6 On the Critical Potential of Rosanvallon's Wide Definition of Democracy¹

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In well over twenty books and many essays and journal-articles published over the past 35 years, Pierre Rosanvallon has analyzed many aspects of democracy's past and present. In what follows, I argue that the originality of Rosanvallon's contribution to political theory not only lies in the wide scope of his definition of democracy but also in its critical nature. Democracy for him does not merely refer to a legal or political system but also to democratic societies in their totality, or what he calls a democracy as a 'social form' [forme de société] and the many different contexts in the past and present in which it took shape. Initially, – when he began his scholarly career at the Parisian Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) at the beginning of the 1980s – he mostly limited the application of his broad conceptual and temporal definition of democracy to France, with occasional comparisons, primarily with the UK and the US. Yet since his appointment to the prestigious Collège de France in 2002 he widened this geographical scope, which now includes many other countries. Today he even strives for 'as thorough as possible a definition of democracy – one that includes all its dimensions and forms' (Rosanvallon 2011a: 226). The fact that Rosanvallon expands democracy beyond the traditional narrow definition used in mainstream political theory may explain in part why the scholarly reception of his work has been comparably limited. The quasi-absence, until a decade ago, of translations of his works in English did not help either. In what follows, I will show how this broad definition of democracy allows him to write its history while also offering a critical perspective that allows us to differentiate between proper and improper views of

1 An earlier version of this chapter already appeared in German as Weymans 2015. I thank Stephen W. Sawyer for his comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

democracy and give a diagnosis and remedies for its current crisis. At the end of this essay, I will argue that the scope of his critical definition may perhaps be, paradoxically, at once too wide and not wide enough.

THE ORIGINS OF A BROAD DEFINITION

Within Rosanvallon's definition of democracy modern democratic societies are "those in which the conditions of life in common are not defined *a priori*, engraved in a tradition, or imposed by an authority" (Rosanvallon 2006: 36). Since democratic societies are by definition no longer seen as determined by a tradition or by God, they need a different foundation. Once sovereignty no longer lies in a special caste or group that rules in the name of a predetermined social order, it instead tends to be claimed by the people, and seen as a collection of free and equal individuals. But why should people be treated equally? In pre-democratic traditional societies, inequalities could still be legitimized by referring to a divine or traditional foundation. Yet once – with the dawn of political modernity – the *a priori* consensus on a stratified or hierarchical society disappears, the only remaining option is to consider all individuals as formally equal before the law, abstracting from their particular background, class or group. As Rosanvallon explains:

"The development of juridical conventions and fictions is [...] driven by the concern to achieve an equality of treatment and to institute a common space among men and women who are very different from one another. Such abstraction is in this sense a condition of social integration in a world of individuals (whereas in traditional society concrete differences were a factor of insertion, the hierarchical order basing itself on the principle that differences were to interlock with and complement one another)." (Ibid: 42)

In democracies the people are seen as a unified fiction consisting of equals, despite all of their factual differences. This becomes visible in universal suffrage, a key element in the history of democracy. Rosanvallon explains its role in democratic societies as follows:

"The ballot [...] couches heterogeneous expressions in a common language and radically simplifies the social world. [...] Equality thus arises from the fact that the votes are counted rather than weighed (the opposite of what suffrage, limited by property qualification, achieved). The citizen, endowed with one vote, is seen as a pure individual, symmetrical with all other individuals and stripped of all specific characteristics. [...] Abstraction is thus the quality that constitutes him socially and drives the development of the idea of political

equality. That is why this form of equality is so radical and exemplary. It emancipates the individual from all the distinctions by which men are usually ordered and classified.” (Rosanvallon 2013: 34-35)

For many theorists, the juridical idea of free and equal individuals (as expressed in elections) is sufficient to organize democratic societies. Some argue that society is based on a contract between free individuals who abstract from their particular background. Others believe that the regulation by the market is the basis of society through a spontaneous cooperation between self-interested individuals. In both approaches, free and formally equal individuals are seen as the basis for a harmonious democratic society, be it through a social contract or an invisible hand. If one adopts such a limited view of democracy based on formal equality and free individuals, then equality between rights-bearing individuals can be seen as a sufficient basis for a legitimate social order. Yet once one takes a broader view of democracy, Rosanvallon suggests, it becomes clear that formal equality or individual rights are not merely a solution but also a problem.

Indeed, because of its abstract foundations – such as the idea of formal equality –, modern societies no longer experience themselves as an organic hierarchical unity but rather as a diverse, fragmented and conflictual whole (cf. e.g. Rosanvallon 1998: 12-19). As Rosanvallon explains:

“If in democracy this formalism is thus a positive principle of social construction, it makes the construction of a tangible people more uncertain at the same time. Accordingly, a contradiction arises between the *political principle* of democracy and its *sociological principle*: the political principle consecrates the power of the very collective subject that the sociological principle tends to make less coherent and whose visibility it tends to reduce.” (Rosanvallon 2006: 42-43)

Although formal equality and juridical abstractions form society’s political foundation, for Rosanvallon they at the same time create a lack of social order. The fact that it is now politically or formally clear who is the sovereign author of society (the people), also implies that at a sociological level society’s form becomes unclear to itself. As a result, the new sovereign – the people – is as powerful as it is indeterminate. While no one doubts politically or juridically that sovereignty in democratic societies lies in the people, few know what the people exactly wants or looks like. According to Rosanvallon, “The people is a master at once imperious and impossible to find. ‘We the people’ can take only debatable form. Its definition is at once a problem and a challenge” (2006: 37).

Moreover, this tension between the political power of the people and its sociological lack of definition, tends to increase over time: as formal democratic principles become gradually more successful at a political or juridical level (through expansion of elections and formal equality), these democratic societies are allowed to become more pluralistic and individualized and therefore become harder to decipher, know, predict and represent. Rosanvallon himself talks about “the gap between the progress of democracy as regime and the regression of democracy as social form” (2013: 3). Elsewhere he explains: “the ‘people,’ understood in a political sense as a collective entity that ever more powerfully imposes its will, is less and less a ‘social body.’ Political citizenship has progressed, while social citizenship has regressed.” (ibid: 1)

How, then, to ‘solve’ this problematic tension? Unlike Marxists, Rosanvallon – and this is important – does not want to do away entirely with this tension, since it is a precondition for freedom and equality and social integration in democratic societies. The abstract and formalistic rules and the general and vague language that politicians have to use are indeed necessary to guarantee freedom and equality before the law (Rosanvallon 1988a: 159-160; Rosanvallon 1998: 92). Politicians are supposed to speak in the name of everyone and the common good, and not in the name of a particular group, class or interest. This also means that people will always feel that their representatives do not fully represent them or their group, and there will thus always remain a gap between politics and society.

Political representation is thus inevitable because a society will always depend on external institutions that represent its generality and that partly escape its control. Like his mentor Lefort, Rosanvallon believes “that collective expression is practically inconceivable without the intervention of a certain exteriority” (Rosanvallon 2006: 47). Rosanvallon therefore contrasts the idea of mediation to the illusion of immediacy, whereby a collection of individuals can allegedly fully and immediately organize themselves harmoniously without depending on any external power or representative institutions.

Although that structural gap between the people and their rulers is inevitable, one can still imagine solutions that diminish the distance between society and its representative institutions without abolishing it. Yet such remedies presuppose a broad perspective on democracy as a form of society, as it enables us to see solutions that one would miss if one adopts a narrow definition of democracy. Seen from a broader perspective, the tension caused by the formal and abstract nature of democratic politics does not require us to do away with these abstractions, but rather to *compensate* for them through often-neglected practices and features of democratic societies that *complement* these abstractions. Rosanvallon emphasizes

the importance of making social conflict and tensions visible, of mediating institutions and the need to consider democracy's historicity. As will become clear in what follows, these three features allow him not only to conceptualize democracy in a wider sense but also to write a *critical* history of democracy that allows him to differentiate between democratic practices and ideas and their undemocratic counterparts. In so doing, I will try to refute the criticism by some scholars that Rosanvallón's broad approach is insufficiently critical (cf. e.g. Conti/Selinger 2016: 556-557).

THE VISIBILITY OF CONFLICT

A first feature that Rosanvallón emphasizes as a way to overcome abstractions and to criticize undemocratic representations, concerns the inevitability of conflict. If a social form in democratic societies is no longer a priori given, then it will naturally become subject to political and societal debate. Yet, those who look at democracy in a narrower sense often tend to forget that formal or legal principles such as formal equality, justice or rights cannot in themselves be a sufficient basis for social order, as they remain subject to political debate rather than transcending it. Take for example the fundamental principle of equality. Those who look at democracy in a narrower sense often tend to forget that formal equality and other formal or legal principles such as justice or rights cannot in themselves be a sufficient apolitical basis for social order, since they too may be debated politically. Even though formal equality can be used as a foundation for democratic societies, its formal and abstract nature at the same time also means that it will indeed always be subject to conflict and discussion, both in theory and in practice (Rosanvallón 1992b: 127; Rosanvallón 1988b: 212). As Rosanvallón puts it: "a society of equals [...] defines a horizon; it is an objective, a goal whose precise contest is continually subject to public debate and criticism. It is part of a permanent democratic debate concerning the notions of justice and equality." (2013: 121-122) This is why equality has been interpreted in so many different ways in its relatively short history (cf. Rosanvallón 2013). Or as he writes about "democratic values" such as "liberty, equality, justice":

"When it comes to putting them into practice, these values turn out to be less obvious than they at first appeared. Equality? Very well, but what equality? And what, in fact, is equality? 'Equal pay or the 'reduction' of inequalities? A 'just' distribution of the fruits of growth? Fine, but how does one define 'justice' in this case?" (Rosanvallón 1988b: 212)

This also explains why election procedures vary according to time and place and thus have a history of their own (see Rosanvallón 1992a).

Conflicts are not just legitimate and unavoidable, they also help social integration, as people feel involved in society when its underlying problems and challenges – on issues such as health care, immigration, pension reform, etc. – are subject to debate. As Rosanvallón writes:

“Conflict and society are inseparable terms. The acceptance of conflict lies at the heart of the process of the self-production of the social. Far from denying or ignoring conflict under the guise of an improbable ‘consensus’, the democratic ideal makes such conflict productive and constructive.” (Rosanvallón 1988b: 211)

This is for example why Rosanvallón argues that the welfare state’s legitimacy increases if its underlying solidarity mechanisms become visible, so that people know what and why they contribute. As he writes: “the only way for the welfare state to become better accepted is to make its machinery operate explicitly for everyone” (ibid: 211). Therefore, in a democracy, conflicts and inequalities need to be made visible and discussed openly (cf. e.g. Rosanvallón 1992b: 104; Rosanvallón 2000: 34, 40). Politics and sovereignty today still have a role to play for Rosanvallón, then only if they take into account conflict and societal struggles:

“If politics is to be made more visible, we need to remind ourselves constantly of the purpose it is meant to accomplish: to take a people that is nowhere to be found and transform it into a vibrant political community. Symbolization is a collective reflection. [...] It is the history and memory of the struggles of men and women to institute a society of equals, despite all the difficulties. The resymbolization of politics is thus part of a permanent questioning of social differences.” (Rosanvallón 2008: 312)

MEDIATION AND REPRESENTATION VERSUS IMMEDIACY

Seen from Rosanvallón’s broad perspective, democratic societies can, secondly, compensate for their lack of natural social order through mediating institutions and practices. Think of unions, political parties, associations or an independent bureaucracy but also social sciences that try to understand and give meaning to an individualized society, which lacks an *a priori* form. As the majority of political theorists stick to traditional narrow theories of democratic legitimation through

elections, they often neglect these (often unelected or unpolitical) mediating institutions, in favor of parliaments, elections and citizenship.²

So, what does mediation or representation consist of? Admittedly, at first sight Rosanvallón's answer appears ambiguous, as he appears to vacillate between a descriptive and constructivist position (cf. Conti/Selinger 2016). On the one hand he wants social scientists to mirror society "as it is." In a postmodern era where society, knowledge and the people are often said to be constructions and fictions, Rosanvallón argues that society consists of realities, voices, opinions and groups with concrete voices that need to be heard and "adequately" represented or described. His "realist" position thus asks social scientists to give a "truer" account of society to compensate for the limited image that elections can offer us. This realism also implies a yardstick to distinguish correct representations from wrong ones. In this view, a complex social reality can be hidden or made visible, be properly represented or – in the case of ideology – misrepresented (cf. e.g. Rosanvallón 2014: 12-15), for example by denying its conflictual nature.

Yet for Rosanvallón this is only part of the story. If the task were to simply "mirror" or "express" a given social structure, then one would not need politics or other mediating institutions. This is why Rosanvallón's realism is compensated by a more "constructivist" view of representation. On the one hand, constructivist means that, although democratic societies still consist of distinct social realities, their overall form is no longer given. This implies that in democracies no final description of society can be offered (which doesn't mean that one cannot strive to improve existing descriptions in order to make them more in tune with new social realities). Different parts of society do exist, but what keeps them together still needs to be "constructed."³ On the other hand, constructivism also means that representing democratic societies cannot just mean passively mirroring what is already there as it also involves creating new realities – compromises, debates, reflections, images, concepts and institutions, etc. – that were not there before and that need to be constructed. Put differently: once they are given a voice, different groups, interests and positions still need to create compromises and stage debates. In short, representation implies both a "realist" or "descriptive" element (where

2 Although Rosanvallón offered an original analysis of the essential role that political parties play in democratic societies (cp. Rosanvallón 1998), in his more recent work (cp. Rosanvallón 2008: 170; Rosanvallón 2018: 13-14) he no longer appears to believe in the role that they can play today. Cp. on this also Weymans 2019.

3 This explains why he declares (cp. Rosanvallón 1998: 18) that the people does not exist before the act of their invocation and why the people therefore needs to be constructed ("il est à construire"). Cp. also Rosanvallón 1998: 91 and Rosanvallón 2014: 12.

society in its variety needs to be taken into account) as well as a “constructivist” creative, abstract, political dimension (where mediating instances or writers actively allow society to get a voice by developing new categories that correspond to new social realities and that thus contribute to making society as a whole “legible”).

Some have criticized Rosanvallon for the ostensible tensions and inconsistencies between his realist (or descriptive) theory of representation and his constructivist theory (Conti/Selinger 2016). Yet, I believe that Rosanvallon’s theory of representation is still largely coherent in so far as it is precisely a lack of a natural *a priori* order (the premise of “constructivism”) which invites everyone to strive for an adequate description of that society (“realism”) without ever reaching that goal (in line with “constructivism”). Just as we still strive for a more equal society and denounce new inequalities without ever pretending to reach “full equality,” we likewise strive for an adequate description of society, trying to include forgotten voices, without ever pretending that any description coincides with society as such. It is precisely the structural indeterminacy of society (or of equality) that drives towards offering more adequate descriptions (or to strive for more equality and denounce inequalities) in an open-ended process. Moreover, when striving for an adequate description of social reality (“realism”) we cannot just mirror what is given but we also need to develop (“construct”) adequate tools in order to do justice to social change.

Rosanvallon’s combination of a realist and constructivist theory of representation allows him to distinguish his theory from rival ones. By emphasizing that society needs to be seen “as it really is” he can criticize “constructivist” (Jacobin) theories that see individuals just as abstract citizens represented through elections, thus refusing to consider a broader pluralist social reality (Rosanvallon 1988a: 167). Conversely, the constructivist dimension of his theory allows him to criticize purely realist views that see representation as merely mirroring society “as it is,” without political mediation, whereby there is no difference between the representative and the represented, which was a view that was for example defended by a part of the French labor movement of the nineteenth century (ibid: 173-175; Rosanvallon 1998: 67-86).

“DEMOCRACY IS A HISTORY”

Just as democratic societies need to compensate for their abstract nature through various forms of mediation and conflict, so theorists of democracy likewise need to contextualize *a priori* formal definitions of democracy including their various

historical embodiments. The fact that democratic societies no longer correspond to a stable definition thus also implies theoretical indeterminacy. As Rosanvallon puts it:

“Far from corresponding [...] to a simple practical uncertainty as to how to bring it about, democracy’s unmoored meaning is due quite fundamentally to its essence. It implies a type of regime that resists any attempt at unequivocal classification.” (2006: 36-37)

Ahistorical normative a priori definitions of democracy that can be used as a yardstick to judge imperfect historical realizations are thus meaningless for Rosanvallon. All this is, again, the result of taking a wider view of democracy beyond its juridical or strictly political role. As a result, any theory of democracy must also explore its history, which explains why most of Rosanvallon’s works are historical in nature. As Rosanvallon explains:

“It has been my ambition, therefore, to rethink democracy by following the thread of its history as it has been spun. But note that it is not simply a matter of saying that democracy *has* a history. More radically, one must see that democracy *is* a history. It has been a work irreducibly involving exploration and experimentation, in its attempt to understand and elaborate itself.” (2006: 38, original emphasis)

As a result, many see Rosanvallon as a historian, thus ignoring the underlying importance of his work for political theory, which may be one explanation for the limited reception of his work amongst theorists. This is regrettable since historicity hardly excludes a critical program.

A CRITICAL AND NEGATIVE HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Indeed, the fact that democratic theories and societies are embedded in specific contexts that vary over time, does not imply relativism or a lack of a standard that allows us to adjudicate between different representative claims (as is claimed by Conti/Selinger 2016: 556-558). On the contrary, despite his emphasis on the indeterminate nature of the people or of an ideal such as “equality,” Rosanvallon still uses an implicit normative and critical yardstick to judge what counts as proper forms of democracy and what does not. As we have just seen, a proper definition of democracy implies an acceptance of the inevitability of conflict, the need for mediation, and of democracies’ various national and historical contexts. Whoever denies democracy’s mediation, conflict or historicity by replacing mediation with

the illusion of immediacy, conflict with harmony and historicity with a priori definitions becomes, for Rosanvallon, ideological or even potentially undemocratic. As he writes: “An ideology is a system of representations that parries all critiques of a social order by making it seem that the principles on which it is based are self-evidently just.” (Rosanvallon 2013: 319, n. 44) Rosanvallon’s broad definition and its implicit criterion allows him to write a critical history of democracy in which he shows which ideas have undermined or supported democracy. As it turns out, in its young history democracy has often been misunderstood.

In the past Rosanvallon identified at least three different strands of undemocratic thought. First there is the French political culture that saw elections as the only legitimate expression of the people’s will, which was based on “the idea that popular sovereignty was structurally linked to the radical project of a self-instituted society” (Rosanvallon 2011a: 124). The state is allowed to act in the people’s name, but any autonomy or mediation by the state – e.g. in the form of an independent bureaucracy – is rejected. As a result, “any intermediary structure that stood in the way of direct communication between the nation and its elected representatives was a priori suspect of impeding the expression of the national will and conspiring against liberty” (ibid: 33-34).

Secondly and conversely there is the liberal belief that society is not derived from a social contract between equal individuals, but rather from the “invisible hand” whereby it is produced quasi automatically by self-interested individuals. As a result, a society no longer needs politics or other forms of mediation, as the invisible hand produces immediate sociability. For Smith “the market” therefore replaces politics, as Rosanvallon explains:

“The concept of the market [...] was understood at the time to refer to a general form of social organization. As conceived by [...] Adam Smith [...] the market represented the self-organization of a nascent civil society [...]. It thus stood in opposition to the idea of contract and to the political concepts of the social bond. Smith was therefore the first theorist of the withering away of politics, just as he was the founder of modern economics.” (2013: 234-235)

Interestingly, for Rosanvallon, even Marx ultimately subscribes to this ideal of a harmonious society liberated from the state or other forms of mediation. In Rosanvallon’s own words:

“Communist society thus aimed to achieve *natural harmony among men*. [...] Communism was rooted in the idea of a pure social bond, of a society in which relations among men

would not be mediated by economics or politics. [...] Communism as a society of pure commerce among men thus paralleled the liberal utopia.” (2013: 127-128).

He explains how this reasoning could already be found in Marx:

“Marx does nothing else than return to the classical theories of the eighteenth century of sympathy and the natural harmony of men. [...] For Marx it is the fault of bourgeois society that the individual is corrupted, for having reduced him to living in society only through the manifestation of his economic interest. In another context than bourgeois society, however, the arithmetic of the passions could produce spontaneous harmony and would no longer need the crutch of interest to produce it. [...] Marx thus fully consummates the modern illusion of social transparency.” (Rosanvallon 2006: 181-182)

This not only means that Marxism is more “liberal” than it may care to admit, but also that neo-liberal ideals of minimal government share the same quasi-totalitarian anti-political view of society as their Marxist enemies (see also Rosanvallon 1999 [1979]). In sum, these “republican”, “liberal” and “Marxist” solutions all presuppose that society can institute itself beyond mediation, that harmony can be achieved and conflict overcome.

Democracy's history shows that anti-democratic ideas were de facto refuted by events and practices. If historians look not just at ideas but also at practices and institutions at the grassroots, they can see that reality proves how and why anti-democratic theories were in fact inadequate (and why Rosanvallon's analysis was right). The French republican tradition, for example, denied in theory the importance of mediating institutions and even prohibited certain associations. Yet like his mentor Lefort (cf. Lefort 1986: 248-251), Rosanvallon emphasizes that practices diverge from ideologies and that it would be wrong to think that these theories or prohibitions did in fact correspond to the social reality they sought to master and repress. Rosanvallon emphasizes that there is “another history that needs to be taken into account if we wish to achieve a fuller portrait, namely, the history of the powerful forms that resistance to this very Jacobinism has taken” (2007: 2; see also Rosanvallon 1990). This is also why he partly criticizes Foucault for believing that the utopian statist project of rationalisation actually corresponds to reality, thus overlooking forms of resistance (ibid: 126). If one looks at the archives one can see how the French *de facto* still had to allow, implicitly, mediating institutions and associations in order to compensate for the lack of organic social order in democratic societies. Even though they were often not properly acknowledged or criticized, even France, like other democracies, needed political parties, unions, associations and an independent bureaucracy to actively structure and

build a society that went beyond individuals (Rosanvallon 2007; Rosanvallon 1995: 104; Rosanvallon 1998: 167-169). Likewise, the opposite liberal dream of an anti-regulatory society can be refuted by simply pointing out that the modern bureaucratic welfare state is the *de facto* result of a society of individuals. More individuals and more equality in reality means more state, not less (Rosanvallon 1992b: 78). This is also why he states that more rule of law (*État de droit*) automatically implies more bureaucracy (Rosanvallon 1990: 277) and that for him “the liberal individual and the administrative state go hand in hand” (Rosanvallon 1988b: 203).

ON HOW NOT TO SOLVE DEMOCRACY’S PROBLEM

We have seen that in democratic societies citizens often feel that politicians only speak in abstract, general terms and do not listen to their particular stories or needs. Although this discontent or disappointment is a structural part of democracies, for a long time election-based politics seemed able to adequately represent a class-based society. Yet since the 1970s this structural disappointment has resurfaced and increased, thus showing the limits of “the electoral-representative democracy [...] based on the axiom that the general will is fully and directly expressed through the electoral process” (Rosanvallon 2011a: 123). Rosanvallon discusses many causes of this increasing discontent: some general and some only applicable to France; some economic – the changing nature of capitalism that undermined a clearly identifiable class-based structure – and some either social or political. As a result of these changes, society has “become more opaque [...] and therefore less easily represented than the old class society with its well-defined gradations and boundaries” (Rosanvallon 2018: 13).

Whatever the causes, the underlying problem remains the tension between democracy as a political system and as a social form. A broad view of democracy not only allows this tension to become visible but also offers ways of mitigating it. Those who instead start from a narrow legal theory of democracy argue that this crisis can only be solved through legal or political means such as more political representation, more procedures, more citizenship, more (human) rights and so on. Yet as the problem is caused by the limits of a traditional juridical model based on elections, procedures and rights, more procedures or rights will not alleviate these challenges. Rosanvallon therefore thinks that it is naive to believe that politics can be based on individual rights alone (Rosanvallon 1988a: 145), or that it can be seen in purely normative or abstract terms, as neo-Kantian theorists like Rawls or Habermas tend to believe. Although they are right that democracy has a

formal, abstract dimension, they wrongly think that it is sufficient. This is why Rosanvallón writes:

"It is necessary to come to grips [...] with the problematic character of the modern political regime [...] and not hope to dissipate its enigma through an imposition of normativity, as if a pure science of language or law could provide men with the reasonable solution to which they would have nothing to add but conformity." (2006: 44)

In fact, such "solutions" ultimately make the problem worse. Rawls' original position for example attempts to reduce the visibility of social conflicts and social diversity, but for Rosanvallón making social diversity less visible precisely increases the problem of society's lack of form (Rosanvallón 1992b: 102; Rosanvallón 1998: 338-340). For him social conflict instead needs to be made more visible rather than hiding it behind abstract legal categories such as justice, rights or equality.

Rosanvallón also rejects ideas that, conversely, want to solve the problem by simply overcoming the gap between abstract politics and society: for example, by suggesting that the people's voice is given and simply needs to be directly expressed (such as in opinion polls or referenda), beyond the mediation of "traditional politics." Or through so-called identity politics which runs the danger of seeing politics as nothing more than the expression of allegedly preexisting identities. In this context, he especially rejects populist ideas that exploit the democratic disappointment and play on people's fears by proposing a unified preexisting nation and excluding its "others" (Rosanvallón 1998: 340-354). In all these examples, the problem of the lack of social consistency is solved by assuming that society has a clear substance or will, that simply needs to be adequately expressed rather than distorted by politics.

If direct democracy's ideals and their procedural counterpart are both inadequate, how, then, may we solve today's problems? One way to decrease the disappointment consists in showing the limits of the traditional ideals of democracy. Once people expect less from traditional forms of democracy (procedures or elections) and realize that society needs external mediating instances (rather than direct democracy) and has to accept conflict (rather than believing in unity and harmony), they will be less disappointed when they are confronted with democracy's supposed "limits." In that sense Rosanvallón's work can be seen as an attempt to diminish democratic disappointment (cf. Rosanvallón 1995: 117).

Yet throughout his work Rosanvallón has also consistently defended a more structural solution to the crisis, namely to expand democracy beyond elections. Juridical fictions, elections and traditional forms of legitimation and citizenship,

should, in other words, be complemented or compensated *for* by other forms of generality, representation, legitimacy or citizenship. In this, Rosanvallon follows Condorcet for whom “‘the people’ [...] was too various to be ‘represented’ adequately by just one of its manifestations” (Rosanvallon 2011a: 129). This is why Rosanvallon’s approach shows “that there is more than one way to act or speak ‘on behalf of society’ and to be representative” (ibid: 8). Rosanvallon proposes at least three different ways to expand democracy beyond elections in order to make people feel represented again and diminish the gap between society and its representative institutions.

First, there are radical “leftist” alternatives, which he has defended throughout his career. In the 1970s, he actively propagated self-management (*autogestion*) or democracy at the grass-roots in companies and at a community-level beyond the state and the market. In the 1980s, he became one of the first defenders in France of deliberative democracy and later participatory democracy (on this see Rosanvallon 2011b). Less radically, perhaps, he also, in the late 1980s, briefly defended “third way” or “new labour” solutions to include citizens in society through work and a “new social contract,” “active citizenship,” “positive obligations” and “moral imperatives” (Rosanvallon 2000: 65-67, 88-89).⁴ In all these alternatives, traditional parliamentary representation is complemented by more substantial forms of representation and civic involvement such as self-management or new forms of participation or work.

Apart from these “participatory” options, Rosanvallon also, secondly, proposes more “institutional” and “traditional” ways to complement elections. As he explains: “democratic politics became something more than merely electing representatives. There are now many more ways in which a regime can be recognized as democratic, some of which complement the consecration of the polling booth while others compete with it” (Rosanvallon 2011a: 7). In the archives he discovers alternative forms of representation, citizenship or legitimacy that were developed alongside traditional electoral practices. Examples of such alternative institutions or practices, that are rarely acknowledged yet no less effective, include unelected state-institutions, unelected independent watch-dogs or regulators, constitutional courts or new “negative” forms of citizenship, whereby citizens constantly oversee and control their rulers (cf. Rosanvallon 2008; Rosanvallon 2011a). For Rosanvallon, some of these alternatives, institutions and practices could help to complement the waning legitimacy of elections, thus overcoming citizens’ disappoint-

4 For a critical assessment of Rosanvallon’s views of “the social question” cp. Duvoux 2015.

ment. As he writes, “on this basis it may be possible to construct a theory of indirect democracy to compensate for the deficiencies of electoral-representative democracy” (Rosanvallón 2011a: 11). Rather than turning to populist fantasies of a unified popular will one should instead turn to these alternative democratic forms of legitimacy and representation.

Rosanvallón's third solution of moving beyond elections is probably the most original. As we have seen, procedures, elections, formal equality and the rule of law aim at treating everyone equally, thus simultaneously generating abstractions out of particular groups and circumstances. People are then disappointed because they feel that their particular problems are not taken into account. The everyday life of a large part of the population indeed remains in the dark and is not given a voice. Instead of more deliberation, procedures or traditional forms of representation, people simply want their voices to be heard and recognized. Representation not only means that someone acts or deliberates for someone else while looking for the common good, but also that someone's particular story or situation is expressed and recognized (for this diagnosis see Rosanvallón 2014: 9-11, 24-26; Rosanvallón 1988a: 139-140).

In what are perhaps some of the most interesting parts of his work, Rosanvallón shows how in the period before the breakthrough of universal suffrage, many attempts were made to give people and society a voice outside politics. Nineteenth-century writers such as Balzac, Zola or Hugo but also many journalists used literature, often based on extensive research, as a tool to bring to light hidden lives. Similarly, the social sciences for Rosanvallón emerged as an attempt to help society understand and represent itself. Using the term of a nineteenth-century novelist, Rosanvallón calls this “poetic representation” and stresses that “representation” is also a cognitive process (Rosanvallón 2014: 35-47, 56-57; Rosanvallón 1998: 279-301; Rosanvallón 1995: 123). He emphasizes that especially today we need much more such poetic or cognitive representation, as the changing socio-economic context has created more individualized life-trajectories and professions that need to be understood, shown and recognized, by using more individualized “narrative” categories and approaches. Traditional class-identities that could still be easily represented have indeed been gradually replaced by complex individualized identities that are harder to represent. Yet precisely because these individuals are no longer part of a clearly visible class, they all the more need to make their stories heard, so that they can still feel part of a larger group and feel that their life-stories are recognized. Social exclusion or poverty is for example not just related to class, but also to certain life events (e.g. a divorce) which means that such events need to be narrated in order to become visible and acknowledged.

Social scientists but also – in the wake of Orwell for example – writers and journalists, can show, map and analyze these new forms of exclusion, life-trajectories or hidden groups and practices in society. They can, for example, tell what challenges a divorced parent has to face or what it means to work in a factory today. Such cognitive or poetic representation not only helps people to feel heard again and allow them to become part of a larger group, but also helps society as a whole to better understand itself (Rosanvallon 1998: 354-361; Rosanvallon 2000: 96-102; Rosanvallon 2014: 23-31).

This illustrates Rosanvallon's ambiguous view on representation, which, as we have seen, both means "truly" reflecting a "hidden" social reality "as it is" (in that sense "realist") and actively making that reality visible, through narratives, social sciences, websites etc. (and in that sense "constructivist," as the reality and identities can only appear through the activity and tools of the one representing it).⁵ Given that "the 'people' can no longer be apprehended as a homogenous mass" but instead "is felt to be rather a series of separate histories, an accumulation of specific situations" (Rosanvallon 2011a: 4), a representation of life trajectories, can even be seen as a more adequate way of representing the people than elections.

Rosanvallon has also put his "constructivist" theory into practice. Whereas other solutions still depend on activists or politicians to turn them into reality, in the case of poetic and cognitive representation social scientists themselves can make a difference. Contrary to many other political theorists who limit themselves to publishing specialized academic books and articles, Rosanvallon has contributed to cognitive and poetic representation. For example, in 2014 he launched a book-series and a website that published hitherto invisible life-stories and analyses of hidden parts of society, thus constituting a "parliament of the invisible" (*parlement des invisibles*) (Rosanvallon 2014: 59-63). Cognitive representation, for Rosanvallon, not only means showing social reality, but also reflecting and debating about it. This is why he stresses the importance of *think-tanks* to foster debate, and participated in an important example in the 1980s (*The Fondation Saint-Simon* that also included François Furet). Since 2002 he has tried to improve the quality of public debate through a book-series (*La République des Idées*) where social scientists present new analyses and ideas or methods that often look at social and political problems differently through small, accessible books. By analyzing social reality, researchers can highlight hidden conflicts and stimulate intellectual discussion (which is what Rosanvallon mainly means by "deliberation") (cf. Rosanvallon 1988a: 180-181). And in 2007 he launched a free bi-lingual online journal and website (called *La Vie des Idées* and its English counterpart *Books & Ideas*).

5 For the "constructivist" reading cp. for example Rosanvallon 1998: 356-361.

In so doing, he has combatted academic compartmentalization and stimulated public debate (cf. for all this e.g. Rosanvallon 2011b: 347).

ROSANVALLON'S DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY: INTELLECTUALLY BROAD YET POLITICALLY NARROW?

We have seen that Rosanvallon's broad theory of democracy allows him to rethink democracy's past, present and future. Yet, paradoxically, it is perhaps precisely the wide scope of his theory that may also pose a certain problem. This has to do with Rosanvallon's double vocation. For Rosanvallon the work of the scholar and that of the citizen engaged in public debate should reinforce each other. He writes:

"For the modern and contemporary history of the political, there is (...) no hope of discovering a zone of inquiry protected, thanks to some means of inaccessibility, from the movements of life. Its ambition, rather, is to descend in the civic arena to offer it a supplement of intelligibility and a dose of lucidity." (Rosanvallon 2006: 57)

Yet one wonders if the combination of the scholar and that of a partisan citizen is indeed as easy as Rosanvallon seems to suggest. As a scholar Rosanvallon wants to offer a broad comprehensive theory (and thus also a history) of modern democratic societies. Yet as a leftist intellectual who is engaged in (mainly) French debates, he clearly wants to foster a more tightly defined set of socialist ideals. For him democracy would seem to imply some form of socialism, which explains the following statement: "The time has come to fight for integral democracy, which will come about through the mutual interaction [interpénétration] of two ideas that have been kept apart for too long: namely socialism and democracy." (Rosanvallon 2013: 11)⁶ This statement has two possible meanings. Either it means that only a socialist leftist interpretation of democracy is a properly democratic one, which is to suggest that "the right" does not have a proper view of democracy. Or else it means that there is something like a specifically socialist reading of democracy alongside a conservative one. But if that is the case, then Rosanvallon no longer

6 It is worth pointing out that in the 1970s, before he became an academic, Rosanvallon was working for the CFDT, a reformist new left union which defended democracy at a time when it was not fashionable to do so (hence its name, in translation: "the French *Democratic* Confederation of Workers"). So, from the start democracy, for Rosanvallon, was seen as a project that he associated with the left. Moreover, at that time he was also part of the Michel-Rocard wing in the French socialist party.

offers a broad general theory of democracy. While this makes his rather partial interpretation of democracy appealing to the left, it also limits its scope. Stronger still, Rosanvallon's theory can in that sense perhaps even be regarded as ideological, to the extent that he legitimizes particular values (a leftist worldview) by depicting them as universal (i.e. representing a broad theory of democracy).

There is, moreover, an implicit tendency in Rosanvallon's work to suggest that the left acknowledges social conflict, while the democratic right denies it. He thus implicitly suggests that by accepting social conflict, the left is more democratic than the right. In so doing, Rosanvallon implies that a truly democratic society that acknowledges its social conflict is leftist. Yet, if this is so, then a political system that truly acknowledges societal conflict should paradoxically first overcome its own left/right divisions. A proper acknowledgment of societal conflict would then *à la limite* imply an abolishment of the undemocratic right and thus of political conflict. Although Rosanvallon of course never argues for abolishing conflict or the democratic right (and although he often discusses thinkers that are not part of the leftist tradition such as Guizot or Schmitt), it would still be the logical outcome of a theory that does not really account for a democratic role of right-of-center parties, ideologies and ideas.

When expanding the scope of his work even further, Rosanvallon may thus have to make a choice: either make his theory of democracy truly comprehensive and thus also offer democratic practices that are right of center a legitimate place in his theory. Or else openly acknowledge his partisan socialist interpretation of democracy. In that case, however, he may no longer claim to defend a truly broad theory of democracy.

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