

# Addicted to Democracy? The Strange Death of Liberalism

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**Presentation notes for 'Democracy and / in the Anthropocene',  
Interdisciplinary workshop at the Point Alpha Research Institute (PARI), Geisa,  
Germany, 9-11 October 2023**

For Liberals the world is forever in the 1990s, the Anthropocene can only be read through the lens of liberalism, as no different from globalisation. The world is complex and interconnected our governing institutions need to be reformed upwards and downwards to cope with this. The strange death of liberalism is the inability to face the contemporary world. It's like Nietzsche's Death of God you can say the words but not face the reality.

**NOTE: THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT DEMOCRACY –  
ONTOLOGICALLY I.E. THE FUNDAMENTAL ESSENCE OF DEMOCRACY AND  
ONTOLOGICALLY OR IN PRACTICE, LINKED TO WESTERN MODERNITY – THE  
ANTHROPOCENE ENCOURAGES US TO CONSIDER THE FORMER**

Why are we addicted to democracy? Because we are addicted to the idea of human exceptionalism, that humans are self-determining, rational, and autonomous and therefore distinct from nonhumans or from sub-humans who need to be governed over. Without the idea of democracy there can be no justification for slavery or colonialism. Democracy is to human what slavery and thingification is to the nonhuman.

**WITHOUT THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY THERE COULD BE NO LINE BETWEEN  
SUBJECT AND OBJECT OR HUMAN AND NONHUMAN.**

**THE ANTHROPOCENE DOESN'T SAY THAT DEMOCRACY IS IN CRISIS, IT SAYS  
THAT DEMOCRACY IS BARBARISM.  
LIBERALISM IS THE INABILITY TO ACCEPT THIS.**

**ONTOLOGICALLY OR DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE:**

**FOUR preliminary theses:**

1. **Democracy is a recent invention.** Product of the entry of the masses into the public sphere

Germany universal suffrage 1918.

UK universal male and female right to vote 1928.

US 1945 universal male and female suffrage without property qualification

The end of formal inequality of colonialism came much later and is still not complete.

2. **The crisis of democracy is not new.**

**KEY PROBLEM: THERE IS NO EQUALITY BETWEEN CAPITALIST AND WORKER  
OR COLONISER AND COLONISED**

George Dangerfield's *Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) in the early years of the last century – difficulty democracy had in coping with demands for Irish independence, women's equality and workers' rights. First World War normally marks the crisis point for democracy – threatened by inter-imperialist rivalries and class conflict. Democracy is a product of the entry of the masses into politics. Democracy presupposes equality, which is a fiction as there is no equality between capitalist and worker and no equality between empire and colony. If there is too much conflict, state power comes to the fore, the armed force of the capitalist class. Democracy is threatened if there is too much conflict.

### **3. The nature of the crisis of democracy is different.**

#### **KEY PROBLEM: POLITICAL REPRESENTATION REQUIRES A SOCIAL ENTITY TO BE SIGNIFIED**

In the post-1968 era a new problem came to the fore in the West. Not the problem of too much conflict but of too little. The exhaustion of class struggle created a problem for legitimacy. The withdrawal of the masses from politics created a vacuum, a black hole where representation should be, the political signifier lacked a social signified. The population as a meaningful collective had to be simulated, forced to speak. Jean Baudrillard writes brilliantly of the problem *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983). Simulation on a national level – ‘participatory democracy’, ‘deliberative democracy’ – different ways of coercing participation. The **European Union** is itself one form of simulating democracy, out-sourcing legitimacy away from the nation state itself.

### **4. The Anthropocene therefore cannot be the cause of the crisis of democracy. If there was some relation it would mean that the Anthropocene was Globalisation**

There is so little connection between the two we might as well talk about Democracy and / in a Global World. Remember the 1990s and 2000s, **global governance, cosmopolitan democracy, global civil society etc etc**. States were too big and too small to deal with inter-related and trans-boundary issues, such as refugees, climate change, environmental and resource issues.

## **ONTOLOGICALLY:**

- 5. The Anthropocene moves us beyond the crisis of democracy. The Anthropocene does so much more than problematise democracy. It problematises the preconditions for democracy. The Anthropocene problematises the possibility of Politics: Human Equality/ Reason/ Human as Exception.**

Human equality is not based on equality of wealth or ownership but the abstract capacity for autonomous reasoning. In the Anthropocene human reason is unreason. Human reason is a myth based on the world as a universal object. It means that the link between intentions and outcomes is broken, as is the link between cause and effect. Effects are unintentional, non-linear, and emergent. This means that assumptions of governing and of politics as a sphere of governing are problematised. The link between humans the basis of their shared equality, the capacity to reason, to act as rational and self-interested is problematised.

If we assume that the Anthropocene brings to a close modernist assumptions of the subject and the world what does that mean? Humans would no longer be exceptional. They would no longer get to be independent, autonomous or self-governing, they would have to be dependent on others, on their environment.

**THEY WOULD HAVE TO BE ADAPTIVE AND RESPONSIVE.  
THEY WOULD BE NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER LIVING CREATURE.  
NO DIFFERENT FROM PLANTS OR ANIMALS.**