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**Democracy in a Global Context.** Politics beyond the nation-state are no longer a matter primarily for interaction between nation-states. International organizations and supranational institutions have taken root as well. Nongovernmental actors participate in political processes and national publics closely follow developments outside their own countries. The interplay of national and supranational policies, issues surrounding the juridification of international relations, and questions of global governance are examined at the WZB predominantly in the Research Area on International Politics and Law.

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## Fault Lines Cosmopolitanism, Communitarianism and Democracy

Wolfgang Merkel

A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of right-wing populism. It has risen up against established parties and elites. It demands to be heard, to have its say, to participate in the economy, in society, and in politics. A growing proportion of citizens on both sides of the Atlantic feel they are no longer represented through the relevant institutions and procedures of democracy. The developed democracies of the West, as well as those of the less developed East have a representation problem. “Those at the bottom” no longer want to be ruled by “those at the top” along the same old lines. An explosive amalgam of globalization losers, insecure *petite bourgeoisie*, ultra-conservatives, chauvinists, nationalists, and racists has developed in protest against an “established politics that excludes them.”

Sustained rebellion against existing structures and politics calls for strong mobilization or sustainable organization. The former has hitherto been lacking. This is also true for the regionally limited and increasingly pathetic Pegida in Dresden and elsewhere. Right-wing populism has long since found more effective forms of political expression. Populist political entrepreneurs have discovered the representation gap and have appropriated the most effective form of organization in established democracies by founding new parties or transforming existing ones. Politically neglected demand has itself created the offer that now propels demand. Zones on the Internet where anything goes and with a penchant for conspiracy sustainably stimulate this vicious circle of offer-demand-offer.

But if political parties are to establish themselves in the longer term, deeper cleavages in society are necessary along which parties can mobilize their support. Is there such a cleavage in developed democracies?

In Western Europe, this situation places catch-all parties under particular pressure. The cosmopolitan/communitarian cleavage cuts right across their programmes, politics, membership, and constituencies. The conflict threatens to accelerate the already advanced decline of this type of party. The chief beneficiaries are right-wing populist, as well as cosmopolitan-postmaterialist parties, which have long since established themselves at the cost of traditional cen-

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**Summary:** The new cleavage between communitarians and cosmopolitans divides parties and party systems on both sides of the Atlantic. The resulting polarization of political discourse is not all negative, though. The political is no longer lost in an alleged lack of alternatives. Our representative institutions are capable of addressing this conflict in democratic ways. They will force the cosmopolitans to get off their high horse. Arrogantly excluding right-wing populists from democratic discourse will only benefit those populists themselves.

tre-right parties. The populist right has occupied considerable ground in the abandoned political terrain beyond traditional conservative parties in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, notably in Hungary and Poland, but also in Switzerland (Schweizerische Volkspartei) they have even developed into new “people’s parties.”

Over the past four decades, Western societies have undergone far-reaching cultural change. New ways of life, same-sex marriage, equality of opportunity for men and women, multiculturalism, and ecological issues dominate discourses. In social democratic parties they have sidelined the distribution issue. Progressivity is increasingly spelled out in cultural terms. Cosmopolitan elites have occupied top positions in the economy, the state, in parties, and in the media. The cosmopolitan discourse of the rulers has become the ruling discourse. Criticism of it has often been morally delegitimized in the public sphere. This negligent denial of discourse has made a gift of the buzzword political correctness to right-wing populists.

At the same time, traditionally conservative values such as nation, national identity, lead culture, or the exclusiveness of the man-woman marriage have become anachronistic. The nostalgic closure against cultural modernization was then the almost consistent—and helpless—reaction of less educated, above all male members of a lower and lowest middle class. They see themselves as the losers of cultural modernity. From this point of view, the populist revolt can be seen above all as a reaction to the excessive cosmopolitanism and moralism of the mainstream and the well-to-do. Does this conflict harm democracy?

## The consequences for democracy

Conflict is nothing new for democracy. On the contrary: one of the greatest advantages of democracy over other forms of political regime is that it is able to resolve conflicts in accordance with previously codified and legitimized procedures. What, then, are the special challenges facing our democracy if the new cleavage becomes established? Three challenges need to be addressed.

The positions of cosmopolitans and chauvinist communitarians occupy normatively opposing poles. This holds in theory and in practical politics. This polarization assumes confrontative form in the party landscape in the contest between established parties within the compass of the democratic constitution and right-wing populist pariahs in the grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism. The democratic mainstream from Habermas to Lijpart, from deliberation to concordance, from CDU to SPD regards polarization in democracy as undesirable. Reason, balance, deliberation unburdened by considerations of power and interest or at least the relatively non-conflictual negotiation of a balance of interests are considered the essence of post-ideological politics in the 21st century. The major centre-right and centre-left parties, the cooperative interest groups and the technocrats were the champions of such politics. Normatively, their favor was courted—but mostly they curried favor among themselves. The success achieved by this politics was far from negligible, but the flip side could not be overlooked: the rich became richer, poverty consolidated, the neoliberal paradigm shaped both markets and the faculties of economics; moral arguments served to exclude conservative and reactionary traditionalists from the official discourse. They, like the lower classes, found less and less comfort in economic rationality and cosmopolitan reasoning. For a long time they reacted with resigned withdrawal from political participation.

This state of affairs is taken up by post-Marxists and left-wing Schmittians such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who sing the praises of polarized conflict in a society that is itself characterized by antagonistic (class) differences. Polarization, they convincingly argue, results in more honest political contention. It also encourages political participation and brings excluded, less privileged, and less education sections of the population back into political discourse. Polarization is lauded as a therapeutic against disaffection with politics.

Programmatic alternatives resurface that had been almost lost to sight in the consensual constellations of the big parties and under the alleged lack of alternatives to the policies pursued. However, in the face of the severe economic restrictions of globally unleashed markets, polarization develops less in the economic sphere than in the cultural-identitary domain. The populist agenda is headed not by the communitarian containment of the markets that generate inequality but the struggle against the Other or even against others. The alienation of the less cosmopolitan lower classes transmutes into xenophobia. On the right fringes, the legitimate pluralist concern to avoid exclusion from political discourse threatens to be pursued in terms of undemocratic content. Right-wing populist issues are not in themselves undemocratic. But they become so if the two fundamental democratic principles of free equality and equal freedom are restricted along racial, ethnic, religious, or gender differences.

Does right-wing populism strengthen democracy? Left-wing Schmittians answer in the affirmative. Political participation increases, and the lower classes and alienated sections of the population regain a say in politics. Pluralist theoreticians of democratic representation would also have to answer in the affirmative. The institutions and procedures of democracy under the rule of law once again demonstrate their capacity for adaptation and reproduction. It is now up to the established parties to reconquer these political spaces in pluralistic competition with good arguments and responsive politics. This is the game of liberal democracy, which takes pluralism seriously and does not seek to save democracy by paradoxical intervention through undemocratic bans or moral exclusions.

However, democratic politics cannot simply copy right-wing populist politics to “pull the plug” on right-wing populist parties. Such a democratically negligent strategy has been pursued in Germany by the CSU. But cosmopolitans, too, should not, with the cognitive and moral arrogance of the better education, seek to exclude communitarian positions from the discourse as morally inadmissible even if there is a nationalistic undertone to these positions. This tends to be counter-productive, driving the growing sections of the population in search of representation into the arms of right-wing populists.

Not unrightly, cosmopolitans assert the moral superiority of their sentiments on human rights and refugee matters. But do they also have the better concept of democracy? Doubt is called for. If cosmopolitans do not fly in the face of reality to vote for a democratic world government, world parliaments, and a world civil society, they opt for the willing cession of national sovereign rights to international organizations and supranational regimes. They range from the United Nations to the European Union, from free trade agreements to the International Monetary Fund, from world climate conferences to fiscal policy directives addressing debtor countries in the euro zone. There are two basic lines to the cosmopolitan argument: functionalist and normative. The world is meanwhile so strongly interconnected, it is argued, that transnational problems are increasing and can be effectively tackled only transnationally. The nation state has to accept that it is integrated into a multilevel system of efficient governance. The efficiency and effectiveness of supranational action become the legitimacy vanishing point of sovereignty sharing.

In addition to this functionalist argument, cosmopolitans such as Thomas Pogge and David Held also advance the normative argument that those affected by political decisions should have a say. This argument goes back to old Roman private law, was enshrined in the Codex Justinianus and brought to prominence in international law by the constitutional theoretician Hans Kelsen (1925). Kelsen uses this argument explicitly to distinguish between national democracies and dictatorships. In extreme cases, the argument would mean, in the interconnected world of the twenty-first century, that the entire rest of the world would have a say in decisions made by the United States, since they usually affect the rest of the world. This demand may well be normatively justifiable, but from a political point of view it is as senseless as it is naïve.

The supranational extension of democracy comes at a price. The larger and more complex political spaces are, the less they can be democratically governed, as the



Wolfgang Merkel is director of the WZB research unit Democracy and Democratization at the WZB and Professor of Comparative Political Science and Democracy Research at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He is also co-head of the Center for Global Constitutionalism. *(Photo: David Ausserhofer)*  
[wolfgang.merkel@wzb.eu](mailto:wolfgang.merkel@wzb.eu)

doyen of democracy research, Robert Dahl, has convincingly demonstrated. Key normative values of democracy, such as equal citizen participation, transparency, and the accountability of political decisionmaking, the reservation of parliamentary powers, and the vertical and horizontal control of government can indeed be less convincingly realized beyond the nation state than within its borders. Cosmopolitans, too, are unlikely to deny this. But the functionalist inevitability of multi-level decisionmaking usually trumps communitarian reservations about a loss of democracy. However, evidence has yet to be presented that the majority of decisions taken by the UN, the IMF, or even the EU can be categorized as particularly efficient let alone wise. The partial blockade of EU decisions or the refusal to implement them have been quite conspicuous since past rounds of expansion and consolidation. This sends a warning to the proponents of governance beyond the nation state.

The nationalist refusal of supranational coordination, however, is likely to be just as harmful to democracy and future development. A third way needs to be found between cosmopolitan liberality in ceding national sovereignty rights and retreat into the communitarian refuge of the nation state. Dani Rodrik, economist at Harvard University, has recently given at least a pointer. "Thin supranational rules," he writes, have to be combined with the "thick rules of the democratic nation state." Supranational regulatory frameworks need to be established, which can then be filled out in detail at the national level by each country. Options for withdrawing should also be made easier. This prevents the transmutation of democratically determined assets by globalized markets and the vested interests of executive coalitions. "Democracies," according to Rodrik, "have the right to protect their social order; and if this right collides with the requirements of the global economy, it is the latter that ought to give way." This third way is thus by no means equidistant between the global Scylla and the national Charybdis. It gives precedence to national democracy as long as it can organize political decisionmaking more democratically than international treaties and supranational regimes. It is not only the normative primacy of democracy that comes to bear. It is also an act of political wisdom to wrest the basis for arguing from rampant right-wing populism by democratic means.

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