

The crisis of democracy and the “look downwards”

A crise da democracia e o “olhar para baixo”

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Abstract

Current diagnoses of a crisis of democracy in the Global North go hand in hand with a disparaging “look downwards.” Already in the nineteenth century, liberal thinkers formulated institutional precautions against the “rabble.” What is striking about the current devaluation discourse is that the return of this “downward look” is not limited to libertarian or liberal conservative conceptions but is also present in progressive approaches. We demonstrate this for the German and Anglo-American discussions.

Keywords: “look down”, rabble, democracy, liberalism, social democracy, history of ideas.


Resumo


Os diagnósticos atuais de uma crise democrática no Norte Global andam de mãos dadas com um “olhar para baixo” depreciativo. Já no século XIX, os pensadores liberais formularam precauções institucionais contra a “ralé”. O que chama a atenção no atual discurso de desvalorização é que o retorno desse “olhar para baixo” não se limita a concepções libertárias ou liberal-conservadoras, mas também está presente em abordagens progressistas. Demonstramos isso para discussão alemã e anglo-americana.


Palavras-chave: “Olhar para baixo”, ralé, democracia, liberalismo, social-democracia, história das ideias.

There is hardly anything on which the research community in the Global North is more in agreement at the moment than the diagnosis of a crisis of democracy (PRZEWORSKI, 2019; SCHÄFER; ZÜRN, 2021). And yet, opinions differ widely on what the reasons for this crisis are. The fragility of democratic institutions and the weakness of democratic convictions are held responsible for this situation, the latter diagnosed among elites as well as parts of the electorate. Some observe an erosion of democratic content from within established political institutions and social power levers, while others argue that Western democracies are mainly threatened by the rise of anti-democratic outsiders and/or an assault on shared political and cultural achievements (CROUCH, 2004; STREECK, 2017).

As shrewd diagnosticians have noted, disputes brought about by the rise of populism have shifted from being conflicts *within* democracy to conflicts *about* democracy (MANOW, 2020; KOST; MASSING; REISER, 2020). Our thesis is that in these conflicts about democracy, a misplaced emphasis on the liberal dimension of democracy has made visible a pejorative “look downwards.” We argue that, far from original, this perspective can be traced back to

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the nineteenth century, more concretely to the history of the emergence of liberal democracy. Moreover, although our emphasis here lies on developments in European and Anglo-American democracies, the discourse we identify might well extend beyond this geographical scope.

Around two centuries ago, the overarching concern in Europe was one of warding off socialist aspirations without, however, entirely dismissing as illegitimate the demands made by the lower classes for material improvement and expansion of political participation rights. Degradation and defensiveness were therefore primarily “supplements” to each other in socio-political terms. Unavoidable political concessions in matters of voting rights were accompanied by institutional arrangements designed to limit the influence of the lower classes. Widespread in this context was the legitimizing narrative of an “educational need” of the masses, deemed ignorant and unpredictable. When dealing with the proletariat, ideologemes similar to those adopted in the treatment of women or the native populations of the colonies were resorted to: liberal thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill simply denied the lower classes the “civilizational” and intellectual maturity necessary to govern themselves in a fully democratic sense.

In contemporary debates among Western academics and political commentators, a comparable “downward look” functions so as to relieve liberal elites of the need to reflect on the contradictions of liberal democracy that underly the widely perceived crisis. Significantly, this disposition cannot only be found among right-wing detractors and liberal guardians of existing parliamentary democracy but also among progressive, critical voices. As will be shown in the course of this article, all three positions converge in suppressing a contradiction between the democratic rhetoric of equality and the actual safeguarding of bourgeois privileges that has become virulent in Western democracies since the erosion of the Fordist class compromise. In this sense, the return of this “downward look” is reminiscent of political and ideological constellations of the nineteenth century.

We proceed in three steps: First, we revisit the liberal discourse of popular devaluation present in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. Next, we discuss the resurgence of the figure of the “rabble” in contemporary debates on democracy. Finally, we show that the return of the “look downwards” can be attributed to the exhaustion of a compromise between liberal and social democracy characteristic of the postwar period.

1 The taming of the “rabble” in the nineteenth century

In 1833, as Alexis de Tocqueville was touring England, he had the opportunity to attend an election meeting—at that time, voting was public and took place over several days. His impressions, recorded in a travel diary, bear a strikingly negative tone. His description constructs the image of a chaotic assembly dominated by shouting and tumult: using the word “disgust” several times, he writes of an “electoral farce” and a “crowd” that dominates the events (TOCQUEVILLE, 1958, p. 44-5). He further comments: “The hall was packed with an inquisitive crowd, most of them clearly of the lowest classes,” and shortly thereafter notes how that was “a very turbulent and rather disgusting spectacle (1958, p. 44).” Tocqueville (1958, p. 26) recognizes in this scene the materialization of the social composition of the “crowd,” which he characterizes as inferior: “Their very faces were stamped with those signs of degradation only to be found in the people of big towns.” Accounts such as these clearly express the “look downwards” that characterized the intellectual debate on the rising influence of the lower classes on democracy in the nineteenth century.

As is well known, Tocqueville (2000, p. 7) called for the development of a “new political science” in view of the dawning age of equality. Such a science, he argued, was to “instruct democracy,” for until then it had “grown up like those children who, deprived of paternal care, rear themselves in the streets of our towns and know only society’s vices and miseries.” (TOCQUEVILLE, 2000, p. 7). In need of education was thus not just democracy in the abstract, but first and foremost the mass of people who previously appeared politically at most in sporadic revolts and had then come to have at least a partial say in the fate of society. Tocqueville (2000, p. 191) saw this mass as made up of people who could not be trusted, among others because they were prone to elect men of their own ilk—“village attorneys, those in trade, or even men belonging to the lowest classes” who “do not always know how to write correctly.” For this reason, in Tocqueville’s (2000, p. 192) view, democracy also required a Senate, a “chosen assembly” that would shape the will of the people into “more noble and more beautiful forms.”

And yet Tocqueville’s writings do not confine themselves to the affirmation of the famous system of “checks and balances.” In his celebrated *On Democracy in America*, he lays out a whole arsenal of instruments designed both to constrain the will of the people and to educate the masses to become good citizens. If these instruments fail, then

not only is there the danger of a “tyranny of the majority” that inevitably accompanies democracy and, as he puts it, “draws a formidable circle around thought” in America, but there is also a threat that passions and mediocrity will rule, ultimately leading to a stifling of bourgeois freedoms by paternalistic despotism (TOCQUEVILLE, 2000, p. 244).

It was in no small part the reading of Tocqueville’s book on America that led John Stuart Mill to a fundamental change in his convictions. While Mill had previously supported the democratic and social reformist demands of the “philosophical radicals,”¹ he came to view the expansion of suffrage demanded by the Chartists much more critically after Tocqueville’s publication. As Mill (1981, p. 238) would later write in his autobiography: “In short, I was a democrat but not the least of a Socialist. We [meaning Mill and his later wife, Harriet Taylor] were now less democrats than I had formerly been, because we dreaded more the ignorance and especially the selfishness and brutality of the mass.”² A few sentences later, his tone intensifies, and Mill (1981, p. 238) describes an “uncultivated herd who now compose the labouring masses.” This herd, he continues, like the “immense majority of their employers,” requires an “equivalent change of character” if it wants to “labour and combine for generous, or at all events for public and social purposes, and not, as hitherto, solely for narrowly interested ones” (MILL, 1981, p. 239). However, this would require a great deal of patience, and the appropriate level of civilization would be attainable only, according to Mill (1981, p. 241), through a “system of culture prolonged through successive generations.” As long as this had not been achieved, democracy would have to be protected from the “masses.”

In his *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill made a variety of proposals in this regard. These included, on top of restricting the right to vote to persons with at least a rudimentary education and who make a living from their work, the introduction of plural voting according to the level of education, as well as the requirement of publicity in voting meant to pressure voters to justify their electoral choice. In addition, Mill called for limiting the competences of parliament to those of a debating and acclamation chamber; actual legislation was meant to be reserved for a body of experts. Finally, Mill also considered the introduction of a second chamber modeled on the Roman Senate.

Just like Tocqueville, Mill saw local self-government as a way of educating people for democracy. In other words, he thought that rights of participation should be granted only in those instances where the insufficiently cultivated “herd” could not cause major mischief. Political power, on the other hand, was to be concentrated in the hands of an intellectual elite. Or as he put it:

No progress at all can be made towards obtaining a skilled democracy, unless the democracy are willing that the work which requires skill should be done by those who possess it. A democracy has enough to do in providing itself with an amount of mental competency sufficient for its own proper work, that of superintendence and check. (MILL, 2010, p. 117)

2 The crisis of democracy, or fending off the “rabble” once again

The narrative of a persistently deficient education and upbringing on the part of the British and European lower classes made it possible to lend apparent plausibility to the otherwise quite paradoxical notion that the exclusion of the masses served, in the last instance, to establish democracy—as in the slogan: “For the people to govern, the rabble must be excluded.” The “rabble,” according to German political economist Philip Manow (2020, p. 45), “represents the unrepresentable.” The institutional solution to this problem of the non-identity of the people and the crowd or mass was soon regarded as a model of representative democracy that made it possible to organize de facto exclusion well beyond the eventually irrepressible abolition of formal and conceptual exclusions. In essence, it was

¹ The ideas of the “philosophical radicals” can be traced back to Mill’s father, James Mill, and above all to Jeremy Bentham. Against the background of a utilitarian moral philosophy, these figures called in particular for the abolition of aristocratic privileges, not least in view of the right of inheritance and the institutional representation of aristocratic interests within the framework of the mixed constitution. Adding to this was the expansion of suffrage, which, however, still included property qualifications.

² Especially in the second half of his life, Mill advocated “socialist” experiments such as cooperatives and land distribution of common land to workers. This, along with calls for a progressive inheritance tax, has led a new line of reception to regard Mill as a “sharp critic” of private property as well as an “advocate of free-market socialism” (BUCHSTEIN; SEUBERT, 2016, p. 150-151; see MCCABE, 2021). Although true, Mill’s “socialist” reflections remain within the framework of bourgeois property individualism. He did not want to see the mechanism of competition abolished, and his criticism of property rights was primarily directed against the aristocracy of the time and its ownership of land. Moreover, in his posthumously published *Chapters on Socialism* as well as in the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill (1973, p. 758; 1989, p. 271) repeatedly emphasizes the educational effects of cooperativism as a contribution to the “mental” and “moral cultivation” of the working classes. As with participation in local self-government, the experience of workers’ self-government would lead to a gradual disciplining/education of “average human beings” and those “persons greatly below the average in the personal and social virtues” (Mill, 1989, p. 268-9). To put it bluntly, Mill is not concerned with comprehensive emancipation, but with the bourgeoisification of the working masses; this is a process which he estimates requires several generations.

not a matter of mirroring all social interests in the political sphere, but of claiming that the excluded rabble was being co-represented by other (more capacious) actors: “repression by representation” (MANOW, 2020, p. 50). According to Manow (2020, p. 46-47), this liberal model of exclusion by inclusion and inclusion by exclusion enters a “functional crisis” when the “co-represented” no longer see themselves adequately represented. However, Manow (2020, p. 50) also breaks with the usual image of a “representational gap” when he emphasizes that the problem on this point is not “that something that is present is no longer adequately represented, but [...] that something that is always present can no longer be effectively excluded by representation. Repression by representation no longer works as usual.”

Manow (2020, p. 53, 49) correctly interprets the new Western discourse on “the masses” as “those who attach little value to democratic rules, procedural rationality, and civilized exchange” and the functional crisis it stems from as a return to nineteenth-century interpretive patterns. Once again, “the rabble” becomes an object of behavioral regulation and discipline. From this, Manow (2020, p. 55) derives his thesis that the current crisis of democracy is but a “symptom of the breakdown of exclusionary rules, norms of representation, and resources of legitimacy.” And it is precisely this deeper, underlying predicament to which many contemporary crisis diagnoses now react by reactivating a (newly repurposed) “look downwards.”

Among the few authors calling for a restoration of traditional exclusionary mechanisms today, American philosopher Jason Brennan (2016, p. 17) has attracted the most attention. Brennan writes openly against democracy, which he regards as the rule of the “unreasonable.” In doing so, he distances himself from Mill’s hopes that political participation would make people wiser: “Most common forms of political engagement not only fail to educate or ennoble us but also tend to stultify and corrupt us” (BRENNAN, 2016, p. 2). He further explicitly adheres to Joseph Schumpeter’s view that political involvement is the source of a “lower level of mental performance” which ultimately turns the “typical citizen” into “a primitive” again (BRENNAN, 2016, p. 2). Such notion of a “relapse into barbarism” that lies at the heart of Brennan’s argument is not new but can already be found both in Tocqueville and among the ideas that gave shape to the discourse about the poor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see EBERL, 2021). Thus, Brennan (2016, p. 7) could even be seen as radicalizing Mill’s skepticism towards democratic participation by the lower classes, particularly when he writes: “Political participation is not valuable for most people. On the contrary, it does most of us little good.” For Brennan, any form of mass involvement ought to be rejected. The conclusion can only be to limit participation altogether.

Brennan’s may be an extreme voice in the debate due to his outspoken rejection of democracy, but it is not a solitary one. For example, in the German-language discourse, it is possible to find others who, like economist (and CEO of the German precious metals retailer Degussa Goldhandel) Markus Krall, take very similar stances. While Brennan calls for an “epistocracy” and links the institution of the elite to education, Krall’s writings go much further, revealing a self-assured attitude on the part of a managerial class that views itself as an achievement elite (but might be better described as a class faction that displays neoliberal as well as nationalist-Christian traits). Both commentators, however, are united in their contempt for a political system in which, as Krall (2020, p. 227-8) states, “it is not the intellectual elite [...] that finds itself at the levers of political power,” but rather school and university dropouts. These, according to Krall, occupy political offices and strive for mandates only to benefit from parliamentary allowances and other forms of compensation. Interestingly, a similar fear already caused Mill (2010, p. 217) to rail against the introduction of parliamentary allowances: Pensions, he argued, would only attract “adventurers of a low class.” Krall (2020, p. 228) further substantiates this analogy when he argues that “the rule of mediocrity (. . .) inevitably leads to the rule of the less well-off.” Ultimately, Krall’s (2020, p. 228) intention is to counter this form of rule by demanding that leadership positions in government agencies and ministries “establish a minimum threshold in terms of education and professional experience outside of politics.”

Unmistakably in the tradition of Tocqueville, Krall (2020, p. 235) further identifies the “basic problem we face [...] as the Siamese twinship of political corruption and the ‘tyranny of the majority.’” As with Brennan, he sees in the masses (of those “socially weak”) the irrevocable danger of an unbridled democracy: A political class keen to “buy votes” interacts with the mass to create a “political school of robbery” from the minority of the rich (KRALL, 2020, p. 235). Krall (2020, p. 237) finds a solution in “further developing” the right to vote, by which he means, more precisely, scaling it back in such a way as to restore the nexus between economic position and suffrage. As he clarifies: “Every voter should be allowed to choose between exercising his or her right to vote and the right to receive state transfers.” This, he argues, would apply to social transfers as well as subsidies to entrepreneurs and would “eliminate the possibility for politicians to buy votes with other people’s money” (KRALL, 2020, p. 237). Ultimately,

for Krall, the “rabble” is a lower class that is in league with a corrupt elite, constantly looking for transfer payments and “robbing” top performers. Once again, the similarities with Mill (2010, p. 170) become evident, as the former was equally convinced that only those who do not receive social transfers should be allowed to vote: “He who cannot by his labour suffice for his own support, has no claim to the privilege of helping himself to the money of others.”

Authors such as Brennan and Krall argue in an openly elitist fashion: a (small) group of “high achievers” is hindered from adequately conducting the business of government by a large mass of mediocre, uneducated (Krall), and unreasonable (Brennan) persons. The formal exclusion of the “uneducated” and those on the state’s payroll flows from this diagnosis. On the other hand, those authors who define the rise of “populism” first and foremost as an uprising of the—not so much socially as culturally—marginalized tend to see themselves not so much as elitist as more like an avant-garde (see BLÜHDORN, 2020). In the late 1970s, Ronald Inglehart (1977) formulated his widely known thesis of a “silent revolution” in the wake of the revolts of the 1960s. In broad terms, Inglehart assumed that “post-material values” had triumphed, leaving (largely) behind the old conflict between capital and labor and calling instead for a politics not shaped by material interests but directly concerned with immediate questions of humanity (above all the problem of ecology). The new cleavage between avant-garde “post-materialism” and traditionalist “materialism” (including its outdated growth logic) was supposed to run across the old lines of social conflict and located the old industrial working class, together with its now not-so-innovative employers, on the side of the obsolete. The modernizers of the past would suddenly find themselves in the role of modernization losers, if not as obstacles to its further progress. In this sense, Inglehart’s thesis of a culturalization of political conflicts was not merely empirical, but also normative. It went hand in hand with a far-reaching socioeconomic evisceration of a comprehensive practice of anti-discrimination traditionally associated with class politics—quite in line with what Nancy Fraser (2019) calls “progressive neoliberalism.” Inglehart further identified the members of the middle class in particular as bearers of such a new avant-garde culture. Here, the voice of Mill seems to echo in the background, as when he writes: “The emergence of a strong middle class, and the spread of participatory skills lead to the establishment of democratic political processes” (INGLEHART, 1990, p. 23). The thesis of the “decline of social class conflict” and the emergence of “new political movements” finds its societal grounding in the rise of “postmaterialist” middle classes (INGLEHART, 1990, p. 7, 66).

What, however, becomes of those who are still and increasingly again “materially disconnected”? It is consistent with Inglehart’s argumentation to label those who are not ready to give up their “materialism” as culturally backward. In recent studies by Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2019), it is these actors who are identified as the central drivers of a “cultural backlash” that encompasses not only the Trump phenomenon and other forms of “authoritarian populism,” but also Brexit. Inglehart and Norris point out that, as early as 1959, Seymour Martin Lipset had attributed to the working class a “less progressive” attitude than the middle classes on non-economic matters such as respect for individual freedom, equality for ethnic minorities, multilateralist foreign policy and liberal immigration laws (NORRIS; INGLEHART, 2019, p. 113). It should therefore come as no surprise today if “blue-collar workers” voted for authoritarian parties and shared their values (NORRIS; INGLEHART, 2019, p. 279). This picture of a backward (industrial) working class that is, as it were, naturally inclined towards authoritarianism, takes up once again Mill’s and Tocqueville’s motif of a (still) uncivilized stratum or class in need of education, culturally and morally inferior, and which would constitute a fundamental danger for democratic procedures.

If Brennan and Krall called for exclusion and confidently assumed a high ground from which to look downward on the people, Inglehart’s (1990, p. 7, 177) thesis of a “decline of social class conflict” and the emergence of new “post-materialist orientations” assumed that it is the qualified and participation-oriented middle classes that act as drivers of far-reaching cultural inclusion. Accordingly, those who cling to old “materialist values” effectively shut themselves out. Here, the rejection of the social question in its classical form and the disparagement of blue-collar workers coincide.

At first, the recent reflections of progressive German sociologist Stephan Lessenich (2019a, p. 20) on *The Limits of Democracy* appear to stand at odds with both previous perspectives. Playfully borrowing the famous formula from the Communist Manifesto, he writes: “The history of all democracy to date is [...] a history of political struggles — and, at its core, a history of class struggles.” Likewise, Lessenich (2019a, p. 17) places the dimension of social inequalities at the center of his analysis, even stating that the “history of democratization is a history of participation through exclusion. And it remains so to this day.” Although Lessenich’s formulation resembles Manow’s notion of “repression by representation” cited above, it is important to understand that he means something different by it. For Lessenich (2019a, p. 17) there is no link between those who are nominally “included” (by representation) but excluded from real participation. Rather, according to him, “the freedoms of some are regularly the constraints

of others,” the “entitlement of some” rests “on the disenfranchisement of others.” In contrast to Brennan, Krall, and Inglehart, but also to authors that attribute the progress of democracy to elite action from above like Richter (2020) or Daniel (2020), Lessenich (2019a, p. 16-7) is thus mainly concerned with what he calls the “survivors of democratic progress,” meaning the “poor relatives of the rich democratic societies of the West.”

None of this so far suggests that a socially disparaging “downward look” can be found in Lessenich’s reconstruction of a crisis of contemporary democracy. Indeed, he starts by identifying different levels of exclusion and fields of social conflict. In doing so, it makes perfect sense for Lessenich (2019a, p. 37) to attribute a significant role to the so-called “external” conflict over “social relationships to nature,” and to consider not only “vertical” class conflicts but also “horizontal” relations of competition as well as “transversal” relations between inside and outside, or between persons with different civic status. However, in the context of these last two dimensions of social conflict, he significantly shifts his perspective.

Lessenich (2019a, p. 67) emphasizes that it is “not at all absurd to speak of world social class relations in which ‘those down there’ and ‘those up there’ compete against each other nation by nation.” Thus, unlike Ulrich Beck (2000), who interpreted globalization—however plausibly or implausibly—as a process of denationalization, Lessenich (2019a, p. 67) falls into a national mode of argumentation that does not come without concerns. He writes:

Citizens of poor nations against those of the rich nations, the total populations of Mozambique, Tanzania, Mali or Uganda as “citizenship underclass” for instance against the total society of Denmark, which as a whole — from the head to the foot of its income distribution — belongs to the world’s upper class.

Within such a theoretical framework, and despite Lessenich’s sharp emphasis on the social question and the continuing relevance of the concept of class, one can find in his work caricatures on a micropolitical lifestyle level reminiscent of Inglehart, as when he writes about the “daily plastic bag, the exotic fruit between meals, the winter pleasure under the patio heater, the airline trip from Munich to Düsseldorf, there in the morning and back in the evening, the short vacation trip to the Caribbean, all for the thrill of the moment: Today a king, tomorrow back in rank and file” (LESSENICH, 2019, p. 77). This enumeration of lifestyle choices no longer accounts for any classes or parties, and Lessenich fails to answer the obvious question of who gets to actually enjoy feeling of ‘being king’ (or ‘queen’) for a short time. At the same time, Lessenich (2019b) repeatedly emphasizes that it is not just the top 1.5 or 10 percent, but also the nationals (or the populations?) of nation-states in the Global North that can be regarded as rich overall: “The attitude of having everything and wanting more is not the prerogative of those ‘up there’. Wanting to safeguard one’s own prosperity by depriving others of theirs is the unspoken and unacknowledged motto of ‘advanced’ societies in the Global North.” (p. 9)

Moreover, just like Inglehart, Lessenich describes the “blue-collar-worker” in a head-shaking, uncomprehending gesture as a figure of the past. Those who enjoyed their newfound prosperity in the form of a car in the 1950s, for instance, appear now to him as examples of a flawed “male lifestyle” (LESSENICH, 2019a, p. 54). Such a verdict inevitably leaves the door open to accusations of inattention or even of open ignorance to the emancipatory demands of women and (in retrospect) also of nature. Ultimately, because it fails to interpellate the global middle classes, Lessenich’s legitimate critique of consumption falls back into the traditional “rabble” discourse.

Lessenich (2019a, p. 16) explicitly presents his considerations as a “counter-narrative” to a supposedly mainstream discourse of “post-democracy” that conceives of the culmination of the welfare state as the apogee of democracy in the West and deems both as receding since the crises of the 1970s. In light of the above discussion, however, it would seem more opportune to connect his writings with that “other mainstream” which, following Inglehart and Norris (2019), laments the “cultural backlash” by those left behind:

At the core of the right-wing populist movements of the most diverse hues are social experiences of declassification, which are not or need not only be of an economic nature [...]. Rather, they can also be about ancestral prerogatives, perceived as deserved and appropriate, that are now seen to be endangered or even revoked, prerogatives of men over women, of natives over immigrants, of whites over non-whites, of ‘developed’ over ‘emerging’ nations, and yes, of man over nature, of the automobile over the environment, of individual freedoms over collective constraints, of pleasure over reason and renunciation. (LESSENICH, 2019, p. 93)

To subsume this potpourri of different sets of problems and issues under the one concept of “experience of declassification” appears to be hardly fruitful; it equates what instead needs to be kept separate.

It is striking that Lessenich’s account hardly addresses concrete historical contexts, not even the European one. The complicity of the “industrial, male, white, automobilized growth subject” with social regression and globalist exploitation appears as an a priori in his work (LESSENICH, 2019a, p. 94). Thus, his “counter-narrative” to the account of a parallel trajectory of the welfare state and democracy—as emphasized by the diagnosis of post-democracy—is problematic not least because it abandons class-based conceptions of internationalism and thereby strengthens rather than weakens right-wing populist “counter-narratives” in a mirror-image form (LESSENICH, 2019a, p. 16). In all, Lessenich emphasizes that which divides without seeking a common locus for the interdependencies of a global system of exploitation, one that could become the material starting point of social struggles for a different global economic order. His concluding chapter, entitled “Solidarity!,” therefore loses itself in appellatory self-exhortation formulas.

3 The “look downwards” in post-democracy

The different accounts outlined above, all featuring in one way or another the risk of a “rabble” endangering Western democracies, are reminiscent—as we have shown—of nineteenth-century liberal thinkers who sought to counter the expansion of suffrage with institutional safeguards and comprehensive educational programs against a supposed “tyranny of the majority,” legitimizing their efforts through a pejorative “downward look.” Even today, influential contributions to the public debate seem to welcome political self-exclusion through the refusal to vote (Brennan), and even contest the right to vote for transfer recipients once again (Krall). The fact that Krall, whose influence is also felt in the populist AfD milieu, is a case in point for the interplay of downright extremist economic liberalism and national conservatism shows just how narrow the discourse has become that interprets “right-wing populism” primarily as a problem of the “rabble” from below. However, it is also striking that not only radical “neoliberal” or elitistlibertarian positions flirt with interpretative schemes from the traditional rhetoric of popular degradation, but that such patterns of argumentation can also be found in authors critical of capitalism and active in social movements such as Lessenich.

It would be too short-sighted to interpret the recurrence of nineteenth-century European patterns of interpretation merely as a contingent return of past discourses. What appears to be central, rather, is the question of the social and political conditions under which the traditional devaluation of the “rabble” has been able to experience a renaissance. Colin Crouch’s (2004) diagnosis of post-democracy—rejected by Lessenich (2019a, p. 11) as “nostalgic”—provides a clue here. Crouch’s work proves fruitful for explaining the return of the “look downwards” because it links the current state of European, liberal-democratic societies (which it criticizes) with the times that saw their slow ascent from the nineteenth century onwards.³ The process of ascent and descent of democracy is captured by Crouch in a geometric metaphor that corresponds to the rise and fall of the (traditional) industrial working class, along with its institutions and organizations. The latter had once managed to turn the industrial working class into a politically influential actor, especially in the twentieth century, one that proved capable of embedding essential aspects of social democracy in the political democracies of the postwar period.⁴

With the decline of the traditional working class and the erosion of “embedded liberalism” in the course of globalization, an important reason disappeared for maintaining restrictions on property rights (such as capital controls), conceded originally in part to ward off more far-reaching demands (SCHÄFER; ZÜRN, 2021). At the same time, the renewed emergence of fragmented and largely unorganized social class strata in Europe and beyond harbors dangers that are in some respects reminiscent of the explosive mixture that led to permanent unrest in the nineteenth century. In this context, the new “rabble” discourse can also be interpreted as symptomatic of an inability and/or unwillingness to achieve social cohesion in contemporary capitalism. Still, a unifying political and social counter-model is not in sight. While hasty linkages between experiences of declassification and the rise of right-wing populist movements should be taken with a grain of salt, the real danger is that reactionary forces will increasingly succeed at tying up social discontent in a particularistic way in what Oliver Nachtwey (2016) calls the “downward mobility” society. Should this happen, the prospect of realizing social democracy would become as distant as that of a revitalized internationalism grounded on solidarity.

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³ Crouch (2004, p. 3) elaborates on what he means by liberal democracy as follows: „This is a form that stresses electoral participation as the main type of mass participation, extensive freedom for lobbying activities, which mainly means business lobbies, and a form of polity that avoids interfering with a capitalist economy.”

⁴ However, Crouch does not systematically address the similarities and differences between “pre-democracy” and “post-democracy.” Like many contemporary diagnoses, his interest is primarily directed at the transition from the traditional welfare state to “neoliberalism.”

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