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DEMOCRACY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Ever since the Cold War era, “democracy” has been a buzzword in international ideological discourse. In connection with “human rights,” the meaning and implications of the concept were controversially debated between the erstwhile ideological rivals in the bipolar constellation of the time. The term has itself become a tool in the struggle to gain the “moral high ground” in the global game for power. In the unilateral framework since the beginning of the 1990s, the definition of “democracy” in the sense of the Western-liberal school of thought has had far-reaching implications for (1) the conduct of foreign policy in general, and (2) the (ideological) justification of interventionist policies, including military actions aimed at “régime change,” in particular. In a context where one party of the erstwhile bipolar constellation saw itself as the “victor,” trying to exploit the new situation to forcefully impose its ideology and rule globally, “democracy” has indeed become part of the arsenal of a new form of “hybrid war.”

To avoid a new Cold War, “democracy” must be taken out of this confrontationist context. For reasons of intellectual honesty and conceptual clarity, it is necessary to state that this political and legal concept – that is powerfully propagated and often forcefully imposed in distant and socio-culturally diverse countries – is primarily based on the principle of **representation**, and not of direct expression of the **popular will** (a point Hans Kelsen has also made in terms of philosophy of law). In distinction from “direct” (participatory) democracy, “representative” democracy is not understood as rule of the people, but on behalf of the people – whereby the selection of the decision-makers is, at least in theory, the result of the people’s decision between competing political parties.

It is worthy of note that the doctrine of representation implies the assumption (a) that there exists a totality of the people and, accordingly, a *popular will* in the sense of an **ideal entity** (Carl Schmitt), and (b) that this popular will can and must be represented by individual office-holders who are only committed to the **general interest** (the common good), and not to the particular interests of themselves or their political group (party). This is the essence of the notion of “free representation” in modern democratic systems.

The **doctrine**, however, is often contradicted by the **practice** of representation in the traditional multi-party framework, especially in the parliamentary systems of the industrialized world. As explained by Schumpeter, this version of democracy is based on **competition** for the votes of the people, whereby the competitors use the latest methods of public relations to influence public opinion or, more blatantly said in the words of Walter Lippmann, to “manufacture consent.” Because there exists no equal playing field (even under conditions of liberal economy), this means that particular and **short-term interests** of groups or well-organized lobbies take precedence over the **long-term interests** of the state and the entirety of

the people (as community of the citizens). However, the common good is more than the sum total of the particular interests of those groups of the population that have been able to organize themselves in a context of party politics. Those countries that propagate “democracy” only and exclusively in this sense, practice representation not according to its **idea**, oriented towards the **common good**, but as a form of **oligarchy**.

The actual practice of representation has meant that the most vocal and best-financed interests (lobbies) have often been able to influence state policy at the expense of weaker sectors of the population. Against this background, rule *on behalf* of the people turns into rule on behalf of the most influential lobbies and pressure groups – domestically as well as internationally, often with detrimental consequences for social stability and peace. This has undermined the **legitimacy** of the respective political systems and has become one of the root causes of “**democracy fatigue**” also in major industrialized countries. Dismissing this attitude as a phenomenon of “populism” will not help to understand the socio-economic framework in which dissatisfaction and frustration has developed, as also stated by Vladimir Putin in his address at the Valdai Club (October 2016).

In this era of global instability – which is characteristic of the transition from a unipolar to a new multipolar order, and where no player can claim ideological supremacy – it will be a major challenge for the theory of politics to overcome the antagonism between *parliamentary* and *participatory* (direct) democracy, and to come up with a comprehensive and multi-dimensional model that (a) incorporates various traditions and schools of thought (leaving room for different socio-cultural experiences and practices, i.e. for a “dialogue of civilizations” also in the political field), and that (b) cannot as easily as the hitherto dominant one be instrumentalized for the purposes of power politics. The “**power of definition**” must not rest in the hands of a self-declared, and self-interested, hegemon (or a dominant power bloc), lest “democracy” is destined to remain an ideological tool – instead of becoming the organizing principle of politics on a **worldwide** scale, *within* and *between* nation-states. Instead of being used as an ideological tool of the arsenal of “hybrid war,” “democracy,” as a multi-dimensional concept (comprising representative and participatory forms of decision-making), should be an element of an equally multi-dimensional “hybrid peace” in the multipolar world of the future.

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