

Resumé

Sara Gebh & Lindsay Atnip

A comprehensive summary of our discussions is an impossible task, but the title of our panel debate yesterday recaps what we talked about all week nicely and will be what Lindsay and I will structure our resumé around: Is what we experience at the moment—the neo-nationalism, distrust in representative institutions, renaissance of authoritarianism etc.—a crisis of democracy or one of reason or (most likely) both? Has democracy become irrational or has reason lost its guiding function? More fundamentally, what do each of these terms (democracy, reason, crisis) *mean*? Lindsay and I will address these questions, certainly not comprehensively, but rather in order to provide some, at times maybe controversial, starting points for our closing discussion.

Part I

Sara Gebh (The New School for Social Research/Universität Wien)

Is democracy irrational? Sure. And I would argue, this shouldn't surprise us. Since its inception, democracy has been understood as a system of rule that equalizes what is not 'naturally' equal, liberates what does not 'deserve' to be free and potentially undermines the very order upon which it is founded. Democracy since Plato in antiquity, Aquinas in the middle ages, Hobbes in early modernity and certainly classical republicans like Abbé de Mably or Montesquieu has been conceived of as inherently unstable and tending towards unregulated and untamed conflict, precisely because it gives room, and even more: legitimacy, to the insatiable desire of the people to self-govern—irrespective of their lack of ability to distinguish between good and bad, rational and irrational decisions. Democracy is associated until the end of the 18th century with excess, disorder and instability and one can still find remnants of these classical anti-democratic motifs, in a more or less subtle form, in academic as well as public debates today. The link between democracy and unreason should, from this historical perspective, appear neither surprising nor as a particularly modern phenomenon. In this sense, the thesis of the crisis of democracy is a banality: Democracy is and has always been, simply as a consequence of its commitment to the original principle of unlimited self-government, in critical condition.

However, it seems that one of the projects of our summer school, in particular, and in some sense of critical theory and parts of contemporary democratic theory more generally is to stabilize democracy's critical condition, or maybe even cure the disease that is underlying. To go back briefly to the historical outline, the moment in which democracy became—definitely as a term, less so in substance—desirable for the first time, sometime around the 18th century, is also

the moment that democracy was pacified, often in the form of republics, and later combined with an additional, more substantive idea: be it justice, equality, redistribution or fairness of procedures. This was thought necessary precisely because democracy as a form of rule alone, seemingly does not have the resources to ensure its reasonability or, less demanding, even to set up barriers against anti-democratic forces using democratic instruments to undermine democracy (e.g. the Brexit party being elected to the EU parliament). That is, democracy left to its own devices is thought of as having no, or very limited, resources against abolishing itself. To save democracy from itself, it needs a qualifier, a supplement. Liberal democracy, in that sense, is not a pleonasm, but it is actually the attempt to substantiate the rule of the potentially irrational people with, in this case: liberal, values.

If we accept this historical framing to ensure, or rather to make more probable, a ‘reasonable version’ of democracy, that is one that offers barriers against those phenomena that are usually identified as crisis-symptoms, we need to look for ways to provide guidance for democracy and that steer the rule of the people in a specific direction. Thus, the decisive question is not so much whether democracy is irrational, but rather: Where can we find resources that might protect democracy from its own irrationalities, from its self-destructing tendencies?

Lindsay and I will focus on two main routes that cover some of what we discussed in the last week, but certainly not all of it. One is the *via negativa*, as Fabian Freyenhagen has termed it yesterday, which I will briefly discuss. The other goes beyond negativity and concerns the idea of reason and Lindsay will address that one.

Route 1: Negativity

Following the texts we read and the discussions we had, one resource for steering democracy towards reasonability, or more broadly: towards desirable outcomes, is critique—identifying blockades, addressing dysfunctions, combating pathologies. I will focus on three versions, that obviously overlap, but nevertheless emphasize somewhat different aspects of this route.

- a. *Normative functionalism*: Both Hegel and Durkheim see the goodness of the structure of society as related to its functionality. Although not addressed directly in these specific texts, the identification of dysfunctions of the system could be a normative resource for democracy. Regulatory systems or rules do not merely function or not in a mechanical sense, that is, whether the means applied effectively serve the end that is proposed, but rather: The well-functioning of regulatory systems depends on their groundedness in actual practices, habits and traditions. Otherwise they are not only bad rules, but more

radically, they don't work. Without them meeting some of the needs of those who are supposed to obey, regulatory systems not only break down, they do so because they lose their normative pull. Thus, identifying dysfunctions of democracy does more than simply state a mismatch of instruments and purposes, it has the potential to address the very legitimacy of that system—whether the rules the citizens are supposed to obey are actually in relation to their needs or not. A focus on the hindrances to the well-functioning of democracy, then, offers, by way of negativity, some normative resources.

- b. *Social pathologies*: We talked about this aspect quite a bit, especially regarding Honneth's text and Fred Neuhouser's paper. It is related to the functionalism-argument, but the language of pathologies implies an organism-, and more than that, a body-metaphor that needs careful explanation. Fred is very conscious of the hazards of describing the current state of society and of democracy as one that is ill, in need of medicine and one that should be cured. The danger obviously is, by describing a specific condition of society as sick, that one prescribes the previous condition as healthy—an inherently conservative perspective and one that privileges normalcy over exception.

And especially when we apply this perspective to democracy, I would like to point to the risk of falling into the century-old trap, that Plato had laid out and that is still hidden in much of today's discourse: that the rule of the people is a chronically sick regime. The disease that democracy suffers from (affirmed again and again by most political thinkers until the modern age) is conflict, more precisely: *stasis*. And thus, the terminology of pathology, disease and sickness is in constant danger of presupposing a healthy unit, an organism that is literally in order, whereas conflict per se becomes disorder, disturbance and a danger to the previously intact organism. An alternative would be to explicitly identify the pathology of democracy not in the fact of social struggles, but in the lack thereof—and this might be in the spirit of Regina Kreide's suggestion yesterday.

Hence, while normative functionalism can provide a similar resource for critique in that it identifies a disconnect between existing actual needs and the institutions that are supposed to address them, the terminology of pathologies, in my view, so desperately requires an explicit distancing from a biologicistic, normalizing interpretation, that I am not sure what is gained by sticking to it. And the simple fact that the pathology-metaphor is so very present in academic and popular discourse on the so-called crisis of democracy

(which is true, of course), might not indicate that there is something to it, and one should keep working with it, but rather that Plato's fear of the people still has not been overcome.

A quick addendum from today's discussion: Neumann's concept of anxiety in some sense fits with this strand of thought, but in another sense it is not prone to the same objection: Because it seems that there is no way out of anxiety for him, it is more a question of true versus neurotic anxiety, not of curing oneself of the fear.

- c. *Normative proceduralism*. Although it is not termed it in this way, Dewey's idea of democracy as a constant experiment can in some sense be interpreted as consistent with the tradition of normative proceduralism. As Rahel Jaeggi has pointed out, the experiment is not inherently of democratic character nor necessarily produces a democratic outcome. But vice versa, as Andrew Arato made clear, Dewey thinks of democracy as experimental, as affirming the right to make a wrong decision, as an endless process of trial and error. Thus, in that sense, democracy is seen as procedure (this would be the minimalist interpretation of Dewey and I know that there are other ways to read him).

One could see this definition of procedural democracy as devoid of any normativity. Or rather, as I would suggest, normativity lies nowhere else but in the procedures themselves. If democracy in its most basic sense means that the people rule themselves, then the ideal of political freedom is nothing external to democracy, but rather its animating principle. Democratic procedures, then, must by definition be free and equal. If they are not, they lose legitimacy. Admittedly, this sounds an awful lot like formal democracy. And it is true that this version could not bind democracy to a truly substantive ideal that ensures correct, good or even only reasonable decisions. However, it is not fully agnostic towards outcomes either. Those results of the democratic process that prevent future inputs from satisfying the immanent democratic principle of free and equal participation could, with reference to the procedures alone, be criticized as deficient. In this minimalist version of democratic experimentalism, there is in fact substance in the procedures. The resource we are looking for, that might save democracy from itself, that establishes some guardrails for what democratic politics might look like (not fascist, not totalitarian, not anti-democratic) without referring to an external, metaphysical value, might just lie in the concept itself. Thus, why not think of normative proceduralism or Dewey's experimentalism in this sense as an exercise in immanent critique?

These are only three ways to think about resources that could address the so-called crisis of democracy via the negativity-route. What they have in common is that all three perspectives negate, but more than that: they also establish normative reference points for critique. But maybe we need even something more robust beyond negativity, to get the job done?

Part II

Lindsay Atnip (University of Chicago/University of California - Santa Barbara)

Route 2: Reason

As Rahel put it at the panel last night, one foundational question of our session has been whether what is lacking is *reason*, whether a rational form of collective life is possible, and if so, how to conceive of that reason. One of the central tenets of critical theory is that the standard of critique can not be imposed from outside, so the question is whether a positive conception of reason can any longer be found immanently.

Horkheimer framed the problem for us—modern society has come to be dominated by subjective reason—formal, instrumental, analytical, calculating reason, the kind of reason that determines the best means for a given end. Horkheimer contrasts subjective reason to objective reason, which is his name for what premodern thinkers used in order to determine the proper *ends* of a human life. This is the reason that has been “eclipsed.” As Shuangli pointed out, this eclipse is the product of two intertwined processes, one internal to reason itself, and the other the historical development of technology and economic and social forces.

Classical critical theory, Honneth argued, still had an idea derived from Hegel of reason as “historically effective,” as realizing itself within history, which could then be used to judge the actual progress of history, but the deconstruction of “grand narratives” have deprived us of such an idea. Though even in Horkheimer, it seems that history proceeds so as to ‘eclipse’ reason rather than being driven by it.

The question, then, is whether some adequately modern notion of reason can replace the former theories. There is no going back—the undermining of former forms of objective reason was a *liberating* process; the working of subjective reason allowed people to see forms of life that had been taken to be rationally objective—hierarchical, patriarchal forms—to be in fact dogmatic, not rooted in the order of the cosmos but in the interests of the powerful.

Horkheimer makes some suggestive but undeveloped allusions to a possible dialectic whereby the mythological and traditional concepts, e.g. of divine right, could be and maybe to

some degree have been “sublated”—preserved and transcended—in demythologized concepts like human dignity. But the group did not come to any consensus about substantive basis for or concept of reason that would not be potentially oppressive to some, nor even whether such a thing would be possible.

Intersubjective reason--Communication

Habermas reintroduces the possibility of historically effective reason, I think—and perhaps brings reason and democracy together—in the idea of a legitimation and motivation crisis. Returning to some idea of normative dysfunctionality as a basis for critique: for Habermas, late capitalism inevitably leads to contradictions between the demands of the economic and bureaucratic systems and the sociocultural lifeworld on which it depends. The totality is potentially thrown into crisis because individuals are no longer motivated to participate—the system can no longer *justify* itself; that is, give affectively effective *reasons* for why they should make the sacrifices they seem to have to make to perpetuate it. (It is not just a matter of suffering, as history demonstrates that people are willing to endure enormous hardships for causes they believe are good or just.)

One idea then, from Habermas and taken up differently by Regina and Fabian, is the idea of a communicative rationality—that communication and language contain within them the basis for reason and therefore, at least theoretically, in certain forms of intersubjective communication we can come to a rational agreement about ends in a way that is not oppressive.

Regina argued that communicative power is an irrepressible—or at least not totally repressible—force within society that will emerge to resist the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. The concern was raised that communicative power can be anti-democratic and destructive. It was suggested that perhaps Habermas’s idea of communicative *reason*—the norms intrinsic to the idea of communication—should be revived as a criterion by which to judge the uses of communicative power.

Fabian’s paper suggested that language itself contains the seeds of rationality and I think that this is rightly at play in our own work. For instance, many things have been criticized on the grounds that they would be oppressive, and this is not just a utilitarian appeal to suffering as distinctions have been made between the suffering of the oppressed and the example Fred brought up of those who suffer when people unlike them become their neighbors. I would propose that the freedom and self-determination of the individual is something that has come, rightly, to be part of what we recognize as objectively rational, in part because of what we have

come to understand as the implications of a range of interconnecting and irreducibly normative concepts like *human*, *goodness*, *justice* as they have historically developed—concepts which in one form or another any modern human being has to appeal to, explicitly or implicitly, in justifying her actions to herself and others.

What is to be done?

Lang, I believe, pointed out that there may be a potential for crisis but capitalism ensures that it remains always only a potential. Crisis can, of course, also be catastrophic. So it seems in our closing discussion we should discuss what, if anything, we—as critical theorists, as individual citizens, and collectively—to create the conditions for a positive transformation of what I think we all agree is a deeply troubled, if not “sick,” global society.

It has been said a number of times both that we need “more democracy” and to do the ongoing work of “democratizing democracy.” If democracy is self-government—autonomy, legislating the law to ourselves, which means discerning a law we can collectively believe to be justified, good, rational—then the idea of communication suggests the need for a rehabilitation or new creation of a public sphere in which true communication could take place, and I would solicit ideas about what that would entail.

Various suggestions have pointed to the need for creating and strengthening mediating institutions—from Durkheim and Hegel’s “corporations” to Dewey’s intermediate communities to unions, as suggested last night—which would both empower the individual, reducing the seduction of authoritarianism, and create real ties between individuals and thus the potential for real intersubjective communication.

Finally, the idea of education—this is, of course, always potentially dangerous, but most of us are or will likely be educators and it seems to me that thinking of the kind of communicative rationality that our own work, including our work here, entails or ought to entail, is illuminating. Fortunately or unfortunately, none of us has the dictatorial power to impose our idea of the good on the world. But we all perform the belief that there is some good and some necessity to becoming clearer about the conditions of creating and sustaining a human form of life—“truly human,” I might say, with the recognition that that has to mean pluralistic. Human beings are the creatures that live in the web of signs that they themselves have woven and education is one major means by which that web is woven; we as philosophers and political theorists and social theorists help to weave the web of concepts of “justice” and “democracy,” which is not just a trap but a support—providing conceptual and historical and empirical depth

to these concepts, in conversation and interaction with each other and our students, and this is an imminent criterion of critique which she should always keep fundamentally in view—the need to gain clarity, for and with ourselves and others.

I don't want to end on too optimistic—or rationalist—a note (or rather, I'd like to, but I don't think it's realistic.) Today we talked about current movements that are likely not going to be swayed by the appeal to reason; we are abysmally failing to address the issue of climate change which should by all rights be uniting humanity in common cause. So it seems to realize the positive possibilities of crisis, or at least avert perhaps existential catastrophe, that we need a pluralistic critical theory and practice that can think and do both short term and long term, immediate political action and long-term institution building, appeal to reason and rhetorical appeal to emotion—and we also need, I fear, a hell of a lot of luck.