DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM

DEMO CRACY LAB

DISCUSSION PAPER

June 2018

Hanno Burmester

Beyond (this) democracy

Seven sketches towards a new democratic purpose

What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.[1]

Liberal democracy experiences multiple crises that are potentially fatal: an ecological crisis, a social crisis and an institutional crisis. To tackle these challenges, incremental reform within today's parameters will not suffice. What it takes to both solve the crises and revitalise democracy is the re-definition of a 21st-century democratic purpose and a radical, transformative approach to doing politics. In seven sketches, the following pages make a case for a new perspective on the status quo and offer ideas regarding the repurposing of liberal democracy.

I. Opening *or* Facing the big questions

Western democracy is in a state of fundamental self-doubt.[2] The 20th-century prosperity model, based on an understanding of freedom that has cost-externalisation at its core, is confronted with its systemic limitations. A rising number of citizens are voicing scepticism regarding the supposed positive interdependency of democracy and capitalism. Climate change and global inequality, both inherent part of what capitalist democracies have created over the past decades, are challenging the legitimacy of today's order and the ideology upon which it is built. Illiberal populists attack pluralism, diversity, and minority rights.

Western societies seem torn. Some fervently defend the current democratic model, sketching a binary scenario of a culture war between a "liberal" and "illiberal" order. Others, discontented and frustrated by challenged identities, economic despair or a lack of life perspective, turn their back on what they feel are the empty promises and ideals of democracy. Between these two groups, hundreds of millions of citizens sense that the post-War democratic model is coming to an end and feel paralysed because there is no viable alternative in sight.

This paper aims to dive into this sense of fundamental uncertainty. Its purpose is to explore the current situation, and challenge established perspectives on democracy, the market and the transformations that lie ahead. The following pages are built upon the following questions:

- How can today's existential challenges to the Western democratic model be viewed as systemic phenomena, instead of regarding them as "external" threats?

- Why do we need democracy? What is its key purpose? Which of the benefits and potentials democracy carries today can be deepened and developed to advance this purpose?

- What would a democracy look like that understands itself as part of the ecosystem's life webs, not external or superior to them?

- How would we understand individual, collective and systemic freedoms in such a democracy?

- What constitutive rules can be derived from that understanding? What institutions would we need to uphold and further these rules?

- What would be the purpose and constitutive rules of the market in such a democracy?

"Only if we manage to re-inject democracy with a purpose that fits the systemic needs will we be able to strengthen public trust in democracy and reintegrate democratic societies into the boundaries of the ecosystem."

The overarching hypothesis of the following sketches is that only if we manage to re-inject democracy with a purpose that fits today's and tomorrow's systemic needs will we be able to strengthen public trust in democracy and achieve the reintegration of democratic societies into the boundaries of the ecosystem.

This paper is structured in seven short parts. Sketch II makes the case for centrist politics to embrace transformative approaches to doing politics. Sketch III explores the successes of illiberal populism, asking how the Western post-War democratic model fuelled the rise of this ideology – and how the broken promises of Western democracy foster today's rising willingness to consider radical systemic alternatives to the status quo. Sketch IV asks why we need democracy and proposes a democratic purpose that is centred on reintegrating society into the boundaries of the ecosystem. Focusing on that challenge, sketch V looks at the systemic limitations current ideology in Western post-War democracy creates, taking today's misconception of liberty as an example. Sketch VI argues that individual and collective self-organisation carry the essential future potential for realising a meaningful democratic purpose. It proposes a political focus on the strategic re-definition of systemic parameters via radical reform – parameters which help channel societal self-organisation into the boundaries of the ecosystem. Sketch VII closes with a call to trust our collective potential to develop both our consciousness and system towards the reintegration of democratic societies into the wider whole.

1. A warm thank you to Rich Mason, Prof. Lance Bennett, Tomas Björkman, Sophie Pornschlegel, Jérémie Gagné and Klara Sucher for their comments. Thanks to Suel Aguranov for his comments on the earliest drafts and some help with the referencing; Quote by Capra, F./Luisi, P.: The Systems View of Life. A unifying Vision, Cambridge 2014, p. 80.

2. In an attempt to differentiate Western European and Northern American democracies from other democratic models, I use „Western post-War democracy" on the following pages. This model promotes a democratic ideal that includes, to name some key characteristics, a strong rule of law, an executive curbed by systemic checks and balances, and an understanding of pluralism that roots in a positive understanding of individualism. Western post-War democracy is characterised by the notion that there is a positive feedback cycle between (individual) liberty and capitalism.

II. A fundamental crisis *or* The end of centrist politics

We are faced with an increasing understanding that the Western post-War model of organising democracy and the market is in fundamental crisis:

• The globalised economy has created an abundance of material wealth for Western democracies. At the same time, it is fundamentally altering the self-regulation of the ecosystem. This is not only putting humanity's survival at stake but also leads to the extinction of thousands of species each year.[3] Despite some political efforts to curb the emissions of CO2 and greenhouse gases, all industrialised democratic countries still significantly overconsume natural resources. This overconsumption's consequences tend to be externalised outside the developed world, affecting disproportionately those parts of the globe that act within the ecosystem's boundaries.

• In the second half of the 20th century, Western democracies have driven economic globalisation on an unprecedented scale. The economic transgression of national boundaries has not, however, been accompanied by the creation of globalised political institutions that are capable of effective governance, including a fair redistribution of wealth and opportunity among all countries that participate in the globalised economy. This failure results in a status quo where humans are more tangibly interconnected than ever by the interdependencies the globalised economy has created. At the same time, this interconnectedness enables everyone to see the unfair outcomes of today's global order: In Western countries, citizens are born into a global aristocracy. Materially, they are comparably well off – no matter their talents and achievements. For those born in other parts of the world, the situation is starkly different. Even the most gifted individuals will find it impossible to redress the systemic imbalance we are consciously re-creating every day. Western liberalism, with its narrative of individual merit, sounds increasingly hollow in this context – even more so when you consider the West's united efforts to maintain the present imbalance, especially via finance, agriculture and trade policies.

• In Western democracies, the limits of domestic growth and ratcheting economic pressure via the globalised markets have led to a reliance on growth via global expansion, the deregulation of financial markets and management strategies to increase cost efficiency and productivity. These strategies have been accompanied by political measures aimed at maintaining competitiveness via the reduction of workers' rights and stagnating wages. In countries like the USA, the UK and Germany, this has resulted in both continued growth and growing inequality. In countries like France, Italy or Spain, the result has been economic stagnation or recession, a lack of possibilities for young generations and increasing poverty. Today, Western democracies' narrative of equality and opportunity, in most cases, fails the reality check. In the United States, for instance, the inequality of material wealth has reached its highest point since the 1920s. At the same time, European social mobility is, overall, stagnating or decreasing.[4] The social status of one's parents determines one's material and social prospects.

"All these challenges express rising incapability of Western democratic governments to deliver on their key promises, nationally as well as internationally: equality, opportunity and sustainability."

All these challenges express rising incapability of Western democratic governments to deliver on their key promises, nationally as well as internationally: equality, opportunity and sustainability. At the same time, centrist politics and centrist political discourse succeed in maintaining the illusion that these challenges are merely technical problems, to be solved through the existing political institutions. More importantly, there exists a wide-spread notion that the existential crises we face are unintended accidents of the existing order; that the democratic architecture has not fuelled their creation.

3. According to the WWF, the extinction of species that is happening today is estimated to be between 1000 and 10000 times higher than the extinction rate that would occur if humans were not around.

4. Eurofund (2017), Social mobility in the EU, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Both suppositions are false. The existential challenges we are dealing with are systemic phenomena; phenomena that are either – as with global inequality – integral to how Western democracies came into existence, or – as in the case of environmental destruction – have been deliberately accepted as *sine qua non* of the capitalist economy. The systemic crises of today exist *because* our democratic systems are the way they are. For these systemic phenomena to be effectively tackled, basic properties of today's Western societies need to be altered, in parallel to the implementation of multiple new policies.

Many analysts of today's political landscape argue that left and right have lost their meaning in an increasingly volatile and fragmented political environment. Commentators now focus on the divide between cosmopolitan and communitarian. This perspective needs to be broadened to encompass the rift between proponents of *transformative* versus *incremental* change. As in the case of communitarian and cosmopolitan worldviews, the perspective on radical versus incremental change runs counter to the lines of party membership, left and right.

Proponents of incremental change focus on reform within existing systemic parameters and see today's challenges as something that can be solved within the means of the post-War democratic architecture. They tend to think in terms of policy proposals and dismiss broader ideas of system's transformation as unrealistic. Proponents of radical change, on the other hand, do not believe that today's challenges can be solved within the existing political frame but require the building of a new one.

While today's political landscape favours the incremental approach, thinkers on the future of democracy emphasise the need for a transformative approach to doing politics. In his book *Democracy Realised*, Robert Mangabeira Unger argues for transformation by implementing *radical reform*: "reform is radical when it addresses and changes the basic arrangements of a society; its formative structure of its institutions and enacted beliefs; It is reform because it deals with one discrete part of this structure at a time". Unger proposes the undoing and remaking of the political system via current ways of decision-making – by taking one radical step after the other, instead of aiming for one systemic overhaul. "Today the idea of revolution has become a pretext for its opposite. Because real change would be revolutionary change, and revolutionary change is unavailable."[5]

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Considering the gravity of today's challenges, this approach seems essential for centrist parties to consider. Western democracies are contested from the outside, whilst increasingly faltering from the inside. Questions of how we distribute opportunity and wealth, nationally and globally, are omnipresent. There is a rising awareness that the capitalist understanding of freedom, based on cost-externalisation, undermines the ecosystem as a whole and needs to be overcome if we want to sustain democracy's legitimacy (See sketch V). This challenges the post-War democratic model at its core – after all, Western democracy has been intertwined with the logic of capitalism from its beginnings. The Western post-War democratic model has reached the end of its history, albeit differently than many predicted in the early 1990s. At this moment in time, defending our democratic model as we know it is a flawed choice. Rather, we should think about how we can rebuild democracy in a way that preserves its benefits but overcomes the structural flaws we are struggling with today.

Systemic changes are a logical prerequisite if we want to start altering some of the basic dynamics that cause the existential crises we face. If we leave the structures of our system untouched, the fundamental dynamics of the environmental and social crisis cannot be changed for the better. To tackle this task, we first must

5. "The idea of revolution, when used to denote the total substitution of one indivisible system by another, describes nothing but a dangerous limiting case of transformative politics, seen under the lens of an illusion about how history happens. (...) Today the idea of revolution has become a pretext for its opposite. Because real change would be revolutionary change, and revolutionary change is unavailable, (...) we are left to humanize the inevitable. Such is the project of a pessimistic reformism resigned so often, especially through compensatory redistribution by tax-and transfer, what it despairs of challenging and changing." Unger, Roberto: Democracy Realised. The Progressive Alternative, London 1998, pp. 20 f.

acknowledge that centrist politics in all major Western democracies seem inexorably caught within the incremental paradigm of doing politics. The centre-left and the centre-right effectively act as conservative forces. Their political actions serve to maintain and strengthen the fundamental logic of today's political system. Take the financial crisis of 2008 as an example: No major party on the centre-right or the centre-left, neither in Europe nor the US, has articulated alternatives to the existing failed financial system. Both sides have focused on re-establishing unchanged basic dynamics of the financial markets. To take another example, both centre-left and centre-right actions regarding climate change lack the effective implementation of measures that have the potential to *systematically* reduce the permanent overconsumption of natural resources.[6]

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Considering the global ecological, social and economic development, it seems reasonable to predict that centrist politics cannot stick to this approach. Either, the global political dynamics will drive centrist parties to include transformative thinking and doing into their repertoire. Or, as the last years' events illustrate, new political forces will replace parties of the political centre at an ever greater pace. At the same time, political newcomers usually have neither the systemic capability nor the voters' trust to implement the far-reaching measures necessary to replace the current, rapid disintegration of Western democracies with a meaningful *democratic reintegration* that systemically addresses the challenges sketched out above. The inclusion of transformative perspectives into the centrist political agenda thus seems vital. After all, it is the knowledge and expertise of centrist parties that is needed to efficiently implement *radical reform*. This expertise could be key for the transformation of democracy.

6. Arguably, even far-reaching international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement have led to the passage of reform measures that follow a mechanistic solution approach and do not interfere with basic market dynamics.

III. Making sense of illiberalism *or* Democracy's broken promises

While Western European and North American democracies still oppose the idea that the post-War democratic model needs radical reform, democracies in Central and Eastern Europe are in the process of structurally breaking with key ideas of the Western post-War democratic model they adopted after 1989 – culturally *and* economically. In European member states like Hungary and Poland, self-declared illiberal governments are systematically dismantling democratic institutions that are meant to guarantee the separation of powers, primarily by attacking the independent judiciary and the free press. They do so in the *name of democracy*, promising to "reconstitute" a majority principle which, allegedly, has been systematically undermined by "the elite". By citing the democratic majority principle, they manage to reframe the protection of minorities and the power of the constitutional jurisdiction as undemocratic.

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In Central-European countries like the Czech Republic and Slovenia, parties who follow this line enjoy significant voter support. The same goes for Western-European countries like Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Despite many attempts, the political centre has found no lasting and effective answer to these forces. Centrist parties see themselves confronted by an illiberal alternative to the model they build and have been promoting over decades: a culturally liberal democracy that goes hand in hand with an increasingly laissez-faire capitalist economy.

Illiberal parties' programmes argue for the weakening of minority rights and a reduction of pluralism. In most countries, this is far from where the majority of voters stands. At the same time, their *economically* illiberal

policy proposals appeal to many voters, due to their central promise that it is possible to *take back control*. Adding to that, illiberal forces in many cases are adept at uncovering weaknesses of centrist politics. With a talent for expressing the systemic discontent that goes beyond the solutions offered by the incremental policy change, they succeed in mobilising a critical number of supporters behind them. Arguably, their ability to express discontent on a systemic level is more important for their success than the perceived validity of the alternatives they offer.

For many years now, the political centre has responded primarily with defaming their illiberal antagonists. As illiberalism's track record in recent years shows, this line of attack is failing.[7] Firstly, the centre does not offer any substance to counter illiberal ideas and narratives. Secondly, by merely defending a system that millions, even far beyond the populist voters, see as broken,[8] established political parties willingly align themselves with the picture populists paint of them: as unwilling and unable to tackle the issues people care about; incapable of changing the failed modus operandi of recent decades.

The strategic fallacy of this position cannot be called out strongly enough in a situation where the entire ecological and societal environment forces us to acknowledge that the post-War democratic model has reached its systemic limits (see Sketch II). Fundamental distrust has crept into the very centre of Western societies, extending significantly beyond illiberal and populist shares of the electorate.[9] In this situation, illiberal players manage to position themselves as the only ones who are willing to structurally intervene into the dynamics of today's political system,[10] and thus attract many parts of the electorate that are looking for alternatives to the status quo. They forcefully make the argument that the system can be politically altered, no matter the economic and international interdependencies that seem to bind and limit the current spectrum of political decision-making. For parties in the political centre, it is hard to counter their targeted attacks effectively. After all, their decisions helped create the wicked challenges we face today.[11] Just like these challenges, illiberalism can be seen as a systemic outcome of both centre-left and centre-right politics over recent decades.

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As illiberal forces attack the paradoxes and constitutive rules of today's systems, centrist parties continue to respond by bringing forward policy proposals aimed at strengthening the very system illiberals attack. Instead of taking up the growing frustration with the *constitutive rules* of today's systems, centrist politics continues to promote isolated policies which, at best, promise to improve the system illiberal players oppose outright. For instance, the party programmes for the German federal election in 2017 list dozens of suggestions on how national democracy could be improved in the existing frame. None of the parties, though, makes a meaningful case for *why* democracy is the right system for the 21st century and *how* it needs to be transformed to continue to serve its citizens and to live up to the existential challenges it currently faces.

With this attitude, most political parties follow the discursive tradition that shapes Western societies since the Cold War. Deliberating alternative systemic options to those we chose many decades ago is still easily discredited along the rhetorical lines of anti-communism and anti-socialism. This makes us forget that we once lived in a multi-optional world: not so long ago, there

7. Another wide-spread tactic is mimicry – copying illiberal players in both style and demands – which mostly furthers the illiberal agenda to undermine trust in democratic values and institutions.
8. See Mounk, Yascha/Foa, Roberto Stefan: The Democratic Disconnect, in: Journal of Democracy, July 2016, Volume 27 No. 3, pp. 5-17.
9. See Bennett, Lance: Who are the people? Communication, Power, and the Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics, in: Texte. Öffentlich-rechtliche Qualität im Diskurs, 20 (2017); for further thoughts on conflicting paradigms in today's Western societies see Burmester, Hanno: Shifting Frames. Six Thoughts on Innovating Liberal Democracy, 2017.
10. In fact, they are not. There are many culturally liberal parties all over Western democracies who propose a paradigmatically altered approach to doing politics. In many cases, they also make use of populist elements, which leads some analysts to treat parties like Die LINKE, Podemos, or La France Insoumise as comparable to illiberal populist players – a grave mistake. Green parties propose altered economic paradigms that go further than what traditional centre-left and centre-right parties propose. But, as in case of the German Green Party, they leave the democratic architecture untouched and refrain from questioning capitalism as such.
11. See, for instance, the democratic deficit in the EU's and the Euro Zone's architecture, or the paradox wish to guarantee both open borders and high social benefits. For further thoughts compare the forthcoming recommendations on illiberal populism by the Dialogue on Europe's Thinking Lab on Populism.

were practised alternatives to today's political realities – alternatives we today would probably label "economically illiberal". For instance, the United States followed a highly interventionist economic approach after the Great Depression when it came to the redistribution of wealth. Higher incomes were massively taxed[12] and prices were politically controlled. *The Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply*, founded in 1941, controlled 90% of the prices of goods sold by the end of World War II. Just like the political intervention into the consumer market, intense state intervention into the job market enjoyed high public approval. Ironically, the success of the consumer economy after World War II was in large part caused by an interventionist state, focussed on improving the welfare of the bottom 50% of incomes. It took fierce political battles to return to a more unregulated model of the market economy, in 1946 and the years that followed.[13]

As this example reminds us, Western-style democracy along with a "free" capitalistic market economy has not always been seen as a self-evident unity. In the early post-War architecture, Western democracies were understood to be an antithesis to toppled fascist regimes and the competing Soviet bloc. In war-torn Western Europe, the introduction of capitalist market regimes was meant to express and catalyse individual and collective liberties and self-expression.[14] In the following decades, liberal democracy became a synonym for a free-markets-economy, just as living in a liberal democracy became the synonym for living a prosperous life in a privileged society.

From 1960 onwards, Western European societies increasingly accepted capitalism as hegemony. The rapid material advancement in basically all strata of Western societies from the 1950s to 1970s was essential for solidifying the democratic order's legitimacy.[15] The intense focus on individual material advancement was imperative not only for the stabilisation of democracy but also – and as importantly – for how Western democracy was perceived in other parts of the world. Accordingly, the expansion of individual material wealth has been the prime focus of most governments in the West for decades as it provided legitimacy for an expanding market economy.

"In the following decades, democracy increasingly became the means to further the expansion of the capitalist market by narrowing its focus on the material well-being of the individual."

In the following decades, democracy increasingly became the means to further the expansion of the capitalist market by narrowing its focus on the material well-being of the individual.[16] The deepening of democracy as a collective endeavour gave way to an individualised, atomised understanding of society where *the market* assured prosperity and opportunity. The focus on the development beyond the material, of individuals and the community, as promoted in the Romantic concept of humanistic education, was relegated to the background. The market moved its position from being an *instrument* for furthering democratic freedom to being an end in itself. After the 1970s and especially the 1980s, an increasing number of politicians and economists saw an "unregulated" market as the *prerequisite* for the shift towards democracy. The difference between the state of the economy and the state of democracy as a humanist system became increasingly blurred. Economic growth and democratic well-being became the Siamese twins of the Western bloc's epistemology.

11. See, for instance, the democratic deficit in the EU's and the Euro Zone's architecture, or the paradox wish to guarantee both open borders and high social benefits. For further thoughts compare the forthcoming recommendations on illiberal populism by the Dialogue on Europe's Thinking Lab on Populism.
12. The top income tax rate in the United States during World War II was 94% for incomes above USD 200000.
13. See Cohen, Lizabeth: A Consumer's Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post War America, New York 2003, esp. Ch. 2.
14. See, for instance, the Bavarian constitution as laid down in 1946, §151 (highlights by the author): (1) „Die gesamte wirtschaftliche Tätigkeit dient dem Gemeinwohl, insbesonders der Gewährleistung eines menschenwürdigen Daseins für alle und der allmählichen Erhöhung der Lebenshaltung aller Volksschichten. (2) 1. Innerhalb dieser Zwecke gilt Vertragsfreiheit nach Maßgabe der Gesetze. 2. Die Freiheit der Entwicklung persönlicher Entschlußkraft und die Freiheit der selbständigen Betätigung des einzelnen in der Wirtschaft wird grundsätzlich anerkannt. 3. Die wirtschaftliche Freiheit des einzelnen findet ihre Grenze in der Rücksicht auf den Nächsten und auf die sittlichen Forderungen des Gemeinwohls."
15. See, with regards to the German example, König, Wolfgang: Eine kleine Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft. Konsum als Lebensform der Moderne, Stuttgart 2008, S. 32-36.
16. "The real battle today is between the American assembly line and the Communist party line," as Paul G. Hoffman, an American automobile company executive who led the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe, put it. Nye, David: America's Assembly Line, Cambridge 2013, p. 127; Ta-Nehesi Coates rightly points out that American democracy was made possible by the proto-capitalist exploitation of enslaved blacks, which helped finance the economy the young (white) democracy based itself on: "America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary." Coates, Ta-Nehesi: We were eight years in power. An American tragedy, New York 2017, p. 180.

By the end of the Cold War, the difference between a capitalist market economy and liberal democracy had become so blurred that introducing democracy as a political system and the radical liberalisation of markets were seen as the same. Leading players across Western society shared the firm belief in the automatic, positive interplay between free markets and free societies. In the former Soviet region – where today's most prominent illiberal democratic experiments are taking place – this ideology led to the systematic selling-off of public assets after 1990 and a re-distribution of wealth towards (Western-owned) global corporations and the privileged few. The infamous economic "shock-therapies" – reforms that promised to free society by freeing the market – led to the destruction of the material safety net for hundreds of millions, an existential experience of collective chaos, and the shattering of bonds of community.[17]

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To those regions that experienced this intentional destruction of societal structures, liberal democracy is connoted with years of existential fighting for survival, a weak state, and a deeply divisive societal climate. What most people in Western societies associate with a life of prosperity and security brings up the remembrance of the reduction of everyday life to survival mode in other parts of the world. Realising this is key to understanding why the forceful defence of liberal democracy evokes resistance or scorn rather than approval in large parts of Central and Eastern Europe today. Liberal democracy is associated with the erosion of material and social status, and thus the destabilisation of identity itself. To those who experienced the introduction of democracy as a Trojan horse for a radical market ideology and the enriching of a small kleptocracy, the appeal of a liberal democratic model that goes hand in hand with radicalised capitalism is, and will remain, unseen.

Empathising with this collective trauma is vital to understand why political forces that label themselves as explicitly "illiberal" celebrate successes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. These governments, as in Russia, Hungary or Poland, are successful in part *because* of their illiberal agenda. From the Western perspective, we tend to overlook that this agenda is illiberal both culturally *and* economically.[18] Its popularity may partly be based in culturally illiberal positions[19] but mostly stems from an illiberal economic agenda. In Russia, for instance, Vladimir Putin reconstituted the power monopoly of the state and a social safety net after taking power in 2000, regaining a measure of control over an oligarchic economy run wild. In the West, he may be seen through the lens of human rights and political pluralism. In the Russian Federation, however, Putin still stands for the reconstitution of the state and the fairer redistribution of wealth. In Hungary and Poland, Fidesz and PiS gained support from those who saw themselves as losers of 1990s capitalism, those who did not feel they benefited from decades of economically liberal governments.[20] Their social and economic agenda, not their willingness to attack the independent judiciary or take apart the constitutional court, was what brought them executive power.[21]

Beyond post-Soviet countries, the centrist economic agenda of recent decades has created substantial negative consequences for millions of citizens in the "heartlands" of Western democracy as well. By unleashing an increasingly globalised market after 1990, Western democracies created a strategic dilemma for themselves. The economic globalisation project was neither accompanied nor followed by political globalisation. The political architecture, characterised by limited jurisdiction and competing national interests, enabled the creation of borderless corporate super-powers with financial

17. For numbers that express the economic and social downfall some countries never recovered from see World Bank indices.
18. Compare Victor Orbans speech at Bálványos Summer Free University in July 2014. Orban repeatedly cites experiences from the post-1990 situation in Hungary which in his eyes discredit liberal democracy as a system, such as the selling-out of public resources to private players, or the lacking regulation of financial markets. He argues that being against liberal democracy does not equal being against individual freedom rights. Illiberalism to him means a strong sense of community, as state that protects public interests against market interests and puts the nation first.
19. See the so-called "Russian Gay Propaganda Law" ("Russian federal law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values") from 2013, which, according to Pew Research, enjoys high public support.
20. For Poland see Ascherson, Neal: Poland after PiS. Handle with care, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, 2017.
21. It is important to highlight that these governments acquired their power via the mechanisms of the democratic majority principle. These cases remind us that it is well possible to act in accordance with the majority principle while actively undermining the rule of law and individual freedom rights. Just as there can be rule of law without democracy, there can be democracy without the rule of law.

resources that exceed those of most nation states.[22] These private players exploit the inconsistencies of unharmonised global standards and policies with active support from some political decision-makers on the national and supranational level.[23] The systematic corporate evasion of laws and rules undermines the legitimacy of today's democratic institutions in those very countries that enabled this development.

Privatisation and deregulation have structurally altered the distribution of wealth in Western countries, and thus basic societal dynamics. The last 30 years have brought tremendous amounts of wealth to the upper 20% of society, resulting in socioeconomic polarisations unseen since the 1920s.[24] For the lower half, incomes have stagnated, and the quality of the social safety nets has been significantly reduced.[25] The public has been becoming more and more aware that the primacy of the political has been replaced by the primacy of the economy. As Michael Sandel puts it, we are no longer a society with a market, but a market society.[26]

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What is relevant here is that the weakening of social security and the so-called "liberalisation" of the labour market has shifted the way significant parts of Western society perceive democracy, as a system and an idea. For millions, politics stopped being an ally and is increasingly perceived as a threat to the individual socio-economic status, serving market interests more than citizen interests. The ambivalent – and for the bottom 20% of incomes tangibly negative – effects of market reforms have catalysed the spreading of doubt regarding the alleged positive interplay between the "liberalisation" of markets and individual as well as societal well-being. As the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election imply, more and more people have ceased to believe there is a positive connection between ongoing economic "liberalisation" and individual welfare.

As doubts regarding the liberal economic agenda rise, a shift towards a greater scepticism of what people see as the *cultural* side of the post-War democratic model is taking place as well. To those who favour a communitarian world, the individualisation and cultural liberalisation of recent decades are felt as a threat to identity, on individual and collective levels. The populist surge of the last two decades succeeded in linking spreading economic and social anxieties to discourses about rising cultural diversity and individualisation. This helped to catalyse the belief that cultural liberalism threatens stability and identity of nation-states: illiberal populist parties have linked the cultural diversification of society to economic challenges of blue-collar workers, arguing that the rise in cultural diversity caused a decrease in economic well-being.[27] Immigrants and cultural minorities, both allegedly supported by their allies on the liberal left, are presented as a threat to national identity and cultural heritage.[28] In this discourse, culturally liberal values are perceived as co-opted by a cosmopolitan "elite" whose agenda benefits the educated few. The post-War model of democracy, with its focus on pluralism and minority rights, is seen as a threat, not as a promise, by a rising number of citizens. This challenges the values of an inclusive democracy at its core.

22. According to the NGO Global Justice Now, the ten biggest corporations, including Walmart, Apple and Shell, have combined revenue of more than 180 countries in a list that includes Ireland, Indonesia, Greece and South Africa. See their 2016 list: http://bit.ly/2jS2YsB.
23. See the cases of tax-evasion to tax havens by corporations like Apple; the systematic relocation of production sites while cashing in public subsidies as in the cases of Nokia or Harman International; the lobbying of states like Ireland or Luxembourg towards minimizing tax rates, and opening loopholes for tax avoidance as allegedly actively supported by today's president of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker.
24. The biggest spike can be seen in the United States. For a short overview see Branko Milanovic's review of Thomas Piketty's Capital in the 21st century.
25. ILO, Global Wage Report 2016/17, p. 10.
26. Sandel, Michael: What money can't buy. The moral limits of markets, London 2012.
27. Compare, for one example of many, a flyer of the Austrian FPÖ for the European Elections in 2014: "Während SPÖ, ÖVP, Grüne und NEOS der immer stärker werdenden Macht der Konzerne innerhalb der Europäischen Union nichts entgegensetzen, richtet sich die Kritik der FPÖ gegen die ausufernde Globalisierung sowie gegen Lohndumping, Sozialtourismus und das Diktat der internationalen Finanzmärkte. Wir (...) stehen deshalb für den Erhalt unserer nationalstaatlichen, gewachsenen Solidarsysteme und unserer sozialen Netze. Umverteilungsmechanismen zu Lasten der Österreicher wollen wir abstellen." Also, see the program of the Front National from 2017: "France must rearm in the face of globalization. A great natality policy will be preferred to costly and destabilizing immigration. Solidarity between generations, which is the basis of our system of pensions, presupposes vast new generations, which will make the strength of France tomorrow."
28. "Conflicts arise along these historical fault lines whenever the most vulnerable sections of the population become caught up in disruptive economic crises or historical upheavals and process their fear of a loss of status by clinging to supposedly 'natural' identities, whether it be the 'tribe', region, language or nation." Habermas, Jürgen: The Lure of Technocracy, Cambride 2015, p. 97.

"The pain, frustration and destabilisation economic liberalisation has caused over the past decades cannot be undone by fixing a couple of policies here and there."

It thus seems fair to say that centrist politics in Western democracies has little ground to gain by merely defending the post-War democratic model. The pain, frustration and destabilisation economic liberalisation has caused over the past decades cannot be undone by fixing a couple of policies here and there. Western centrist politics must find and promote new approaches to a democratic reintegration that reinforces the primacy of the political over the economy. Until they do so, they will continue to lose ground to illiberal populist challengers who currently are the main profiteers of the spreading public unease with the democratic status quo.

IV. Why democracy? *or* The confusion of Why with How

As we layed out in Sketches II and III, the post-War democratic model faces a systemic crises. Considering the gravity of these challenges, it seems more important than ever to be able to answer one basic question: Why, considering its ambivalent legacy, do we need democracy at all?

In the post-1990 decades of democratic hegemony, we have grown comfortable evading such questions. Today, in a moment when the idea of liberal democracy is fundamentally challenged, we cannot continue to do so. The moment when one could rely on a supposed moral superiority of the Western post-War democratic model is long gone, as the illiberal challenge and legitimate questions regarding Western democracy's global environmental and social footprint show. In this situation, agreeing on the purpose democracy should serve is the fundament for thinking about how democracy should be re-designed in the coming decades and what kinds of structures and processes this new democratic frame needs.

As many culturally liberal players realise these days, arguing for democracy beyond stereotypical patterns from the Cold War is not easy. We speak of democracy as if there is such a thing – but democracy is, first and foremost, an idea, an ideal, a hope. This idea has morphed quite extensively over time, to the extent that makes it hard to speak of "an" idea, as it has been a myriad of ideas put into very different practices over the course of centuries, and around the globe. Since the beginning of human civilisation, we have repeatedly and paradigmatically altered our perspective on what it means to be human, how we as civilisation see the world, and us in it. In this stream of truths, democracy is merely one of many currents, swimming from place to place, continuously altering its context, meaning and surface.

Accepting this is important, as it prepares us for the discursive status quo, where people mean very different things when they use the word "democracy". As the populist and illiberal challenge of the last two decades shows, there is less and less alignment within Western democracies regarding what is perceived as "democratic". Indeed, as millions of illiberal votes show, a growing number of people consider representative governmental and legislative systems to be *undemocratic*, just as they argue against the legitimacy of the protection of minority rights against the will of the majority. What is important here is that these people are not factually wrong. Democracy *can* mean the tyranny of a voting majority. It *can* mean a direct-democratic rule within constitutional boundaries. It *can* mean the idea of representative democracy. Historically, the meaning of democracy is fluid and its meaning has always been and will always be contested.

In its original sense, democracy signifies nothing but the rule of the majority.[29] What once was a famed exception, an endeavour of a tiny Attic elite, has since the Renaissance morphed into an universalist agenda.[30] During recent centuries, the idea of democracy has become increasingly intertwined with modern

29. Some prefer to use the broader frame, "government by the people", as opposed to the "government by the elite", which, in representative systems, is not a very useful frame.

understandings of what it means to be human, and thus attached to an idea of individual self-determination. Western democracy is based on a humanist worldview. It prioritises individual human well-being over collective systemic needs, as well as over the needs of the ecosystem's web of life, humanity is part of. This worldview once included white men only, but has been expanding its understanding of equality to more and more people since the 18th century.

"The rule of law, with its purpose to uphold individual and societal liberty, is at the core of today's Western democratic systems."

What we today refer to as "liberal democracy" is a governmental system that bases its decision-making on a legislative majority that is limited both in time and power. The constitution (or statutory laws) and the structural checks and balances that result from it, moderate executive power and protect individual and collective freedom rights. The rule of law, with its purpose to uphold individual and societal liberty, is thus at the core of today's Western democratic systems. Majority-based elections are merely one instrument of systemic intervention, just as the constitutional courts are.

After decades of historical gains, it pains culturally liberal players to realise that history is not necessarily on their side. Today's events remind us that what is meant by "democracy" and "democratic" is a matter of interpretation, argumentation - and political power. 50 years ago, it was perfectly democratic for many Swiss citizens to deny women's suffrage. 150 years ago, it was considered a basic principle of US-American democracy to exploit and plunder black people. In today's Hungary and Poland, a considerable share of voters does not hesitate to vote for parties who proclaim that there is no limit to the will of the voting majority, be it minority rights or the proceedings of constitutional courts.

Arguably, these differing mental models of what democracy means are grouped around different ideas of democracy's purpose. Those who favour a direct-democratic rule of the voting majority promote a different democratic goal than those who argue for a carefully balanced representative model. Instead of focusing on these fundamental differences in our perspective on why we need democracy, though, public debate is focused merely on the reform of policy and democratic processes. We discuss detailed proposals as if there was general alignment regarding the fundament of values we stand on – an autosuggestion that makes us forget that what is at stake today is the fundamental baseline of how we see ourselves as a democratic society.

In this discourse, most centrist proponents of the post-War democratic model seem to confuse the *structures and instruments* of the democratic system with its *purpose*. They feel a profound unease to question the current constitutive rules of the economy, of how we organise representation or of how we design elections. This unease stems from a lack of inner differentiation – what is the core of democracy we should protect and thus not transform, and what are instruments that are meant to serve the well-being of a democratic society, and thus are time-bound and subject to constant questioning and improvement? Arguably, parts of this state of confusion go back to the intentional blurring of lines between democratic purpose and democratic instruments, as the neoliberal framing of a supposed interdependence between "unregulated" market and "free" democratic citizens shows (see Sketch III).

Whoever cares about the future of democracy thus needs to focus on how we can define, embed, and deepen its core purpose. In times when culturally liberal democracy is under attack from both the inside and the outside, this reflection is of existential importance. It is a precondition for enabling the emergence of systems that contain both the ideals and potentials of post-War democracy *and* overcome the mental models, systems and structures that drive us towards systemic collapse today.

30. I thank my friend Maximilian Benz for our conversation on this point. Peter Graf von Kielmansegg points out the religious fervour modern democracy is based on, as laid out in the Declaration of Independence: "Was schon in den amerikanischen Anfängen ganz deutlich wird – die neuzeitliche Demokratie, unmittelbar aus den Menschenrechten abgeleitet, tritt mit einem Wahrheitsanspruch in die Geschichte ein, der in einer Art säkulärer Heilsgeschichte seine Wurzeln hat – bestätigt sich in der Französischen Revolution, die eine gutes Jahrzehnt später ausbricht, auf das Eindringlichste." See Kielmansegg, Peter: Die Grammatik der Freiheit. Acht Versuche über den demokratischen Verfassungsstaat, Bonn 2013, S. 13.

"Considering the existential challenges we face today, we need to re-think democracy's purpose not so much from a historical point of view, but from the future."

Considering the existential challenges we face today, we need to re-think democracy's purpose not so much from a historical point of view, but from the future. From a 22nd century perspective, it must be part of today's democracy's purpose to catalyse the overcoming of the current mode of systemic self-destruction and re-channel the creative energies of society towards re-integrating ourselves into the ecosystem. Democracy can do so by providing a space that enables individuals and collectives to unfold and develop their human potential, embedded into a set of new constitutive rules that channel the individual *pursuit of happiness* into sustainable parameters of societal self-organisation. Democracy's purpose, in other words, is to hold a space for building a society that can last, instead of facilitating the self-destruction of its societies, as it does today.

In this line of thinking, democracy is just an instrument – used to create a space that enables the self-organised co-creation of a sustainable society. The structures and processes we choose for democracy to realise and recreate that purpose must constantly be re-evaluated and improved, according to the needs and requirements of each historical moment. In other words, elections, the structure of the executive and legislative, and other parameters for democratic self-organisation are time-bound and must not be confused with the purpose of democracy. The same goes for how our democratic systems interact with the self-organised market – ultimately, the market is nothing but an instrument for societal development and must be subjugated to that function.

V. Overcoming liberty *or* Towards new mental models

Building on the purpose layed out in Sketch IV, let us, for the following pages, assume that democracy's core potential is its systemic potential to unfold, develop and deepen our creative human abilities, both as individuals and as collectives. Also, let us assume that democracy's most meaningful purpose lies in providing parameters for the sustainable self-organisation of individuals and societies, aiming to re-embed humanity into the boundaries of the ecosystem while granting a higher degree of global social inclusion.

As briefly touched upon above, the realisation of this purpose is currently systemically hindered by certain systemic parameters, most importantly the mental models these parameters are built on. Take, for instance, our understanding of freedom. Today, we feel individually entitled to produce and consume solely based on our own decision-making, even if the sum of these "free" individual decisions leads to the continuous and existential violation of other humans' well-being and the overarching ecosystem's boundaries. The current understanding of freedom implies that cost-externalisation is legitimate, even if it violates other humans, species, and destructively interferes in the self-regulation of the ecosystem as a whole.

This ideology contains a weird paradox. In contrast to the *fictional*, human-made boundaries set by the constitution, the *factual* limitations of the ecosystem's resources are nothing we must individually take into consideration. In this understanding, political actions that limit the negative consequences of individual cost-externalisations are regarded as a *limitations of individual freedoms*.[31] This ideology severely caps our potential for successfully tackling systemic challenges like climate change. New systemic parameters – like laws or social norms – that potentially could lead to shrinking our destructive social and environmental footprint are made impossible by this mental model, as they are regarded as ideologically unsuitable for the freedom democracy supposedly grants us.

31. Think of current debates like the prohibition of Diesel cars from entering inner cities in Germany or controlling the sale of guns in the US.

"For ideological reasons, we shift the solution of systemic problems to individual decision-making."

We may be in urgent need of new systemic parameters – but due to our ideological unwillingness to systemically interfere into "free" individual decision-making, we are incapable of coming up with meaningful solutions. Paradoxically, this leads to a shift of systemic responsibility that reverses the idea of representation. Individual citizens, with their limited capability of making decisions that balance both individual and systemic well-being,[32] are burdened with the task of permanently doing exactly that. For ideological reasons, we shift the solution of systemic problems to individual decision-making. For instance, we hope that people, guided by rational insights and moral considerations, buy emission-free cars, use renewable energy and avoid using plastic. At the same time, we leave systemic parameters in place that incentivise behaviour that runs counter to this expectation. Politics, which could set new parameters that facilitate meaningful individual decision-making and steer collective action into the desired direction, denies this responsibility. It reduces its actions to incremental, technical efforts to interfere into current cycles of self-destruction (like implementing deposits for recyclable cans and bottles). Governments thus externalise the attempt to "solve" current systemic challenges on individual citizens, instead of aiming for systemic solutions that then steer collective action. This outsourcing of responsibility to the individual level is a major example of systemic irresponsibility. Challenges like climate change are so massively complex that they can per se only be solved through collective approaches.

Liberal ideology is used to justify this political irresponsibility. This ideology – derived from times that were characterised by starkly different challenges than today's status quo – is overly focused on the individual, and thus furthers an atomised political perspective, instead of catalysing an integral one. This habitual referencing to ideologies from long since past is something we must reconsider if we want to develop a kind of politics that nourishes the future, instead of a nostalgic understanding of the past. It is important to remember that, in contrary to neoliberal wisdom, it is the quality of and the dynamic in human relationships that shape the well-being of society (and thus shared systemic properties like culture, peace, solidarity), not primarily the state of its single parts (your material welfare). As Norbert Elias put it, civilisation is ultimately created by the increasingly differentiated and interconnected level of interdependency in society.[33] On the individual level, this insight is mirrored in the findings of psychological and neurological research, which increases our understanding of the massive interdependence and fluidity of individuality in an interconnected world. As social beings, interwoven into the massive complexity of the ecosystem, individuals are inseparable from that surrounding. Our individual well-being is meaningless if we, by behaving the way we do, add to the suffering around us that ultimately undermines our own quality of life.

"We will continue being paralysed in the face of existential systemic challenges: Knowing that we have to change, but not knowing how because most strategic options are ruled out by patterns of thinking that were established in former times."

These thoughts remind us that there are many mental models that keep us from solving the challenges we face, instead of helping us doing so. We could confront our idea that humans are a superior, godlike species, or our understanding of progress as a linear development. Such beliefs have defined the modern era and hold us back significantly regarding today's pressure for societal transformation. If we do not manage to identify and overcome these notions, we will continue being paralysed in the face of existential systemic challenges: knowing that we have to change, but not knowing how because most strategic options are ruled out by patterns of thinking that were established in former times – unaware of the wicked challenges they would create.

Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of falling into sheer opposition against dominating mental models. Yes, we suffer from an excess of individual liberty. However, 20th-century history reminds us that

32. See Kahneman, Daniel: Thinking fast and slow, Penguin 2002.

33. Elias, Norbert. Über den Prozess der Zivilisation, Volumes 1&2, 1976.

cutting back individual liberty by promoting centralised decision-making causes disaster as well. It is vital for us to understand that the key lies in repurposing as a collective, while protecting and expanding individual self-determination. As a triad, autonomy, relatedness and growth are something we must protect to allow for the development and meaningful self-organisation of people. The challenge lies in balancing this individual freedom with a systemic sense of responsibility. This is certainly easier said than done – and yet, the continuous re-negotiation of systemic and individual needs is what characterises responsible policy-making of the future. In that challenge, the past has no solutions to offer – but it can keep us from repeating flawed choices made before.

VI. Towards new systemic parameters *or* A sustainable frame for societal self-organisation

The democratic challenge is to focus all radical reform on a sustainable purpose, while at the same time preserving the immaterial gains of the post-War democratic order, like pluralism, accessible education, and a high degree of innovation. These immaterial gains are a product of societal self-organisation – patterns that are the result of both decentral, self-organised decision-making and systemic parameters that incentivise their emergence.

SELF-ORGANISATION:
A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

The globalised economy and our diverse societies are a product of a high degree of **individual and collective self-organisation**. Social systems – like societies or the global market – are characterised by a high level of interdependence between the system's agents and the interrelatedness of each agent with the system's environment. This web of interdependency makes even the smallest social system highly **complex**. This complexity is the product of dynamics of self-organisation, which create patterns we perceive as order. In contrast to natural systems, social systems are influenced by human-made parameters like rules and norms, the exertion of power and control. But the interaction between and within the single parts of a system is so abundantly complex, and thus non-linear, that desired outcomes are the exception, not the rule.

In **systems theory**, *self-organisation* signifies the unintentional formation of **patterns** that create order within and between systems. These patterns **emerge** as products of interaction between a system's single parts. These patterns are of higher complexity than the individual elements that constitute them: "Emergent properties are the novel properties that arise when a higher level of complexity is reached by putting together components of lower complexity. The properties are novel in the sense that they are not present in the parts; they emerge from the specific relationships and interactions among the parts in the organized ensemble."[34] Whatever living system of higher order you see – a cell, the living body, an organisation, a society – is an emergent pattern, created by self-organised dynamics between its single parts which are not controlled by a higher order. At the same time, all unintentional dynamics of self-organisation in social systems are influenced by **systemic parameters** which can be **explicit** (constitutions, laws, regulations) or **implicit** (shared beliefs, norms, routines). To a varying degree, such parameters influence how a social system like the market "behaves", by providing a framework that influences individual and collective decision-making.

34. Capra/Luisi (2014), p. 154 f.

In comparison to authoritarian systems, democracy grants a high degree of self-organisation, individually as well as collectively. Society is seen as something that ultimately regulates itself, bound and steered by the rules of the constitution, the more interchangeable regulations written as laws, and the more implicit set of norms we call culture. In contrast to authoritarian systems, Western democracy explicitly holds the potential for the self-organised formation of new patterns that express and shape society. For instance, the principle of subsidiarity, as laid down in the basic laws of the European Union and federal countries like Germany,[35] explicitly furthers decision-making of local communities, and thus diversity in the overall system. The independent judiciary, most importantly constitutional justice, deepens this dynamic by keeping the fear of executive abuse of power at bay. Such systemic incentives to differentiate (and thus self-organise) and to alter the direction of political decision-making, increase the innovative potentials of democratic societies.

"The challenge for democratic transformation lies in establishing systemic parameters which incentivise societal self-organisation that helps to alter our course towards societal sustainability."

As in every system, democratic self-organisation happens within parameters that are set, be it explicitly (constitution, laws) or implicitly (tradition, norms). These parameters constitute a frame. Within this frame, society self-organises, forming a highly complex system of interdependence that no one could steer centrally. As the post-War decades showed, democracy was successful because it combined civil freedom and self-organisation with a self-organised market. As argued above, some outcomes of this civil and economic self-organisation were highly positive (pluralism, innovation, etc.), while others were negative (environmental destruction, global economic polarisation). The challenge for democratic transformation thus lies in establishing systemic parameters which incentivise societal self-organisation that helps to alter our course towards societal sustainability. Referring back to democracy's future purpose (see Sketch V), the challenge of radical reform lies in designing parameters that channel societal self-organisation towards the re-integration into the ecosystem's boundaries and expanded social inclusion.

Today's systemic potentials for self-organisation, and thus a high potential for responsiveness and adaptability, will be key for mastering rising degrees of complexity within and around today's societal systems. Not centralised control, but a deepened competence of society to self-organise, that takes into account higher systemic needs, will be essential to successfully adapt to the heightened interdependence of our increasingly complex environment. Whoever wants to strengthen society's collective ability to co-create meaningful solutions for today's complex challenges, in other words, must relinquish the misguided hope that authoritarian power structures will be able to organise lasting solutions centrally. At the same time, the expectation that bottom-up dynamics will come up with solutions under current conditions is naïve. There will be no bottom-up solutions, as long as they are bound by today's systemic parameters.

As importantly, we need to deepen our understanding of how we can use the democratic system to further the individual ability to successfully and meaningfully self-organise and develop as part of society. Arguably, a key challenge is to realise that democracy is there not only for providing sufficient prosperity, but also for creating and holding structures that facilitate lifelong development and learning beyond the needs of the job market. The basic ethical duty of politics in the 21st century will be the structural facilitation of identity and purpose beyond economic status and paid jobs, while at the same time, keeping the destructive potentials of individual decision-making at bay. The challenge lies in building institutional structures that facilitate the development of individual consciousness towards a level of maturity that includes the well-being of higher systems into the individual pursuit of happiness. This is a prerequisite for equipping citizens with the mindset and skills it takes to participate meaningfully in the self-organisation of a sustainable society.

This goal transcends the traditional state functions of measuring and controlling, and requires the willingness to more radically develop specific ideas of how our

35. Treaty on European Union, Article 5; German Grundgesetz, Article 23.

institutions can be redesigned, and thus taken towards serving and catalysing more meaningful paradigms than those we accept as hegemonic today.

VII. Closing: Accepting complexity *or* Embracing our lack of control

This paper makes the argument that many of the external and internal attacks against the current Western democratic model are based on an apt analysis of Western democracy's inner contradictions, broken promises and disastrous social and environmental footprint. Considering this status quo, this paper calls for the incorporation of a transformative, radical approach into centrist politics, believing that today's systemic challenges cannot be solved with the system that produced them. It predicts that a continued position of systemic conservatism will make it impossible for centrist parties to stop the success of illiberal parties. The paper then makes the argument that the purpose of a future democracy must be the re-embedding of a self-organised society into the boundaries of the ecosystem. To do so, we must challenge the established mental models, as the example of today's understanding of liberty showed. A radical reform of democracy means re-channelling collective and individual self-organisation via re-defining systemic parameters. These systemic parameters create a frame for new constitutive rules, which will enable us to redefine how we structurally organise the market and politics. Democracy has the potential to successfully do so, as it has already developed a culture of self-organisation, which will help to change course once the compass is re-set.

Considering the disastrous outcomes the self-organised capitalist market has created over the last decades, it seems fair to ask if laying so much emphasis on the potentials of self-organisation is naïve. I believe it is not. We witness a hitherto unseen level of self-organisation, as a global society as well as in the inner-European and national boundaries. Human systems nowadays master a degree of internal complexity that is a lot higher than ever before in human history. We have greatly improved our ability to manage successfully ever higher levels of collaboration, and thus to organise a civilised life. Higher degrees of self-organisation have brought increased individual and collective capacity to navigate our social system's internal complexity and to quickly adapt to (internal or environmental) changes.[36] Amazingly, humans managed to do so without changing their "hardware" over the last millennia. Human brains and bodies today are the same they were 500, 1000 or 2000 years ago. What has changed is the "software", or consciousness: how we organise our perception, and thus interpretation of the world we live in, and how, accordingly, we structure our thoughts and actions.[37]

"This paper calls for the incorporation of a transformative, radical approach into centrist politics, believing that today's systemic challenges cannot be solved with the system that produced them."

The challenge today lies in evolving our collective consciousness regarding the purpose we are self-organising for. In today's Western societies, we are focused on individual material welfare, and structure our decision-making accordingly. While many individuals take the well-being of others and the higher system into account, we collectively do not seem willing to do so. At the same time, past advancements of collective consciousness remind us that we *may* be able to do so. Western societies have reached a level of diversity and equality that would have been unthinkable to most a century ago. In historical comparison, we have established a remarkable degree of global peace since the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, most of what we see as given today results from past changes in how humans collectively see reality, and thus of changes in how we collectively self-organise. We are so used to certain parameters of our social systems that

36. See Björkman, Tomas: The world we create (forthcoming, 2018), esp. Part I.
37. Robert Kegan, one of the most renowned adult development psychologists, speaks of five stages human consciousness is organised in. Consciousness signifies the way in which we give meaning to the world in and around us. Rising levels of societal complexity are balanced with increased levels of consciousness that enable individuals to navigate their environment successfully. In Kegan's model, stages three to five describe evolutionary stages that go beyond biologically determined development, and thus are closely bound to the cultural environment humans live in. For an overview see Kegan, Robert/Lahey, Lisa: Immunity to Change. How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organisation, 2009, Ch. 1.

we have to make a conscious effort to remind ourselves that they are human-made, that these are results of past transformations: that there is a state, that we use money, that the state has a power monopoly. All this is the result of time-bound historical processes, which are re-created and reinforced by dynamics of self-organisation every day. Only in times of fundamental reorientation do we remember that all these "normal" parameters of our everyday lives are human-made, and thus more fragile than previously hoped or feared.

"What should be done is the rewriting of the constitutive rules of how we collaborate in a global market and those systemic parameters of today's democracy that limit the potentials of meaningful collective development."

Today, we are in the process of collective (re-)realisation that it is the quality of and the dynamic in human relationships that shapes shared systemic properties (culture, peace, solidarity), *not* primarily the state of its single parts (individual material welfare).[38] In a world that seems increasingly fragile, we more than ever experience very tangibly what once was nothing more than a spiritual idea: as humanity, we are one self-organising system with many sub-entities, embedded into a larger self-organising whole we call the world or the universe. We are enmeshed into a tightly knitted web of interconnectedness that, ultimately, binds all human beings together, embedded into a web of life that connects *all* life – human and non-human – into a self-regulating whole.[39] The harder the shock events that collectively shake us, the more we realise it is not globalisation that has linked us together, but the world we share. This realisation breaks fundamentally with the illusion of separateness we learn to culturally re-create on an everyday basis.

The ecosystem is per se global – economic globalisation is a mere interpretation of an interrelatedness that exists on a very fundamental level, an interdependency that binds together everything, and thus everyone with everyone. In that sense, economic globalisation can be interpreted as one step towards a shared global consciousness. Human consciousness now consciously includes the hitherto invisible web of interdependency as an explicit part of the economic view on current reality. This global perspective can be a vital prerequisite for collective action to influence the human-generated qualities of universal interdependency as productively as possible. Globalisation can never be undone; what can (and should) be done is the rewriting of the constitutive rules of how we collaborate in a global market and those systemic parameters of today's democracy that limit the potentials of meaningful collective development.[40]

One thing we can do individually to reach this goal is to reflect on what constitutes and maintains life. It is not our brain, our soul, our heart, our lungs or our muscles that give us life. It is the self-organised, highly complex interplay between these and many other parts – an interplay that creates our individual life as an emergent property. Beyond this microcosm, individual life can only exist in the self-organised and infinitely complex life web that we, as humans, create together and share with the ecosystem we are part of. We mirror the bigger whole of the planet: living, self-organising systems whose regulation emerges as an inherent property of the complex system of interrelatedness within the system. Embracing the infinite – and never fully to be understood – beauty of this may help to inspire a politics of life. Such a politics of life roots in the incomprehensibility of the complexity that produces us. This humble perspective may help to create and sharpen an awareness that it is our purpose as 21st-century humans to co-create systems that productively re-embed us in an ecosystem we currently are set to destroy.

38. As Norbert Elias put it, civilization is ultimately created by the increasingly differentiated and interconnected level of interdependency in society. Elias, Norbert. Über den Prozess der Zivilisation, Volumes 1&2.
39. See the atmospheric chemist's James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, first published in 1972, today a highly respected theory. It describes the ecosystem as a highly complex network of feedback loops, which, by linking together living and non-living systems, regulate the planetary system. Regulation is an emergent property in that system. See Capra/Luisi (2014), pp. 163 ff.
40. See Björkman, Tomas: The Market Myth, 2016, esp. Ch. 7.

The Author

Hanno Burmester is Policy Fellow at *Das Progressive Zentrum* ("The Progressive Centre"). He is the strategic lead of the *Democracy Lab*, which is the Zentrum's platform for projects on innovating democracy. Hanno is a public speaker and interview partner on the future of democracy, populism and political parties.

Hanno owns a company that focuses 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. In the past, Hanno has worked for a parliamentary group in the German Parliament, as well as for party headquarters and several Members of Parliament on the German federal level. He was an investigative journalist for the German public broadcaster NDR and wrote for various national media outlets.

The Democracy Lab

Das Progressive Zentrum launched the *Democracy Lab* in April 2017. It offers a space for creative, interdisciplinary and international exchange as well as network-building. As a collaborative platform, it aims at translating ideas coming from civil society into practical recommendations for decision-makers in the field of democratic innovation. The Lab's projects cover a wide range of topics, from digital democracy, the engagement of young people in politics to the issue of representativity and trust.

Funded by

Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

as part of the federal programme

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Issue: June 2018

Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.
Werftstraße 3, 10577 Berlin, Germany
Chairs: Dr. Tobias Dürr, Michael Miebach, Katarina Niewiedzial
V.i.S.d.P.: / Executive Director: Dominic Schwickert

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org
www.facebook.com/dasprogressivezentrum
twitter: @DPZ_Berlin

Editors: Vincent Venus, Lukas Kögel
Design: 4S and Collet Concepts
Layout: Daniel Menzel