



Editorial

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According to a conflict-conscious conception of democracy, polarization is part of its essence. According to this ‘agonistic’ conception of democracy, polarization means that the political positions of values and interests can never merge consensually into one another but remain in opposition in order to struggle persistently and continuously for political power within a democratic framework. The ‘polarization’ currently in dispute as a new threat to democracy, on the other hand, is meant as a process or state in which the usual pluralism of liberal democracy changes into an opposition of parts of the population which, refusing to argue and communicate, confront each other only as power blocs. Because in this state the willingness to cooperate in joint state control is abandoned, not only is democracy endangered, but a transition to the autocratic alternative is also in the offing. Here is a brief description of the roadmap towards autocracy to identify the critical turning points. Without knowing them, we do not know where we currently stand.

At the beginning of seeing clearer of what polarization is about, there is the definitional question of when an agonistic conflict of interests turns into an antagonistic one that undermines democracy itself. Not every conflict of opinion represents polarization, such as that of migratory bird conservationists against wind farm operators, ‘Easter march’ pacifists (in Germany) against rearmament advocates, radical ‘Last Generation’ activists against slow climate pragmatists. Where exactly does the polarization begin? By questioning parliament, for example, but where does this in turn start off? Through actions such as super-gluing oneself in the street, damaging works of art, or in the end only with terrorist acts? The transition from agonism to antagonism can probably be found where the opponent in the conflict is denied legitimacy in the political sphere. This transition can be expressed in threats of violence or exclusion, but it sometimes also manifests itself in non-violent refusal to accept official policies. If these examples are not sufficient for the question of definition, it is because of the lack of a simple explanation of the tipping point from agonism to antagonism. Only if the underlying motives and drives are grasped can the potential to endanger the state be assessed.

More in-depth work on the question of definition is necessary because the term ‘polarization’, as now widely used in empirical studies, threatens to get blurred into

anything. It is not surprising, for example, and symptomatic for this tendency that there is heavy disagreement among social scientists about the extent to which polarization has actually increased in society. There is an impression that this indeed is the case, which has been sharpened above all by daily international news, but it is countered by some recent academic studies with the completely opposite diagnosis. Such partly quite contradictory results suffer from the fact that they often differ greatly in their use of terms. Thus, talk of polarization threatens to become a wide-open receptacle for social contrasts, or even just differences, i.e., not only for opposing opinions, but for occupational, familial, ethnic and many other segmentations in society. With a term having become so arbitrary, it is no longer possible to make concise statements. To start with, we should focus under polarization on 'political' polarization. However, a definition that is shared in research is also lacking for this narrower use, and the remarks here will not do to help finally towards such a definition.

A difficulty also with political polarization arises from the fact that populist currents can be much less clearly classified politically compared to the simple right-left orientation of the twentieth century. At the present, many diverse life-world occasions are elevated to political ones. Insofar as there is an overarching sign of polarization, this consists of individual groups claiming to fight for a 'general interest' representing the whole of society and nation. An overall moral claim is made by right-wing radicals in the name of ethnic and cultural unity, by nationalists against cosmopolitans in the name of the nation, by cosmopolitans in the name of humanity, by secularists against believers in the name of liberalism, or vice versa in the name of life or God, and currently, especially in Germany, by climate activists in the name of the entire planet. Compared to the cherished older class conflict that has long dominated the political dynamics in Western democracies, the new polarization has a far greater potential for escalation. Unlike collective bargaining, these oppositions are difficult to compromise with. Such strongly moralized counter-positions lead to demands radicalized in terms of ethics, which can hardly be answered pragmatically by the political establishment. The examples also show that not all polarizations are based on the rich-poor divide, even if this one always also is an accompanying cause with catalyzing effect. The very value-ethical sharpening of endemic economic existential problems creates the new polarization dynamic, and contributes to its particular anti-democratic explosiveness.

However, it would be an error to identify value-ethical orientation abstractly as strictly caused by value attitudes, turning the activists into pure moralists. The target and binding point of orientation is primarily the collective, usually the nation, the homeland, the people, the religious community, and more recently nature, the future generation, the planet. The increase in a deontological 'ethics of conviction' (Weber) goes hand in hand with a moral claim to exclusive representation and

develops into the formation of blocs of ‘us’ against ‘them’ on the basis of social bonding and radicalization effects. In Western democracies, these are usually populist groups and parties in opposition to the traditional mainstream parties. Democracy comes under pressure when either these groups enter the parliamentary process through new radical parties or challenge official policies as ‘representatives of the people’ from the outside of democratic institutions.

A critical phase in populist collectives occurs when they turn away from official democracy because they no longer expect a desired response from it. This can happen in the name of ‘real’ democracy, claiming ‘real’ equality for the oppressed against the one-sided, partisan equality of the ‘elites’ or the ‘system’. In the process, the rich-poor divide today has become blended with often arbitrary combinations of anti-capitalist, anti-scientist, nationalist, ethnic declarations, and therefore increasingly tends towards an exit from regular inner-democratic solutions. Then begins a potential transition to the autocratic alternative. This can be partial (illiberal democracy, Hungary, Turkey), temporary (state of emergency, USA) or permanent. The path to autocracy often is supported by one or more professional politicians within the democratic system, or by charismatic outsiders like Trump, who run against the system in the name of the nation and promise new power to the ‘oppressed’.

The now widespread discussion about polarization has two obvious focal points. One is the analysis of the nature (definition) and causes of polarizing processes. Philosophers have commented in this context on how polarization might be identified. Philosopher Robert Talisse, for one, distinguishes different forms and levels of polarization. Talisse has also shed light on the approaches of antagonistic polarization in the ambiguity of basic democratic values, primarily the tension between equality and justice. While philosophers are astute in studying the subjective preconditions of polarization, however, their work easily lapses into mere normativism if they do not even fall for the aberrant notion that the main cause of polarization lies in a lack of reasoning ability. This is where explanations of a systemic nature must come in: Poverty, alienation, excessive demands in work and life, unemployment, religiosity turned political, existential threat, etc.

The second focus in present research is about the danger for democracy under attack. This attack is not an external one, but quite often one for an alternative understanding of democracy. As mentioned at the beginning, if democracy has inbuilt a readiness or even willingness towards conflict, this is to be expected. The dynamics that an internal development gains in the process of course depends on the quality of democracy. The Schumpeterian model of democracy, for example, oriented at the market-analogue offers to the electorate invites divisiveness more easily than a communitarian model would, favoring stronger communal bonds. The

deliberative model, on the other hand, which has recently been strongly recommended, shows Janus-faced traits towards polarization.

Proponents of the deliberative ideal propose intensified debates, ‘minipublics’, and ‘lottocratic’ selections for citizens’ councils and special parliamentary seats. Objections of excessive demands to average citizens, one-sided advantageousness for academics, non-representativeness concerning the demos, and overall, a tendency towards elite rule come ready to hand. Moreover, the empirical evidence is so far lacking that any deliberations are likely to effectively mitigate polarized conflicts. It is equally possible that the uncompromising disputants remain incapable of compromise and even that conflicts deepen through increased moralizing and discursivation. In politics, the participants often confront each other not as truth-seeking and understanding-oriented partners, but as representatives of irreconcilable power claims, and often not as autonomous individuals, but as bound by group loyalties. Analyses of tendencies of one kind or another would be urgently called for, but at the moment are few and far between.

The impression remains that political polarization as a threat to democracy will remain a challenge not only at present but in the near future. Due to the thematic breadth of underlying phenomena, from psychological, socio-structural and not least normative-democratic sub-areas, it must become the subject of interdisciplinary attention. The articles in this focus are one further contribution to this endeavor.

The Editors