



**Claus Leggewie, Harald Welzer**

## Can democracies deal with climate change?

Rising energy costs and the eco-social consequences of climate change are causing anxieties about the future to increase, while trust in the ability of political elites to solve these problems is evaporating. Reaching eco-political targets calls for more participation of citizens as active architects of their society, write Claus Leggewie and Harald Welzer.

The "third industrial revolution", to use the current phrase, stands for the ecological transformation of modern economies based on an intelligent combination of technical innovation and political control. The witty advertising slogan could be: "The solar panel on the roof, the electric car in the garage — and take the subsidies", suggesting a win-win situation, above all for countries in the north. But the deal will not be pulled off quite so easily: a combination of rising energy costs, the eco-social consequences of climate change, and intergenerational injustice is putting increasing pressure on democratic consent and hence posing significant challenges to the self-understanding and legitimacy of the state. If we are to avoid the collateral damage of the climate and energy problem, we must think about a third industrial revolution in less instrumental terms than the first and the second. Climate change means cultural change — and hence a change in political culture.

### **Democracy and indifference**

It is time to think about how to prepare democratic society for the significant stress that adjusting to climate change will cause, and how to guarantee political participation in a difficult period. In Germany, citizens are already beginning to doubt that they live in the best of all political worlds. According to a study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, almost one in three people hold the view that democracy is functioning badly; astoundingly, 60 per cent of eastern Germans were of this opinion. There is a growing impression that the political system is not equipped to deal with "big issues" such as climate change, global justice, and demographic development. In other words, democracy is no longer "delivering" and is lacking an essential pillar of its credibility: output legitimacy. A quarter of all respondents no longer want anything more to do with "democracy as it is here". Declining voter turnout and atrophying membership of political parties and other large organizations (despite the population increase after re-unification) show that these are not precise representations of the public mood but rather snapshots of a trend.<sup>1</sup>

Blame for the growing dissatisfaction with democracy lies with the usual suspects — the long-term unemployed, recipients of Hartz-IV (unemployment benefits — trans.) and the poorly qualified; among these

groups, the survey results are particularly catastrophic. But globalization and rising energy costs are also dragging the middle classes into a perceived downwards spiral, and doubts about the system's ability to function are hence making themselves felt at the centre of society as well. In some surveys, up to 90 per cent of Germans believe that the democratic parties are simply incapable of solving difficult problems, and almost all believe that elites are primarily interested in their own wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

Broadly speaking, five "problem groups" can be identified: (1) eastern Germans, who are impressionable both to left- and rightwing nationalist populism (observable throughout eastern central Europe); (2) native "subclasses" or "marginalized" groups, in which anomie phenomena can be observed; (3) young male immigrants suffering the effects of poor education and discrimination; (4) Islamist Muslims opting for a radical critique of western modernity, who see democracy as a form of dominance and a lifestyle; (5) sections of the management strata who have rejected democracy and the state.<sup>3</sup>

Labour market problems, which for security-oriented central Europeans are a source of sustained unease, combined with the energy crisis and the already perceptible consequences of climate change, are causing anxieties about the future to increase. Simultaneously, trust is evaporating in those formerly credited with the ability to solve problems — the (party) political elites. Declining trust in democracy is not only demonstrated by a rise in authoritarian tendencies, it is also mirrored in the inability of political elites to address credibly problems related to the future and to deal with them convincingly. For that reason, the erosion of democracy must be taken seriously: it reflects on one hand the fears of those who perceive themselves as the losers of modernization, and on the other, the realistic judgement that the political classes do not know how to continue either.

### **Autocracies and illiberal democracies on the advance**

Democracy also seems to be under pressure if one looks outwards at the developing countries, where one cannot but note that the model of western democracy is considered unattractive. Nourished by the initial success of the "fourth wave of democratization" after 1989, the modernization theory complacently assumed that political liberalization would inevitably follow in the footsteps of economic liberalization — that whoever said yes to capitalism would take on board democracy as well. Thus, hopes were raised that sooner or later the world would become one big West. Obviously, the Chinese government is of another opinion, as is the Russian: capitalism not only works without democracy, it works quicker. The laborious and protracted processes of canvassing and decision-making, the drafts, the sessions, the public statements, and the polling — all these time-consuming procedures are done away with in autocracies: one can simply go ahead and modernize. Where in western democracies it takes years just to decide to build a wind farm, a central committee plants a fossil-fuel power station in the countryside every other week.

Evidently, abandoning democracy accelerates modernization rather than putting the brake on development. Anyone who observes how subtly the Chinese government works to stabilize trust in the system by reducing hardships and distributing gratifications cannot be so sure that this system will fail just because it is undemocratic. It is even possible that this "successful model" motivates technocratic illusions in the West as well.<sup>4</sup>

This alarming development reflects the fact that economic globalization has already led to significant tectonic shifts in world society. The early industrial nations are steadily drifting from the centre of the global dynamic of transformation and in some cases are already spectators of a game in which they continue to believe they are the main players. However a relative power surge in one part of the world is equivalent to a relative power loss in another. With the absolute certainty about the effectiveness of the western model, this potentially fatal equation has long been ignored, especially after the apparent victory of the West over the East in 1989.

With the decline of the West's model character, democracy also came under pressure externally. Other routes into modernity emerged, and on current evidence will continue to be successful until ecological problems upset the new variety of turbo-capitalism. The expiry of western models of democracy in the global perspective is therefore connected to the loss of confidence in democracy in the West: the losers of globalization in western nations are the first to sense that trust in the welfare pledges of the nation-state is unfounded. For a long time now, a skilled labourer no longer competes on the local job market but rather — as he perceives it — in a snake pit without delineation or exit route. Rapid social relegation — getting left by the wayside in what used to be the land of the economic miracle — becomes the biographical worse case scenario hovering over one's head.

### **From communication management to democratic skill**

It is not hard to understand that those affected by such situations feel themselves abandoned by the state, and often from democracy as well. One of the main reasons is precisely that the state has not ceased to profess willingness to provide care that in reality it can no longer afford. Thus, for example, the increasingly loud demands that low and middle income groups receive compensation for dramatically rising energy costs are likely to be disappointed. No democracy in the world that can vouch for this if resources become scarcer and therefore more expensive; moreover, if democracies wish to retain trust, paradoxically they must admit that they cannot do so. It is possible to imagine what will happen if rising energy costs result in a decline in living standards even for middle income groups, with low earners no longer able to heat their homes. In modern societies, private risks are stabilized by institutions. But what happens when public institutions such as political parties, trade unions, churches, and healthcare and social services can barely assume these functions? The history of the twentieth century demonstrates that trust in the stability of social conditions is principally unfounded — things can very quickly get out of hand. History also shows that when people feel under pressure and threatened, they tend towards attitudes and decisions they previously never would have dreamed of.

In recent decades, political elites have tried to establish trust with "more communication" and public relations. However, while communications media require ever more resources, the elites are increasingly incapable of communicating what they are doing and why they are doing it. The future of western democracy certainly does not lie in a return to the planned state that skilfully communicates its benedictions, but in the revitalization of participation and debate. Only then will citizens be able to play an instrumental part in the intelligent reversal of the consequences of industrialization, which otherwise will necessarily strike them as austerity imposed from above. It will only be possible to set plausible targets such as "resource efficiency" if those affected participate and are involved in putting rational climate policies into

practice. On the other hand, if the state merely suggests willingness to provide care (that it cannot remotely afford), it undermines the basis of the democratic. With a shrug of the shoulders, it rejects the engagement of those without whom the necessary reorganization of the contemporary lifestyle cannot be realized.

The surveys quoted should therefore provide occasion to consider how to modernize not only political technologies, but also democratic institutions. Integration means participation, not provision, and — however unfashionable this might be — must be strengthened by "more democracy", in other words innovative forms of direct participation. In order to prevent structurally large groups feeling excluded or "dumped", the experience must again be conveyed that political participation can mean genuine *effectiveness*. In many cases, voter apathy is less a cognitive problem — a problem of knowledge that one can counter with "classical" political education — than a reaction to experiences of disappointment or frustration on the part of citizens who are thoroughly willing to participate and who have at their disposal sufficient knowledge about political institutions to do so. What is lacking is know-how about the practical-instrumental democratic skills required to put ideas and interests into practice. What has gone astray is the sheer ability to articulate one's own experiences effectively and to assert these in political debate. "Politics" has become an opaque social space.

In the context of climate change, this process is indeed revolutionary;<sup>5</sup> it is all about communicating and exercising concrete and practical know-how about the functioning of the (local) political system. In a so-called "media democracy", popular rule finds its form in the media, and above all the visual media. Politics competes in vain with other more entertaining and appealing media products and formats. This is proved by the unsightly stereotypes offered above all by political reporting, for example the caricatured "shake hands" or "catwalks" that are supposed to provide visual padding for information. Even more problematic is the suggestion of active participation through mere spectatorship — rarely has the public known more than it does today, yet it is glued to the sofa. "Perceived" participation is at any rate far greater than actual participation, and this imbalance is in turn supported by the impression made by politicians' public appearances that they are the sole bearers of responsibility. In urgent or long-term issues, this causes a growing disillusion with politics, whose responsibility is in reality diminishing, above all at the national level. Here, telegenic leftwing and above all rightwing populists present themselves as "a force that stands outside the closed world of the political elites, that speaks *for* and *with* people, that can give identity to the formless mass at the centre of modern societies".<sup>6</sup>

## Perspectives

In the search for actors that possess or could acquire democratic skills, the gaze falls less and less upon professional politics. Some see the chance for the revival of social participation in active consumer responsibility; consumer rights lends itself well to learning democratic skills through apparently trivial questions such as: "What can I do so that our school is supplied by the local organic dairy?"<sup>7</sup> According to this approach, analogous issues of climate and environmental protection open up new opportunities for political engagement that connect local and regional agendas with global ones.

It would be naive to expect that climate and environmental reforms depend solely on solar and wind power in a "third industrial revolution" and on how well its governance structures can be implemented, while only touching on

citizens' education and citizen empowerment and seeing it as a problem of accepting new technologies, applying the law, or as a lack of information on the part of the rational consumer. Only when, along with the development of innovative concepts for policies on taxation, funding, structure, and research, members of the political community are spoken to as active architects of *their* society, can changes in lifestyle and options for action be realized. This involves the explicit formulation of more concrete identity goals: what society do *we* want to be in 2010, 2015, or 2025? It also involves defining positively the need to shape such a future by means of citizens' participation and engagement, not least in order to be able to counter from the outset the illusion that the state can and will sort things out, which only creates passivity. The reorganization of industrial society will only function if it is posed as a project with which members of society identify, in other words if people understand it as *their* project. Then it will become a generator of identity rather than a problem of implementation. However, that will only work if politics is thought of in terms that are participatory and activating.

### Postscript

The by no means sudden dawn of the "financial crisis" (i.e. the irresponsible speculation in banks and stock markets to which the deregulation gladly embarked upon by the OECD countries since the 1970s has given rise) places the "climate crisis" (and also, by the way, the "terror crisis") in a new light and insofar poses the question of democracy afresh.<sup>8</sup> The fact that governments, central banks, and transnational agencies are re-introducing the state and making available funds far greater than what allegedly could not be raised for climate protection only apparently demonstrates that the state is able to return to active infrastructure policies. The truth is that the state is likely to limit itself to a minimal, almost early-modern function as protector in situations of emergency and exception, in which it acts as a dam builder while preferring to privatize all "active" responsibilities from education to social and environmental policy, and in which it installs merely a kind of emergency government that is unable to show consideration or to wait around for citizens' involvement.<sup>9</sup> In the same way that the "war on terror" was defined as the responsibility of the secret services, so the financial crisis is being veiled in secrecy — customers are not allowed to know precisely how things stand with their savings, their pensions, and their credit ratings.

As soon as the leverage is shifted from preventative climate protection to pre- and post catastrophe measures, something similar could happen in environmental policy. In this sense, the financial crisis has accelerated the transition to a "post-democratic" society, with potentially disastrous consequences for climate policy. Three reactions seem conceivable. In the best case, the financial crisis will teach political actors that they must act faster in climate policy than they have until now and that they must protect the market not only through state financial guarantees but also through climate investments of all kinds. In the worst case, climate policy becomes "unfinanceable" — a reaction already seriously jeopardizing the ambitious EU climate protection package. Governments such as Germany's that have not done their homework and have allowed themselves to be placed under pressure from the automobile lobby are able to argue thus, not to mention climate sceptics in eastern Europe and Africa. Then there is the worst worst case scenario: that the financial crisis and the climate crisis become intertwined in such a way that emissions trading becomes an object of speculation and inflates the next speculative bubble.

*This article is a shortened version of the German article that will appear in Transit 36 and is pre-published in Eurozine.*

---

- <sup>1</sup> Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (ed.), "Persönliche Lebensumstände, Einstellungen zu Reformen, Potenziale der Demokratieentfremdung und Wahlverhalten", 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Heitmeyer (ed.), *Deutsche Zustände*, Folge 6. Frankfurt/M 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Heinz Bude, *Die Ausgeschlossenen. Das Ende vom Traum einer gerechten Gesellschaft*, München 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens, "The Politics of Climate Change: Some Remarks", ms., London 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Claus Leggewie/Harald Welzer/Ludger Heidbrink, "KlimaKultur", in: Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden (ed), *2° Das Wetter, der Mensch und sein Klima*, Göttingen 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Colin Crouch, *Postdemokratie*, Frankfurt/Main 2008. English original: *Postdemocracy*, Oxford 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Tanja Busse, *Die Einkaufsrevolution. Konsumenten entdecken ihre Macht*, München 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> On the analogies and connections between the financial crisis and the climate crisis, see: Christian Schwägerl, "Faule Kredite. Finanzkrise und Umweltausbeutung", in *Der Spiegel* 20.10.2008; and Axel Rühle, "Warum retten wir nicht unsere Erde?" in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 18.10.2008.
- <sup>9</sup> See: Andreas Zielcke, "Helden und Versager. Die Finanzkrise verstärkt postdemokratische Tendenzen", in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 17.10 2008.

---

Published 2008-11-21

Original in German

Translation by Simon Garnett

Contribution by Transit

First published in Transit 36 (preprint)

© Claus Leggewie/Harald Welzer/Transit

© Eurozine