

Kosmos Lecture by Maeve Cooke

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**Democracy in the Age of Anthropogenic Environmental Destruction: Do We Need New Approaches?**

Today's democracies, and those who shape them, are faced with serious problems. Advocates of democratic participation must contend with a multitude of interlinked threats. I need only recall this year's state parliament elections in Germany. I am not referring solely to the elections on 6 September in Saxony-Anhalt, where the far-right AfD achieved a record result of around 44 per cent, thereby becoming the strongest political force. I am also referring to the elections in March in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg, where the far-right AfD secured 19.5 per cent and 18.8 per cent of the vote respectively. The results of these elections suggest that democracy in Germany is currently under serious threat. It is also reasonable to assume that the AfD's success can be explained by ever-increasing political dissatisfaction coupled with democratic alienation; this democratic alienation, in turn, may explain the view held by supporters of the far-right party that only strong, top-down political leadership can tackle the prevailing social ills in Germany. Added to this is the widespread view that today's politics only appears to serve the 'demos' – that is, the people who legitimise it through elections – whilst in reality it exclusively promotes the interests of the socially privileged classes. Such sentiments and perceptions, which cannot simply be

dismissed out of hand, are cleverly manipulated and thereby further reinforced by powerful economic and political interests with the help of new social media.

The precarious state of democracy in Germany is by no means unusual. The challenges to German democracy mentioned above appear to reflect a global phenomenon. Democratic participation is under threat everywhere: Worldwide, there is a growing sense of alienation from democracy; this is compounded by rising political authoritarianism in ever-changing forms, some of which have fascist leanings.

Another, and extremely important, aspect of the complex challenges currently facing democratic participation is the catastrophic environmental situation in which all people worldwide find themselves, even though this catastrophe is denied in many sections of democratic societies. For advocates of democracy, the environmental catastrophe presents a dilemma: The ever-increasing anthropogenic destruction of the planet appears to demand urgent and effective political action. However, the urgency of the need for action is at odds with democratic participation. For democratic participation, particularly when it takes a deliberative form, is not a task to be completed quickly, but a lengthy process that requires a great deal of time and, at best, can only be accelerated to a minimal extent.

Furthermore, everyone who uses the internet today is at risk of falling prey to the manipulative power of giant technology conglomerates (so-called 'Big Tech'), not only in the spheres of government and law-making, but also in the realms of culture, entertainment and consumerism. These technology conglomerates can influence users' values and worldviews, but, in a world of information overload, they can also control which information is most readily available to them. And last but not least, digital media can, through their digital echo

chambers, deprive people of the experience of engaging genuinely in vibrant, controversial dialogue with their fellow human beings.

This range of contemporary challenges to democratic participation appears to be closely linked to the ongoing development of capitalism, which has now become not merely an economic system but a way of life in its own right. As Karl Marx observed almost 200 years ago, capitalism undermines social equality, which is an essential material prerequisite for democratic participation. Furthermore, the social inequality brought about by capitalism is one of the reasons for the current alienation from democracy. The neoliberal variations on capitalism in recent decades have not only intensified and widened this alienation: they have also masked the waning power of the state and the ever-increasing power of the market, with the result that the people who suffer most from the existing social ills continue to direct their anger at state policy, when they should in fact be turning against capitalism. Instead, the opposite has happened. In recent decades, a neoliberal vision of the 'good life' has largely taken hold, leading to the veneration of a stereotype that is new to liberal democracies: a figure who stands out from the masses through their unique, innovative brilliance and makes no secret of the fact that their own well-being is of paramount importance to them. This role model, widely embraced not only by the rich and socially privileged, but also by the poor and socially underprivileged, goes hand in hand with calls for privatisation and deregulation, accompanied by anti-state tendencies and a contempt for democratic processes.

The picture of our political era that I have outlined in broad terms is intended to make it clear that the future of democracy in the 21st century is at stake.

Why should we regret this? Should we not rather regard the political, social, economic and environmental phenomena mentioned above as indicators that democracy as a form of government is obsolete? For, as a form of government, democracy, by definition, serves the 'demos' – the people – and depends on their active participation in political processes. It can therefore be argued that the fact that the people are largely turning their backs on democracy is a sign that we now need alternative, entirely new forms of government and institutions. I believe we should take this question seriously and not uncritically commit ourselves to democracy as the supposedly only valid form of government. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that democracy, as both a form of government and a way of life, should continue to be advocated and promoted, above all because of the values of freedom, equality and solidarity that underpin it normatively. That does not, however, mean that new types of democratic institutions and new ways of engaging with these institutions are not necessary. On the contrary: in view of the complex challenges currently facing democratic participation, I believe that a fundamental reorganisation of many existing democratic institutions is required, alongside novel democratic practices and customs.

Are there ways that could lead to a resurgence of democratic participation? I would argue 'yes'. It was German philosophers who, in the wake of the catastrophe of the Third Reich, established that functioning democracies require participation that goes beyond formal acts of voting. Jürgen Habermas emphasised the importance of rational, inclusive discourse, whilst Hannah Arendt highlighted collective political action in the public sphere. I would like to draw conclusions from this for tackling the challenges we face today:

Championing democracy means, first and foremost, taking widespread democratic alienation seriously and investigating its underlying causes, which undoubtedly include social

inequality. It also means opposing economic neoliberalism and the associated global dominance of 'Big Tech' and the financial markets, and advocating for the regulation of human societies through political institutions. Finally, it means wresting the democratic potential of digitalisation from the clutches of 'Big Tech' and harnessing it in the interests of everyone on the planet.

However, such a struggle for democracy can only be successful if certain preconditions are met. Firstly, this democratic endeavour must be based on a precise social analysis that accurately identifies and explains the grievances to be addressed. However, an ethically oriented politics or political theory is also indispensable. By 'ethically oriented', I mean a form of politics that aims for a 'good life' for each and every individual within a corresponding 'good society' and sets itself the goal of realising this vision through concrete political proposals. When I speak here of a 'good life' or a 'good society', I mean 'good' not merely in a functional or instrumental sense, but above all in an ethical sense, although, of course, subjective perspectives on an ethically good life can vary greatly. The diversity of subjective perspectives on the 'good life' can be seen as an additional challenge for democratic participation. But I view this diversity of perspectives in a positive light, as a resource for mutual learning, which I understand as a process whereby each person can develop their own ways of living a good life through communicative exchanges with others, precisely because of the differences in their world views.

My first thesis is this: The path towards a future form of political life, whose cohesion and further development are secured through democratic participation, must itself be a democratic path. Otherwise, there is a historically proven likelihood that the realisation of the democratic utopia will fail because the prevailing patterns of behaviour, lifestyles and

customs are undemocratic or even anti-democratic. This thesis, however, raises a difficult question: how can those who envisage such a democratic future win over their fellow citizens, who are alienated from democracy, to the future they envisage?

As explained earlier, the answer to this question must take seriously the existing social conditions and subjective perceptions of needs, desires and hopes. However, I indicated at the outset that the current global rise in authoritarian, even fascist, tendencies can be attributed, at least in part, to democratic alienation. My explanation for this was the widespread perception that today's democratic politics serves exclusively the interests of the privileged social classes. If this is the case, utopian visions of a democratic future will only be able to win people over to this political way of life if tackling social inequality is made a political priority and political strategies are introduced that bring about the necessary far-reaching social changes. But this brings us face to face with another problem.

As noted earlier, contemporary economic neoliberalism reinforces a human stereotype that has become a role model for many people and is widely admired: the image of a lone wolf who is characterised by innovative brilliance and makes no secret of the fact that their own well-being is their priority, for which economic privatisation and deregulation are indispensable. Associated with this role model are anti-state tendencies and a contempt for democratic politics. I have also observed that contemporary economic neoliberalism distracts attention from the global decline in political power and conceals the ever-increasing power of an unregulated, globally operating capitalist market. My second thesis is therefore as follows: the social equality necessary for democratic participation requires the exposure of the currently concealed dominance of the market and the redirection of the anger of the socially underprivileged classes from state policy towards neoliberal capitalism.

However, this second thesis raises the question once again: how can advocates of democratic participation win over their fellow citizens, who are alienated from democracy, to a common struggle against neoliberal capitalism?

One initial answer to this question is that the so-called 'digital revolution' could help in this regard. Global digital connectivity enables worldwide political communication that would be genuinely inclusive, open and egalitarian. Entirely new forms of inclusive, open and egalitarian political consultation and decision-making amongst all people on the planet are conceivable. But even in this respect, advocates of democratic participation face a dilemma, because exactly the opposite has happened: Global digital connectivity is currently not promoting worldwide democratic participation, but rather 'echo chambers' in which like-minded people reinforce each other's opinions, whilst filtering out and ignoring other views, counter-arguments and conflicting facts; furthermore, people outside the respective echo chamber are often demonised because they do not share the views held within it. Echo chambers are clearly a negative consequence of the manipulation of public opinion by huge technology conglomerates, which I mentioned at the start. It therefore seems as though we are caught in a vicious circle: digital connectivity could help to combat economic neoliberalism, which is necessary for the realisation of genuinely democratic ways of life in the future, but digitalisation is a core component of current economic neoliberalism.

A vicious circle is a seemingly hopeless situation in which the relevant factors reinforce one another, with the result that any attempt to break out of the cycle leads to an even deeper entanglement. Perhaps vicious circles do indeed exist. I would argue, however, that the dilemma described above is not one. For there are ways out. We are not doomed for ever and ever to remain defenceless against the manipulations of technology conglomerates and

the economic and political interests they serve. However, advocates of democratic participation must seek out these ways out themselves, whilst endeavouring to reorient their democratically alienated fellow citizens and win them over to the fight against neoliberalism. The resulting question of how this can be achieved cannot be answered in abstract terms. My third and final thesis is therefore as follows: advocates of democratic participation must themselves, in cooperation with their fellow citizens who have become alienated from democracy, seek out the new paths required for the realisation of a democratic utopia within the specific historical and geopolitical contexts in which they find themselves.

Why is it not possible to answer the question of realisation in the abstract, at a general level, or perhaps even theoretically? I take the view that such questions are, in principle, context-specific. Firstly, because the actions and practices that could contribute to the realisation of a particular utopian vision depend on the specific historical development and geopolitical situation of the groups of people in question, as well as on a variety of social factors such as educational attainment and material provision. There is also a further consideration:

Abstract instructions for realising a utopian vision run the risk of giving rise to political ways of life which, despite their democratic claims, prove to be oppressive rather than liberating.

Abstract utopian visions carry the danger of imposing a particular way of life on their audience in an authoritarian manner. I refer to such abstract visions as 'bad utopias'. Bad utopias are imposed on their intended audience without taking their actual needs, desires and hopes seriously. However, this does not mean unquestioningly accepting the needs, desires and hopes that are socially dominant. On the contrary: in the current context of the anthropogenic ecological catastrophe, many human needs, desires and hopes that are subjectively regarded as important exacerbate and accelerate the destruction of the planet.

(Incidentally, this is why I take the view that the realisation of a 'good society' in an ecological sense must be coupled with a profound ethical reorientation.)

I have warned against abstract prescriptions that offer solutions to the current democratic alienation, which are supposedly universally applicable without needing to take into account the context-specific causes of alienation and the respective constraints and possibilities for liberation. For example, I would therefore regard any attempt to uncritically replicate in Germany the astonishing success of New York's new mayor as a potentially dangerous misstep. As you are no doubt aware, Mayor Zohran Mamdani belongs to the party of *Democratic Socialists of America*. He appears to recognise the close connection between democratic participation and socialism that I highlighted earlier. Within a very short space of time, he has succeeded in introducing political measures in New York that were previously completely unthinkable, and which now enjoy the support of a large majority of the city's residents. Among the many factors that might explain Mamdani's impressive and surprising success, however, is the phenomenal success of Donald Trump as President of the United States, which Mamdani knows how to counter extremely skilfully – incidentally, in much the same way as Trump promotes his own politics, through an extremely clever and skilful use of new social media. As a result, Mamdani seems to have succeeded in presenting himself convincingly as Trump's socialist counterpart. The Trump factor alone – which, in Mamdani's case, is context-specific – explains why uncritical replication of his innovative measures and policies would be a potentially dangerous mistake.

This emphasis on the context-specific nature of the question of realisation may be disappointing. Many of you were no doubt hoping to hear concrete advice and receive guidance on how to safeguard and promote democratic participation at local, national and

global levels. But even if I am going to disappoint you, I insist that political theory, if it is genuinely democratic in orientation, must remain cautious when answering this question. Nevertheless, political theory can be of assistance when it comes to the question of realisation. It contributes at a theoretical level by drawing attention to the fact that even a profound transformation of society as a whole need not entail a radical break with existing social conditions, but can also be brought about in small steps through a variety of small-scale initiatives and experiments. In this respect, advocates of democratic participation can certainly learn a thing or two from Mamdani's example in New York: for instance, from the financial support he has introduced for fortnightly 'date nights' for overworked parents, so that they can arrange to meet up and escape the daily grind together. Or from the evening study sessions he organises in various neighbourhoods, where a diverse mix of New Yorkers read 19th-century critical political texts together. When I say that advocates of democratic participation could take a leaf out of Mamdani's book, I do not, of course, mean precisely these initiatives and experiments. Rather, I mean that we can draw inspiration from the courage, imagination and creative energy of Mamdani's politics to see how our fellow citizens, who feel alienated from democracy, might be won over to democratic socialism in our own – possibly very different – historical and geopolitical contexts.

With this final point, I wish to draw your attention to the fact that even far-reaching social changes come about in small steps and can be set in motion by small-scale initiatives and experiments. This brings me back to my initial observation regarding the current ecological catastrophe. I began by drawing attention to the tension between the urgency of taking action in response to the ecological catastrophe and democratic participation, which is a long and time-consuming process. At this point, I would like to emphasise once again that small-scale initiatives and experiments can also contribute to radical social change. In my

view, the kind of 'small-scale politics' that Mamdani is currently practising is far better suited than any authoritarian approach to building a robust democratic society that could also become an ecological utopia.