

Improving democracy, in particular by abolishing general representation

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'I shall show (...) how the so-called "sovereignty of the people" came to be based on the votes of an electorate that was neither given adequate information nor an opportunity of getting together and deciding on one policy rather than another. And how the much vaunted "free vote" came to signify no more than the meaningless assent of assemblies tamed to servility and silence'

Alexis de Tocqueville¹

Introduction

Democracy nowadays is by far the most popular method of public governance. Democracy according to Abraham Lincoln is a very broad concept: "government of the people, by the people and for the people". Some centuries later Schumpeter however defines it in a minimal manner: "...the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote"². Hundreds of definitions are situated in between.

Democracy from its birth on, Athens about 2500 years ago, always showed serious conceptual deficiencies.

- The concept of a demos on one hand, and the notion of a population living within a certain territory on the other, were intimately intertwined but never became identical. In Greek cities slaves were excluded. Later on gypsies and nomads spoiled the game.
- Citizen's sovereignty and benign paternalism by democratic rulers produced continuous reciprocal tensions, both constructive and destructive.
- Democracy, considered as a decision-making device, proved to be vulnerable too: the majority rule sometimes produced Arrow's paradoxes³, and moreover passion remained underscored because the majority rule itself did not reveal the cardinal dimension of individual preference orderings. As a consequence possibly coalitions were built according to the Ostrogorski paradox⁴ representing minority views on each issue.

These deficiencies were recognised already in the eighteenth century by De Condorcet⁵ and Rousseau⁶, and in the nineteenth century by Lewis Carroll, Alexis de

¹ Tocqueville, A. de., *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*. Anchor Books. Doubleday. New York, 1955. pp. xi.

² Schumpeter, J., *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Harper, New York, 1950, pg. 269

³ Arrow, K.J., *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 1951; 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957

Veld, R.J. in 't, *Meerderheidsstelsel en welvaartstheorie (Majority Rule and Welfare Theory)*, Stenfert Kroese, Leiden, 1975

⁴ Rae, D. and Daudt, H., *The Ostrogorski Paradox: A Peculiarity of Compound Majority Decision*, *European Journal of Political Research*, 1976, pg 391-399.

⁵ Condorcet., *Essay on the application of analysis to the probability of Majority Decisions.*, 1785

Toqueville⁷, J.S. Mill⁸ and others. The Madisonian variant of democracy theory therefore concentrated on checks and balances between governmental functions as the core democratic concept instead of the mere application of the majority rule. Separation of powers became the focal issue in that variant of democracy. Till now the debate on the relative merits of consensual versus majoritarian typologies of democracy goes on.

Still, in the course of the last two centuries a group of related types of representative, constitutional democracy became the predominant format of the nation-state. It enjoyed unheard popularity, and still does, all over the globe. All Western political leaders preach democracy as an all-healing recipe. Representation gradually became the predominant mechanism by which the population at large through elections provides a representative body with a general authorisation to take decisions in all public domains for a certain period of time. State, sovereignty, society and territory became intensely related with democracy: the formation of the nation-state was territory-oriented by nature, its violence monopoly became legitimated by representative democracy, the population to be represented was the stable population of that same territory, gradually evolving into a society with a degree of cohesion that justified sovereignty. Of course the dynamics of this development were far more complicated than just indicated.

Recently the decline of representative parliamentary democracy has been called upon by many authors under whom Dahrendorf⁹, Castells¹⁰ and Crouch¹¹. Their explanations are related but not identical. Because I wish to deal with the phenomenon of representation as a cause of decline in particular, I restrict myself to these three authors and I leave out important contributors like Guéhenno¹², Lefort¹³ and Elchardus.¹⁴

Dahrendorf identifies the relationships between the crisis of democracy and the crisis of the nation-state as the focal issue.¹⁵ “Die Demokratie braucht einen politischen Raum um zu existieren.... Ublicherweise den Staat.”¹⁶ “Allerdings erleben wir heute eine Schwächung der Nationalstaaten, eine Verschiebung der Kräfte hin zu multinationalen Organisationen und Korporationen“.¹⁷

⁶ Rousseau, J.J., *Het Maatschappelijk Verdrag of Beginselen der Staatsinrichting*, Boom, Meppel, 1995

⁷ Tocqueville, A. de., *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*. Anchor Books. Doubleday. New York, 1955. and Tocqueville, A. de. *Democracy in America*., University of Chicago Press. Chicago, 2002.

⁸ Mill., J.S., *Considerations on Representative Government*., Prometheus Books, New York, 1991.

⁹ Dahrendorf, R., *Die Krisen der Demokratie*, Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 2002

¹⁰ Castells, M., *The Internet Galaxy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001

¹¹ Crouch, C., *Coping with Post-democracy*, Fabian Society, London, 2000

¹² Guéhenno., J.M., *La Fin de la Démocratie*., Champs Flammarion, 1993

¹³ Lefort, C., *Het democratisch tekort; over de noodzakelijke onbepaaldheid van de democratie*., Boom, Meppel, 1981.

¹⁴ Elchradus., M., *De dramademocratie*., Lannoo, Tielt, 2002

¹⁵ *ibidem*, pg. 11

¹⁶ *ibidem*, pg. 15

¹⁷ *ibidem*, pg. 16

While many important collective decisions now are taken outside the traditional space of the democracy, it is not possible any longer to answer the three main questions Dahrendorf considers as crucial to test whether or not we deal with democracy:

- How can we bring about change in our societies without violence?
- How can we control the rulers with the support of a system of checks and balances and ensure that they will not abuse power?
- How can all citizens participate in the exercise of power?

Dahrendorf points at the existence of a new elite, a global “class” that benefits from its competence to utilize the options of information technology. Zygmunt Bauman in his 2000’ Globalisation¹⁸ and in his 2002’ Society under Siege¹⁹ cogently pipes the same tune. He quotes Richard Rorty:

“Platoons of vital young entrepreneurs fill the front cabins of transoceanic jets, while the back cabins are weighted down with paunchy professors like my self, zipping off to interdisciplinary conferences held in pleasant places”.²⁰ And his own position is crystal clear: “An effective response to globalization can only be global. And the fate of such a global response depends on the emergence and entrenchment of a global (as distinct from ”international”, or more to the point interstate) political arena.”²¹

This elite has according to Dahrendorf the “natural tendency” to dissolve itself from the traditional democratic institutions.²²

Crouch speaks about post-democracy, indicates that democracy simply has not kept pace with capitalism’s rush to the global, and considers the global firm as the key institution of the post-democratic world.²³ He also points at the existence of a corporate elite:...”as the rise of the corporate elite parallels the decline in the vigour of creative democracy”.²⁴

On the global level one does not find any democratic institution. The global economic conglomerates may reign because there is hardly any countervailing power available. Understood in this manner globalisation immediately threatens democracy.

Manuel Castells is an analyst of today’s worlds. This Spanish-American sociologist has written a trilogy on the 'The Information Age'.²⁵ Castells reveals in his impressive attempt to provide a fundamental and broad analysis of The Information Age other major changes in basic beliefs. He has the firm opinion that as a consequence of ICT and in particular Internet our perception of Time will change dramatically. To the judgement of Castells during the modern era well established linear-causal concept of time can not be uphold any longer: “This linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society, in a movement of extraordinary historical significance.” (I, pg. 433). His line of argumentation leads to the formulation of hypotheses: “I propose the hypothesis, that the network society is characterized by the breaking down of rythmicity, either biological or social, associated with the notion of a lifecycle.” (I, pg.446).

¹⁸ Bauman, Z., Globalisation, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000

¹⁹ Bauman, Z., Society under Siege, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002

²⁰ ibidem, pg. 41

²¹ ibidem, pg. 19

²² ibidem, pg. 22

²³ ibidem, pg. 20-29

²⁴ ibidem, pg. 36

²⁵ Castells, M., The Information Age. Blackwell, London, 1996-1998

Simultaneity and timelessness are the main products of ICT: “Timeless time ...occurs when the characteristics of a given context, namely, the informational paradigm and the network society, induce systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena performed in that context”. (I, pg. 464).” Timeless time belongs to the space of flows, while time discipline, biological time, and socially determined sequencing characterize places around the world, materially structuring and deconstructing our segmented societies”.(I,blz.465). It appears clear to me that the functioning of democracy takes place in biological time: processes of legislation must be slow because of the necessity of deliberation and reflection, elections have to be amply prepared, etc. Timeless democracy seems a contradiction in terminis.

The network society is characterized by lack of centrality, because networks are not solely based upon hierarchy. Relationships within non-infinite networks are in each case based upon empathy: if two actors in a network close a contract, or cooperate in any way, they will keep in mind how other actors within the network are affected by their actions. The presence of empathy does not exclude certain elements of hierarchy, but pure hierarchy cannot cope with the complexity that characterizes the functioning of networks. Hierarchy for instance also is incompetent to deal with the complexity of the optimal distribution of goods that is taken care of by a market system. The main differences between networks and markets are:

- Markets can function on the basis of egocentricity only; they do not demand empathy;
- Markets generally consist only of horizontal, contractual relations while networks might also consist of semi-hierarchical relations
- Markets are characterised by bilateral relations, while networks might also know multilateral relations.

The violence monopoly however is synonymous to hierarchy and centrality. Because the existence of the nation-state is based upon the violence monopoly, the state concept and therefore state-oriented politics are endangered in a network society that does not allow centrality any longer.

Both Castells and Dahrendorf refer explicitly to the rise of mediapolitics as a threat to democracy. Their explanations are related to what I wrote earlier on the waning role of political parties and the migration of the political forum from parliaments to television studio's.²⁶ The line of reasoning is the following: because of the disappearance of compelling political ideologies political parties have started to behave like economic actors striving for an maximum number of future voters. Therefore they follow economic theory as far as their choice of a position on the political spectre is concerned: the main parties choose a position very close to the other main players. As a consequence the programmatic space shrinks dramatically. Personalities instead of programs become the most important discriminating factor. Only through mass media it is possible to “sell” personalities. So the structural dependence of politicians on the mass media increases significantly. On the other hand media need politicians in order to produce news, one of their main products. So dependence is reciprocal. The central position of the media – networks in themselves – , with their natural focus on the production of news, causes the political debate to

²⁶ Veld, R.J. in ‘t, Sturingswaan en ontzuivering, Lemma, Den Haag, 1999

become superficial and short term oriented. More fundamentally mediapolitics destroy the original meaning of representation.

As Castells points out, it is not improbable that I will utilize my vote at general elections to show my disgust or disapproval, more than revealing my preference for the favourite representative. Castells expressed it recently this way: “political representation is obsolete now”(De Balie, Amsterdam, april 21 2002). Castells himself does not refer to the argument that the development of a new concept of time as described above also causes problems because the idea of a sustainable authorisation cannot be reconciled with timeless time.

To his judgement representation does not produce any longer a sustainable mandate for the representative. It does merely register at the moment of elections a picture of disgust, a timeless picture without any meaning for future trust, and certainly not for a longer time span. Volatility will probably increase.

So the arguments concerning the decline of democracy on one hand point at the underinstitutionalised global developments characterised by the increasing predominance of global economic conglomerates and accompanied by the rise of a new global elite. The notion of state, of territory, of society, of sovereignty and therefore of democracy appear to be endangered. Moreover on the other hand ICT and mass media are identified as threats for the political realm with a specific negative influence on political representation as mediapolitics develop. All these trends appear to cause the gradual disappearance of checks and balances.

In this article I would like to digress upon the issue of representation in democratic contexts. At first I will sum up the classical arguments in favour of representation. Then I will analyse whether the force of these arguments in favour of representation is weakening as a consequence of recent developments in addition to the above mentioned observations.

In the final paragraph I will suggest some fruitful alternative development paths for future democratic practices.

Representation: the classical arguments in favour

Federalist Paper 10 by James Madison:

“The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended. The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose. On the other hand, the effect may be inverted. Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people.”

The question resulting is, whether small or extensive republics are more favorable to the election of proper guardians of the public weal; and it is clearly decided in favor of the latter by two obvious considerations: In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.”

So Madison named “a republic” what we would call a representative democracy. He saves the term democracy for what we would call direct democracy. His argumentation contains a lot of nuance as to the merits of representation. “No taxation without representation” was a successful battle cry from the mouths of groups emancipating both from feudal landlords or from colonial despots. This way taxation, being a core task of the later nation-state, and representation were linked forever. What does representation mean? The representative represents the represented, but does not replace him. The representative is not equal to the represented. The representative is authorized in a certain context to act on behalf of the represented. In the context of parliaments the authorisation, although of a temporary nature, has a very broad scope: parliament may handle any public affair!

Locke and Montesquieu dealt with the phenomenon of representation in the first place as a remedy for enlarged complexity of a society. Direct democracy had been possible only in a primitive phase of the development of a community according to their view. As soon as matters of external protection and safety appear on the agenda, the creation and differentiation of separate bodies become necessary. An elected parliament is one of those.

The wisdom argument

The citation of Madison’s federalist paper 10 reflects a powerful first argument in favour of representation: the supposed wisdom of the representative. This way “the public voice as pronounced by the representatives” will be more beneficial to society than the voice of the represented. In between Madison deals with the problematique of the optimal scale- which complicates many debates on democracy as we shall see yet - in a simple manner: the larger the supply of fit minds, the better.

Does Madison consider the wisdom of the representative as a conditional advantage, later authors deal with it as a matter of course. In her classical contribution Hannah Pitkin defined representation as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them”.²⁷

The “superior wisdom” argument has dominated the representation issue for a couple of centuries. The enormous expansion of the public sector in all traditional democracies was based to a considerable degree on benign paternalism exercised by democratic rulers, both parliaments and governments, on different levels of society. Merit good provision by public authorities rested on two legs: first the veil of

²⁷ Pitkin, H.F., *The Concept of Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967

ignorance on the side of the citizens so that they did not realise what was good for them, and second the unequal distribution of purchasing power among citizens. The first caused too weak preferences for merit goods, while the second would result in a sub-optimal aggregate demand because of lack of purchasing power among the poor. Benign paternalism in democracies all over the world brought about a never earlier experienced increase of health and educational level of the population at large. The wisdom argument of course is related to the defence of aristocracy but with the restriction that the rulers should be elected by the population at large. The danger of corruption – both in power and in money terms- gradually seemed to decrease as general welfare increased. Later on we will discuss whether the amount of success reached in the past may be the main cause of the nowadays decreasing validity of the argument in favour of representation.

The cost reduction argument

A very powerful argument in favour of representation is delivered on the basis of cost considerations: if everyone should participate in collective decision-making by convening on one place, one topos, society would come to a complete economic stand-still. If all decisions should be made by consultation of all citizens, the public sector would come to a complete halt. So representation was an economic necessity. Later on we will discuss whether this argument is weakened in the internet era.

Territorial representation

The modern concept of the state developed as a concept within a sedentary, territorial world. A national society lived on a national territory. Democracy overwhelmingly related to the same territorial focus. Everything that happened within that territory was of interest to the rulers, and therefore to parliament. So general elections and general representation appeared logical institutions. Of course for some human cultures a stable territory has never been desirable. Nomads and related cultures always were important exceptions to the rule.

We will deal with the impact of current developments as to the meaning of territory for the idea of representation later on.

Ideology and values

Political ideologies created clear and integrated perspectives for action. We define ideology as a value pattern that is internally coherent and that is formulated in such a, programmatic, manner that it is apt to guide action. Political parties gradually developed into the main institutions that take care of the programmatic labour necessary in order to deal with societal dynamics. These dynamics time and time again requested new policies which could and would be developed by reprogramming activity within the party on the basis of the stable ideological point of view. Voters were enabled to choose according to their ideological preferences. The inner logic of a system in which the political parties produce lists and candidates to represent that point of view is clear. Later on we will discuss whether the disappearance of classical ideologies weakens or even destroys this logic.

Representation: gradual decline of support?

Let us now reconsider the arguments in favour of representation mentioned earlier, in the perspective of recent trends and developments.

The major trends are well known:

- ?? Individualisation intensifies the wish for individual sovereignty in many human domains;
- ?? Globalisation and internationalisation increase physical mobility and weaken the attachment to a limited and stable territory; some observe a countermovement characterised by intensified attention for the local and the intimate environment; the term “glocalisation” refers to this;
- ?? ICT and in particular internet bring about a way of human life that does not consist solely of citizenship in physical communities but does also enable us to share memberships of virtual communities;
- ?? Some argue that our cultural evolution is characterised mainly by differentiation and fragmentation.

Do the classical arguments in favour of general representation still hold? Some authors speak about a general crisis of representative democracy.²⁸ I however restrict myself to the issue of representation.

As the general educational level of the population has raised so much it becomes more doubtful whether the representative will make better decisions than the average citizen. Veils of ignorance have disappeared. Increasing individuality has intensified the wish for sovereignty on behalf of the individual citizen.

The superior wisdom argument has weakened as a matter of course now that the educational level of the population at large has improved immensely. Moreover the prestige of politicians has deteriorated, among other things as a consequence of media interventions, so that many of the more talented people tend to refuse to enter politics. Only people who perform well in the media are apt to enter politics in a leading position.

The cost argument is far less important than before, because internet offers possibilities to involve all citizens as participants in the preparation of major proposals for collective decisions, with complex reciprocal communication networks, at very limited costs. Internet also enables very actual and accurate search for preferences of specific groups of citizens. Deliberative democracy can be afforded nowadays.

The concept of a stable territory as a scale of societal organisation has weakened as a consequence of increasing physical and virtual mobility.

As the new global elite as described above however is “floating, skating, surfing – often physically, but at all times spiritually” (Bauman, 2002, pg 234), the membership of this elite is more defined by their disengagement, and by freedom from binding territorial commitments, than by a common focus on a certain territory.

Virtual communities are not limited by any physical frontier.

²⁸ An able compilation of this literature is provided by Zielonka, J., *Explaining Euro-paralysis*, 4. The crisis of modern democracy, pg. 137-176, London, MacMillan, 1998

Many describe recent decades as a period of gradual fading away or even disappearance of ideologies. That does not mean that values as sources of inspiration and of collective action have disappeared, but it does mean that the degree of coherence has decreased, that value systems have fragmented. In the political realm there do not exist any longer alternative, mutually exclusive specific sets of values with programmatic consequences, each of them serving as a common denominator with an umbrella function for political action such as liberalism or social democracy. The words and terms have remained the same but nowadays they only provide vague labels for political organisation, not for well defined political action any longer. Even their symbolic function is ambiguous. Political parties lack contents and meaning, but they have identified themselves more intensely with the state than before and they have established a common monopoly, a phenomenon called by Zielonka “the cartelisation of political parties”.²⁹ Peter Mair has put it in an even stronger way: “While the partyness of society is declining, the partyness of the state is increasing.”³⁰

As a consequence the membership of political parties has decreased in number and meaning. Meanwhile in many national societies single issue organisations – also called single value organisations – have multiplied their memberships. Such organisations represent citizens in so far as specific value related domains are concerned. In this way a citizen reveals his preferences in each of a number of domains by his memberships. Exit, voice and loyalty are important regulating principles also here. A citizen may feel that he is behaving very rationally and accurately by choosing his memberships for such organisations in a thoughtful manner. If he compares his influence as a member of a political party in a consensual democracy, characterised by multi-party-coalitions, with his influence resulting from a portfolio of single-value- organisations memberships he may feel that the latter is the bigger. His support for a certain political party will result in a behavioural pattern of that party as described above: the orientation on the voter’s market will prevail over value orientation. After elections in a multi-party system, a not too transparent coalition formation process will further weaken his influence. Of course the choice between membership of political parties on one hand and single value organisations on the other is not an “either...or” matter, but as a matter of fact the willingness of citizens to accumulate memberships is not unlimited. As party membership appears to be more marginal than others, political parties are the first victims of scarcity.

Fragmentation of value patterns is not only an institutional but also an individual phenomenon: one does not have to adhere to post-modern views – envisaging the disappearance of human individuality, and/or the deconstruction of the notion of personality - in order to accept and to share the observation that the disappearance of grand theories and coherent ideologies has left traces in our own mind. It is not feasible any longer that each individual human being disposes of a single coherent value set related to all societal domains, for instance covering both environmental policies and educational policies. I may have strong views on environmental matters as well as on education but they are not based on one and the same pattern of values. The latter may be unrelated to the former. My individuality is to be considered as an archipelago of islands that contain more or less consistent sets of values related to specific domains. How can I act then in an integrated manner? What does that notion

²⁹ Zielonka, *ibidem*, pg.140

³⁰ Mair, P., *Party democracies and their difficulties*. Leiden, University of Leiden, 1994.

of integration mean? Is it necessary? If I spend money, and money is scarce, or if I spend time, and time is scarce, trade-offs are necessary. The utility of either a euro or an hour spent is related to values, but only indirectly. I am able to rank alternative ways of spending money and time without a single all encompassing predominating value set because supposed utility of alternative courses of action is there, serving as a guide to action.

Now all theories on democracy share the idea that societal decisions should correspond with individual preferences to a certain degree. Arrow's Impossibility Theorem has demonstrated that no decision-making rule both satisfies reasonable criteria and yet always produces transitive ranking orders of alternatives. But in many cases the collective decisions in reality seem to be based on citizen's preferences in a reasonable manner what so ever. However, once we accept the idea of fragmented individual citizens the problem is how a representative democracy could produce a well integrated set of decisions, for instance on allocation of scarce resources. Of course the existence of the nation-state is essentially connected with centrality, but the idea of democracy is not. How can I give a general authorisation to a representative if my own value representation of the world is not at all integrated?

We could design a universe populated by fragmented individuals who take collective decisions in varied circles, organisations, institutions, area's, as to different domains of life. Centrality then becomes the problem instead of the solution. Of course however in our minds the application of the monopoly on violence demands centrality. Of course the monopoly on violence was necessary to overcome the Hobbesian problem, the prisoner's dilemma. It is hard to imagine a reasonable human society of any kind without a monopoly on violence. Therefore decision-making by invisible hand mechanisms does not seem feasible for the public sector. So it is too early to abolish the state concept in order to vary the shape of democracy. But once we accept the possibility of fragmented individuals, permanent tensions between the demands in order to optimise democracy understood as sovereignty of citizens on one hand and the need for centrality on the other appear unavoidable.

Mediapolitics restrict the time perspective of political action, and reinforce again and again the importance of incidents: hypes become the main political events. The media create their own political reality, their own political locus, and explain the world to viewers and listeners and readers according to their own interests. Politics and politicians have become dependent upon media. The media do not favour representation, because they focus on direct confrontations between "rulers" and "the people" represented by the medium itself.

The accumulation of processes leading to decreasing convincing power of each of the above mentioned classical arguments in favour of representation in combination with differentiation and fragmentation of individual values has caused a fundamental crisis in the essential characteristics of representative democracy:

- The wisdom argument, the cost argument and the territorial base argument have weakened considerably;
- In so far as elections mainly produce testimonies of disgust they do not lead any longer to a sustainable authorisation of the representatives;

- Elections concern choices between political personalities, more than programmes. As these personalities (and the political parties they lead) strive for maximum voter's support each day again and again, an individual voter can not expect that the programmatic viewpoint of the political leader as expressed before the elections will be echoed in a coalition government in a trustworthy and stable manner;
- Why would an individual with a large number of values, scattered over domains in a unique manner without any ideological common denominator, prefer to have himself represented by a general representative with vague and unstable viewpoints instead of by memberships of specific single value organisations?
- Political parties are empty boxes as far as contents are concerned, but very powerful within the framework of parliamentary democracy;
- Media now are in the centre of politics but neglect representation completely.

So the strength of political representation, understood as a general authorisation of a representative for a certain longer period of time, has been undermined fundamentally. That preliminary conclusion leads us to the question how to improve the quality of democracy by changes in the character of representation.

Improving democracy

We consider the presence of sufficient checks and balances in a societal system of collective decision-making as the core concept of democracy. Going back to Arrow's most fundamental demands collective public decisions should originate in revealed preferences of free and equal citizens, while no exercise of power should remain unaccounted for. Dictatorship of any kind should be avoided.

Arrow's impossibility theorem proved this set of demands already too ambitious. Separation of powers is a means of creating checks and balances by restricting the domain of either citizen's sovereignty or/and government: judges, regulators, and the like take important public decisions with binding force for all people involved, rather independently from representative bodies.

Parliaments however play major roles in either of the well-established systems of checks and balances on a higher level of abstraction than that of the individual decision:

- they act as co-legislators and so limit the power of governments to bring about binding decisions
- they hold governments accountable for the exercise of executive power
- they appoint in many cases the members of constitutional or supreme courts and the members of the General Auditor
- they approve of the composition of coalition governments
- specific chambers of parliaments in some cases devote themselves to reflection on earlier draft-decisions.

As we observed the phenomenon of general representation is threatened by important societal trends. Is it possible at least to maintain the quality of the system of checks and balances, and to improve the degree of citizen's sovereignty, by a redesign of the representative institutions of national democracies?

The main directions for improvement could be indicated as following from the previous analysis:

- more direct democracy could be introduced. The present European parliamentary democracies are mainly characterised by coalition governments which are composed after elections of parliaments. However citizens could also directly choose both their governments and their general auditors. Elected auditors could not only control governments but also should be authorised to send them home. This would result in new elections of both the government and the auditor. In this manner checks and balances would have been provided. The control function of parliament is exercised then by the elected general auditors.
- the preparation of legislation could be taken care of by modes of deliberative democracy; processes of communication and argumentation could be organised on a large scale in order to produce well legitimated decisions; citizens and organisations are free to participate; the intense use of internet enables the architects of these processes to communicate with millions of citizens at the same time without considerable costs; after completion of a process the government takes the final decision;
- the more and more fragmented character of value systems could result in a development whereby more domain-oriented authorities with executive power are installed. Direct elections for such authorities could be held periodically. These authorities could be held directly responsible for policy-making in that specific domain – e.g. regional education or health care -. This is also called functional decentralisation. It seems to me that the splendour of democracy could be restored in this way because citizens feel very passionate about, for instance, education and health care. Regional functional authorities could certainly be based upon real choices between domain-oriented values, and so earn legitimacy.

This way it is possible to eliminate general representation gradually without harming any essential characteristic of democracy. Of course there exist major hindrances to acceptance: the most powerful one may remain fundamental mistrust towards the citizen's potential to produce valuable expressions of the general interest.³¹

Before recommending the adoption of some of these proposals however, we might look into the problem in a still more fundamental manner. Earlier we identified sovereignty, state, territory, society and democracy as closely intertwined. In today's Europe however this pattern has become more complex: sovereignty now is spread over more layers or levels. Different authorities of the European Union take binding decisions. A European demos however does not yet exist, the territory of the European Union has become dynamic. The national state is in many respects not any longer sovereign. So the notion of centrality as intensely and solely connected to the nation-state concept could and should be reconsidered anyway. Centrality as we discussed above appears necessary for the application of the violence monopoly, but centrality does not have to concern all public domains. Networks may do the job. We

³¹ For an overview see: Hindess, B., Deficit by design. Australian Journal of Public Administration, 2002, march, pg.30-38

could construct different domains with varying scales in which quite independent authorities operate. The use of the term decentralisation to describe this multi-level framework would be somewhat awkward as one may realize that the national state is one of those levels.

Of course the nodes in the networks and the interconnections between different domains and levels should be designed very carefully. Broadening our scope enables us however to reshape societal institutions according to our own individual value structures, and to abandon institutional characteristics that originated in a more paternalistic era.

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