environment for the best of the best?

13. For the concept of anti-fragility see Taleb, Nassim Nicholas: *Antifragile. Things that gain from disorder*, 2014.

## Leaving Binary Debates Behind

When looking at the academic and public debate on democratic innovation, you will notice a heavy focus on direct participation and new ways of public deliberation<sup>14</sup> – a change of the democratic process, in other words. Proponents of more participation and broadened deliberation believe that the introduction of measures such as direct legislation, mini publics, or popular assemblies will help solve the democratic crisis.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the discourse on direct participation and intensified public deliberation gained dynamic, most political challenges could be solved within national frames, and intensified citizen participation, in combination with increased transparency and accountability, was the plausible next step for Western democracies.

Since then, many meaningful ideas have been introduced into the public discourse – but only a very small number has been prototyped and implemented. It is interesting to see that, while the societal environment has changed dramatically since the earlier days of the debate, the main hypotheses and hopes of the proponents of a participatory democracy have remained largely unchanged.<sup>15</sup>

The same goes for the general debate on democratic innovation: its focus lies almost exclusively on process reform. In accordance with the dominant paradigms of the 1970s, when the discourse was shaped, the mental model behind most process innovations treats the democratic challenge as a technical one. The assumption in most cases is that the process can be fixed, like a machine, by adjusting and replacing single parts of it. Introducing different modes of participation and deliberation, in other words, is believed to save democracy.<sup>16</sup>

While innovations in the fields of participation and deliberation may be laudable in many cases, an exclusive focus on process innovation unnecessarily limits

14. See as one of the most relevant works in the field: Smith, Graham: *Democratic innovations. Designing institutions for citizen participation*, Cambridge 2009.

15. See, for instance: Roth, Roland: *Praxis und Perspektiven einer neuen Beteiligungskultur*, in: Glaab, Manuela (ed.): *Politik mit Bürgern – Politik für Bürger. Bürgergesellschaft und Demokratie*, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 367-388.

16. For an influential example see Pateman, Carole: *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge 1970.



the public discourse on democratic innovation. As the societal environment is fundamentally different from the mid-20th century, we need to re-assess the mental frames we use when discussing the development of democracy. The meaningful answers from decades ago are – in most cases – not the ones we need today.

The public debate in most Western democracies equals a more direct democracy with a better democracy. At the same time, the evidence we have gathered over the last years draws a more ambivalent picture. Referenda, for instance, the most popular direct-democratic means implemented over the last decades, are a fundamentally flawed measure to further and deepen democracy. This goes especially for referenda on highly complex questions – the very questions representativeness has been invented for. The French and Dutch referenda on the European Constitution in 2005, the repeated Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, the Brexit vote in 2016, or the Italian constitutional referendum in the same year – all these referenda have laid bare the flaws of direct democratic decisions that formally require zero deliberation and preparation in order to vote on questions of fundamental importance. The same degree of scepticism emerges when we look at the social polarisation of participatory democracy. Participatory measures today are a gateway for the well-informed to further their issues and interests, while those who are less educated participate on a significantly lower level.

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Sometimes, it seems the debate on participatory democracy is overtly characterised by its binary character. Those who favour a more direct democracy in many cases disregard the institutions and mechanisms of a representative democracy. They pretend to hold the golden key for saving democracy. Those who prefer the representative model talk down the potential benefits of increased citizen participation. For decades now, both sides have been exchanging well-trained arguments for or against introducing certain innovative measures.

Both sides tend to lose sight of the fact that neither introducing nor stopping single measures will solve the challenges we face. More importantly, we need the best of both worlds to master the challenges to come – and, probably more relevant, new ideas on how to innovate democracy, instead of continuing to rely on ideas which were created in a situation that is long since past. We need to focus on expanding the discourse on democratic innovation, and be careful to not get caught in existing patterns of debate. Basic assumptions and architectures, as well as their fundamental structures, need at least as much attention as specific measures of process reform.

Instead of exclusively debating how to change the picture, in other words, it seems more urgent now than ever to discuss how we can rebuild the frame. Yes, we need to discuss and – more importantly – implement smart process innovations. But we also need to re-evaluate the mental models of liberal democracy, and consequently re-design its structures and institutions. Democracy will neither be saved nor killed by isolated innovative measures.

## **Democracy for a Fuller Life**

Since the boom periods after World War II, there has been a close connection between material well-being and democracy in Western societies. Liberal democracy equals material wealth – an interrelatedness that for many decades has constituted the collective identity of many Western democracies. Today, the image of the consumer citizen is omnipresent; sometimes it seems as if purchasing power trumps universal citizen's rights.

In global and historical comparison, Western liberal democracies today enjoy tremendous material wealth. The focus on a (more or less) social market model has brought high life-quality to Western democracies, still envied in wide parts of the world. While there is no doubt that politics and the state need to continue to assure a certain level of material wealth for everyone, it seems fair to ask: what is the next step, after this historic achievement? What comes beyond the almost exclusive focus on wealth redistribution?

Psychological research shows that, from a certain wealth level onwards, the individual correlation between wealth and well-being ends. As humans, we have material needs or, in other words, long for a feeling of security. At the same time, though, we long for purpose, relatedness, growth, and autonomy (as outlined above). Thus, material well-being is only *one* of several essential parameters for a good life. And yet, political discourses in Western societies barely include those needs that go beyond material security and, to some degree, autonomy.

This rift hints towards where we can develop liberal democracy. We need democracies that transcend the material paradigm – which means incorporate and go beyond it, in order to help provide frameworks for *richer* lives that do not necessarily need to be *wealthier*.<sup>17</sup>

Democracies need to focus more on how they can facilitate a *full* life. This includes an intensified debate on how the construct we know as *state* can further personal and societal growth and development, a meaningful life, private as well as professional, and relatedness that catalyses our individual and collective “mental complexity”, which, among other things, includes an increased capability to respond to changing environments in accordance with our liberal democratic values.

Indeed, if we want societies that emancipate their well-being from their individual material wealth, we need to invest more time into finding out how we can collectively equip every citizen with the ability to master a democratic life in an environment of permanent change. The existing frames of education and broader enablement do not suffice for equipping each other with what we need to successfully navigate a world that many perceive not only as complex but as chaotic. To achieve that, we need to deepen our political understanding of what makes us human when the environment is increasingly inhumane; what makes us more democratic when our learned reflexes further societal fragmentation; what lets us live a wholesome life even if the social status that comes with wealth cannot be held for millions.

17. Philosopher Jonathan Rowson argues that well-being and happiness are the wrong standards for measuring a good life. After all, every life includes suffering: the death of a family member or friend, sickness, phases of fear and insecurity – such experiences make us learn and grow, and thus develop as individuals. Rowson thus introduces the term *fullness* – a full life can include unhappiness and phases where you are not well, and yet deeply fulfilled. See Rowson, Jonathan: *Spiritualise. Revitalising Spirituality to address 21st Century Challenges*, RSA, London 2014, p. 21.

If we have the courage to do this, we open pathways for a new political discourse – a discourse that is focused on the full spectrum of human needs. This is deeply relevant in times where people increasingly feel left behind in our political system, alone with their fear and worries, and the anger that results from it.

## What is Also Needed: Claiming Agency

Western democracies today, especially those that weathered the financial crisis relatively unaffected, are characterised by a paradox. In society, there is a widespread feeling that things are falling apart, no matter how solid the economic growth indices are. There is a sense that we are witnessing fundamental shifts, which may change or even destroy the world as we know it. At the same time, the political discourse seems weirdly saturated. Humanity’s self-destruction mode concerning climate change, financial systems on a lasting brink of collapse, the injustice of global inequality, the mass migration of millions: while these issues are constantly present in private discussions, politics seem absorbed by muddling through. The political arena invests huge amounts of attention on whether welfare should be raised by 5 or 20 Euros, how to label energy-efficient fridges, or how football players’ salaries can be capped. While the world as we know it is collapsing, the political field seems to do its best to pretend that things go as normal, and to find incremental solutions for existential challenges.

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### **The political field is caught in an hysteresis effect - people and social systems doing what they usually do, despite the outside environment asking for different actions.**

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Synergetics, the science of complex, self-organised systems, speaks of the “hysteresis effect”.<sup>18</sup> It signifies the phenomenon when people and social systems do what they usually do, even if the outside environment asks

18. See Haken, Hermann/Schiepek, Günter: *Synergetik in der Psychologie – Selbstorganisation verstehen und gestalten*, 2006, S. 214.





for completely different actions. Many people in the political field seem to be caught in this dynamic. Psychology tells us that people, when in fear or stress, tend to fall back into learned patterns and automated behaviours – even if these habits are counterproductive when it comes to solving current challenges. When we look at the challenges we face today, it is more than plausible that politicians focus on what seems doable: fine-tune a regulation, write a press release. Like all of us, they feel massively overwhelmed by the crises we are facing. This is understandable from a human perspective – as well as from a professional one, as most political decision-makers feel massive frustration by the boundaries set for regional, national, and even European politics.

And yet, these understandable individual patterns of disempowerment add up to a collective catastrophe. If those who we elect into power decline to empower themselves, democracy must fail. I had several private conversations with members of the German parliament and highest-ranking civil servants who were utterly convinced that they were powerless; a self-fulfilling prophecy, of course, as those who believe they can do nothing will never claim the power they need to change things.

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### **To rebuild the national and international architectures of doing politics we need individuals who empower themselves.**

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We must rebuild the national and international architectures of doing politics. To do this, we need individuals who empower themselves to undertake the effort to do so. This takes more than political mandates. It takes individual audacity, the self-permission to attempt what others declare to be impossible. It needs people who realise that the man-made can always be changed. The biggest hurdle in our way are self-limiting beliefs: in a world without alternatives, in a world where meaningful transformation is nothing but a dream.

On the illiberal right, you see plenty of people who forcefully pursue the supposedly impossible. Take Donald Trump, a man who is driven by the belief that he can achieve things. However despicable his agenda, and

however despicable his means in pursuing his goals – progressives can learn from his sense of agency. We need liberal democrats who entitle themselves before they seek the democratic entitlement from others. We need democrats who see the willingness to try spectacularly, and thus to fail spectacularly as noble attitudes.

Whatever good ideas for democratic innovation there are, whatever good ideas we come up with: they are worth nothing without individuals who accept maximum responsibility, and do their best to achieve great things, for the good of democracy and this planet.



## The Author\*



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Hanno owns a company that is focused on human and organisational development. In this capacity, he designs and facilitates change processes in national and international companies and public institutions. His work is rooted in systems theory, integral theory, and developmental psychology. As keynote speaker, he delivers speeches on organisational culture and the future of organisations and the workplace. In the past, Hanno has worked for a parliamentary group in the German Parliament, as well as for a party headquarters, and several Members of Parliament on the German federal level. He was investigative journalist for the German public broadcaster NDR and wrote for various national media outlets.

### The Democracy Lab of Das Progressive Zentrum

The *Democracy Lab* is the platform for projects on innovating democracy within *Das Progressive Zentrum*. The Lab hosts, fosters, and connects projects that aim to generate ideas and practical approaches on how to innovate liberal democracy and to enable political actors and institutions. The projects span different disciplines, countries, and regions and are realized in cooperation with a multitude of partner organizations.

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**DEMO  
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### About Das Progressive Zentrum

*Das Progressive Zentrum*, located in Berlin, is an independent and non-profit think tank. The aim of *Das Progressive Zentrum* is to foster new networks of progressive actors from different origins and work towards a general acceptance of innovative politics aiming at economic and social progress. In this respect, *Das Progressive Zentrum* gathers in its progressive debates mainly young thinkers and decision-makers from Germany and Europe.



### About Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)

*FEPS* is the European progressive political foundation and the only progressive think tank at European level. *FEPS* establishes an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project, putting fresh thinking at the core of its action. As a platform for ideas and dialogue, *FEPS* works in close collaboration with social democratic organisations, and in particular national foundations and think tanks across Europe, to tackle the challenges that Europe faces today. *FEPS* embodies a new way of thinking on the social democratic, socialist and labour scene in Europe.



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