The κρίσις of Liberal-Democratic Europe: The Roots of a Modern Political Project Laid Bare and Reimplanted?

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Abstract
This paper questions the deeper causes of the political crisis of liberal democratic states in the EU and examines certain theological models for the performative constitution of community as possible sources of impulses for an alternative democratic imagination of community beyond liberal conceptions. The starting point here is the thesis that the current crisis of liberal democracy is ultimately due to an epistemological paradigm shift. For just as the liberal foundation was formed primarily against the background of modern epistemology and onto-theology, it is necessary to search anew for the sources of democracy against a postmodern background. In doing so, the so-called radical democracy in particular shows that democracy at its very root no longer has a secure guarantee outside its own processes. This unavailability at the center of democratic constitution of power thereby also shows a great closeness to the constitution of the church in the liturgy. Following this trace, some aspects in the liturgical constitution of community, first of all an eschatological understanding of time and the concept of concrete universality, are examined as possible resources for a performative understanding of democratic community.

Key-Words
crisis of EU, liberal democracy, performativity, political imagination, Eucharist, William T. Cavanaugh, Carl. A Raschke, Marcel Gauchet

1. Introduction: Approaching the Phenomena of Crisis

The EU is in a crisis. And this crisis – or rather crises – has been going on for some time. In fact, one could even go so far as to say that crisis no longer depicts a state of exception, but rather a permanent state of affairs. While this crisis has many names – for instance, the financial crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis of 2015, Brexit, or the ongoing constitutional conflicts between the EU-bureaucracy and Hungary and Poland – one could argue that all these different crises depict different symptoms of a more principal causal crisis underlying all these different facets. This causal crisis I describe as a crisis of liberal democracy, or more precisely of the liberal conception of democracy. I want to argue that underlying the crisis of liberal democracy is a crisis of (early) modern metaphysics and epistemology as the philosophical underpinning of classical liberalism. What really is at stake in our current crisis can be described as a crisis of the way

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the classical liberal tradition conceptualizes community – union – through its particular concepts of representation and sovereignty. Describing the current crisis as a crisis of liberal representation and sovereignty also means that the crisis of liberal democracy is not necessarily equivalent to a crisis of democracy in general. This important distinction is all too easily overlooked, due to the close historical ties between democracy and liberalism in their respective developments. Nevertheless, to interpret democracy as a tradition of its own right brings with it an enormous advantage for our current situation: if we consider democracy as a tradition, that principally can have multiple philosophical foundations, the crisis of its liberal foundation need not be its end. It only leads to the task of finding a different philosophical understanding and approach. Following this line of thought, I want to argue that in order to address the current crisis of liberal democracy we need to reinterpret democracy in view of contemporary epistemology. This contemporary epistemology I characterize with reference to Ulrich Engel as an epistemology „nach" postmodernity, „nach" meaning both „according to" and „after" (Engel 2016: 13).

This, however, by no means is an easy task, a simple update, as it were, of democracy with a bit of new philosophy. Establishing a new web of evidence shared by a majority of people in various contexts is hardly an easy thing to do. This political crisis is serious, it is deadly serious when it comes to the established political order. This we have to realize and accept in the first place, in order to even start thinking about a different way of interpreting and establishing democracy. In that regard, Slavoj Žižek challenges us with his call to a *Courage of Hopelessness* to find courage by fully appreciating the depth of the abyss in front of us. He writes, that „[…] the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction" (Žižek 2017: xii).

In what follows, some light will be shed on this train approaching us by interpreting it as a crisis of the liberal foundation of democracy. In a first step, I will „narrate" the story of this crisis by showing in how far variate facets of it can be read as crises of liberal conceptions of community, representation, and sovereignty, all following what will be characterized as the „logic of the one". Based on the work of Carl A. Raschke and Marcel Gauchet, the underlying fundamental crisis of modern and liberal metaphysics and epistemology is analyzed in a second step. In a third step, the theopolitical imagination of the Eucharist of the US-American theologian William T. Cavanaugh will be introduced as an alternative to imagine a political community in a more processual and performative way. This, however, by no means indicates, that religion can provide the

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solution for a political problem, but rather that religion, by taking the ultimately unavailable and unrepresentable God in its centre, can prove as important dialogue partner for democratic politics, whose goal is not the overcoming of difference, but rather the management of it. Therefore, the article concludes with a set of open questions.

2. *Description of the Symptoms: A Widespread and Multifaceted Crisis*

The first symptom to be pointed at is the one, one currently simply cannot not talk about: the corona crisis. The management of this crisis both globally and in the EU can hardly be described as good teamwork. Pope Francis puts it quite clear in his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*:

> For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality (Francis 2020: 7).

In order to tackle this fragmentation, Pope Francis calls for a new conception of community and universal aspiration in the spirit of global fraternity (ibid: 8). This search for a new universalism has to steer between the two extremes of a „false authoritarian and abstract universalism", as some models of globalization as one-dimensional uniformity suggest (ibid: 100). On the other hand, the pitfall of radical individualism, for „[t]he mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family" (ibid: 105). This sense of fraternal unity instead has to balance out the tension between globalization and localization, between the universal and the local (ibid: 142). The most interesting aspect of this „new" concept of universalism and unity, respectively, is that it slightly deviates from classic Catholic Social teaching, insofar as it diagnoses the need to reestablish such a notion of community. Without offering a close reading or interpretation of Pope Francis *Fratelli Tutti*, particularly two aspects are interesting for our current investigation.

The *first* aspect is Francis' adherence to the concept of the people. He writes:

> Any effort to remove this concept from common parlance could lead to the elimination of the very notion of democracy as ‚government by the people'. If we wish to maintain that society is more than a mere aggregate of individuals, the term ‚people' proves necessary (ibid: 157).

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On the one hand, Francis thus holds on to the classical view that long-term projects and the orientation on the common good need this concept in order to transcend individual differences as well as to avoid simple collective aspiration. But on the other hand, he is aware of the pitfalls of this concept, most of all the currently globally widespread distortion of this concept as closed group identity. Therefore, Pope Francis argues for people as an „open-ended" concept (ibid: 160). And to stress this aspect, he comes up with a reinterpretation of the concept that is very close to a constructivist and performative approach: „To be part of a people is to be part of a shared identity arising from social and cultural bonds. And that is not something automatic, but rather a slow, difficult process… of advancing towards a common project" (ibid: 158)[1]. This performative aspect in the formation of a political project or identity will be key in the further course of this investigation, as well as the question of which role religion can play therein.

The way Pope Francis carefully indicates the part of religion in this performative understanding of politics is the *second* aspect I want to point to here. He declares that „without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity" (ibid: 272). Here again, we can see the tension between the adherence to a solid and stable ground on the one hand and a call to openness towards the unavailable – here in the figure of the Father – on the other hand. The same tension can be detached from Pope Francis' reference to the transcendent foundation of human dignity and truth. The effect of this transcendent foundation is that it „helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters" (ibid: 274) instead of owners of the binding force, which paradoxically guarantees our community. In sum, Pope Francis' recognition of the deep crisis of our conventional concepts of community and his plea for a new, more flexible, movable concept of global fraternity can be read as one of the global symptoms of a deep *κρίσις* – understood as both decline and turning point – of established liberal politics.

To illustrate this crisis a little more, one can turn to another of its symptoms, the so-called refugee crisis as it appeared in the EU. Apart from the undignified haggling over the number of people one might grant refuge to between the different member states – even though this in itself indicates the disastrous condition of a community whose cornerstone on its own account is human dignity – it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the effect

1 Francis i.a. refers to his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (24th November 2013), 220-221.

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the refugee influx had on the perception of national sovereignty. In the month and years following the dramatic events of the summer of 2015, in basically all European countries a drastic increase of ultra-conservative, national to outright xenophobic political movements could be seen. Especially in the context of the new right movement all over Europe, this sentiment found its extreme expression in the crude theory of the „great replacement" which postulates the existence of a secret plan to exchange white majority populations for Muslim or non-white immigrants. Although this conspiracy theory belongs into the realm of fiction, there is one aspect of it that deserves more attention than it generally has received in the fight against xenophobia. Because, indeed, the so-called refugee crisis hints at the question of national sovereignty, which in the classical liberal conception is in the hand of „the" people. In most European contexts, the constitution of the „one" people as the sovereign functioned through a homogenizing process – one people, one state, and Europe as a confederacy of different people with different states. This picture, though, is indeed confused when the composition of a specific people is changing quite rapidly, and with it the concept of sovereignty and its „logic of the one". The real problem with the new right movement etc. thus is not their realization that political power is changing, but their respective solution to it, i.e. some kind of 19th century strategy to re-construct the „one-ness" of the people, most notably through nationalism in all its biologistic and cultural-chauvinistic versions. Thus, in order to tackle these movements more effectively, we need to rethink sovereignty beyond the logic of *the one* without, as Pope Francis put it, having it „sullied by ideological or self-serving aims" (ibid: Nr. 273) and pitfalls of former conceptions. To do so, we first need a thorough analysis of the problem, based on a clear understanding of the established political system and how the poles of representation and sovereignty are balanced out within it.

3. *Analysis of the (possible) Cause Behind the Symptoms: A Paradigm Shift in Modern Political Epistemology*

As already indicated above, the current crisis of liberal democracy can be read as a crisis of the liberal conceptions of both representation and sovereignty, as they were forged in the late 18th century. This is at least what the US philosopher and theologian Carl Raschke puts forth in his book *Force of God*. In it, he traces the current crisis of political liberalism back to a deeper crisis of modern metaphysics and epistemology, on which liberalism is ultimately based. And, according to Raschke, the

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crisis of modern epistemology has been unfolding for quite some time. Referring to Nietzsche, Raschke states: „The death of God and the crisis of liberal democracy, in fact, consist in different facets of the same epochal, event' delineating the late modern period" (Raschke 2015: xiv). This epistemic crisis, delineating the transition from an early-modern to a modern and a postmodern paradigm, for Raschke results in a crisis of representation, which in the context of representative democracy is intertwined with a crisis of the theory of sovereignty (see ibid: 3-9)[2]. For Raschke, this epistemic crisis has always been at the core of liberal democracy, ever since the epistemic shift of modernity out of which it grew in the first place. To outline this point, let me turn to the French philosopher and historian of modern democracy Marcel Gauchet.

Looking at democracy arising from the French Revolution, Gauchet characterizes it as „eternally unfinished" (Gauchet 1991: 39)[3]. This unfinished character he deduces from the principle problem to represent a collective sovereign, once the body of the king as representative of the unity of the people has been beheaded. Gauchet:

> The monarchy bequeathed to the Revolution a figuratively unimaginable collective sovereign which it could not master at its core, but from which it drew much of its original ‚abstractions', whether it was the form of government, the idea of law, or the administrative means of ‚indivisible unity' (ibid: 56).

The challenge of conceptualizing and politically actualizing this unimaginable collective sovereign never has left democracy. In that regard, the actual crisis can also be read as a path leading us back to the principle of modern democracy – understood as *principium*, i.e. both its historic and systematic starting point. The current crisis thus is a mere symptom of an „eternally finished" constitutional aspect, which currently finds expression in the crisis of the liberal conception of mediating between the formal freedom of the individual and a collectivist dictatorship. In classic liberalism public power is formed through the bond between individuals

2 Regarding the topic of the „crisis of representation" also see Deibl, Jakob/Achataler, Lisa: Issue „Crisis of Representation", in: Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society 2/2 (2018). For a closer analysis of the paradigm shifts from Early Modernity to Modernity and Postmodernity see the contribution of Karlheinz Ruhstorfer in this volume.

3 The quotes are taken from the German translation of the French original (La Révolution des droits de l'homme. Paris 1992.) and translated into English by the author.

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and thus becomes sovereignty. This sovereignty is formed through the representation of the social totality, which is itself more than the sum of its parts. At this point, where sovereignty is established through representation, Gauchet speaks of the „accession of the nation to power" as the „cornerstone of representation" (see ibid: 50-51). But it is precisely this form of representation that is in crisis. What is German, what is French, what is European? The intrinsically emancipatory and expansive striving for freedom and equality of the individual/particular seems to have lost its deeper connection and embedding in the universal/absolute. The individual and the universal must be linked anew in the face of a transnational and globalized world.[4] And it seems that the identity marker of the cosmopolitan or the Habermasian liberal counter-design of constitutional patriotism are not sufficient.[5]

Apart from that, the question of (national) sovereignty is posed in a radically new way in a world without borders. Here, for example, the Islamic scholar Rüdiger Lohlker notes with regard to the liberal concept of representation in dealing with non-Western societies that they are not as universal as they claim to be. It is a European universality, bound to experiences of European history (see Lohlker 2018: 121).

But where does this analysis of the „principle challenge" of democracy to constantly re-imagine and re-narrate its concept of community leave us in the current situation? In this search for an alternative concept of community some aspects in the establishment of religious communities might be informative. The point here is that both religion and democratic politics suffer from the same „principle challenge": the difficulty to represent the respective centre around which the community gathers. In the political field, this points to the so called radical democratic theory, most notably to Claude Lefort, who conceives of democratic power through the symbol of an empty place of power, which – in juxtaposition to liberalism's logic of the one and conformity – no-*one* can occupy without degenerating

4 For a closer analysis of the paradigm shift underlying the need for an alternative relation between the individual and the universal see again the contribution of Karlheinz Ruhstorfer in this volume.

5 See i.a. Sternberger, Dolf: Verfassungspatriotismus. Frankfurt am Main 1990; Habermas, Jürgen: Staatsbürgerschaft und nationale Identität, in: Ders. (Hg): Faktizität und Geltung. Frankfurt am Main 1992, 632-660. One might add that in Habermas in particular, one can find elements from his pragmatic approach for relating the individual and the universal, which can be interpreted in the direction of the performative perspective proposed in this article.

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democracy into totalitarianism (see Lefort 2007)[6]. Through the lens of a radical democrat, the root (Lat. *radix*) of democracy lies precisely in the rejection of a unifying political force, of a „com-unity", i.e. a community established through the logic of the one. Instead, the focus lies more on the management of pluralism. But to avoid complete social fragmentation, some aspect of the logic of the one needs to be kept. Lefort, who is aware of this dangerous tendency, therefore introduces his symbol of the empty place not only as an anti-ideological tool but also as a precarious point of reference around which the pluriverse multitude nevertheless has to gather. While this symbol of an empty place of power is in itself worthy of a thorough analysis, not least from a theological perspective, the further investigation here wants to focus on yet another central aspect in this radical reading of democracy, namely the resulting dynamization of the political process.[7] Because once the rather static logic of the one delineating from an onto-theological epistemology is opened up into a postmodern floating, the procedural or performative aspect of the establishment of the political becomes central. And it is this performative – or liturgical – aspect of the political, which also reconnects our discussion to the theological field. As already indicated when referring to Pope Francis' vision of global fraternity, the performative aspect in imagining and constructing community is of particular interest when looking at the religious field. In order to demonstrate that, let me turn to what the US-American political theologian William T. Cavanaugh calls the theopolitical imagination of the Eucharist.

4. A Eucharistic Political Performance: The Reconfiguration of Space and Time

„Political power", notes Cavanaugh, „is largely about configuring bodies in space to tell stories with them, creating a larger, body politic' out of individual bodies […]" (Cavanaugh 2014: 385).[8] Cavanaugh hereby illustrates an understanding of politics that is very similar to that of the radical democratic founding figure Cornelius Castoriadis. The latter, like his radical democratic companion Lefort and the theologian Cavanaugh,

6 See also Lefort, Claude: Permanence du théologico-politique?, in: Les temps de la réflexion 2. Paris 1981, 13-60.

7 On a theological discernment of Lefort's symbol of the empty place of power see i.e. Tautz, Stephan: Symbol or Sacrament? A Theological Discernment of Radical Democracy's ‚Empty Place of Power', in: Louvain Studies 44/1 (2021), 25-39.

8 See also ibid., 401: „‚politics' is defined not as the achievement of state power but more broadly as the ordering of bodies in space and time."

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emphasizes the central role of the imaginary in the constitution of social reality (see Castoriadis 1987). The social reality of the church – as the body of Christ –, is liturgically enacted – performed – in the celebration of the sacrament of the Host. For Cavanaugh, the Eucharist represents the point in time and space where the eschatological future of the Kingdom of God is already present. It reconfigures space and time: „The eschatological imagination of the Eucharist will be key to reconfiguring the temporal not as a space but as a time, namely, the time connecting Christ's first coming with His second" (Cavanaugh 1998: 207). What becomes apparent here is an eschatological or messianic understanding of time, which stands in contrast to a secular, linear conception. In the Eucharist, we see a simultaneity of past and future in the present. For the identity of the thus enacted community, it is crucial, that this dynamic tension is kept, for the body of Christ thus is both „realization" and „self-differentiation" of God's Kingdom, as Felix Körner puts it (see Körner 2020: 212-214).[9] Cavanaugh's conclusion for the political identity of this political body is very close to what Pope Francis said regarding our global siblings as travel companions: „the members of the Eucharistic community live as aliens in any earthly country" (Cavanaugh 1998: 228).

This brings us to the special reconfiguration of space in the Eucharist, which likewise lives from a dynamic tension. Cavanaugh defines Eucharistic space by juxtaposing two different concepts of universality: catholicity and globalization:

> Catholic space, therefore, is not a simple, universal space uniting individuals directly to a whole; the Eucharist refracts space in such a way that one becomes more united to the whole the more tied one becomes to the local (Cavanaugh 1999: 190).

This refraction of space also results in a reconceptualization of community, also with a dynamic tension between the universal and the particular/individual. Universality and particularity are not two poles, but true universality *actualizes* itself in particularity or concreteness. Cavanaugh also brings this together in the keyword of „concrete universality" (see Cavanaugh 2001: 338). The Eucharist is thus both: on the one hand a bond with the concreteness of the present assembly in a particular place at a particular time, and on the other hand, a deep connection with God's pilgrim people throughout all times and places. The Eucharist is the centre, but a „decentered centre". Again Cavanaugh: „Consumption of the Eucharist consumes

9 The German original reads „Vergegenwärtigung" and „Selbstunterscheidung".

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one into the narrative of the pilgrim City of God, whose reach extends beyond the global to embrace all times and places" (Cavanaugh 1999: 182). And it is not we, the people, who form this centre, but Christ, the head, who invites us to participate in his body. This participatory aspect in that liturgically enacted social body yet again brings to the fore the performative character of the political performance which is the Eucharist. And to point to yet one more aspect here, one needs to keep in mind that the Body of Christ, which is enacted in the Eucharist, is not a static community, but a community that is constantly liturgically actualized in each celebration. Therefore, the form of community and universality thus liturgically performed can rather be described with a concept the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has called „doing universality" (Reckwitz 2017: 441) which also stands in quite a strong contrast to liberal's „e pluribus unum".

Although this short survey over a (liturgically) performed conception of community does not allow for a thorough analysis here, already four aspects can be pointed out, which can help us to reconfigure democratic politics beyond a liberal conception. The first is the eschatological or unfinished character of a community. Any conception or political imagination of a political body needs to conceive of the constitution of a community more as an ongoing process rather than a static status. The second aspect, and directly derived from it, is the performative character of any political body. A body politic is enacted or continuously actualized, which also means it has to be continuously re-imagined and re-narrated. The third aspect is the concept of concrete universality and its alternative mode to reinterpret the connection between the universal and the individual in a dynamic and not static, juxtaposed way. It might turn out vital for future political projects, particularly also for democratic ones, to think of new, albeit precarious ways, to conceptualize universality or common denominators for a community under an epistemological paradigm following the one of postmodernity.[10] And the fourth aspect, which could not be addressed here in depth, is the question of which role the unavailable, the decentred centre – God in theopolitical imagination of the sacrament – plays. Although possibly the most difficult to accept, it might be the case that the more one becomes open to an empty place in the centre – the unavailable at the constitutional process – the better a political body is safeguarded against both the tendencies of self-enclosure and dissolution.

10 Again, see the constribution of Karlheinz Ruhstorfer in this volume.

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With these four aspects in mind, let us once again return to the crisis of the EU.

5. *Instead of a Conclusion: Fundamental Insecurity and an Ongoing Political Task Ahead*

Regarding the crisis of liberal democratic Europe, we are in the middle of a process and so far it is difficult to predict which story of it will prevail. Therefore, it seems, we cannot (anymore) hold on to a conclusion, no solution once and for all. We are, indeed, left in a critical situation, and to refer once more to Žižek, it is vital to fully appreciate the seriousness of this situation in order not to mistake an easy solution with an even greater catastrophe. But as indicated in this article, this does not leave us without hope or initiative. For as the works of Raschke, Gauchet, and Lefort indicate, this basic crisis can be read as the original principle of democratic social imaginary, as „groundless fundament", or in Gauchet's words the eternally unfinished character of democracy. The real danger with regard to our current political crisis in Europe then does not lie in the appreciation of the „fundamental insecurity" and „groundless fundament" of social processes, but in the illusory assumption of an enclosed and timeless concept of „com-unity" – a community established through the logic of the one. And as the example of Cavanaugh's Eucharistic reconfiguration of time and space demonstrates, the acceptance of a fundamental insecurity, an unavailable or decentered centre, can be key for reimaging and reconfiguring a democratic community. In this regard, the concept of performativity can prove central, both in a deconstructive and reconstructive direction.

But right here, we need to pause and ask critically: in how far can performativity likewise be safeguarded against the intrinsic danger of becoming a grounding concept? Could transcendence be an important theoretical guarantor against ideological and totalizing aspirations here? This leads to the question, how exactly performativity can be read and conceptualized as the new paradigm of a situation „nach" postmodernity, a paradigm carefully pointing beyond the deconstruction of postmodernity. And in accepting this paradigm-shift to performativity, how would that affect our understanding and the intertwining of other central political concepts such as statehood, nationality, and sovereignty? There is a lot to think about.

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