Democracy as a Promise: Leading from Here to There

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Philosophical research can in principle make anything its focus. In the language of Immanuel Kant, it can ask, among other things, what humans are, what they can know, what they should do, or what they may hope. As these four questions already make clear, philosophical inquiry draws on the whole of (human) reality. Though based on concrete experience, it also analyzes human reality from an abstract meta-perspective. Its aim in doing so is usually not only a reconstruction of reality, but a critical distance as well: Where are contradictions, aporias, or tensions that need to be pointed out and critically discussed? These critical perspectives suggest a utopian potential of philosophy to make human reality its subject and, by doing so, affect possible change in the future.

With its critical (and at times utopian) perspective, philosophy has always had an impactful influence on social dynamics as well. Philosophers have reflected on the present and explored new paths of living together on a theoretical level, and their thoughts have gone on to resonate in practice. Take, for example, the various manifestations of the contemporary technical-scientific world. These, too, are based on philosophical considerations, which (by virtue of being a socially-impactful force) enabled that particular perspective on reality in the first place. Or the ancient philosophers who contemplated democracy as a possible form of coexistence consisting of equals among equals – long before democratic structures were considered and tested in complex, modern-day societies.

Philosophy has always been a changemaker: it has helped shape the world (of tomorrow). And yet it also has a conservative streak, as pragmatist phi-

losopher John Dewey and others have pointed out.[1] After all, philosophical thinking always only begins when people have already acted or tried out something new. As Hegel put it: The owl of Minerva (i.e. philosophy) takes flight only at dusk – that is, 'at the end of the day.'[2] As such, it does not always succeed in creating critical distance; on the contrary, it often tends to reproduce prevailing social structures and opinions and legitimatize them intellectually through philosophical reflection.

This conservative aspect of philosophical thought manifests in its fixation on the present, for example. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida intently considered the extent to which the basic disciplines of philosophy – ontology or metaphysics – have, in their reflections on reality, always concentrated on the present of reality, thus implying a fundamental narrowing of focus.[3] According to Derrida's analysis, philosophers contemplate *Sein* [being] and are inclined to make the most general possible statements about it. Yet in doing so they forget that their general statements about being refer only to the *present* of being. Precisely due to its abstractness, the temporal dimension of being has often been (and continues to be) overlooked. Other philosophers including Martin Heidegger have drawn attention to this fact.[4] Heidegger's thesis posits that being as *Dasein* [being-there, or presence] is always conditioned by the past and tied to the future, especially death. Yet philosophers such as Heidegger are the positive exception. However, Heidegger's philosophy was mostly apolitical, which is why his thinking also implied a conservative streak.

The philosophical mainstream has often seen the truth of being in the present tense. Derrida, by contrast, argues that even a glance at our language shows that every word is bound up with historical references that derive from the past and simultaneously always imply a reference to the future.[5] Consequently, the meaning of terms cannot be fixed in the present, as the occurrence of language is constantly changing. This is a fundamental indication of the structural temporality of being – a consideration to which philosophy has devoted far too little attention. If one is to reflect on how the changing world might be shaped, then it is crucial to focus first and foremost on the temporality of human reality. Bringing this question to the fore strikes me as one of

1 Cf. Dewey, 1928/2003, pp. 79–93.
2 Cf. Hegel, 1820–1821/1986.
3 Cf. Derrida, 1999, pp. 31–56.
4 Cf. Heidegger, 1927/1986.
5 Cf. Derrida, 1996.

the most urgent and important tasks of philosophy. The following contribution will do exactly that with a view to political philosophy in general and to democratic theory in particular.

Democracy's Fixation on the Present

The question of democracy constitutes a key topic in current political philosophy. In this sense, philosophy can be said to react to current political developments in which democracy appears ill-prepared to meet all arising trends and crises. These structural problems with democracy are particularly serious in light of the global and ecological consequences of political action. It is obvious, after all, that today's political decisions have an impact on people in many other regions of the world. But there is more: any decision by democratic states can also have massive consequences for future generations, as is evident not least in the example of climate change and its effects. But in both respects it is difficult for democracies to process these global and temporal situations. It seems democracy, too, is fixated on the present. Faced with short election cycles and given the nation-state framework of democratic action, democracies are ill-equipped to factor the global and long-term consequences of their actions into decision-making.[6]

From a philosophical point of view, however, this contradicts an important core characteristic of democracy: not only does it constitute a way of living together that is as fair and just as possible for the demos that lives at present, it also always does so with a binding reference to the future. Democracy wants to make the world better. Again, as Derrida put it: Democracy is a fundamental promise toward the future; the world of tomorrow is to be better than the world of today. For him, democracy is therefore always in the making, that is, there will never be a complete or ideal form of democratic institutionalization. Rather, democracy is challenged to constantly evolve in order to provide appropriate answers to the crises of its time. In this sense, it is an open promise for both the near and the distant future. As such, and for that very reason, it is imperative to question democracy's fixation on the present, and to find new forms of democratic action. A philosophy that places temporality at the center of its inquiry draws particular attention to that fact.

6 Cf. Reder, 2018b, pp. 81–97.

In view of the global and ecological long-term consequences, one basic mode of democracy elucidates this particularly well, namely representation.[7] Representative democracy has become the accepted form of government in most countries. In essence, democracy means that citizens elect representatives with whom they have a reciprocal relationship. The representatives, in turn, are accountable to those who elected them. These circumstances make it difficult to conceive of the representation of people beyond democracy or of future generations. This is especially true of the latter, where there is no reciprocal relationship to speak of. Future generations cannot vote, and representatives have no direct counterpart to whom they can be accountable. The consequence of this is that the demos of democracy is often limited to citizens who are currently alive and, thus, eligible to vote. In fact, it is often even limited to ruling, wealthy groups in a society.

A philosophy that wants to rethink temporality and shape the world of tomorrow is therefore challenged to critically reflect on such structural limitations. The past ten or more years have seen a great deal of intensive discussion around the *All-Affected Principle*,[8] for example. The philosopher Robert E. Goodin pointed to this principle in raising the objection that the standard model of representation is too narrow. If democracy means that everyone affected by a democratic decision may also participate in it, then new forms of representation must be sought. For instance, given the massive impact such decisions can have on future generations, they must be adequately represented in democracies – even if they are unable to articulate their interests in the traditional sense. Political philosophy scholars are currently discussing what specific forms this kind of representation might take. Possibilities include changes to the right to vote (e.g. children's or parents' suffrage), anchoring the interests of future generations in the constitution or establishing ombudspersons with the power to veto laws that do not adequately consider the impact on future generations.[9]

There is as yet no final answer to these questions, let alone any one mode of representation that has prevailed in this context. In the sense of Dewey, it is rather about an experimental further development of this basic mode of democracy. Under the heading '*creative democracy*,' he drew attention to the

7 Cf. Tamoudi, Faets & Reder, 2020.
8 Cf. Goodin, 2007.
9 Cf. Köhler, 2017.

fact that democracies are always continually challenged to creatively advance and develop their institutions and practices with a view to newly-emerging crisis experiences.[10] It is incumbent upon all citizens, equally, to participate in this process. For him, the basic characteristic of democracy is therefore its open, experimental development. Accordingly, he also views this adaptation and openness to new democratic modes in terms of a promise for the future. Against this sketched theoretical background, the following formulates four critical insights toward the possible philosophical spelling-out of this broadening of the democratic idea.

Expanding the Democratic Idea for a World of Tomorrow

It we are to think philosophically about the aforementioned expansion of democracy, and in order to develop a model of democracy capable of shaping the future, it is important to ask *firstly* what the social basis for this is in the first place. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that many theories dealing with democracy and the future are rooted in a methodical individualism in the sense of liberalism. The basic unit of liberal theorizing is the individual. Social and societal contexts always emerge only in the second and third steps. This is also the basis for the normative core demands of liberal theories, which aim, above all, for the freedom and autonomy of the individual.[11] Not least, however, this focus on individualism as a basic theory of society leads to interpreting future relationships as subordinate.

To counter this, one might propose a model that focuses more on the social relationality of people in the tradition of Georg Hegel or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As Dewey puts it, associations, i.e. relationships, are the primary constitutive element of the social.[12] It is relationships, interactions and networked practices that have a formative impact on people and society, and these always exist in the plural. This means that, especially in a globalized world, relationships result not in homogeneous units but in a dynamic, ever-branching network of relationships.

Such a relational social concept would also enable a more adequate consideration of temporality. After all, relationships always have a history. People develop out of these historically grown and future-open relationships and are

10 Dewey, 1939.
11 Cf. Reder, 2018a.
12 Cf. Dewey, 1928/2003, pp. 79–93.

therefore fundamentally related to them. Consequently, relationships always have a diachronic character. If democracies are understood more through this lens, namely as a relational concept, then it also becomes clear that they are always embedded in temporal relations and must be thought diachronically. Such a social concept can serve to release philosophical thinking about democracy from its fixation on the present and shift focus to the future.

Secondly, in normative terms, contemplating democracy on the basis of a relational social concept is less a matter of justifying abstract principles than one of reconstructing the specific, crisis-informed experiences that initiate the formation of shared values. This can be seen very clearly in the example of climate policy. People all over the world are already experiencing the consequences of climate change, which pose an imminent threat to their current way of life. This will be all the more true of their children and grandchildren. It is precisely these experiences that give rise to such values as climate justice. Philosophy should start with a reconstruction of the diverse range of experiences, by making audible experiences that are heard too little or not at all. Central to this, from a normative perspective, is the experience of being at risk, and that of vulnerability. Democracy, at its normative core, aims to take these experiences seriously and to find forms of participation that would include the most vulnerable groups and, in doing so, rewrite the idea of equality among equals.

Against this background, it is only too understandable that a political philosophy should not set its sights on abstract principles – those of climate justice or intergenerational justice, for example. Such principles are always in danger of becoming too far removed from reality, and of negating the diversity of experiences in a top-down model or hastily subsuming them under an abstract generality. It is rather a matter of looking at the plurality of values in their overlaps and interdependent relationships, and in doing so, understanding how new normative foundations for democracy can be developed.

The context also calls for a critical discussion of existing, seemingly unquestioned distinctions. One such distinction would be that of the generations living today versus those of the future. A precise analysis shows that future climate policy is usually understood as affecting a period of 80 to 100 years at the most. This means that climate policy is ultimately about our children, who have already been born or are about to be born. Future generations are not a static entity that can be compared to a currently-living group of people. On the contrary, future generations grow out of the current world community as it exists moment-to-moment and, because of this relationship, must al-

ways be considered both normatively and politically. Consequently, it has less to do with what we owe these generations at a later date. Instead, normative claims emerge from a dynamic, diachronic relationality, which must therefore be articulated and politically formed.

From a normative perspective, this insight might *thirdly* be conceptualized in the notion of solidarity, which seems particularly important for the future of democracy. It is, after all, the concept of solidarity that highlights the misleading nature of the kind of rational voluntarism often represented in liberal theories. Moreover, people are always already involved in a complex and dynamic web of social relationships and interactions. Solidarity means nothing more than recognizing that people live in social relationships, and it is these relationships that give rise to normative claims.[13]

That said, debates around solidarity have also revealed a dark side to the emphasis on it. In some cases, solidarity is interpreted as a closed formation, e.g. in the sense of an essentialist concept of culture or a strong sense of community. And yet it is exactly at this point that relationality fades from view, particularly at the margins. This blind spot is also evident in current discourse surrounding the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: in quite a few places, the demand for solidarity refers primarily to a (more or less) closed community and ignores the manifold references beyond this community. The coronavirus pandemic's impact on the poorest people in the Global South or the unequal global distribution of vaccines is rarely addressed.[14]

Inherent to solidarity is always the understanding that one must to go beyond the borders of one's own community or nation. Much of it has to do with comprehending the consequences of political decisions and action undertaken by countries in the Global North, and yet (many) people in completely different regions think in terms of global solidarity.[15] In the sense of a pragmatic theory of solidarity, the demand for global solidarity implies that people at different nodes of the relational network feel solidarity with other people (or living beings), and thus bring their concerns into the political field of vision. Solidarity also means not falling into a presentist thinking of the political, which again is inherent in many liberal political theories.[16] Ultimately, the re-

13 Cf. Lessenich, Reder & Süß, 2020, pp. 310–326.
14 Cf. Reder & Stüber, 2020, pp. 443–466.
15 Cf. Gould, 2007.
16 Cf. Tamoudi & Reder, 2018.

lational structure upon which the demand for solidarity is based in social theory can only be meaningfully conceived as dynamic-diachronic.

Solidarity in this politicals form pays particular attention to the crises of the time and seeks transformative solutions.[17] By referring to political solidarity, we ask what potentials societies might have to respond to these crises; how, for example, political commitment can be awakened beyond institutional solutions, and how fierce commitment to the poor, the precarious, the excluded – in short, particularly vulnerable people and groups – can be strengthened. In this respect, political solidarity is critical of existing conditions. It wants to work in a transformative way toward the society of the future, and hence is a fundamental and far-reaching critique of existing political and economic conditions.[18] Thus understood, solidarity is a suitable normative category for transforming the relational approach into a globally – and also temporally sensitive – model of the democracy of the future.

Fourth, linked to such a normative understanding of normativity and solidarity is an alternative conception of *the* political, one oriented on the demos as a voice of the excluded and vulnerable, as Jacques Rancière, for example, puts it.[19] The demos of democracy is neither the sum of rationally acting citizens nor a homogeneous group. Instead, given the deeply far-reaching, global and temporally intertwined consequences of political action, it will have to be continually redefined. Thus, the key question becomes: Who is particularly affected by the decisions of democracies and therefore also belongs to the democratic demos? Democracy as a promise for the future, one that aims to shape the world of tomorrow in a utopian sense, is an open discussion about exactly this question. Who should be heard and considered, and therefore also be allowed to participate in political processes? This is also a query that can never be answered.

The question shows once again how urgently a global expansion of the democratic idea is needed at present. Though many theories of democracy continue to strongly evince a nation-state context, the major questions of the future are obviously of a global nature. Consequently, there is a need for increased recognition of and engagement with global relationality. Only then can we create a basis for understanding the democracy beyond the na-

17 Cf. Scholz, 2008.
18 Cf. Adamczak 2017.
19 Cf. Rancière, 2002.

tion-state framework. This is the great challenge for the future, both philosophically and politically.

Education, as Dewey understood it, is a central element of the political sphere. Education must not be understood as a subordinate task in the sense of educating offspring.[20] On the contrary, democracy is the critical examination of people's diverse experiences and the start of an experimental learning process. The goal of education is the collective processing of experiences, and the search for suitable ways to critically address the democratic frameworks, e.g. the limits of the demos, again and again. This thesis presupposes that democracy must not be reduced to its institutional arrangement. Democracy means that citizens and political decision-makers question their decisions anew every day and that everything is up for discussion anew. Democracy is constant renewal. Here, too, the global and temporal dimension must be more firmly integrated into the diverse educational processes at all levels.

Conclusion

Philosophy has a conservative streak, one that becomes especially apparent when it simply reproduces existing structures on an abstract level. And yet it also has a progressive character, which is important when it comes to contemplating what form the world of tomorrow should take, and how that change should be affected. In this context, it is above all a matter of looking critically at existing formations of democracy. It is precisely this critical stance that gives rise to new forms and modes (for example, with regard to representation) that can then be tested in creative, experimental ways. New forms of an institutionalization of the democratic idea, e.g. representation for future generations, will not by themselves help to shape the world of tomorrow in any concrete-utopian sense. For this, as Gramsci explains, current hegemonic structures – a capitalist world order, for instance – are given far too much importance. We see this in the persistent tendency of almost all democracies around the world to externalize costs, for example.[21]

A critical attitude in the sense of a broadening of the demos, a creative self-education and a global expansion of democracy have the ability to take such hegemonic structures to task, notwithstanding the persistence. This democratic attitude is interested in an open future that can be shaped. De-

20 Cf. Dewey, 1916/1964.
21 Cf. Reder, 2018a.

mocracy in this sense is a social potential of resistance – one that must be continually re-activated, one that constitutes the promise of democracy at its core. Democracy aims for solidarity as a social structure and critique of existing conditions. To shape the world of tomorrow in solidarity is to deal critically with the present and to open experimental paths for the future. Such an undertaking requires a philosophy that is creative, and that impacts and engenders new ways of thinking and acting beyond traditional boundaries.

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