

The rule of unreason. Analyzing (anti-)democratic regression

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1 | THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE CONCEPT OF REGRESSION

In contemporary debates about the crisis of democracy, it is often said that we are living in a time of an anti-democratic regression, and insofar as it is a phenomenon that develops within democratic systems, this is also called "democratic regression," as Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn (2021) do.¹ I think this addresses a crucial dimension of the critical analysis of our present, but I also see the need for further conceptual reflection and clarification. For "regression" is a complex concept with many connotations, and its usage must be considered carefully, in particular because it is important to avoid several fallacies in the discussion about it, of which I discuss three—that of the status quo ante fixation (Section 2), that of the reduction of the concept of democracy (Section 3), and that of the misclassification of critiques of democracy (Section 4). These considerations lead to my own assessment of the causes of democratic regression (Section 5).

I begin with some remarks on the concepts of crisis and regression. A crisis is the moment in which the fate of a person or a society is decided, when there is no more going back and not yet a way forward. It marks, as Schleiermacher (1984/1799) says, the "border between two different orders of things" ("*Grenze [...] zwischen zwei verschiedenen Ordnungen der Dinge*"; p. 325). The old is dying, and the new cannot be born, as Gramsci (1996/1930, p. 33) puts it. One should, therefore, be cautious about talking of a crisis of democracy (in distinction to a crisis within democracy, or a crisis that democracy has to cope with) because this is the situation where it seriously teeters on the brink whether it will last.

With regard to socio-political orders, I distinguish between two types of crisis (cf. Forst, 2021, Chap. 12 and 16). A *structural crisis* occurs when the order is structurally no longer able to fulfill its tasks. We ascertain a *crisis of justification* when the self-understanding of an order shifts so that it loses its very own concept. Then, authoritarian political visions can emerge under the guise of democratic rhetoric, for example, in movements that proclaim "We are the people" but really mean "Foreigners out." If such movements are understood as democratic, we experience a crisis of justification that can lead to regression.

Regression is a weighty concept when applied to societies, not only, but especially since the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which states that the "curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002/1944, p. 28). Drawing on psychoanalysis,² Horkheimer and Adorno (2002/1944) do not merely mean the "impoverishment of thought no less than of experience" (p. 28), but also a regression behind forms of civilization to the point of "barbarism," into a world in which ideological delusion leads to irrational inversions of all

kinds, including the willingness to collectively annihilate others. Habermas (2019, p. 174, tr. RF), in turn, employs the notion of a “self-inflicted regression” (*selbst verantwortete Regression*) to oppose construing this as an atavistic “relapse into barbarism,” but rather as “the absolutely new and from now on *always present* possibility of the moral disintegration of an entire nation that had considered itself ‘civilized’ according to the standards of the time.” This is what the talk of a “civilizational rupture” (*Zivilisationsbruch*) implies.

I propose to locate the talk of “democratic regression” on a spectrum which ranges from this extreme form of civilizational rupture to phenomena of social and political regression of a particular quality. By regression we mean, if we retain the two dimensions of structure and justification (or: of social and political relations and of self-understandings), not only the one or the other kind of regress, but a comprehensive, collective undercutting of standards that must not be put into question—and indeed: must not be questioned at the price of *reason*. Regression is, in classical Frankfurt terms, a victory of unreason: reason alone, in a comprehensive, practical and theoretical sense (to be defined in more detail), should be the standard for the usage of such a demanding concept. Hence, the real dimension of regression is the noumenal one, and thus the space of justifications (Forst, 2017a), because epistemic or moral standards of what cannot be rejected with good reasons are not merely moved away from a bit, but are either forgotten, misinterpreted, or, worse, explicitly rejected. A regression of this kind does not simply represent a step backward, but sustainably prevents possible moral-political progress. This is especially true when it affects not only individual groups, but large sections of society.

2 | STATUS QUO (ANTE) FALLACY

A democratic regression, as Schäfer and Zürn (2021) understand it, is not merely characterized by a structural lack of collective self-determination, but by the citizens “turning away” from democracy (p. 11). They call this a “double alienation”—of the practice from the democratic ideal and of citizens from democracy as an institutional form.

Both use the word “ideal,” which should help to avoid a mistake often made when using the term regression: the *fallacy of a status quo (ante) bias* as a normative fixation on this state of affairs.³ For it is all too easy (also in Schäfer & Zürn, 2021, pp. 12, 49–56) for formulations similar to “the departure from already achieved democratic standards” to creep in when regression is deplored, and suddenly a phase of autocratic populism appears like the sinful apostasy from the paradise of democratic conditions that, by implication, seems to have existed before. There is, however, a *non sequitur* involved here: Structurally, there can be a regression with respect to certain democratic achievements without implying that the *whole* system previously conformed to truly democratic ideals. And in the self-understanding, there can be a push toward an *explicit*, say xenophobic, celebration of the authoritarian that merely brings to light the xenophobia that was already *implicit*.⁴ The fallacy of the status quo (ante) bias then also obstructs the analysis of the (structural and cultural) causes and tendencies that led to regression; they were inherent in the previous state or were produced by it.⁵ Even more, the paradox arises that the problematic condition that led to the crisis in the first place is elevated to an ideal.

In addition, there is also an (anti-)democratic regression where there was *no* democracy at all in a sophisticated sense, but now the way to it is *even more* blocked than before. For the regression is, as I said, not only a step backward, but a lasting obstruction of the possibility for moral-political progress. I emphasize here this dimension of progress, understood as the improvement of social and political relations of justification (a point to which I will return),⁶ because, as Horkheimer and Adorno highlight, technological progress can go hand in hand with moral-political regression.

Consequently, the “ideal” spoken of must (and here I go beyond Schäfer and Zürn) be an ideal of *reason*—“ideal,” however, not in the sense of a utopian vision of the perfect world, but in the sense of principles that are rationally valid and that accordingly cannot be rejected with good reasons. Classically said: principles of reason, because a different kind of normativity cannot carry the fundamental critique of irrationality expressed in the concept of regression. If one fails to see this, one falls prey to a conventionalism that can only assess regression based on already achieved and institutionalized standards or socially accepted ideals. That not only entails the aforementioned danger of ideological

nostalgism (keyword: “defense of democracy”), but also that one can no longer explain why this ideal should be *valid* at all—what the source of its normative force is. Otherwise, there could be a fascist regression, a patriarchal regression, and so on, on the same level—that is, a departure from fascist or patriarchal standards once achieved or recognized that is to be regretted. That something has once been established or recognized does *not*, considered properly, provide a good reason why it should be valid and rescued. The reasons must come from some other, clearer source. Otherwise, we obstruct the way to look critically at what existed before and at the regressive tendencies of the present *at the same time*. However, that is what we should be able to do from a standpoint of reason that can prove itself critically and discursively and allows us to speak of stagnation, progress, or regression in a differentiated manner. Regression is a *negative concept of reason*, so to speak, because it marks out *real unreason*. Only from a rationally justifiable normative standpoint can we speak about regression in social-analytical terms; historicist conventionalism is not a suitable candidate for this.⁷ This is not to say that judgments about regression do not, in social-diagnostic terms, refer to temporal processes; they usually do, even if a single condition can also be called “regressive.” Importantly, however, temporal process statements about regression, where they compare two states of affairs, appeal to a superior normative standard that is *not* temporally grounded, though it is related to those states of affairs. The social-scientific and the normative perspective must be recognized in their different logics.

The distance from conventionalism can be explained by recourse to the concept of progress that I argued for in critical discussions with, in particular, Amy Allen (cf. Allen, 2016, 2019; Forst, 2019a, 2019b). In order to avoid conceptions of progress that contain ethnocentric notions of “developed” societies or veil structures of domination that envision teleological ideals that could also be paternalistically realized by external actors, I advocate a reflexive and emancipatory, non-teleological conception of progress that locates it where those subjected to a normative order increasingly become normative authors of that order, as (ideally speaking) moral and political equals. The justification of progress lies in the progress of justification, as a progressive process of producing structures of autonomous justification that replace structures of domination (as a denial of justification). Progress exists where the right to justification (Forst, 2012) is incrementally realized by persons in an autonomous manner, that is, determined by the affected persons themselves.

Regression, therefore, does not just mean any kind of regress or setback with respect to such processes of emancipation, but developments that radically question and deny the foundations of progress, so that the understanding and possibilities of progress are chipped away. Regressive developments do not just indicate that there is a relevant lack of justificatory quality in social and political institutions; rather, regression implies that there is a serious defect in the understanding of oneself and others as equal subjects of justification. Entire social groups are excluded as irrelevant from the space of justification, and it is closed off and distorted by false, ideological justifications that justify the unjustifiable (which is, in short, the definition of ideology I use here). In the extreme, they twist an aggressive, bellicose attack into an act of anti-fascist liberation, transform migrants into threats, make economic structures of domination appear to be based on individual freedom, turn an electoral defeat into a victory and, ultimately, democracy into a tool of domination that violates basic rights. In the end, such regressions exhibit what I analyze as first- and second-order *alienation*—the denial to others of the status of being equal justificatory authorities, and in the extreme, even the disrespect of oneself as such an authority (Forst, 2017b). Here, the aforementioned crisis of justification reaches its climax. Regressive movements not only deny rights and practices of reciprocal-general justification; they aim to destroy them—and with them reason, too. Eventually, not only does the rhetoric turn violent, but the actions as well.

3 | THE CONCEPTUAL REDUCTION OF DEMOCRACY

The relevant kind of democratic regression lies within the space of reasons—where one is willing to give up the concept of democracy as a form of rational rule, grounded in the collective search for good, reciprocal-general justifying reasons among equals, completely or in part—and nonetheless considers this a democratic act (see Forst, 2021, part III). Therefore, the meaning of democracy has to be grasped with precision. Otherwise, all empirical cats will turn gray in, as it were, a night of conceptlessness. Then, the person who enjoys the liberal-democratic status quo because

it secures his stock profits would be a good democrat, whereas the person who criticizes the respective economic system as undemocratic and thus rejects the current form of democracy appears to be an anti-democrat. And yet it is the former, not the latter, who suffers from a deficient conception of democracy. Here, everything depends on clear terminology.

This requires, however, that the concept of democracy is not interpreted in a truncated manner. And there lies a second mistake, which can be encountered in everyday rhetoric as well as in scientific discourses—a mistake of *conceptual reduction*. If we look at it from a historical-normative point of view, the idea of democracy entered the modern political era as a normative order to overcome forms of arbitrary social and political rule (*domination*). First in the resistance against feudal rule, later in the struggle against economic exploitation in the capitalist-industrial age, in the protest against political authoritarianism, the oppression of women or against state-bureaucratic and oppressive forms of socialism—and today against late-capitalist, neo-feudal (global) socio-economic structures and authoritarianism in its many variations, and also against contemporary forms of racism and discrimination based on origin, religion, and gender. Modern democracy did not arise as a beautiful and abstract idea of deliberative community building but as a battle cry against oppression, exploitation, and exclusion of different sorts. It is not simply some prudent way of governing but the political *practice of justice*, and its primary task is to establish structures of fair and effective public-general justification in which those who are subjected to arbitrary rule and domination can become subjects of justification who can co-determine the normative order to which they belong as equals. The demand for democracy is a demand for justice, that is, for no longer being treated as a “normative nothing,” but instead attaining the status of being an equal normative authority—for becoming politically what one always already morally *is* (but is hardly allowed to be in reality). This morally grounded claim to justice is at the same time a demand of reason to be respected as an equal justificatory authority for the norms that claim general validity (Forst, 2012, Chap. 7; 2014).

This is why moral-political respect among equals is normatively inscribed in democracy. And that is also why a conception of democracy is regressive that puts political power in the hands of a few or privileged groups or assumes that majorities may use the power of democracy to dominate minorities, that is, to deprive them of social resources, cultural rights, or opportunities for participation that have to be guaranteed among equals. It is equally problematic to allow talk of “illiberal democracy” and to merely add critically that the “liberal” is important as a supplement, as if it did not belong immanently to democracy⁸—which, however, does not mean that democracy includes the claim to have unlimited property rights (Rawls, 2001). For it is equally mistaken to declare an economic order that undermines or ignores the principles of democracy as a component of democracy. An economic-libertarian, capitalist (at best) partial democracy that forces people into economic dependency and marginalization is not sufficiently democratically justifiable.

The normative conception of democracy I rely on realizes the *right to justification* as a general, morally grounded right in the form of individual basic rights (Forst, 2016) as well as of reflexive, if it goes well: self-improving political and social institutions that are exposed to public criticism and provide for institutional ways of autonomous change and self-correction (see also Forst, 2002, Chap. 3; 2020b; Lafont, 2020). There is no concrete blueprint set up by an “ideal” theory of democracy to be realized, but there is a first principle: that every form of political rule and social organization that lays a claim to democratic justification must be judged by whether the right to justification is realized in the best possible way (or at least better than before), namely in a politically autonomous way. Wherever that is not the case, there is *democratic stagnation* or *regress*. And where this principle is not even understood or openly rejected, there is *noumenal, anti-democratic regression*.

4 | MISCLASSIFIED CRITIQUES OF DEMOCRACY

The relation between the levels of structure and self-understanding is also of importance in another respect. For it is surely possible that a neo-fascist or right-wing populist movement, in its critique of democracy, identifies real problems, such as those of the lack of representation of certain strata or groups, and thereby gains support. But that does not turn it into a *democratic* movement. Here, we have another error, that of the *causal-normative fallacy*: Deficient

structures of representation and political will-formation or of social exclusion can, much like the negative economic effects of the global market, lead to the alienation of certain groups from the social and political system in which they live—they may then explicitly bid democracy adieu or think that true democracy means that an authoritarian “leader” like Trump calls the shots. That and the fact that they may see migrants as the root of evil and commit themselves to an aggressive “hatred of the non-identical,” to use Adorno’s term, has nothing to do with a democratic impulse or a democratic “breaking up of exclusion” (*Aufbrechen eines Ausschlusses*), as Philip Manow (2020, p. 50) writes—it merely calls for “democracy” as a means of illegitimately overpowering others. Therein lies no “return” of the repressed demos (see Manow, 2020, p. 51, with reference to Priester, 2012). To be sure, criticisms that the excluded raise of exclusions that are ideologically hidden behind the label of “democratic representation” are, here Manow is right, necessary as a demand for the democratization of democracy. In this regard, the rhetoric may also be brute, because the quality of the justification of a claim is not measured by the elegance of the language used; that does not make those who revolt in such a manner a “mob” (*Pöbel*).⁹ However, a right-wing populist authoritarian criticism of supposedly undemocratic mechanisms of contemporary societies, which claims to represent the “true people” who are “finally” making themselves heard via Trump or the German AfD, does *not* make such criticism democratic, because in doing so a problematic, criticized kind of “representation” is replaced by one that is essentially anti-democratic (see especially Arato & Cohen, 2021; Urbinati, 2019). To speak of *democratic* criticism in that case is a fallacy—such as the one that overlooks the fact that many of those who complained about democratic deficits after the German refugee situation in 2015 would have been delighted if “non-majoritarian institutions”¹⁰ had closed the borders. Not all those who cry loudly for “participation” are democrats, neither in terms of the preferred political form of rule nor in terms of content. Not all critiques of existing democracies, even if to some extent justified, are of a democratic nature.

A non-regressive democracy is based on the principle that there is only one supreme *normative authority* in the space of norms that apply to all, and that is the justificatory community of all *as equals*. To realize this status of equality (or of *non-domination*, understood in that way)¹¹ legally, politically, and socially is the (never-ending) task of democracy and human rights; they form a normative unity. For, like the political form of democracy, human rights express the irreducible right to justification; that is why the claim to collective self-determination is a human right, and so there can be no legitimate form of democracy that restricts human rights. Against this background, the criticism of one-sided or repressive systems of representation is justified.

5 | CRISES AND THE PARADOX OF DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

Crises are opportunities for progressive as well as regressive thinking because they invite narratives of crisis causation that may be closer to or further away from the truth. A crisis is the time of unreason or, if things go well, of learning. Contemporary democracies are in a precarious position in that respect. During the Financial Crisis of 2008 and onwards, it became clear that nation-states can not only be negatively affected by the global interconnectedness of the financial system, but also that they hardly have enough power to intervene and control that system in a regulatory way at the national level. Some respond to this with calls for national isolation (Brexit, for example), others with calls for transnational regulation. Both invoke the name of democracy. Here, we find the core of the enduring social crisis that shapes our time. The belief in effective democratic politics presupposes that the problems that arise can be overcome by collective political power. However, when this confidence fades, the quest for democratic power often turns irrational into the delusion of nationalist self-empowerment, which produces not real political power but aggression that is often directed against the worst-off groups.¹² In the doubt as to whether democratic power, which continues to be primarily conceived of in terms of the nation-state, can still be reality-changing, lies the root of a deep insecurity that haunts democratic societies worldwide. The authoritarian populism of “take back control” (or “make great again”) is a consequence of this, fueled by the skepticism about whether the ruling classes are willing and capable to bring about change, and paradoxically, this not rarely leads to some of the members of those classes being chosen as the ones who could do things differently in “unorthodox” ways.

The ecological crisis also reveals the limits of the national power to act, but also of the will to act as collectives, not least of democratic states. Here, transnationally coordinated democratic responses and, above all, institutions have to be found; the European Union should take a pioneering role in this. But doubts are growing as the crisis worsens. The same is true with regard to the scandalous realities of global poverty and economic dependence.

In the crisis of global migration, some call for closing borders to preserve the democratic infrastructure of societies, while others insist on respect for human rights and rightly stress that no democratic majority has the authority to let others fall into destitution and rightlessness. Here, too, we see how quickly the call for democracy can become an instrument of oppression—and how necessary a non-regressive understanding of democracy is.

Regressions stood out even more strongly in the corona pandemic, which had to do with the fact that we were dealing with immediate existential threats and corresponding fears. Then, the impulse of isolating oneself against “foreign” threats becomes just as virulent as that of solidarity, which must be examined reflexively, however, for it not to turn into a limited, nationalistically defined “cohesion” (Forst, 2021, Chaps. 3 and 4; Forst, *in press*). We find a particular democratic regression where people in democratic societies put themselves into the role of subjects who either want to be ruled harshly by a Leviathan or think that this is already the case and revolt against “vaccination Nazis” (cf. Forst, 2021, Chap. 16; 2022). In both cases, this understanding of freedom is unworthy of a democracy. For democratic freedom means deciding responsibly to refrain from risking lives in ways that are avoidable. No one has the freedom to endanger others in ways that cannot be justified, and this is a democratic insight.

We live in a time of the *paradox of democratic regression*: All serious political challenges—whether it is a pandemic, climate change, financial crises, global poverty, or the question of war and peace—are of a *transnational* nature, and yet the political impulses of the reaction to them go more and more in a *national* or nationalistic direction, up to the aggressive desire for demarcation and exclusion. As if one could thereby leave the global problems out of the equation, which have been caused, after all, by one’s own politics (if we think of Western societies in particular), one thinks in terms of borders—even to the point of denying the realities of the ecological danger, the virus, and so on. In such denial of reality as a form of profound irrationality, regression is just as evident as in the celebration of power that the powerless have when they cheer for authoritarian populists who delude them into believing in a different reality (on this cf. King, 2021). A clear sign of political alienation and the rule of unreason.

The most serious form of alienation that democracy has to fear I call *noumenal alienation* (Forst, 2017b). It begins at a first-order level where persons do not recognize each other as equal normative authorities, and it may lead to an extreme, second-order level where people no longer respect themselves as such an authority. The existing orders, which we call democracies, produce this kind of alienation in many ways (not to mention non-democratic ones). Social groups are forced into relations in which it becomes difficult for them to regard themselves as normative authorities, and it is not unusual that other groups that also do not exactly have a privileged social status relegate the former to the margins of society and tell them they do not belong. The neglect of democracy, which expresses itself wherever persons are denied their status as equal justificatory authorities, sometimes clothed in the false invocation of democracy, has many causes, structural and mental ones. But it is one of the negative dialectical truths of critical analysis that many rebellions against democratic regression (such as the rule of elites) are themselves regressive. The regressive core consists in denying and fighting the right to justification among equals.¹³

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ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. also Geiselberger (2017), King and Sutterlüty (2021).

² Enlightening on this is King (2020; and especially 2021). See also Brown (2018).

³ Svenja Ahlhaus and Peter Niesen (2019, pp. 613–614) point this out. However, they do not choose the path of a moral-political rational determination of the standards of progress or regression, but rather propose a standard of progressive cosmopolitanism, introduced as relative, that calls for further development rather than restoration.

⁴ Peter Gordon (2018) is very clear on this.

⁵ Cf. my analysis of Thomas Mann's notion of a "neglect" (*Verwahrlosung*) of democracy in Forst (2020a).

⁶ Cf. Forst (2017a, Chap. 4; 2019a).

⁷ The need to specify normative criteria of rationality for progress or regression also becomes clear where the former is determined pragmatically as successful problem solving and the latter as a blockage in this respect, as Jaeggi (2020), for example, does. Otherwise, the definition would remain formal or empty; regressive movements also claim to solve problems and thereby gain many supporters.

⁸ See Mounk (2018). For the opposite view, see Müller (2021).

⁹ For a different view, see Koschorke (2020) with reference to Manow (2020).

¹⁰ Cf. the problem diagnosis of Schäfer and Zürn (2021, Chap. 4), which I do not follow here.

¹¹ On the difference between my view and that of neo-republicanism, see Forst (2020b).

¹² Similarly already Adorno (2020) in his lecture at the University of Vienna on right-wing radicalism and the dialectic of powerlessness in 1967.

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