

Democracy, equality and progressivism¹

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Introduction

Democracy is a standard of behaviour for society. It is in no case a mere description. If society has to obey the demands of democracy, then it sounds sensible to ask for an explanation of the claim to, and more importantly, the need for democracy. This paper does not attempt to provide a definition of democracy. On the contrary, its claim is not only that there is no such thing as a definition of democracy, but also that what can possibly be discussed in this context is at most which representation of democracy we have. Political agents act according to the representation of the situation which they have. The representation and the respective actions can either correspond to the real needs of the society or not. In the case that they do not correspond, the employed political action is mistaken. If a political action is mistaken, it is so because either the action itself or its political and generally socially relevant consequences do not conform to a certain standard. If democracy is the prominent standard, then the way in which a political action, or an entire political strategy can be assessed as justified or not is dependent on the way in which democracy itself is determined.

Democracy, like most concepts cannot be defined.² This paper will therefore rather focus on certain features of democracy as it is usually conceived of, and in particular on equality as constitutive of democracy. The paper will attempt to maintain that equality should not be taken as an absolute norm in the sense in which the basic moral concepts should. I attempt here to explain why this is the case as well.

1. Democracy: An Egalitarian Perspective on Equality

Democracy in modern society is closely associated with equality. Equality appears to be pragmatically efficient in a certain historical framework and this is the reason why modern societies try to internalize it on the level of individual conscience as a *just norm*. That a norm is just means that it disposes with absolute validity. If there exists such an absolute validity of democracy and equality, then it is derived from *the moral load* bestowed on both democracy and equality.

On the other hand, the normative concept of democracy is historically conditioned, and there is no strict philosophical reason for a society to be democratic. It is historically conditioned in the sense that it has proved to be efficient in terms of political pragmatics over a long-term period of history.³ It is therefore learned on behalf of society that democracy has been efficient. The present-day highlighting of democracy as the basic term in any justification of a political or a social system derives from this historical conscience. Hence the concept of democracy not as descriptive, but as normative, is a purely egalitarian concept.⁴

¹ This paper was part of the final thesis which I did while I was a postgraduate student for a specialist degree in European Studies at the Department of European Studies of the Central European University in Prague, during 1992 and 1993. For helpful comments and discussions I am thankful to all the colleagues who participated in discussions and seminars. I am, however, especially grateful to Slawomir Kapralski and Katharine Vadura for reading the previous versions and offering many improving comments and suggestions.

² However, striking, this thesis seems to me true, because a partial description of a connotation is not a definition. Funny enough, a definition is *by definition exhaustive*, which renders most theoretical concepts undefinable.

³ It is most frequently argued that this 'probational' period for democracy spans between the French revolution and the present time.

⁴ A concept is 'egalitarian' if its validity is 'inherited' from the past. In other words, it is considered to be valid as a standard not on the grounds of its logical justification or an

Democracy is not desirable because it somehow relates to morality and because to be democratic for a society is to keep to the moral conscience of its members. Democracy is desirable because we are used to thinking that is desirable and it is not at all clear to us why we started believing that it is so in the first place. It is possible that democracy is not believed in because it fulfills the demands of common morality, but because it is conducive of satisfaction of those desires which do not necessarily have anything to do with moral justification and which may even be opposed to any particular demands of morality.⁵ This lack of moral justification, if true, is the root of the egalitarian character of democracy.

Democracy is an institution in the present political world. It has not been conceived as a moral concept, but rather as a political system which is conducive of the greatest net balance of satisfaction of social needs. On the other hand, the basic value inherent to institutional democracy is equality.⁶ It is considered that democracies are morally justified largely because it is held that in them everybody is equal before social institutions. Equality has a deep intuitive appeal because equality of starting positions in the social run is the elementary premiss of the social agreement. From the individual perspective, society is seen as an agreement between individuals, at least as far as its justification from the individual point of view is relevant.⁷ In order for that agreement to be sustainable, it must include provisions for equality of the positions 'into which people are born', as John Rawls states.⁸ Since these positions are unequal by definition, social institutions must exist which can intervene and restore order. The alleviation of consequences of infractions inside the system is the prime task of social institutions. This task makes sense only given the fact that some people are better off and some are worse off in the social run at any given point. The newly born therefore come into an already existing unequal positions. However, in democracies these positions are held to be unequal only materially, while presumably being equal in the functional sense. In other words, some members of society are in more powerful positions than others, so that the ones born into weaker positions are not on equal standing with those born into weaker positions are not on equal standing with those born into stronger positions. On the other hand, all of them are presumably functionally equal in that the rules of the game are the same for the lucky and for the unlucky.⁹

immediate insight in its content and the relevance of that content to the present social context, but rather on the grounds of it having been accepted as successfully justified for a long enough period of history.

5 What 'the common morality' is can be left aside for the moment. Whatever this may imply, the contention of the present argument is that it would entail the claim for absolute validity as morally justified, which is simply not necessarily the case with democracy.

6 In the remainder of this text the term 'institutional democracy' will generally be substituted by the term 'democracies', referring above all to the existing electoral democracies in Western Europe. The substitution is for the sake of brevity exclusively.

7 This thesis is not merely an embracement of the Rousseauan concept of social contract. It is indeed possible to interpret society from the philosophical point of view in a way irreconcilable with the doctrine of social contract. Probably the starkest example of such theory is Hegel's theory state which interprets the state as the embodiment of supra-human rationality and society as its logical corollary. However, this conception does not allow for a justification of either the state or society from the individual point of view. The only possible kind of justification of such a theory is the one attempted from the detached, impartial, ill-defined point of view which is often called in contemporary philosophy 'the point of view of omniscient interpreter'. In discussions of democracy, however, the only relevant kind of justification is the one which is feasible from the individual point of view. Each such justification includes the appeal to the contractual nature of society.

8 See Rawls, J., 1971, especially chapter I.

9 The sameness of the rules of the game for the lucky and for the unlucky ones is by no means the same as welfare policy. Welfare policy is the security net designed to catch the unlucky ones who fall through in the social run. Welfare policy will be commented on later on in the text.

This explains the intuitive appeal of equality. The fact that all existing democracies insist on this standard is promptly explained as the need to keep their citizens within a certain network of norms. These norms are the ones which a particular society wants its members to internalize most. Once they are firmly implanted in their value system, citizens are prompt to respond to the stimuli delivered by the social executive according to the predicted causally operative dispositions. In other words, each society has specific interests given its historical and geographical position and circumstances. These interests are presumably constant over long periods of time and societies develop their strategies around certain basic values which suit these interests best. However, values can be internalized only as a system or as part of the already internalized system. Some values are especially expedient for the satisfaction of the interests of society, and it favours them over some others. On the other hand, the internalization itself must be stable and durable, if the society is to count on the causal operativeness of these values.

Hence the system itself must be coherent and consistent. In other words, the society must build a system of values which is centered around the following values:

- (i) those most prominent for the future satisfaction of the interests of the society itself, and
- (ii) those intuitively most appealing.

Since (i) and (ii) often contradict, compromises are regularly sought. From the logical point of view, the justification of a social system for an individual citizen is the justification of that system in terms of social contract. The basic term in social contract is equality of opportunity, or functional equality of the system thus created. Hence, a society which wants its citizens to internalize certain socially expedient values and the respective norms, must center the entire system of values around a basic body of values, *which always includes equality*.

Democracies in general insist on equality. Moreover, they insist that equality is their very functional principle. For these societies, this means that what they claim is that they themselves are *just* societies. If this is true, then equality must stand in important logical relations with justice. Given the obscurity and the arbitrariness of the concept of social justice and the relevant unequivocality of the concept of social equality, it might prove difficult to relate these two terms. On the other hand, if democracy is to claim to have a moral value, then equality must figure in it as part of its definition. This, however, is not the case with institutionalized democracy. Equality is not part of the definition of democracies, whatever this definition may be.

Perhaps the first question to ask is why equality is believed in. Is it because it is right that people should be equal and if yes, then in what sense? Or is it just because societies based on the standard of equality function better than those based on inequality? If it can be established that the answer to this last question is 'yes', then equality can be considered to be a completely egalitarian concept.

The antique *polis* is often cited as an example of democracy in its purest form, while obviously the polis was what might be called *anti-democracy*. Aristotle's critique of democracy in favour of aristocracy applies fully to what was implemented in the polis. Namely, Aristotle was claiming that institutionalized democracy at the level of the entire society simply does not work, because the differences in capabilities between individual members of society prevent them from reaching efficient and beneficial decisions. On the other hand, his concept of *politeia* entails that there is a democratic procedure taking place in decision making between the chosen ones, that is, the ones who belong to the aristocratic circle. It is therefore unclear why democracy is often considered to be a moral norm.

Part of the reason for this, at least to the extent that the contemporary European situation is concerned, is the fact that, in the course of the demise of centralized societies in the Eastern part of the continent, the norms constitutive of the value systems of its Western part are being taken for granted. Where two different, *counter-balanced* 'integrative systems' used to exist, the collapse of one means the expansion of the other, but at the same time this expansion bestows a new meaning on part of

its basic normative content.¹⁰ At the same time, the contemporary European situation includes thinking of democracy as a moral norm *only in a contingent way*. In other words, it may be the case that democracy is taken to be a moral norm because it is efficient, which includes a major shift in the concept of justification of moral standards. However, this line of argument cannot get us very far, because if there is nothing *a priori* valid in democracy, it does seem difficult to see on what ground the claim that it is a moral norm could possibly be based. This ground cannot simply be a pragmatic one, because morality is by definition separate from expediency and what is moral does not necessarily have anything to do with instrumental value. In other words, it is trivially true that what is instrumentally valid, that is, what is expedient for achieving any purpose is not *ipso facto* morally justified or morally relevant at all. In fact, morality is concerned not with instruments and means for achieving ends, but with the nature of ends in themselves. Moral justification of actions rests on moral justification of ends. It therefore may be the case that both institutionalized democracy and equality as its basic 'moral' feature are not at all ethical concepts, but only useful tools for maintaining social order and stability. I will argue here that this is the case.

The crucial question about democracy in relation to equality is not what justifies democracy morally, but rather what justifies it as a social system. In other words, if democracy is to prove to be the right standard for any society to conform to, given the prime role of equality in it, then what non-moral criterion is there according to which it should be assessed? The only non-moral criterion, apparently, is *the advancement of the well being of its members*.¹¹

As far as the justification of democracy from the individual point of view is concerned, the prime expedient of democracy within society is *the basic social structure*. The basic structure consists of social institutions. The task of these institutions is the distribution of costs and benefits between members of society. The question of what democracy is, is much the same as the question of what characterizes what can legitimately be considered a democratic basic social structure.

Institutions of the basic social structure are assessed on the grounds of their performance throughout a historical period. They are justified if they have promoted the common interest of members of society satisfactorily far. Their doing so is not conditioned by any moral restrictions. Moral restrictions do not apply to the outer performance of society. They apply exclusively to its inner performance. In other words, moral questions for society are the ones for its social institutions, which are concerned with internal distribution of costs and benefits. The justification of democracy from the internal, individual point of view is the question of distributive justice of institutions of the basic structure. This justification is based heavily on appeals to internalized moral norms as terms of the social contract. The justification of democracies from the internal *in abstracto* point of view is the strict philosophical, *a priori* justification of democracies. In the latter perspective, democracies cannot be justified in terms of equality. The reason for this is simply that equality is a term of equality. The reason for this is simply that equality is a term of the social contract and thereby pertains exclusively to justification of democracy from the individual point of view. On the other hand, moral justification of democracy from the individ-

¹⁰ The idea of two counterbalancing integrative systems, those of Eastern and Western Europe was for the first time used in a similar context by Karl-Otto Apel, in his *Die Transformation der Philosophie*. It is this interpretation of integrative systems that I rely on, together with some support derived from Niklas Luhmann's system theory of society as founded in his *Sociale Systeme* - see bibliography.

¹¹ In fact, the philosophical ground of the intuitive appeal democracy has is the intuition about justice as fairness. On the other hand, in political discourse justice and similar highly evaluative concepts are rarely encountered and mentioned seriously. The word that appears most frequently in political discourse about democracy is equality. However, equality seems to me to have little sense without recourse to its links with intuition about justice. This is what I propose to show here.

ual point of view is not a proper philosophical discourse. Its 'morality' is exhausted in the question of *distributive justice*. In my view, the question of distributive justice is not a moral question, but rather a question of expediency. At the same time, proper philosophical justification of democracy can be undertaken only from an internal *in abstracto* point of view and amounts to question of *cumulative justice*. While leaving the discrepancy of these two perspectives aside from this discussion, the next thing to do is to show why democracies cannot be morally justified from the point of view of distributive justice.

An important premiss for this is to develop a perspective on the relation between political and ethical discourse. This perspective entails the question whether the political and the ethical can be reconciled or they should be ultimately separated. The assumption of a definite attitude towards this question is conducive to the grasp of a sensible case either for, or against the possibility of moral justification of democracy in terms of distributive justice. If only for the sake of argument, it will be assumed henceforth that a reconciliation of the ethical and the political perspective is possible and that political discourse is in fact embroiled in moral judgements. *It will be assumed that political acts are as liable to moral judgement as all other human acts.* Within this perspective, the desirability and the wide acceptance of democracy will be shown to have nothing to do with moral judgement. The first step to show this is to prove that equality, as the highlight of modern democracies, is morally neutral, although it indeed does represent an important regulative factor for distributive justice.

2. Democracy: Morality or Social Efficiency?

Institutionalized democracy is accepted as the basic standard for the organization of society in the twentieth century. To assess a society as 'democratic' or 'non-democratic' is much the same as to say that it is justified or not justified. However, once the equation between democracy and justification is accepted, a major prejudice is assumed, and the discourse is entrenched in an essentially egalitarian perspective. Since democracy is an institution of the contemporary political world, no theoretical argument can legitimately be considered to be completed successfully on the grounds that it reached the point on which democracy is brought into the game. In other words, it is unacceptable that a justification of a social order stops at the point at which it is established that the society at hand is a democracy. Institutionalized democracy is neither a moral, nor a logical concept and cannot play the role of the final term of any chain of theoretical justification. This is to say that there seems to be no philosophical reason for accepting democracy in principle as a standard of justification. At the same time, it is clear enough that any theoretical argument concerning 'democracy', 'equality' and similar concepts has palpable concrete practical consequences, if only in providing a justification of a society, the effects of workings of which are personally experienced by many individuals.¹²

Democracy has in no case always been taken as the ultimate ground for justification of a society. For example, according to Aristotle, democracy is an extremely inefficient social system. It does not allow for prompt responses on behalf of the society to extra-societal stimuli because the decision-making base is too wide and therefore the decision-making process too slow and hindered by too many differences. In other words, the narrower the circle of decision-makers is, the quicker the process itself is. A society in which decision-making is fast and which is able to respond to extra-societal stimuli quickly has better chances of satisfying its social needs. In other words, such a society is efficient. According to Aristotle, the crucial question is what the criterion for the selection of 'the chosen ones' who 'run'

¹² At this point it is useful to keep in mind that the subject of this discussion is *institutionalized democracy*. The basic feature of democracy is equality and it is usually thought that democracy has a certain moral value because equality is inherent to it. In order to be able to distinguish between democracy and equality in the first place, it is useful to consider democracy as an institution and equality as its fundamental norm.

the society should be. There was no question of whether every member of society should participate in decision-making. The idea that only a small circle of the most capable should make decisions seemed to Aristotle as a self-evident truth.¹³ This view is most elaborately exposed only by Aristotle. However, it is a view shared by a sequence of philosophers from Plato's *Republic*, virtually to Montesque.

Paradoxically enough, political philosophers sometimes mention the antique *polis* as 'the paradigm of democracy', thereby seemingly forgetting that in the *polis* only aristocracy was disposed with political power. Citizens with voting rights were often mentioned by philosophers and historians as 'the happy ones'. Only the hereditary 'noble' members of society were materially well off enough not to worry about the daily exigencies of life, and this was the case exclusively because they were part of the circle in power. The question of limit of participation was therefore posed in the *polis* only within the aristocratic circle. There was absolutely no intention of widening the decision-making body to include 'the less happy ones', and much less 'the unhappy ones' in it.

The reason for the aristocratic ordering of the *polis* is simple from the point of view of social efficiency. The *polis* was a small society. In the ancient political world, with enormous differences in education, with highly educated aristocracies, and 'the unhappy ones' often confined to complete ignorance, the well-being of all was promoted by the participation of the aristocracy only in political life. It seems easily imaginable what the prospects of any one of the Polises would have been, had the slaves been involved in the making of political decisions.

On the other hand, with the growth of city population in the Hellenistic Age and subsequently, the political life grew less transparent. Dense city populations had to develop high skills in earning their living, thereby giving rise to different guild-affiliated communities with the task of promoting social status of the members. The development of these skills led naturally to the raising of the level of political and social consciousness in general, thereby involving the general population in the political life to a higher degree than before. In other words, what had used to be only individual behaviour, family-behaviour or, widely conceived, class behaviour, gradually grew into *political behaviour* as a result of the development of social consciousness. This resulted in the *multiplication of social perspectives* within the society, thereby making the inter-social relations conditioned by more factors than before. Popular participation and, in fact, the popular base of political behaviour led to the greater political 'weight' and influence of the general population. In other words, the ordinary citizen achieved a level of participation in the official political behaviour.

The respective values in the Third and Second centuries B. C. were, of course, not yet populist values. But the trend towards populist values was assumed. The standard of aristocracy was not sustainable any more, because one of the basic principles of the Aristotelian political recipe was missing: *the limitation of the size of cities*.¹⁴ Once this size exceeded several thousand inhabitants, the traits of democracy proved unavoidable, which is precisely what happened in the Hellenistic Era.

It is important to bear in mind that the underlying 'purpose' of this transition was the advancement of well-being of the citizens. *The transition in urban pragmatics caused a respective transition in political pragmatics*.

Democracy was not established as a value until the French revolution and the eighteenth century. It stepped into the historical scene in a completely pragmatist costume. It is therefore important to distinguish between democracy as a political practice and democracy as a norm. As a political practice, democracy is the result of a continuous historical process; as a norm, it is a historical phenomenon of the period from the eighteenth century onwards and does not have any independent moral

¹³ Aristotle, *Politics*, *Nichomahean Ethics*.

¹⁴ Through his *Politics* and *Nichomahean Ethics*, Aristotle keeps pointing this out.

content that was not present in the Aristotelian concept of aristocracy.¹⁵ The basic requirement on social order was and still is in its *efficiency in satisfying social needs*, that is why social orders exist. *This is the meaning of distributive justice*. Certain individual claims for satisfaction of social needs are mutually incompatible, still indispensable. The satisfaction of these needs is ensured through competitive success, and in order for the competition to be socially bearable, distributive justice is introduced. The mechanism of distributive justice is rather simple, and the question whether certain principles of distributive justice are more important than others or whether they are successfully implemented is not a question to be directly addressed here. It is the satisfaction of social needs that regulates distributive justice. It is the same need that maintains or destroys political systems. Once a political system becomes unable to cope with the rising social needs, its structure is bound to be broken.

Democracy proved to be a very vital structure. This, however, does not mean that from this, internal and individual point of view, it has any specifically moral value. It can be said that in the antique polis, aristocracy responded most efficiently to social needs. In the modern world, from the French Revolution onwards, democracy proved to be more appropriate. The grounds for justification of either political system are the same: ones of *social efficiency*.¹⁶ Neither of these systems is, however, in any sense morally justified in virtue of being pragmatically justified. Trivially enough, being efficient has most of the time nothing to do with being moral and the same holds for society.

3. Democracy: Equality and Progressivism in the Change of Meaning

Distributive justice is the living principle of the inner ordering of democracies. This justice can be realized to a greater or lesser degree; however the principle that there should exist distributive justice in democracies is preserved. The basic feature of distributive justice is rough equality of all citizens in rights and initial chances, as well as their absolute equality before the law. How equality is conceived depends largely on the most widely shared preconsidered judgements in a society. However, there seems to be general agreement among the advocates of democracy that in principle democracies should be based on equality, because equality is the starting position of any situation characterized by distributive justice.

What can be described as two competing integrative systems, those of East and West, both claiming equality as their basic characteristic, account for the enormous changes taking place in the European space at the end of the twentieth century. These systems were primarily *systems of values* around which social organisms were being repeatedly reintegrated. The self-perpetuation of this process of social reintegration was the *spiritus movens* of the opposition between the systems themselves. Once one of them grew 'tired' of the efforts for self-revitalization, the more vital system simply prevailed and its functional principle 'leaked' into the previously forbidden sphere, thereby disturbing the long enduring balance. This is illustrated by

¹⁵ From the eighteenth century onwards democracy has been taken as a self-sufficient value and a ground for the assessment of social systems as justified or unjustified. Before that time, it was conceived only as one of the different types of social arrangement. The objectivation of the normative content of democracy from the plane of political practice to the plane of values occurred after the French Revolution and the coming of the modern political society.

¹⁶ The standard of democracy is so firmly implanted in the modern mind, and so is the conviction that it is the most efficient social system, that for the modern citizen to speak about justification of a social order is much the same as to speak about that social order being a democracy or not. This is perhaps correct in regard to the pragmatism of justification of democracy. On the other hand, it is by no means true if what is meant is any kind of moral weight which democracies supposedly have. The moral value of democracies, if it exists, is reflected only in the cumulative justice of those democracies, not in the fact that they are democracies.

the mostly conservative East European culture being rushed by the predominantly competitive values of the Western part of the continent. The collapse of the *political institutions*, which in Eastern Europe were the embodiment of conservative values and the guarantee of their endurance, meant the collapse of the values themselves.¹⁷

Both systems were important for the balance, since they were upholding different claims in the same political space. As the same political space cannot be ruled simultaneously by contradicting values and therefrom resulting forms of social integration, the balance was bound to have the character of conflict. However, it was largely a silent conflict, which provided for a fifty year enduring period of relative stability. An interesting question is what this stability consisted of. In other words, the question is *what was stabilized* in the described situation.

East and West European systems of values were integrated around different conceptions of equal life chances for all members of society.¹⁸ The Eastern system favoured static preservation of initial equality in all social respects. The Western one insisted on equality of starting positions only. The rest is competition, subject to rules of distributive justice. In the West European context, the competing claims made for social dynamics. On the other hand, efforts to obliterate all the externalities emerging once the initial situation of equality was abandoned, and to preserve the starting equality *in tacta*, provided a strong basis for the dynamics of the East European environment. The stability of the balance can be explained as *the stability of meaning* within the systems. The inner hierarchy was unquestioned. Holes in the information network were filled in strict compliance with the hierarchy of values. Both affirmative and negative criteria were employed in preserving the stability of meaning within the systems:

- (i) affirming one's own values was supported by
- (ii) denying opposite or discrepant values of the counterpart.

At a moment in time, surprisingly, denial on the East European side started fading away and soon vanished completely. Instead of being resisted, the functional principle of the other system was eagerly absorbed. It is tempting to say that this happened because the *spiritus movens* of the East had apparently expired. In Eastern Europe, those values which were contradictory to the most important ones of Western Europe were gradually abandoned, while the political institutions that had used to support them disappeared over night. The remaining values were integrated into a different, more comprehensive network, capable of integrating the previously rival claims of equality. The need for the preservation of the original situation is being explained as *limited to the socially most vulnerable*. The mechanism for preservation of equal positions was applied to only the least lucky ones, thereby growing into the, in their importance, increasingly emphasized social welfare systems. Competitiveness assumed a prime role in Eastern Europe over-night. This

¹⁷ When I say "conservative values" or "conservative culture" of the East, what I mean is the tendency to preserve or "conserve" the equality of the initial position throughout the social process. On the other hand, Western European type of social culture favours competitive values challenging the initial situation of equality. The relevance of equality is strictly limited to the original position, which means that people are born into social positions on an equal footing, but only to start challenging equality itself as soon as possible. The fact that they are challenging it is itself a justification of the standard of equality. Since no individual is favoured externally, the only discriminating factor is individual abilities and merits. This, of course, pertains exclusively to the ideal, or paradigmatic cases of both integrative systems.

¹⁸ East and West European social systems were simply established by two different ideologies. The systems of values of these ideologies, however, are what is interesting to look at in examining the so-called 'transition' processes taking place on the continent now. Apart from the fact that this 'transition' in some spots of the continent appears to be a complete disaster, it is also unclear what the meaning of transition is. Since the constellation of power was a constellation of conflicting claims, the word 'transition' does seem ironic.

‘translation’ was a source of problems, but at the same time an avenue towards a far more flexible system of values. The communist society in the shape in which it was present in Eastern Europe used to be a ‘*totally welfare*’ system, which in fact amounts to nothing else but totalitarianism. Due to the introduction of the standard of competitiveness, this system transformed into a different, more complex one, including welfare institutions as but one of its sub-systems.

On the other hand, it is important to note that West European values ‘leaking into’ Eastern Europe, trivially enough, are in fact no longer properly West European. The point is that, as well as with the East European system, part of the meaning of Western Europe used to be determined *negatively*, by the denial of the opposite system. The disappearance of the counterpart rendered this negative connotation absolutely senseless, meaning that only the affirmative confirmation remained relevant. What had used to be a bi-polarity became a coherence, which means that no part of the network could remain the same. Hence, it makes no sense to talk about the West European social system any more, since neither of the two integrative wholes can in the above decried sense exist without the other. An expansion entails a transformation, *upholding only those normative claims which are universally acceptable*. Parochialism, of course, still exists, if only as a minor drawback to the Big Change. *The newly emerging bi-polarity is that of a silent conflict between universalist tendencies and resisting parochialism on both sides*. The constellation of social vectors is therefore being translated onto a different plane.

The claim to democracy and for democracy seems to be one of universalism, if only by virtue of the fact that the validity of democracy is maintained as universal. Parochialism is readily labeled as ‘conservatism’. While competitive values are taken for granted, the basic social structure rests heavily on welfare intuitions. The price of ‘transition’ which the East has to pay also confronts the West more vividly with the fact that the universal applicability of its own values is in fact heavily questioned. The claim of universality was one of the pillars of the former *negative confirmation policy*.

The shift in the European political and social situation from the conflict between conservatism and competitiveness to the conflict between universalism and parochialism is closely connected with the shift in the meaning of democracy. In the socialist system, democracy was more or less identified with social welfare and limitation of differences in wealth. In the competitive system of Western Europe, it was conceived of as ‘liberal competition’. At the present stage of ‘transition’, democracy is primarily conceived of as *progressivism*, and as opposed to *conservatism* and *regressivism*. Society is democratic as far as it is apt to absorb novelty and as far as it is able to move forward fast. Progressivist thinking is the main feature of the perfect modern citizen. Part of this fashion of thinking is also the questioning of the old competitiveness models and development of welfare systems which are better suited to contemporary circumstances.

The basic criterion for society is therefore *social efficiency*. The ‘transition’ in Europe shapes this criterion in a way on *leaving equality in the backyard*. The concept of democracy retains its external features, such as universal suffrage or freedom of expression and thought. On the other hand, it *evolves away from equality* as the highlighted norm. Being equal is no longer as important as being in the stream flowing ahead, not even as far as the initial social position is concerned. The starting positions are no longer interpreted; rather they are taken for granted as given. Welfare institutions are still there to prevent any drastic injustice in regard to initial positions. However, no attempt to preserve universal equality of starting positions throughout the social process within long periods of time is made. The normative content of democracies is being changed, while its external indicators remain the same. The question to be addressed in regard to the justification of democracy is therefore not one in terms of equality, but rather that of its justice to *the least favoured ones*. Distributive justice is shown not to be the ground of moral justification of democracies. The question of justice for the least favoured ones is a wide philo-

sophical question, which cannot be properly addressed within the framework of the present discussion. It is enough to indicate that in my opinion, this question is the same as the question of basic rights and liberties which, as John Rawls puts it, are never to be subject to any kind of bargaining. This is the old philosophical question of cumulative justice, which I hope to discuss elsewhere. But, for the present purpose, it is enough to conclude that welfare institutions exist to create a social net which is supposed to catch those who fall through the competitive network. This net is still an important mechanism in modern society. On the other hand, its relevance has little to do with the equality of starting positions. It rather has to do with cumulative justice. Equality pertains to distributive justice and distributive justice is the regulative mechanism of social competition. Competition itself is the highlighted norm, because without competition there can be no progress. The reason for competition ranking highly is that *progress* ranks highly in modern society. On the other hand, on some occasions overall progress demands actions contrary to the rules of competitiveness. The control of competition in these cases is the other part of the role of welfare institutions. Taking care of the unlucky members of society has consequences for both cumulative justice and for progressivism. Equality is confined to distributive justice, and distributive justice currently chooses between equality and progressivism.

The treatment of its unlucky members is the most sensitive indicator of the degree of progressivist thinking of a democratic society. *Welfare policy is not purely a matter of society's encountering individual intuitions of equality. It is rather the insight that there exist certain rights and liberties which must not be bargained with.* This very point is the point on which progressivism and cumulative justice coincide. Basic rights and liberties, concerned with the maintenance of personal identity and integrity, are absolutely guaranteed and the differences between modern European societies in the treatment of basic rights and liberties are not due to their different attitudes. Rather, they are due to their greater or lesser ability to provide for them. Democracies tend to provide for the possible maximum of welfare. Welfare partly resembles equality in that the least lucky members of society are protected on the level of their minimal rights and possessions. This, however, by no means makes them equal. The minimum is the same for all. But the minimum is not a proper social starting position. It is a safety net.

On the other hand, the philosophical explanation of the reason why democracies favour welfare institutions is that welfare institutions maintain consensus about the terms of the social contract. No member of society is to be left to their own misfortune. There are certain things they cannot be deprived of, regardless of the circumstances. Society is there to make sure that these things will always be available. What these minimum needs are varies from society to society and is disputable. Leaving that aside, it is feasible to conclude, generally, that basic rights and liberties, in whatever way they are defined, are part of the social contract. Social processes are dynamic and fast and it is difficult for individuals to overview them while they are involved in them. This makes for the need for institutions whose task it is to overview the entire social process. *Their task is therefore to preserve the inner balance by keeping all the participants in the social game on the surface. The more certain it is that all the participants will remain on the surface, the more efficient social processes will be, because more confidence will be invested in them. All the possible players are potential losers. The more confident they are that even if they lose they will survive on bearable terms and maybe have another chance to join the game actively, the more dynamic the game itself will be. This is the point of social efficiency. The same as in the market, the quicker the capital is changing hands, the bigger the benefit is. And at the same time, the bigger the benefit is, the faster the social process is. The speed of social processes is directly proportional to the degree of progress. The increase of progress is the definition of progressivist thinking, so much characteristic of modern Europe.*

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Summary: Democracy Redeemed

As opposed to the classical view that democracy bears an intrinsic moral value which cannot be questioned, the view that I am advocating here implies that in contemporary European situation democracy seems to be rather a means than an end in itself. In other words, the basic standard for societies is the progressivist criterion, while democracy in its procedural, institutionalized form helps advance the progressivist model by aiding overall social efficiency. This, in my opinion, is illustrated by some facts of today's Europe.

The disappearance of the Churchillian 'iron curtain' and the global warming have some paradoxical results. While weapons are being laid down and negotiations begun, immigration procedures are being tightened so much that they irresistibly remind of cold war discrimination. In this context, the advancement of Western democracies is seen as a moral achievement.

This, I think, must be wrong, because everything we can see in those democracies serves the purpose of efficiency. This is reflected in the fact that nation-bound democracies often discriminate between their own citizens and foreign citizens, especially those from countries which once used to belong to 'the other side of the iron curtain', on issues such as immigration or employment. The world-wide recession is being solved by closing up, instead of opening up. Solutions are being sought in particularism rather than universalism, in isolationism rather than internationalism. This proves that democracies in themselves have no specific moral weight. The fact that democratic societies of Western Europe (and not only Western Europe) can be discriminatory illustrates the fact that democracy is but another social arrangement in procedural terms, not the social standard. The social standard is progress for that particular society. The reasons for this position should be apparent in the text.