REDESCRIBING DEMOCRACY*

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If a prize were awarded for survival in the history of political concepts, democracy would be very high on the list of nominees. Until today, the concept has successfully resisted every attempt to relegate it to the museum. And in fact it has survived precisely because it has been so vehemently contested.

However, in view of the tremendous differences between ancient, modern and present usage it looks like a miracle that the term democracy is still used in scholarly and everyday language. How remarkable the semantic changes the concept has gone through during its long history since the antique are becomes obvious by comparison with the career of other terms. Most of them suffered a much worse fate in the evolutionary history of our political vocabulary. Classical concepts like "aristocracy", "oligarchy" or "usurpation" are hardly used anymore, and "monarchies" now seem to exist only in a folkloric sense. Only the Roman term "dictatorship" survived successfully into the 20th century,[1] first as a positive concept and then later mainly as a negative contrast to "democracy".

Why has "democracy" not been simply replaced by other terms as a descriptive category for political systems, rather than being arduously renovated again and again? Is it obvious that we still hold onto the concept of "democracy"? Are there certain semantic elements that made it look attractive again and again to different political actors? What are these aspects and what role might they play in the future evolution of the concept? This last question returns us to the issue of

how the concept of democracy has survived so far. To what semantic transformations does it owe its continued existence? These are big, in the sense of complex and important, questions in political theory. Just because they are so "big", however, they share the fate of other big questions: they often receive no answer and are finally no longer even asked.

In order to deal with at least some aspects of these questions, we address them in a less rigid way than usually practiced in academic papers. In this essay we cannot give definite answers to the questions listed above. Instead we want to put these questions into a historical framework and set out a possible research agenda on the semantics of "democracy". In the first section we begin with an analytical distinction between different actors who practiced democratic theory in the past, emphasizing the characteristics of practicing democratic theory within the field of modern professional political science. Next we propose a reconstructive scheme of past semantic transformations of the term "democracy" – what we call "positivation", "futurization", and "completation". Together, these transformations mark the starting point for any conceptual renovation of the term today. In the third section we claim that a new semantic transformation of the concept of democracy can now be observed. We call this transformation the "rationalization" of democracy. At the logical end of this semantic shift democracy is evacuated of its participatory moments as far as possible. Finally in the last section of the paper we discuss two different reactions to this semantic transformation. Whereas the first builds on the "post-democratic" character of modern political systems, the second can be understood as a "dynamization" of the concept of democracy – in our view a preferable way to deal with "rationalization" from the point of view both of normative democratic theory and of the empirical measurement of democracy.

Theorizing Democracy

Theories of democracy, like all other products of daily life, are "produced" under specific conditions. Just like making a car or engaging in democratic action, theorizing democracy is part of a complex (and, in the case of producing cars, highly technical) collective project. Thus, every work of democratic theory – even in the case of such a

solitary author as Spinoza – refers to other members of the political community.

One can roughly distinguish between three sorts of actors who theorize democracy: A first group that contributes to democratic theory consists of politically active persons whose demands, arguments or ideologies become influential in the course of concrete political debates (the Levellers during the English Revolution, the activists of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the East European protest movements of 1989). Members of a second group, namely politically active intellectuals, provide declarations relevant to democratic activities and demands. These intellectuals contribute to democratic thought by way of systematization, further development and criticism (think of Eduard Bernstein's book on the Levelers, interpretations of the Hungarian events by Hannah Arendt and Georg Lukács, or the late writings by Adam Michnik and Václav Havel). A third group consists of intellectuals who have given up or at least set aside their political ambitions in favor of a professional academic occupation.

This typology is not meant to provide sharp distinctions; some intermediate cases come to mind immediately. But the typology is of heuristic value because it emphasizes the fact that, in contrast to earlier times, significant parts of the discourse about the meaning of democracy have shifted to professional academics. Many citizens still have their own conceptions of (and recently in growing numbers: against) democracy; these conceptions are regularly gathered and interpreted in opinion polls by experts. But today socially accepted reflection on what democracy is and is not mainly takes place in the academic field. This academization has two consequences: firstly an immense thrust towards differentiation and refinement of democratic theories, and secondly a growing alienation of many citizens from the discourse on democracy, which has drifted into expert cultures.

Let us remain with the first consequence for a moment. Academic political theorists have been criticized in a controversial book by Bonnie Honig for being generally hostile to political change, trying instead to hide under the umbrella of moral theories, which free modern subjects and their institutional arrangements from real political conflict and instability.[2] Honig gives no causal explanation for what she aptly terms "the displacement of politics" by academic political theorists, but throughout her book one can find a quasi-psychological explanation of this tendency: political theorists tend to look for defi-

nite solutions to their normative concerns. To some degree, our line of argument approaches some aspects of Honig's criticism. Our starting points, however, are not implicit assumptions about the psychology of political theorists. Instead we want to draw attention to the social logic of the academic field.

Today, the production of normative and analytical democratic theories by political scientists takes place under circumstances similar to the production of other goods by modern industry. From patent application (who invented the term "deliberative democracy"?) to recycling (who rediscovered John Stuart Mill for modern democratic theory?), similar basic rules apply. To some degree there is a simulation of the market mechanism, which in the academic system of science takes the form of a contest for the best arguments, looking at competitors' products, and constantly searching for theoretical innovations. When dealing with "democracy", political theorists are socialized to coolly observe different positions and enter the permanent competition for the best justification and institutional design of democracy.

In this "survival of the fittest", only arguments that are able to counter or at least weaken the respective counterarguments survive academic debate. The permanent pressure for innovation leads ever-new theses, terms, attributes, concepts, explanations and reassurances from the history of ideas to be injected into the debate. They then become independent theme cycles – one need only think of the career of concepts like "civil society", "virtue", "public weal" or "trust" in the recent discussion. This plurality of perspectives and approaches ensures that different argumentative and explanatory contexts are shielded from fundamental objections in the long term. From the point of view of the ideal social structure of a cognitive field, such plurality is preferable to conformity because different approaches conserve insights and thoughts that could easily be lost in a discussion only interested in innovation. At the same time, the vocabulary of political science has become more technically sophisticated as even traditional terms like "democracy" receive different readings from different academic schools.

Today no direct path leads back from the elaborated terminology and argumentative complexity of modern democratic theories to the basic impulse – the egalitarian participation of the citizens – that stood at the beginning of the modern process of political inclusion in the 19th century. The quality of normative or empirical contributions to

democratic theory is evaluated by professional academics on such a high level of sophistication that it leads to a paradox: the academic debate about democracy massively violates the democratic commandment of equal access. The test of a good theory of democracy today is its standing in the academic community, not whether it is understood and accepted by citizens. For other areas of science and for other terms in the social sciences and humanities, this specialization and professionalization of technical terminology is as helpful as it is necessary. Things look different when it comes to a term like "democracy", which serves as a key signifier of political identification. The hiatus between its semantics within the academic field and discourse about democracy on a day-to-day level becomes all but unbridgeable.

In the non-academic world politicians, citizens and advocates of our political system (even neo-Nazis in France and Germany) refer to the concept of "democracy" to legitimate their own political preferences or visions. All agree that their own political activities recur to the "people" as the one and only sovereign in politics. Their usage of the concept is rhetorically presented in the form of a promise – a promise of political will-formation "from the bottom" that includes at least a minimum of political participation by the citizens. From the beginning of the modern process of democratization in the 19th century this promise has functioned as the motor of an inflationary usage of the concept of democracy. So it should come as no surprise that any talk of "democracy" in the context of western political systems still evokes expectations relating to the participatory component of the democratic ideal.

In the political debates of our times, these expectations inevitably lead to frustrations and "disenchantment with politics". This disappointment can be noted in the decline of electoral turnouts in nearly all western democracies as well as in the rapid devaluation of the word "democracy" in most new democracies. "Democracy" is used more and more sarcastically in the countries of the former East Bloc, aimed against those who broke the promises of democracy. Even if it is common to ask for more "realism", "enlightenment" or better "political education", so far not even the oldest existing democracy on Earth has managed to rid the concept of democracy from its participatory promises.

But is the academic discourse, which goes on in professional journals that rarely reach a broader audience, really relevant outside the

academic field? One can hardly imagine anything more innocent than the work, detached from the world, on scrupulously exact terminologies. These questions direct our attention to semantic transformations of the term "democracy" that took place before the academic takeover, to which we now turn.

Past semantic transformations

Clearly, modern democracy has little more in common with its ancient predecessors than its name.[3] Democracy in Athens was characterized by the sovereignty of the citizenry in the agora. "Direct democracy" was practiced, in which the citizenry didn't just deliberate together, but all substantial decisions were taken directly by the assembled citizenry. The public meeting was the highest committee, not limited by any other political institution. Democratic politics also expressed itself by the drawing of lots and the rotational principle for the allocation of political posts. Political systems which today bear the name "democracy" are characterized on the contrary by representative institutions, the election of personnel, a separation of powers and constitutional limits on political action. In comparison to classical Athenian democracy, modern democracy is less and more at the same time. It offers less opportunity for political participation, but it offers more with respect to the quality of political decision-making, based on the ideals of constitutional freedom and the welfare state.

The shift in meaning from the classical to the modern concept of democracy occurred through a multistage transformation. The basic semantic changes concern the evaluative, temporal and institutional aspects of the concept of democracy. We call these processes "positivation", "futurization" and "completion".

"Positivation": In the theories of Plato and Aristotle as well as Polybius and Cicero, "democracy" was a negative concept. All the major sources from which the ancient concept of democracy has been handed down to us are by critics, if not enemies, of democracy. Their critique was vehement, and their list of democracy's shortcomings was long. Democracy allows unqualified citizens to participate in politics; it complicates political decision making; it produces bad decisions; it debauches the political culture; or it is amoral – just to mention the most important points of critique.[4] This negative usage of the concept

continued uninterrupted from the Middle Ages to modern times; only in the writings of Spinoza and in the political speeches of some Dutch republican thinkers in the 1780s can we find attempts to give democracy a positive signification.[5] Robespierre's late speeches, in which he adds forms of representation to the antique term *"demokratia"*, is a founding moment for a positive understanding of the term in modern political thought.[6] This positive connotation became gradually accepted after the French Revolution and was used in connection with the extension of suffrage in the U.S., some western European countries, New Zealand and Australia in the 19th century. This whole process was accompanied by sharp ideological disputes, which only came to a temporary standstill in the mid-20th century. Today the transition to a positive concept is complete, at least in western societies and the concept has developed into a category of self-description in global political disputes. In western societies, the term no longer has many fundamental enemies; even extremists of the New Right like Benoist defend their political visions in the name of "democracy".

"Futurization": Political thinkers of the Hellenic and later Roman periods like Polybius and Cicero already regarded democracy as a form of government from a bygone era. It was situated in the past and associated with the existence of the *polis*, the small city state of the lost world of Greek antiquity. If only for that reason – regardless of its negative aspects – it was not a serious option for the political future for liberal authors like Montesquieu, John Locke or the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. For Hegel too, who presented a much more positive reading of democracy in Athens, "democracy" was not a political option for the future: due to its emphasis on the irresistible liberation of the subjective mind, his philosophy of history leaves no way back to democratic forms of self-understanding. And even authors like Grotius and Rousseau, whose theories took bold steps towards making democracy positive, were rather cautious concerning a realistic future for democracy.

It was only with Tocqueville's book on America that a political rhetoric prevailed that reversed this temporal structure, enabling contemporaries to see democracy as a project of the future. On Tocqueville's view North America was already mostly a democracy, and in Europe it would soon win out too, as problematic and ambivalent as this tendency was for him.[7] It was this futurization that made the concept of democracy a key term in the political battles of the 19th

and 20th centuries. Enemies as well as proponents of democracy were electrified by this perspective – the former because they now faced a challenge that laid claim to the future, the latter because they had an feasible political project with the name "democracy" in front of them.[8] Today the futural character of democracy is undisputed. Democracy is a project of constant amelioration in which we all cooperate, until one day it is completely redeemed.

"Completion": Thirdly, the concept of democracy underwent a fundamental change in its institutional inventory. While in antiquity there was a primacy of political participation, slowly a constitutional usage prevailed that systematically restricted the moment of direct participation. It is this transition, embraced by Benjamin Constant, from the freedom of the old to the freedom of the new at the beginning of the 19th century that makes the paradigmatic break apparent. The change from a negative to a positive evaluation of the concept of "democracy" coincides with the transition to a primacy of liberal rights and the establishment of a representative system. Democracy is now regarded as an institutional order that must be complemented with a system of "checks and balances" to secure negative freedom – the protection of the individual – from the decisions of the majority.[9] The list of proposals for how the institutions of democracy should be complemented is long and bears witness to a high level of institutional creativity by contemporary authors. The most important innovations include constitutionalism (e.g. an independent judiciary, constitutional jurisdiction), different models for the separation of powers, federalism and multistage representative systems.

It was only because of the three semantic transformations that the term "democracy" was able to survive as a key political concept. No one but a handful of experts in the history of political thought can still make sense of democracy's classical counterparts like *"isonomy"*, *"politie"*, *"timocracy"* or *"ochlocracy"*. But when we take the tremendous semantic shifts of "democracy" into account, it is hard to find a satisfying answer to the obvious question of why the concept was not simply given up, instead of being filled again and again with new meanings. The astounding survival of the term can probably best be explained by the political attractiveness of the two component elements of the Greek compound – *"demos"* and *"kratein"*. This rhetorical reference to "the people" and "strong rule" constitutes a – however weakened – reference to the participatory elements of political move-

ments or systems and provided them with mass legitimacy from the beginning of the 19th until the end of the 20th century.

The current rationalization of democracy

Due to the competitive structure of the academic field, one might expect the last decades to have led to an immense differentiation in the offering of democratic theories: every halfway imaginable position in democratic theory should have found supporters, critics and metacritics. In this section, however, we will argue that instead one paradigm – the "rationalization" of democratic theory – and thus one particular understanding of the term "democracy", has become dominant.

Today, in the era of denationalization, not only has the participatory component become ballast of which the term democracy has to be relieved; even small doses of participation seem to stand in the way of the term's further success. This is at least the impression one gets from reviewing current debates in political science and the way the academic discussion deals with participation. Considering the most important strands in current democratic theory, one notices that they share – despite other important differences – a common semantic alteration that leads the way to a fourth transformation in democratic theory. These theories use a concept of "democracy" that admits a deep chasm between participation in the political process and the "rational" results of that process. Forced to take a stand on this dilemma, current democratic theories opt against political participation.

We call this transformation the "rationalization" of democracy. According to this term, the focus of modern theories of democracy has shifted to the evaluation of the quality of the results of politics. Democratic theory is output-oriented and its theoretical efforts aim mainly at enhancing the rationality of this output. Significant differences within this paradigm only arise with respect to the criteria of rationality, such as effectiveness, feasibility, fair representation of interests, gender equality, justice or the public good. Despite these differences, political participation is no longer regarded as the goal, but as one of several possible ways of enhancing the rationality of collectively binding decisions.

Admittedly, our claim that "democracy" is experiencing a new semantic transformation requires a much deeper investigation of cur-

rent political theory than we can present in a short paper. But some hints with respect to the various ways in which current democratic theories try to foster rationality may help give our claim at least some plausibility: Be it about the rationality of political preferences on the input side of the political process (e.g. Sunstein 1993, Goodin 2003), the rationality of political processes within the democratic institutional system (e.g. Habermas 1994, Bohman/Rehg 1997, Rawls 2001), the compatibility of democratic systems with "the order of egoism" (Dunn 2005), gender equality (e.g. Phillips 1991) or the rationality of the output of the political process (e.g. Bobbio 1989, Przeworski et al. 2000), in these normative theories the production of rational political results has primacy over all other aspects of democracy. The participatory component of the concept of democracy thereby becomes a dependent variable and, if necessary, must move to the background.

Rationality trumps

It would take a much longer and deeper discussion of today's leading democratic theories to further substantiate our claim. And surely, such an analysis would point out considerable differences even between today's representatives of left-liberal democratic theories like David Held, Jürgen Habermas, Noberto Bobbio, Anne Phillips, Robert A. Dahl, David Shapiro, John Rawls, Adam Przeworski, Cass Sunstein or Robert E. Goodin – to mention just a few. But a common denominator is discernible from the works of these authors, mostly written under the realistic turn in politics during the last decade of the 20th century. This common denominator transcends the oft-invoked differences between liberal, deliberative, feminist and to some extent also republican theories of democracy: they all direct their theoretical energies to refining the quality of political outputs. They justify democracy as a political system that produces or at least should produce good, in the actual sense of "rational", political results. They describe democratic theories that still insist on the irreducible value of participation in the process of political decisionmaking as "voluntaristic", to take a recent criticism by Jürgen Habermas.[10] The keywords in current theoretical debates are instead rule of law, good governance, justice, political productivity, deliberative political arenas, epistemic democracy, comitology and democratic expertise.

Lippmann, Schumpeter and their followers were already sceptical about political participation, and their conceptions of elitist democracy sought to tame the influence of participation. However, the new paradigm of rationalization moves in a slightly different direction. In these theories, it is no longer the "best" or "wisest" who guarantees the quality of democracy, but liberal or deliberative institutions. On first view, the participatory component of "democracy" is thereby strengthened. But these institutions function as "sluices", to use Habermas's term, letting through only those citizen voices compatible with the rational goals of the society. Citizen participation is thus replaced as the basic value of democracy by the "rationality" of the political process. The rule of law and the production of welfare and stability constitute the most important parameters – more important than the participation of all citizens.

What are the reasons for this semantic shift? Certainly, one decisive factor must be seen within the academic field. Due to the internal factors mentioned in the first section, normative approaches have to follow the findings of empirical democratic theory in order to claim scientific relevance. In the debate over democracy in political science only ideas that can show their relation to empirical phenomena and thus their proximity to reality are taken seriously. Since modern political systems are called "democracies", the empirical political exploration of these systems is almost automatically called "democratic studies". In defining "democracy", it is only a small step by normatively agnostic empirical political scientists to gather the properties of the term by collecting characteristics of political systems that are called democracies. This puts normative theorists of democracy under pressure. In order to avoid being isolated within the academic field and thus becoming irrelevant, they adjust their definitions to the requirements of empirical political science. Thus, the findings of empirical research on democracy, e.g. on the degree of political participation or the irrationality of political preferences, exert a subliminal but nonetheless powerful pressure on normative theories.

The new dominance of output-legitimacy and the paradigm of "rationalization" is thus closing the gap between utopian normative theories and realistic empirical research. This empirical research is assisted by systems and rational choice theory, which in their own ways explain why political participation in modern mass democracies is without effect for the participants. Both lead to the conclusion

that political participation makes no real sense for citizens. Even participatory conceptions of democracy subscribe to the new paradigm when they claim that more participation will lead to better political outcomes instead of their former insistence of the intrinsic value of participation.

The realism of the theoretical debate about democracy is much praised for its scientific aspects – it offers protection from the utopias and illusions that inveigle political adventures. The only loss to be lamented from this perspective is perhaps the "lacking courage for democratic utopia" – a loss that from the perspective of a realistic democratic theory should even be entered on the credit side, since in this way "bad" normative ideas are laid aside. Normative democratic theory that does not buy into the rationalistic paradigm finds itself on the defensive. According to the rationalization paradigm, "democracy" is a regime-type that produces a certain amount of legal certainty, cultural and educational goods, welfare and other collective goods (e.g. security from terrorism), sacrificing the active political participation of its citizens for these goods.

Our point in this essay is not to lament this semantic development within the academic field from the perspective of participatory and "strong" (Barber) democracy, but to ask whether this semantic shift really could be consolidated. Could rationalization be the final semantic transformation of the term – from a democracy with a strong impetus for active participation towards a "democracy without democracy" (in the classical sense)?

Democracy as a promise

No attempt to nail down a certain meaning of democracy as consensual and unchangeable can succeed. Owing to the permanently contested nature of political concepts, attempts to give the word "democracy" a durable core meaning can only fail. A purely contextual understanding of the political history of concepts, however, leaves no starting point for criticizing the current expulsion of political participation from democratic theory. Keeping the openness of the term in mind, are there other ways to react to the current shift of paradigm? Or, to put the question in another way: Is it possible to claim – despite all the justified methodological objections – that participation is essentially inscribed in the term democracy?

At this point in our argument the performative character of political concepts and the fact that the use of concepts always expresses evaluations comes into play. Concepts can be defined as subtly as possible, but they only become political concepts when they are actually used by political actors. And in this everyday usage by political actors, the reference to the concept of democracy historically as well as in current political conflicts has actualized not only "rational goals" like the rule of law and justice, but also the promise of participation. Again and again – from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine and political protests in China – the demand for political participation and political rights have been articulated through the explicit and literal use of the term "democracy". Protest movements in times of change as well as political parties in times of political routine use "democracy" to promise a participatory moment in politics. This promise legitimizes democracy in contemporary political rhetoric. Even members of the political classes and proponents of the status quo refer strategically to this promise.

In view of this practical usage in political debates, the probability that the participatory moment will be stamped out from the meaning of the term "democracy" is not very high. It is too attractive for defenders and critics in political debate to refer to the democratic promise and to remind us again and again of this promise. The particular performativity of the term "democracy" limits its transformation to a purely output-oriented term. Thus, in the political language and despite the current semantic shift in political science, democracy will probably not be completely uncoupled from the idea of participation.

How can modern democratic theory deal with this promise in a more productive way than by drawing a line between a pure, scientific and a "impure", everyday understanding of democracy? Currently, one can observe two main alternative strategies that could not be more different. The first strategy relieves modern political systems of higher levels of legitimacy simply by picking other terms from the long list of political systems in order to label them correctly (1). The second strategy consists of a reformulation of modern democratic theory to make reflexive use of its immanent promise (2).

1. Choosing the proper designation for a political system has always been a political move.[11] Robert Dahl already pleaded for a terminological shift in the 1950s when he suggested the term "polyar-

chy" as more appropriate for modern political systems in the West.[12] Although a handful of political scientists followed Dahl's suggestion, even he in his later work returned to the term democracy because the new term did not resonate beyond a small group.[13] Thus, one way to deal with discomfort about modern democracies is to reject the label "democracy" and look for a negatively connoted concept from the vocabulary of constitutional theory. This semantic strategy builds upon the tradition of the "Italian realism," from Vilfredo Pareto, Roberto Michels and Gentano Mosca to Danilo Zolo. If we follow Zolo's line of argument, today's democratic theory is not "realistic" enough because it calls western societies "democratic" solely on the basis of their character as constitutional states. According to Zolo's systems-theoretical description of the political process in modern democracies, political participation has been replaced by manipulated public discourse. He suggests that it would be more appropriate to accept this and call these systems "liberal oligarchies".[14] Michael Lind applied the same designation to the United States in the 1990s,[15] and it caught on among political scientists and journalists during the first six years of the George W. Bush administration.[16]

The intuition that modern democracies have undergone a tremendous change over the last two decades has brought suggestions to rename these political systems. Normally, these suggestions follow a stage-model, starting with early versions of democracy at the end of the 19th century through full-fledged democracy in the last third of the 20th century to new challenges and institutional responses.[17] In this context, different terms have been invented in order to draw a line between the "good old" and the "bad present". One candidate in this recent semantic competition is "virtual democracy", which puts the emphasis on strategies of depoliticization in modern democratic systems.[18] An analogous way of capturing a changing democratic reality can be found with Sheldon Wolin and Jacques Rancière, who call western political systems "post-democracies".[19] Among the authors of this group, which inherits the traditional critique of merely "formal democracy", Colin Crouch has presented the most systematic account.[20] He points to a fundamental ambivalence of western societies. According to Crouch, in post-democracies all traditional democratic institutions like parliament, regular elections and party competition as well as the rule of law continue to exist. These political systems thus differ significantly from autocratic political orders or repressive

dictatorships. But these institutions are substantively undermined by processes of globalization and the state's declining capacity to regulate the economy: "My central contentions are that, while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of predemocratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes."[21] Without being able to produce a more egalitarian policy, democracy becomes a hollow shell. Whereas for the neo-realist Danilo Zolo democracy is already a concept from the past, the left political thinker Colin Crouch makes the case for a radical political switch in order to overcome the era of post-democracy and move back to a form of democracy that restores political participation and social justice.

The advantage of the strategy of looking for a term "after" democracy is obvious: it opens up space to question the ideological use of the term "democracy" for modern political systems without assimilating them to political forms that include state repression (like dictatorship). The new term allows those who want to point out that vital aspects of western societies can be collectively decided only to a very small extent to take a more critical stand.

As long as "post-democracy" could be used in an affirmative way (like "postmodernity"), it could even be viewed as a reasonable semantic response to the decline of democratic self-rule, since it would limit the burden of legitimacy in Western political systems. This function, however, is already fulfilled by other terms, like "representative democracy", "liberal democracy", "modern democracy" or "constitutional democracy". But in fact, the idea of post-democracy represents a polemical reaction by its inventors. They want to draw attention to the extent to which modern western political systems stand apart not only from the democratic impulses at the beginning of European and American democratization in the 19th century but also from the self-interpretations of these political systems in textbooks.

But there is one main reason why the strategy of introducing "post-democracy" as a term that better fits to our current political reality has only a slightly chance of prevailing beyond a small circle of political scientists: too many of those who use the concept of democracy will want to carry on exploiting its capacity to generate political hope. Members of the political class, for example, have a strong

interest in connecting their profession with the promise of democracy because they gain legitimacy from it. Social movements and radical opponents of modern political systems also claim that their activities are truly democratic. And the same affirmative use could be found in justifications for military interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq, which were justified in the name of spreading democracy and human rights. In all these cases, "democracy" stands for the promise of a political order that includes citizens in the process of political decision making. And as long as this promise and hope are taken seriously by citizens, "democracy" will not be replaced in the political language by terms that reject this promise. Only the consistently cynical use of the term "democracy" by political elites or occupying powers can turn the democratic promise into a threat – a process we can start to see today in parts of Latin America, Russia and Iraq. And only in such situations does the term "post-democracy" have the capacity to become an alternative form of political self-interpretation.[22] But as long as participatory intuitions constitute a significant part of a political culture, the two components *"demos"* and *"kratein"* will be used rhetorically to express a promise. It will therefore remain part of the vocabulary of all political actors who (honestly or dishonestly) want to make an appeal to other citizens.

2. Hence a second strategy, which we call "dynamization", has a better chance for the semantic future of democracy. The aim of this strategy is to put the component of the promise, which has ensured the survival of the concept of democracy so far, *explicitly* at the centre of democratic theory. According to this strategy, it is not political systems or institutions that should be classified as "democratic", but certain kinds of political actions. Dynamization detaches democracy from certain characteristic institutions (parliament, parties, electoral rules, e.g.) and makes it instead into a "*Handlungsbegriff*", an "action-concept", according to the following criteria: political actions are "democratic" when they contribute to a collective decision making process among equal participants. Democratic principles on this view are "primarily things that we do, rather than rights or statuses" (Saward 2003: 164). The strategy of dynamization aims to correct the currently dominant rationalization paradigm and its institutional consequences. Dynamization can hardly gain its full strength in current theoretical debates when it is understood as a replacement for or alternative to the current paradigm. Instead, it should be viewed as a

critical supplement to the "rationalization" of the concept of democracy.[23]

Following this basic idea, the rhetorical thrust of our repositioning of the concept of democracy should be seen as a reminder of the fact that the promise of democracy is only ever partly fulfilled and that its ideals come alive especially through political action that confronts the current institutionalization of democratic ideals. A dynamized concept of "democracy" recalls the fundamentally unfinished state and openness of the democratic project. It approaches what Jacques Derrida has called *la démocratie à venir* – a democracy yet to come – by emphasizing the future openness of democratic identities and institutions to political action.[24] Such a perspective also stresses the elements of opportunities (*Chancen*) – the *Weberian moment* (Palonen)[25] – to intervene, interrupt, and dispute. But instead of disregarding the normative features of democratic theory (like "radical democrats" such as Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière[26]), the elements of chance and contingency are included in the normative profile of a dynamized concept of democracy. A dynamized concept of democracy is also sensitive to the fact that even the best organized deliberative democracy becomes encrusted over time and needs permanent re-evaluation. Theories of deliberative democracy have to be enriched with tools that allow us to detect when deliberations are closed or distorted.[27]

The inclusion of this dynamic aspect has consequences not only for the normative profile of democratic theory, but also for debates over how to assess the democratic quality of democracies. A democratic theory that focuses on chances for political action, political intervention and dispute starts its reflection about appropriate indices for empirical research not on the level of political institutions but on that of political action. It accepts the premise that "democracy" as an action-oriented political order can be realized institutionally in many different ways. Therefore, indices for the degree or quality of democracy should not put liberal institutions on top of the list, like those produced by organizations like "Polity" or "Freedom House".[28] These and similar indices of empirical democracy stubbornly check certain institutions, e.g. the protection of individual rights or basic elements of the separation or powers and parliamentary democracy. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a political system like that of the U.S., in which voter turnout barely reaches 50 percent, is regularly awarded top scores for the quality of its democracy.[29]

In contrast, the dynamized concept of democracy broadens the horizon to register democratic phenomena in two respects: for one thing, democratic practices that are not entirely within the liberal western model of democracy come in for closer inspection; for another, the dominant parameters of measurement change, since the degree of effective political participation moves into the foreground. Such conceptual starting points support alternative ways of assessing democracy that have been suggested in the last two decades. Here we just want to mention David Beetham's model of a "democratic audit". His qualitative approach, with its emphasis on "popular control", clearly focuses on the input side of democracy. In addition, the quality of "popular control" is measured with regard not only to the scope and inclusiveness of voting, but also to the actual participation of a civil society and the democratic spirit of the political culture.[30]

So even if it may look as though the paradigm of rationalization dominates the field of normative democratic theory, tendencies that could overcome this onesidedness can be found not only in the language games of everyday political interaction but also among political scientists. And the probability that the current output-orientation and rationalization will continue to dominate the semantics of "democracy" in the near future is not very high. Returning to the Darwinian metaphor, which we chose in the beginning of this paper to highlight the surprising "survival" of the term democracy from antiquity to today, nothing better than "dynamization" could happen to the concept of democracy. This "dynamization" could contribute to the term's future success. A shift from "rationalization" to "dynamization" gives this key term of our political vocabulary an essential advantage over other political concepts: "democracy" would become a synonym for the permanent struggle over the concrete content of democracy as a set of political institutions and spaces for political intervention. The contest over the meaning of democracy would thus itself be an essential part of fulfilling the promise of democracy.

NOTES

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1. See: Arato 2000, 2002
2. See: Honig 1993.
3. For the differences between antique and modern democracy see: Hansen 2005.
4. For an overview on the antique critiques of democracy see: Ober 1998.
5. For this starting points see: Dunn 2005: 64-68, 84-91.
6. See: Rosanvallon 2006: 94-97.
7. For Tocqueville's ambivalence about democracy see: Wolin 2001.
8. For the arguments of democracy's opponents and proponents in these struggles see: Roper 1989, Hirschman 1991, and Femia 2001.
9. This transition is traced back carefully in Manin 1997.
10. In opposition to an "epistemic" theory of democracy, to which Habermas counts concepts of deliberative democracy (see: Habermas 2001: 187-189). For a more developed concept of an epistemic theory of democracy see: Estlund 1997.
11. For the political implications of these designations and re-designations, see: Buchstein 2007.
12. See: Dahl 1956.
13. See: Dahl 1989, Dahl 1998.
14. See: Zolo 1992.
15. See: Lind 1996.
16. See: Klein 2006.
17. For a *muster* of such a stage-model see: Dahl 1994.
18. For the introduction of the term "virtual democracy" see: Blühdorn 2007. For strategies of depoliticization as a form of government see: Buller/Flinders 2005.
19. See: Wolin 2001, Rancière 2005.
20. For a critical overview on the post-democracy debate see: Buchstein/Nullmeier 2006.
21. Crouch 2004: 6.
22. See for Latin America: Ceresole 2000.
23. For a similar idea of "repoliticizing democracy" see: Rosanvallon 2006: 249-52.
24. For a critical evaluation of Derrida's concept of "la démocratie à venire" see: Fritsch 2002.
25. For chance and contingency as parts of "the political" see: Palonen 1998.
26. For a discussion of "radical democracy" see: Norval 2002 and Heil/Hetzel 2006.

27. See: Young 2001.
28. For the latest version of the "polity-indices" see: Marshall/Jaggers 2001. For the Freedom House indices see their yearly reports.
29. For an overview of the different approaches and their rankings see: Pickel/Pickel 2006.
30. See: Beetham 2001.

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