

Between Participation and Respect

Liberalism, Culturalism and the Common: A German Perspective 30 Years after Reunification

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1. Survey of a Contemporary Diagnosis

Liberal democracy has come under pressure. Authoritarian and populist forces are gaining considerable ground worldwide. However, their agendas are quite different. Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro represent an aggressive style that puts their own country first. Industries in sectors such as steel, energy and agribusiness, which are feeling the pressure of progress, are being pushed ahead despite severe damage to the environment, climate, and international trade. Putin's Russia, which declares the liberal idea obsolete, is economically weak, but internally presents itself as neo-Byzantine Caesarian papalism while externally aiming to score points as a military power. In Turkey, Islamic extremism and nationalism have entered into an alliance under the leadership of Erdogan, whose party rewards subservience with key economic positions. China, which shifts the world's balance of power with its geopolitical-economic presence, shows a highly effective combination of turbo-capitalism and communism, in which the rule of one party is ensured by the most sophisticated surveillance techniques. And in Europe, not only are tendencies against political integration within the EU emerging, but also those in favor of exit strategies, along with the objections to principles such as the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. Criticism of elites is widespread, the will of the people is identified by its self-appointed tribunes, and people agitate against those who are different. The style of the actors against liberal democracy can be very considerably, from dazzling rhetoric, erratic vanity and fomenting anger and hatred, to cool-headed, cunning provocation. The principles of compromise, multilateralism and the universalism of humanity fall by the wayside. They belong to the political idea of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is inconceivable without regular procedures of political decision-making being open to the participation of everyone, without the rule of law and the protection of minorities. It is based on the fact that citizens are recognized in their fundamental equality and freedom. This applies without prejudice to essential differentiations, for example, on the basis of nationality or a limited scope for action.

With the end of the Cold War, the Western model of liberal democracy seemed to be expanding triumphantly worldwide.¹ In any case, the socialist counter-model had imploded. Only liberal democracies seemed to be able to fulfil the expectations of freedom and prosperity. At the latest, this Western model would prove to have universal appeal on the paths of trade, which increased massively with the last wave of globalization after the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. This wave of globalization was accompanied by technical progress in transport and communications, the transport of goods by air and sea became considerably less expensive, and the exchange of electronic information became possible in real time. However, the chances of excelling in areas of economics and intellectual discourse through globalization and the risks of losing against cheaper competitors in a global competition tended to be distributed unequally. In conjunction with the neo-liberal offensives of the 1990s and 2000s, this led to an enormous increase in wealth being matched by an increase in precarious employment conditions – despite strong economic growth and a worldwide reduction in extreme poverty. For many in the West, the danger of economic decline seemed to be real, but even more sensed as occasion of pressure to self-optimize under competitive conditions. In addition, institutions of public interest, right down to the state supporting them, were subjected to market logic, even in the welfare state regions of Europe. These and other factors have further widened the gap between the elites who think, live, and move around globally, and those who lag behind. There is mobility, money and a ‘hip’ lifestyle in urban centers on the one hand, and fear of losing one’s homeland, a shortage of doctors and a decaying transport infrastructure in rural areas on the other. Lines of demarcation are determined by political correctness, contrary language and an atomized sorting of the world according to lifestyle, nutritional preferences and sexual orientation. Another side of globalization was shown by the financial crisis of 2007/08, when the state suddenly mobilized enormous sums of money to rescue banks. When profits are privatized but debts are socialized, when states themselves become the object of hazardous economic games and lose their protective function for the less powerful, the credibility of an order – one that legitimizes inequality with the promise of career opportunities – erodes. Added to this was the partial loss of state control in Europe’s refugee crisis, which reached its culminating point in 2015.² Migration, including mass flight from war and poverty, is ultimately a reverse side of globalization. Behind the conflict-laden causes of

¹ See the classic book by F. FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster USA, 2006).

² This became a catalyst for a lengthy internal crisis of German conservatism, which became increasingly entangled in internal struggles and opened up room for the rise of right-wing populism. See T. BIEBRICHER, *Geistig-moralische Wende. Die Erschöpfung des deutschen Konservatismus* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018).

flight, especially in the Islamic world, there are, of course, developments that were connected with the older colonial history in the Near and Middle East, which came to a head in the Islamic revolutions of 1979.³ Religion wrote politics – and not for the first time.

In Germany the authoritarian populist forces did not take power, but they were massively strengthened. This applies in particular to the East – at a time when the economic situation is better than ever before. However, there is still a clear gap in socio-economic data along the former border between East and West. But the massive unemployment in the East has disappeared, the infrastructure is much more modern than in the West and the cities have been largely redeveloped. Admittedly, there has been a high exodus of well-educated, young people – especially women, resulting in demographic depletion, especially in rural regions, while the immobility rate among those who have remained has risen. Civil virtues and education as a prerequisite for a self-determined way of life were almost completely eroded by the GDR. And the leading positions in politics and business were often occupied by West Germans. Not least for this reason, right-wing populist forces with hollow slogans are very popular at a time when the vast majority of people consider their own economic situation to be good. Envy toward asylum seekers becomes a media catalyst for portraying the political elites of the past as conspirators against their own people. In a largely irreligious society, the Christian West is to be defended against Islamization by those who themselves form mobs in protest against the Christian churches and their refugee-friendly rhetoric of welcome. The slogan of the peaceful revolution: “We are the people” [*Wir sind das Volk*] is used by those who distanced themselves from the milieu in which the GDR regime’s opposition circles originated, many of which were Christian churches. They want to “complete the turnaround” [*Wende*] by sweeping away the forces supporting liberal democracy. This simple agenda, which was developed by the West Germans themselves who had a leading role in the new right-wing party, distracts from the fact that no program is being offered to solve the problems that have become more complicated with globalization. It is more about the illusion of reducing the overburdening complexity of reality, combined with respect for one’s own existence in one’s cultural identity and one’s biography, which are insufficiently appreciated by elites. Sensitivities are in the foreground; the soul wants to be caressed. This goes for all sides.

These highlights alone show that liberal democracy is approached under the banner of ideas that belong to its own periphery. For this reason, the first thing we need to do is to look more closely at its principles. Then efforts to make one’s own identity and culture the anchor of political action will be discussed. Finally, with regard to liberalism and culturalism, one should consider where

³ F. Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979. Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019).

both concepts have their blind spots and whether there is a common good – and what challenges for religion, Christianity and churches this involves.

2. Liberalism: Between Freedom and Equality

The basic principles of political liberalism gravitate around freedom and equality.⁴ Highly constructive assumptions about humans in their natural state and socialization through a contract should lead to a balancing of the opposing poles. Here, an emphasis can be placed on freedom, which can be thought of more as a quantitative in terms of economic increase, or more qualitatively, as a basis for real participation opportunities.⁵ But the balance can also come more strongly from the pole of equality, be it in the sense of a common good⁶ or in the sense of participatory social relations.⁷ In typological abstraction, the first variant can be attributed more to John Locke and the latter more to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As the many variations show, the two lines are not easily separable. This applies to the more recent debates on liberalism – in the narrower sense – and communitarianism, both of which belong to the spectrum of liberal ideas – in the broader sense. Major figures such as John Rawls or Charles Taylor even use this typological pattern.⁸

The philosophers from the age of Enlightenment expounded the natural or rational legal background of liberal convictions in the anthropological images of creation. According to them, man has the right to self-preservation in the original state in which creation and nature are the same.⁹ It is the source of the

⁴ D. LANGEWIESCHE, et al., “Liberalismus,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., Vol. 5 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 315–323.

⁵ C. DIERKSMEIER, *Qualitative Freiheit. Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerlicher Verantwortung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), esp. ch. 3 (201 ff) and 4 (277 ff).

⁶ This concept is traceable back to antiquity, which influenced a wide spectrum of social philosophies between Utilitarianism and Catholic social teachings in modernity, H.-H. SCHREY, “Gemeinnutz/Gemeinwohl,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. XII (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1984), 339–346.

⁷ Cf. in a consistently liberal perspective: V. GERHARDT, *Partizipation. Das Prinzip der Politik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006).

⁸ Cf. the exemplary J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) (hereinafter quoted as PL), 4; C. TAYLOR, *Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie? Aufsätze zur politischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), containing the eponymous essay 11–29; esp. 13 ff.

⁹ J. LOCKE, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Essay Two: Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government, Chapter II: Of the State of Nature, *The Works of John Locke*, Vol. V (London: Thomas Tegg; W. Sharpe and Son, 1823), 106–112 (quoted as TG); J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *The Social Contract (Du Contrat Social; Ou Principes du Droit Politique*, Paris 1762) in *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. S. Dunn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2002), Book 1, chapter 1–9, 156–169 (quoted as SC).

rights of liberty. The two basic meanings of the concept of freedom, self-conformity and spontaneity, can be combined based on this. In a negative sense, it is about defense against interventions that impair the integrity of the self and in a positive sense, activity to strengthen it, especially through the appropriation of natural goods for consumption or exchange. The category of property has its origins here. Freedom can only be lived in a social relationship in which the relationship to things is embedded. This leads to the other liberal basic idea: equality. For as much as freedom aims at one's own self-preservation, it also has a significant effect on that of others. Everyone is equal in their freedom. This can be developed under the banner of competition or cooperation. From this comes the construct of the social contract, which geneticizes the common under private law. In Locke's case, equality is established alongside freedom in the anthropological state of creation and allows the pursuit of one's own competing interests.¹⁰ With Rousseau, the state of nature is seen in cooperation among families, which promote the self-preservation of their members to the best of their ability.¹¹ Thomas Hobbes had already linked equality in a stark form with the fact that the state of nature of self-preservation is distinguished by the war of free-for-all.¹² This is to be fended off by the social contract, which for this purpose monopolizes violence through the power of the sovereign. Here equality is thought of in negative terms with regard to the war that unites everyone together, while Locke and Rousseau, in contrast, think positively of cooperation and trade. Finally, Kant considers the motif of equality from the rational side of man as a moral being. Reason as the capacity of the general balances the arbitrary dimension of freedom through the formal rule of evaluating the moral law, according to which only what is suitable for the general law can ever be wanted.¹³ Autonomy is thus always a social category that is based on a comparison with all the others.

To the extent that, according to fundamental liberal convictions, the community stems from a social contract for the protection of their respective self-preservation, a private law that is economic in character extends into its constitution. This is accompanied by various social-philosophical patterns. For Rousseau, the contract that the members enter into out of their own interest to defend themselves against war and enslavement results in a common will that is ultimately free of error, encompassing all, even if not explicitly of: the *volonté générale*.¹⁴ The *bonum commune* is articulated in this, and becomes manifest in the legislative sovereign. From this, the various forms of government

¹⁰ TG, 106.

¹¹ SC, chap. 2.

¹² T. HOBBS, *Leviathan* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 76 ff.

¹³ I. KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), A 59, trans. W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 80.

¹⁴ SC, chaps. 2 ff.

are to be derived and critically assessed. It also had the authority to represent itself and the principles of the community in the faith of the citizens, through a simple civil religion.¹⁵ In contrast, Locke focuses on the protection of individuals and their property.¹⁶ In particular, the contractualist constitution of the community was based on the fact that in its natural state there is no arranged form of judicial sanctioning of excessive violence against self-determination and property. The freedom of all can only be secured by a bourgeois society with a state monopoly on the use of force, originating from paternal violence, whereby this violence in turn is divided into the basic forms of legislative, executive, and federal power.¹⁷ The exercise of the state's monopoly on the use of force is immediately about limiting division. Instead of the strong common will with incontestable sovereignty and the authority to establish the *bonum commune*, Locke's state is weak in terms of content, but also acts with procedural checks and balances, protecting the freedom of the citizens in their respective pursuit of happiness. In particular, this is conceived in economic patterns of property acquisition for use and trade. Property is a social category of the asymmetrical distribution of the power of disposition over things, whose inequality at the same time urges exchange through trade. The ownership relationship is constituted by an original acquisition of the unclaimed goods in a quasi pre-societal state. This is close to arbitrary appropriation, which cannot be called arbitrariness and violence only because there is still no bourgeois society. For Locke, this arbitrariness is, so to speak, the opposite of the non-negotiable, binding common will of Rousseau. That is condensed with the sovereign. What the liberal positions have in common is that the main task of the state is to banish violence through monopolization and legal coercion, while being bound to the constitution of the citizens it represents. Which form the constitution takes and which forms are chosen for representation, as well as the design of the separation of powers and political procedures, are subject to considerable variation.

In the sense of a mediating position Kant can summarize that a state is the "union of a multitude of humans under laws of right," that law is the "sum of the conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of the another in accordance with a universal law of freedom," and that the attributes of its citizens include "lawful freedom," "civil equality," and "civil independence" of subsistence and legal representation.¹⁸ In addition, national constitutional law corresponds to international law, and territorial citizen-

¹⁵ SC Book 4, chapter 8: Civic Religion.

¹⁶ TG, 106 ff.

¹⁷ TG, 142 ff; 162 ff; 167 ff.

¹⁸ I. KANT, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), transl. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 99, 27, 100.

ship demonstrates connections to universal world citizenship law. Freedom to exchange and trade is also part of this.

In the political thinking of the 20th century, the background assumptions of liberal social theories were to be translated into procedures of liberal democracy in order to uncouple them from metaphysical conditions.¹⁹ One of the most important concepts is John Rawls' theory of justice.²⁰ It aims to reduce the rationality preconditions of Kant's concept of autonomy in such a way that its consequences become generally acceptable.²¹ To this end, it operates with the fictitious construction of an all-encompassing original state of society. Through two irrevocable principles for procedural justice, this construction is intended to function as a means of representing social welfare.²² These principles emphasize on the one hand the "same right for everyone to the most extensive system of equal fundamental freedoms [...], which is compatible with the same system for all others"; on the other hand "social and economic inequalities are to be shaped in such a way" that an advantage is expectable for all and "positions and offices [...] are open to everyone."²³ This combination of Kantian and utilitarian principles could at any time be claimed for all evidence, because a "veil of ignorance" was placed over everyone, so that nobody would know where he would stand in the distribution of inequality.²⁴ The principle of equality associated with freedom is, through this operational negation, to become effective as a counterfactual regulation in the respective social negotiation procedures for resources and participation.²⁵ The minimalism of content associated with this makes possible a well-ordered society of free citizens, one which is capable of overlapping consensus, and whose religious, ideological and political orientations remain highly plural. Only these

¹⁹ In addition to the American liberal John Rawls, who will be addressed in this section, this also applies to the German thinker Jürgen Habermas, who certainly only belongs to political liberalism in the broader sense of the word, to the extent that he is an advocate of democracy of the social-liberal understanding. He initially attempted to locate the metaphysical preconditions and counterfactual intuitions of older liberal conceptions in the procedural idea of a deliberative discourse based on the consensus of all participants. However, Habermas contends the counterfactual preconditions of these discourses are permanently endangered by the asymmetrical power relations of capitalist societies, which is why it is essential to find support for commonly shared give and take in the realm of living – and ultimately in culture and religion as well. Cf. J. HABERMAS, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I and II* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); *Between Facts and Norms* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

²⁰ J. RAWLS, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) (quoted as TJ).

²¹ J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 99 ff (quoted as PL).

²² RAWLS, TJ, 17 ff; PL, 22 ff; 257 ff.

²³ TJ, 60.

²⁴ TG, §§ 4; 24: "Veil of ignorance," PL, 23.

²⁵ PL, 133 ff.

principles could stand for common goods in a society centered around each individual's separate and equal freedom. This minimalism consistently results in a primacy of the right over the good.²⁶

However, this minimalism does not prevent tying the use of freedom to the pursuit of economic advantage. In view of capitalist developments toward overpowering large corporations with cartel power, the effectiveness of justice regulation has in any case remained limited. This has often been countered with the proceduralist wing of liberal democracy, not least by its communitarian strand. It is more concerned with common goods, and tends to side with Rousseau – even if an escalation of the *volonté générale* into socialist ideals, or the establishment of the common will by self-proclaimed know-it-all actors (e.g. socialist leaders) is rejected. According to Charles Taylor, freedom and welfare for all, participation in the political process, recognition of diverse lifestyles, and solidarity across milieu boundaries – i.e., central factors of proceduralism – should be explicated as fundamental goods.²⁷ They could be understood as elements of a *bonum commune* that guide the actions of the society members in their own, and thus quite plural value orientations. Moreover, they could be found in the civic culture of modern Western societies despite internal conflicts. They would therefore not have to be introduced via counterfactual constructs with negation operators.²⁸

In fact, the liberal basic ideas of freedom and equality are also conveyed historically and culturally. At least their genesis is contingent and culturally relative in the context of Western Enlightenment, even if their validity aims to be universal, as the construct of the original state allegedly demonstrates.²⁹ Thus, such validity is based on complex preconditions with counterfactual moments. They can be based on creation anthropology, explicated transcendental philosophically or be realized procedurally. Even Rawls is not unfamiliar with the idea that values such as the public use of reason with a tendency towards the general and the limitation of mere self-interest were found in the horizon of God's transcendence, even if they were detachable from it.³⁰

²⁶ Cf. *PL*, 173 ff.

²⁷ Cf. C. TAYLOR, "Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie;" "Der Begriff der 'bürgerlichen Gesellschaft' im politischen Denken des Westens," in *Gemeinschaft und Gerechtigkeit*, ed. M. Brumlik and H. Brunkhorst (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 117–146.

²⁸ Cf. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. Part One: Theory (3–192); Part Five, 25: The Conflicts of Modernity, 495–521.

²⁹ Cf. J. HABERMAS, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2008), 271–311.

³⁰ J. RAWLS, "On my Religion" (1997), in John Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, ed. T. Nagel et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 259–270. Of interest regarding the meaning of religion in the life of John Rawls is the epilogue to the volume of the German edition, written by J. HABERMAS, "Das 'gute Leben' eine 'abscheuliche Phrase'. Welche Bedeutung hat die religiöse Ethik des jungen Rawls für dessen Politische

The communitarian critique³¹ that accompanies hard liberalism not only appropriates the fact that the conditions are in fact by no means as liberal and egalitarian as claimed, but also focuses on the factual dominance of an economic functionalism over all rationality. Although correctives against the natural and unequal distribution of opportunities for freedom can also be conceived of based on liberal principles, such as in the figure of equal opportunity justice,³² according to communitarian diagnoses the mental sources for a culture of social integration are undermined by the primacy of economics. For Charles Taylor, these include, in particular, subjectively perceived values and assumptions of meaning.³³ These were brought into the plural society of the present by various strands of tradition and are to be promoted. This also applies to religion, but only as an option in an age in which for the first time it is possible to live completely without religion.³⁴ But charity and solidarity can enter into alliances, and the recognition of man by God can be combined with inner-worldly recognition, as it is explicated in the idea of human rights. Taylor sees modern culture as a fertile ground for a *bonum commune* that gravitates around freedom and equality. According to Taylor, however, less should be thought of the minimalist liberal ideas of the Enlightenment than of their romantic corrective.³⁵ This idea understands humans as holistic beings at home in circles of life that have become historical and overlap each other. Admittedly, Romanticism has also given rise to impulses that drift away from the general balance of freedom and equality. Taylor sees them especially in the forces of an expressive individualism and a striving for authenticity centered around the respective self-experience.³⁶ These phenomena belong to

Theorie?," 315–336. Habermas elaborates on Rawls' early theological bachelor's thesis, drawing the conclusion that the meaning and validity of deontological principles linking freedom and equality are, according to Rawls' view at the time, on God's horizon.

³¹ Michael Walzer's thesis is that communitarian criticism accompanies liberalism like a shadow and does not simply oppose it. M. WALZER, "Die kommunitaristische Kritik am Liberalismus," in *Kommunitarismus. Eine Debatte über die Grundlagen moderner Gesellschaften*, ed. A. Honneth (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 157–180.

³² Cf. T. POGGE, *Weltarmut und Menschenrechte. Kosmopolitische Verantwortung und Reformen* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011); *Gerechtigkeit in der Einen Welt* (Essen: Klartext, 2009).

³³ C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*; "Ursprünge des neuzeitlichen Selbst," in *Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie*, 11–29.

³⁴ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 505 ff; *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); *A Catholic Modernity, Charles Taylor's Marianist Award lecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. M. Eduardo and J. Van Antwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34–59 (the volume also contains an essay by J. HABERMAS, "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," 15–33 and the dialogue between Habermas and Taylor, 60–70).

³⁵ C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, 855 ff; *A Secular Age*, 505 ff.

³⁶ See C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*; *Varieties of Religion Today*.

modernity as well. Nevertheless, for Taylor, the circle of motifs that goes back to Romanticism does not simply stand in opposition to the one that owes its existence to the Enlightenment. That seems to be changing at the moment.

3. Culturalism: Between Singularity and Universality

If at the core of the liberal circle of ideas is the notion that everyone should be able to develop his or her freedom, then this applies equally to everyone – regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. The plurality in the development of freedom is combined with an abstraction of unique characteristics. On the other hand, there are currently strong tendencies to focus on unique identity characteristics and demand respect for the development of a freedom that is based on these characteristics.³⁷ This can certainly go hand in hand with forced pluralism. The buzzword ‘diversity’ stands for the social recognition of individuals and groups with different identities. They should receive respect from society. If society is not understood as a commonality across identities, the unifying goals of politics fall away. According to Mark Lilla, this leads to a situation in which the mere addition of identity-based expectations of respect prevents the whole democratic political program, and opens space for populist politics that are in favor of other particular forces,³⁸ such as that of ‘old white men’ and their traditional identity. Identity is non-negotiable, cannot be exchanged – even though it appears in plurals. To some extent, it appears to be a given, such as gender or sexual orientation, skin color or ethnic affiliation, and to some extent appears to be constructed, like piercings and jewelry, aesthetic posing with clothing, and lifestyle or nutritional preferences. In many cases, that which is given and that which is constructed merge together. Examples may be transsexuality and gender adaptation, the promotion of sexual orientation through the creation of a social environment, physiological or ecological motivations for food preferences, the marking of ethnical group affiliations through slang and habits, and so on. Within the space between the given and the constructed also lie the historical and social backgrounds of individual lives: their cultural imprints in the broad spectrum of larger factors, such as language exposure, thought patterns and religion, average determinants, such as regional customs and dialects, up to determinations by specific elements,

³⁷ Cf. F. FUKUYAMA, *Identity. The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2018). Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of the affective dimension of the pursuit of recognition, the loss of which – even if only perceived to be the case – can transform into hate and rage.

³⁸ This corresponds to the criticism by Mark Lilla of the supposedly left-wing, liberal program of adding the interests of identity politics. Cf. M. LILLA, *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).

such as family traditions, education and occupation. Nobody can escape the imprint of these multiple entanglements of the general and the particular, and yet they can be changed through action – from small shifts in milieu boundaries to major cultural changes. This is illustrated by migration.

The idea-based political arsenal of identity politics and diversity normatively forces the latter, but justifies it with empirical cultural features that aim to undermine the dialectic of the general and the particular in the liminal region between the given and the constructed. Identity politics exists on almost all sides of the social spectrum. It can be carried out in the name of solidarity with a homeland and the preservation of traditions, but also in the name of LGBTQ identities, or in favor of the social practices of ethnic or religious groups. Such identity politics are often articulated from the perspective of minorities. Normative claims to future privileges are to emerge from historical-empirical oppression. It is also about respect and recognition. The degrees are felt with sensitivity, an incorrect tempering can quickly turn into anger. Identity politics is not just a matter for actual minorities. This is ironically demonstrated by the insurrection of a moral majority that believes itself to be pushed into a minority position. The distinction between the truth and the fake falls away.

Identity and individuality are themes that arose particularly in the Romantic milieu, as are the natural and historical-cultural imprints of life. However, as can be seen with Friedrich Schleiermacher as a pioneer of the individual, this should not be played off against the communal.³⁹ Rather, for Schleiermacher, the whole becomes manifest in the individual, namely through the fact that the identity of the individual is constituted by differences to that of others and has its own mixing ratio of the general and the particular. Thus, the others virtually belong to the peculiarity of the individual. Nor can identity be gained without natural-bodily and historical-cultural elements. They form the framework for the communicative interaction of identity through individual differences. Identity, consequently, always knows to relate to something collective.

This is already different with the expressive individualism described by Taylor. It has gained social significance because the economic dynamics of the 20th century turned the cultivation of a lifestyle formerly reserved for the elites into a mass phenomenon. This is overshadowed by the cultivation of

³⁹ Cf. F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *On Religion. Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), ed. and trans. J. Crouter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Second Speech: On the Essence of Religion, 22–74/18–54; Cf. *Schleiermacher's Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. H. L. Friess (Chicago: Kessinger Publishing, 1926). On this point cf. J. DIERKEN, "Individualität und Identität. Schleiermacher über metaphysische, religiöse und sozialtheoretische Dimensionen eines Schlüsselthemas der Moderne," *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 15 (2008): 183–207.

one's own authenticity. It applies even more to recent developments for which Andreas Reckwitz has coined the multifaceted phrase "The Society of Singularities," which, paradoxically reproduces the unique.⁴⁰ Romantic developments surpassed the old Romanticism.⁴¹ This posits differences to liberal communitarianism. From a sociological perspective, Reckwitz describes processes of 'culturalization' of large areas of life, through which the affectively experienced, value-laden practices and expressions are stylized into 'uniqueness'. Against the background of the technological accelerations of post-industrial capitalism, it is possible that life energy will increasingly focus on the sphere of the cultural-creative rather than on that of economic production.⁴² The latter would lead to a "logic of the general," determined by the processes of standardization, generalization and rationalization of industrial modernity, which will now be replaced by a "logic of the particular."⁴³ In the end, there are no mediating patterns of order between the two. Rather, they are dominated by harsh differences between 'singularities' within a competing diversity. This refers to productions, practices and objects that are manufactured for highly competitive markets that are designed to attract and are intended to provoke as much attention as possible.⁴⁴ This spectrum ranges from travel, housing and food to the body, education, politics and religion. The prerequisite for such singularization is, in particular, the digital revolution. Electronic communication organizes the markets for attention; media presence is crucial. These markets lead less to an exchange of the most diverse commodities or to the satisfaction of a certain requirement, than to the dominance of the supposedly unique according to the logic of 'winner takes all.'⁴⁵ It is hard to achieve the first 10,000 likes for a video, a blog, a picture or a product by influencers, whereas catapulting to millions upon millions is no longer impossible for the few successful ones. This applies not only to sports and pop stars, but also to political activists. One German example is Youtuber Rezo, who shortly before the European elections called for the destruction of the CDU, the center-right majority party, in the interests of climate protection. Germany's largest political party reacted helplessly to his rather simple message. For Greta Thunberg, who wants to provoke panic among her listeners so that they unconditionally submit to the maximum demands of climate research, the trip to the USA on a high-tech racing yacht became a global media event. Her ritualized welcome by Obama or her glare towards Trump will attract far more attention than sober analyses

⁴⁰ A. RECKWITZ, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne* (quoted as GS) (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).

⁴¹ GS, 18; 285 ff et seq.

⁴² GS, 111 ff.

⁴³ GS, 11.

⁴⁴ GS, 147 ff; 225 ff.

⁴⁵ GS, 155 ff.

for a viable agenda for carbon reduction. Complex issues such as the socially acceptable restructuring of the economy towards climate compatibility are not really discussed, there are substitute actions such as debates – launched by Greta’s trip across the Atlantic – about the volume of additional air travel the trip across the Atlantic caused, or simple friend-enemy dualities such as in Rezo’s blame game. There is no room for ambivalence in the society of singularities. The same applies to the culturalization of society and the economy of the creative classes, who due to the explosion of education constitute the new upper social strata, as well as to the decoupled layers of a new precariat class, which is polarized toward a muddling through.⁴⁶ Here, singularization can be observed with trash TV and in the vulgarities on display, which populist politicians like to make more socially acceptable.

Reckwitz’s description of the society of singularities succinctly captures several phenomena of contemporary Western societies. One may discuss whether singularization is in fact something entirely new in comparison to individualization stemming from Romanticism, and one may ask whether particular perspectives, such as those of the new creative classes, are not favored here.⁴⁷ Despite the plausibility of the phenomenon description, it cannot be overlooked that the society of singularities contains serious tensions. A culture of authenticity that focuses on attention turns the authentic into a means of success. If creative types make up the new upper class – with global distribution – their way of life is ubiquitous rather than singular. The digital communication of the singular works with extreme standardizations, culminating in the binary logic of 1 and 0. The algorithms generated by their complex combinations actually reproduce the behavioral patterns of society and follow its probabilities.⁴⁸ Even the ‘winner takes all’ logic is an ordering structure with implicit normative content. And if identity politics follow from the society of singularities, then the fact whether they are pursued by right-wing or left-wing groups, by nationalists who think ethnically, or by diverse minorities, does not justify a normative primacy of homogeneity or multiculturalism. Culturalism, which makes use of identity-political patterns, goes hand in hand with normative relativism. This translates empirically into social claims to power, and also applies to highly normative or morally-charged identity politics, such as those of fundamentalist religious groups that push for a final battle between good and evil, or the staging of violence and terror.⁴⁹ Even if they themselves may

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 350 ff.

⁴⁷ Both points could also be addressed directly to Reckwitz: it should be questioned whether his description of the ‘singularities’ itself claims the status of singularity, and whether he pushes the perspective of the creative, not just describing it.

⁴⁸ This is the thesis of A. NASSEHI, *Muster: Theorie der digitalen Gesellschaft* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019).

⁴⁹ GS, 409 ff.

only take one side, their search for attention and respect – even for money – already shows that there is something general at play. The dimension of the universal cannot be forgotten by the program of singularities either. Instead, it has a subliminal effect. This needs to be clarified.

4. Closing Remarks: Liberalism and Culturalism, *Bonum Commune*, and its Transcendence

Liberalist and culturalist programs reveal internal tensions and blind spots. The liberal motive of freedom cannot guarantee a balance with equality; particular interests often dominate against the background of a natural, asymmetrical distribution of opportunities. And the culturalist motif of a society of singularities already shows a contradiction with its pluralization. Without balance with the universal, singularities mutate into claims to power that often conceal self-assertion. Even the enlightening or romantic contexts of both motif complexes are not free of tension. That freedom and equality and not their opposite can claim social plausibility is a historically-contingent cultural development. It can also become different, as we are currently experiencing. The empirical-historical contingency of Enlightenment ideas is to be countered by their normative validity, which was formerly based on creation theology and natural law. If their place becomes hollowed out by increasing secularization, there is a problem in the visualization of the normative validity anchored in the transcendent, of those liberal paradigms whose mode is the counterfactual. The romantic principles of individuality and identity also provoke a dialectical counter-calculation. The self of individuals or groups may intuitively open up and articulate itself through its expectations. But without resonance in manifold social references which would in turn enrich it, it becomes empty and languishes in disappointments. Striving for power then becomes a means of compensation. Such resonances are often contingent as well. They become more probable when individuality and identity are experienced as formative with a social aspect.⁵⁰ The individual reaches out to a whole in which it wants to be embedded and which manifests itself in it. This basic romantic motif is indispensable. Ideally, it can contribute to resilience in the face of disappointing resonance. To this end, the implicit holistic dimension in the perception of individuality and identity must be updated. And the experience of the social side of individuality and identity requires a universality superseding the empirical in order to stabilize institutional norms. In this respect, the blind spots of both configurations, liberalism and culturalism, as well as Enlightenment and

⁵⁰ Cf. H. ROSA, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Munich: Suhrkamp, 2016).

Romanticism as frames of reference, belong together complementarily – even if the pressure for plausibility is currently likely to be greater on the liberal side. Both refer to a dimension of the transcendent, to which not only the respective figures of the whole and the counterfactual are attached, but with which the *bonum commune* is also connected.

Dealing wisely with this transcendent dimension is a central challenge for religion and its church institutions. First of all, this means gaining crucial distance from the temptations to just associate religion with the simplification of one of the configurations. This applies, for example, to the Gospel of Welfare and Prosperity that follows liberalist figures, especially in Pentecostal circles. Contrary to this are temptations to incorporate civil religion⁵¹ into the church or to transform church Christianity into a better party for the public enforcement of the good. As Christian groups and churches can easily connect to identitarian programs, their positions seem to be sufficiently distinguished by their mere appearance. In this there is the temptation of being able to dispense with the challenges of communicating an explanation of this position across borders.

Thus, the prudent handling of the transcendent dimension involves understanding the basic distinction between transcendence and immanence as an archetype for further differentiations among the immanent. This allows not only for the perception and recognition of differences, but also for contradictions and ambivalences. In contrast to the tendency of a society of singularities to push aside ambivalences, it is rather a matter of processing them. To put it in technical terms, religion can help to manage ambivalence and thus promote a realism in the perception of contradictions. It can also remind us that there is always an alternative for action, for example in view of the constraints imposed by the factual primacy of the economic or ‘winner-takes-all’ logic. Religion can contribute to practice in the finite by differentiating between it and the infinite, in such a way that the unconditionality of freedom or the creativity of the cultural are at the same time forms in which the infinite is present in the finite. Thus, the basic figure of differentiation is already in play with basic liberalist or culturalist concepts. This helps to understand that the differentiations of reality, for example, between society and state or between cultures of life and communication, are not a loss, but a gain. In light of the liberal and the culturalist paradigm, the distinction between transcendence and immanence continues to mean lightening up the respective blind spots by contrasting the motifs of wholeness and contrafacticity, each of which accompanies but is underexposed. Religion can be a form of communicating this socially through

⁵¹ In Germany, celebrations of the anniversary of the Reformation were often associated with the message that the current democracy was a direct consequence of the Reformation, which is why the Church’s memory of it has a function of supporting the state.

symbols. The liberal idea of human dignity has a strong religious counterpart in God's likeness, the culturalist idea of creativity reminds one of the creator. The post-empirical universality of equality makes it clear that salvation is for all.

Finally, the prudent treatment of the transcendent dimension also includes the insight that the *bonum commune* is reduced to a particular position if it is conceived of as immanent. Since it itself translates the main points of liberal proceduralism, such as freedom and participation, into the communitarian idiom, and since communitarian good manifests itself in a liberal order where everything is exchanged in a decentralized system, its significance lies rather in functioning as a corrective regulator for both social-philosophical patterns. For this reason, it cannot be fixed within the immanent. This is already shown in the constant dispute about what the common good can be. This dispute cannot be turned off, rather, it is a mode of presence in the negative for the *bonum commune*. In this dispute, possibilities balancing the general and the particular must be sought out, as well as for compromising different interests. This is the primary task of politics. It is always pragmatic and subject to moral temptation. Religion can help to deal with this tension if it locates the good in its transcendence with God – and publicly articulates this along with the consequences for the immanent.