



9<sup>th</sup> Letter, in June 2023

## Society, state, and fundamental issues of democratic practice

Dear friends of political philosophy,

Nowadays, the term *democracy* functions mostly as a general, legitimising and propaganda formula. According to this, the idea of democracy would already be realised in the form of representative democracy, i.e., in the forms and practices centred on elections in the context of the liberal-capitalist formation of society. In the end, even human dignity and human rights should be tied to this 'value-Western' model.

Reference is often made to the ancient Greek polis and oikos economy around the 5th century BC. The full citizens of the Athenian city state left their wives in the house and the slaves in their fields in order to assemble in public and to decide or participate in matters of state: The suitability of *agora-democracy* was disputed by Plato and Aristotle at the time. An echo can still be found today in forms of public consultations, direct citizen participation or referendums such as in Switzerland.

For modern times, *people's sovereignty* is the connecting factor. The calls of the French revolution were directed against the sovereignty of the absolute ruler: A step in the transition from feudal rule to capitalism. But what is the *people* from whom all power is supposed to emanate? For liberals, it is the individuals as right-holders as opposed to the state. Conservatives rely on its composition of social groups and a strong state that holds everything together. For the left, it is *society* and *social individuals*, whereby the nature of the state is disputed.

In fact, people shape and change their lives through their work, social reproduction, and practice. Thus, according to Marx, the *social practice* of *individuals producing in society* forms the elementary substrate or subject of history. Even if the radical democratic thinker did not formulate it this way, it follows that democracy in the sense of self-government of people over the common production and realisation of their lives is primarily bound to a correspondingly structured and constituted commonwealth or state.

However, from antiquity to the present day, this social mode of existence has crystallised in divided, classist, authoritarian and polarised social formations. Finally, the upheaval associated with the bourgeois revolution and liberalism was completed in the course of neoliberal globalisation. This led across all continents to the full development of the capitalist world system, until now still with the USA as the main imperial and hegemonic power.

Embedded in this are socially, culturally, economically, and politically diverse socialities, all involved in conflicts over political and economic development as well as democratic constitution and state sovereignty. The latter is constituted by popular sovereignty as a right to and orientation towards *national self-determination*, which is asserted to the outside world. In these complicated world relations, various models and aspects of democracy are at play, such as representative, participatory, consultative, or even socialist democracy.

All this shows that it is presumptuous and doomed to failure to try to prescribe or impose a particular economic system, form of government and political praxeology on others: Even Europe's highly *socialised, social-capitalist legal, social, and national statehood* is, because of its constitutional shortcomings, neither a benchmark for others nor for its own future:

As extreme inequalities in property and income, education and influence are commonplace and considered legal, there is too much that cannot be claimed and enforced under such a *rule of law*. Or to what extent is individual freedom secured by an institutional *checks and balances*, when in reality central banks, financial markets and supervisory boards, EU and transnational institutionalities removed from social control, or lobbyists and think tanks also have a high share, not least media corporations as a fourth power?

Thus, there are increasing signs of decadence, tendencies towards surveillance capitalism, *post-democracy*, if not totalitarian traits. Parts of the population may stay away from the *free elections* because their life and future interests do not penetrate to any effective representation. In general, there is no good solution for the general formula of *democracy* as long as the supporting socio-economic reproduction, in the form of a capital and exploitation economy, is deprived of *social determination* and control, or if sovereignty is usurped by the military, financial institutions and hegemons.

In view of the realities of *democratic capitalism* and all over the world, the problems must be thoroughly considered: Between popular sovereignty as an implicit determination of the meaning of social practice and the explicit constitution of workable, democratically legitimised institutionalities, there are fields of social existence that require a wealth of forms of the democratic: In education and science, information and media, in civil self-organisation and at the level of communally organised urban practice. Without this, what remains is a thin rehash of *electoral democracy*.

In this way, everything genuinely democratic is related to *social emancipation*. In this substantial sense, democracy is a supreme achievement of political civilisation and an indispensable claim. It is *real democracy*, insofar as it brings social reason, truth and peace to bear, if necessary, through popular uprising, as democracy in action: towards an all-round *emancipation of social individuals*, towards a *socio-economically* supported and ecologically sustainable, *associative-democratic* social formation and the promotion of corresponding world relations going beyond this.

Best regards,  
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### **Recommendation:**

A systematic compilation of the previous 8 "Letters from the PRAXIS Workshop" can be found in the " Course on Political Philosophy and Practice Today", enriched with quotations, comments and source references on each topic. Two slides "On the core political-economic structure of social practice" contribute to the understanding of the correlations. Link: <https://www.praxisphilosophie.de/kursus-zur-politischen-philosophie-und-praxis-heute.pdf> (approx. 64 p.).