

Democracy and Liberalism – Harmony at human measure

Christoph Heuermann
University of Konstanz

„*Dosis facit venenum*“ - the dose makes the venom – already was reported by the famous physician Paracelsus. This wisdom is not only applicable on the human organism, but also on society. Symptomatic for our time is the cult of the whopping, which not only extends to prestige-projects like the Elbphilharmony of Hamburg. Wilhelm Röpke, about whom we speak later in more detail, concludes this cult in wise buzzwords: Hybris, Rationalism, Szienticism, Technocracy, Socialism, Mass Democracy of Jacobine character (Röpke 1958).

These buzzwords of the Big do not seem to correspond with the ideals of liberalism, but to harmonize with the reality of democracy. However, the more it looks like a stress ratio, the less it is one. Democracy harmonizes with Liberalism – but only at human measure. For what in today's political science is called „liberal democracies“ has to do little with both Democracy and Liberalism. What now is the human measure will be clarified after an introduction in the here used comprehension of both Democracy and Liberalism, adding further implications afterwards.

Democracy and Liberalism are both concepts falling prey to a Babylonian confusion. This is nothing to wonder about since most old as new „Isms“ can be compared to a megalomania like the building of the tower of Babel, because they overstretch comprehensible ideas to dangerous extremes. The idea historian Eric Voegelin saw this as the consequence of a political gnosticism, which leads to the three central types of progressivism, utopism and revolutionary activism (Voegelin 1999: 107f). These did not spare the „Isms“ of Liberalism in its different shapes as well.

To not make the definition of the concepts „Democracy“ and „Liberalism“ arbitrarily in face of the Babylonian confusion, we shall deal with their etymology. Democracy for example does not mean rule of the people, but denominated the self-administration of the most basic communities: the „deme“ as most basic administration unit is the primer source of identity for their citizen. The community of the polis should be no bigger than being possible to be overlooked from the hill of

assembly. Only this publicity of the home community counted as „demosios“ (Taghizadegan 2009: 2ff).

Also, Liberalism was created in the context of the small: „liberal“ originates from „liberalis“, which means „worthy a freeborn“. Until the eighteenth century Liberalism was something individual – a denomination for a personal virtue, which retrieved itself until today. For example, Goethe named this „*Gentleness, mildness and moral delicatessen*“ (Eckermann 2006)¹. Making Liberalism from something small to something big was of all things being done by a small, but megalomaniac Frenchman: Napoleon was the first, who spoke about „liberal ideas“ in great style and thus stamped this political concept, which differentiated the following decades in great pace, becoming an „ism“ completely.

A definition of the concept „Liberalism“, which harmonizes with the depicted concept of „Democracy“ originates from Wilhelm Röpke: the „*principle of political decentralization*“ already contains the „*programme of Liberalism*“ (Röpke 1944: 179)². „*Old Liberalism*“ did not err in its plea for free markets, but in its model of society (Röpke 1944: 18), the „cult of the whopping“ for that Röpke used the buzzwords mentioned at the beginning of this essay. For Röpke „Liberalism“ is an idea, which „*composes the basic principle of the essence of occidental culture per se*“ (Röpke 1950: 15)³. Thus, he explains in this context: „*The measure of economy is man and the measure of man is his relationship to God*“ (Röpke 1962: 355)⁴.

Röpke was neither the first nor the last to use the words of a „human measure“. Already the ancient philosopher Prothagoras claimed: „*Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, how they are, and of things that are not, how they are not*“. Later, a green anarchist, the economist Leopold Kohr from Austria, coined the term. He represented a philosophy of size, which inspired his friend, the economist E.F. Schumacher, to write his popular book „Small is beautiful“. Kohr

1 Corresponding translation of: „*Güte, Milde und moralische Delicatessen*“ (Eckermann 2006).

2 Corresponding translation of: das „*Prinzip der politischen Dezentralisierung*“ enthalte bereits das „*Programm des Liberalismus*“ (Röpke 1944: 179)

3 Corresponding translation of: „*die die Grundlage des Wesens abendländischer Kultur schlechthin ausmacht*“ (Röpke 1950: 15)

4 Corresponding translation of: „*Das Maß der Wirtschaft ist der Mensch und das Maß des Menschen ist sein Verhältnis zu Gott*“ (Röpke 1962: 355)

himself writes in his work „The Limits of Complexity. Back to a human measure“: *„Size seems to be the central problem of creation. Wherever something has errors, it is too big. [...] The size – and only the size! - is the central problem of human existence, both in social and physical meaning“* (Kohr 2002: Introduction)⁵. Kohr means with size not only the absolute, but also the relative, the too big, size. The only salvage in his eyes will be *„the idea and ideal of littleness as only serum against the cancer-like proliferation of oversize [...]“*⁶.

However, where ends size and where begins littleness? Which is the human measure? Are there objective criterias or does the subjective arbitrariness win? Both Röpke and Kohr have written about this. First however, we should consider the appeal of F.A. Hayek: *„There cannot be a general rule for desirable size, because this is dependent on the perpetual changing economical and technical conditions“* (Hayek 2003: S. 384)⁷. Wilhelm Röpkes ideal of human measure correlates to a 3000-people village in Switzerland with artisans, agriculture and middle class (Röpke 1944: 80f). For him the „most extreme maximum“ will be a town with 50 to 60 thousand inhabitants (Röpke 1944: 287f). For Leopold Kohr, even this is too big. He writes, 350 people will hit the size of a community where occupational specialization is possible (Kohr 1988: 36f). Aggregates of several ten thousands of people is something Kohr sees critical: *„After the tavern-, village- and town-states the tribe-, national, -continental-states and international economic communities came. They could not enrich our „summum bonum“ with no only additional pleasure which not is already available for the citizen of little Liechtenstein. All, what overgrown monster organizations, give us, are more costs, more conflicts, more sorrows, more problems, to which these overgrown state structures draw the conclusion they have to grow even more [...]“* (Kohr 1988: 38)⁸. Ludwig von Mises explains this well in his „Critique of Interventionism“ (1976): every intervention does necessarily lead to further interventions. Consequence of these „loops of intervention“ are, what we know from

5 Corresponding translation of: *„Die Größe scheint das zentrale Problem der Schöpfung zu sein. Wo immer etwas fehlerhaft ist, ist es zu groß. [...] Die Größe – und nur die Größe! – ist das zentrale Problem der menschlichen Existenz, im sozialen und im physischen Sinn“*. (Kohr 2002: Einleitung).

6 Corresponding translation of: *„die Idee und das Ideal der Kleinheit als einziges Serum gegen die krebsartige Wucherung der Übergröße [...]“*.

7 Corresponding translation of: *„Es kann keine allgemeine Regel für die wünschenswerte Größe geben, da diese von den ständig wechselnden technischen und wirtschaftlichen Bedingungen abhängt“* (Hayek 2003: S.384).

8 Corresponding translation of: *„Nach dem Wirtshaus-, Dorf- und Stadtstaat kamen die Stamm-, National-, Kontinentalstaaten und internationale Wirtschaftsgemeinschaften, die unser Summum bonum mit keinem einzigen zusätzlichen Genuß bereichern können, der nicht schon den Bürgern des kleinen Liechtenstein zur Verfügung steht. Alles, was uns diese überwachsenen Monsterorganisationen geben, sind mehr Kosten mehr Streitereien, mehr Sorgen, mehr Probleme, zu deren Lösung diese überwachsenen Staatsgebilde das Gefühl haben, daß sie immer noch größer werden müssen [...]“* (Kohr 1988: 38).

financial science as „Wagners law of increasing state activity“. Thus, the modern welfare state creates itself from a pure ordoliberal state without interventions. Lewis Mumford (1974) called this a „*mega machine*“, which grows and grows, alienates man and is certainly all but not liberal.

However, we should not grasp the human measure only quantitatively, but rather qualitatively: rather than considering a quantifiable size, we should consider its adequacy concerning man and nature. In this regard, Wilhelm Röpke seems to be minted by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who meets this difference in his psychology of the masses: mass, says Ortega y Gasset, is no concept meaning many man. „*Mass does not denominate a social class, but rather a class or type of humans*“ in a qualitative sense (Ortega y Gasset 1931: 113)⁹. Röpke means with this type of human the modern mass man, who goes with the tide due to his conformity. He writes, this over-massing accomplishes „*its unsurpassable summit*“ in collective states (Röpke 1944: 250).

This type of human is a problem in an unmanageable, big society, Ortega y Gasset writes extensively: „*The mass man regards government as an anonymous power and, because he feels himself anonymous similarly, he believes government belongs to him. When there grows a challenge, conflict or problem in the public life of a country, the mass man will favour to call for an immediate intervention and direct solution on side of government with its immense and invulnerable resources. [...] When the mass gets to know any accident or simply feels a strong appetite, its greatest temptation lies always in the assured possibility to solve everything without effort, dispute, doubt and risk by simply hitting the button and getting the big machinery into movement*“ (Ortega y Gasset 1931)¹⁰.

In a small community however, there cannot be a mass man even quantitatively. Also qualitatively, this type of human, who according to Röpke lives in a „*natural order*“ (Röpke 1950: 153), is different from the modern mass man, because in small communities count other proportions than in big

9 Corresponding translation of: „*Masse bezeichnet keine gesellschaftliche Klasse, sondern eine Menschenklasse oder -art.*“ (Ortega y Gasset 1931: 113).

10 Corresponding translation of: „*Der Massenmensch sieht im Staat eine anonyme Macht und, da er sich selbst genauso anonym fühlt, glaubt er, dass der Staat zu ihm gehört. Wenn sich im öffentlichen Leben eines Landes eine Schwierigkeit, ein Konflikt oder ein Problem auftut, neigt der Massenmensch dazu eine sofortige Intervention und direkte Lösung seitens des Staates mit seinen immensen und unangreifbaren Ressourcen einzufordern. [...] Wenn die Masse irgendein Unglück erfährt oder einfach einen starken Appetit verspürt, liegt ihre große Versuchung in jener stets gewissen Möglichkeit alles ohne Mühe, Streit, Zweifel oder Risiko zu bekommen, indem sie bloß einen Knopf drückt und die mächtige Maschinerie in Bewegung setzt*“ (Ortega y Gasset 1931).

ones. Concretely, these are a better grasping of social processes, personal responsibility and solidarity, the protection of individual rights and a higher dynamic, both regarding to economical, political, psychological and moral aspects.

The first aspect is clear: a small community is easier to overview and thus less complex in sense of being overviewable. The individual there is necessary part of the social process – his daily action, his decisions make a difference as a rule. Being conscient of this responsibility the individual will rather being interested in social processes and participate through democratic elections. Actively by practicing influence on important communal decisions in direct democratic ways, passively by holding a political function voluntarily once in life, because this is necessary for a small community. The littleness also has the advantage to make an economical and administrative structure conditional, which is not minted by big organizations, but rather by many self-acting individuals. F.A. Hayek namely made an important point in this regard: *„We already had the opportunity to speak about the danger, which originates from the fact that more and more parts of the population work in always growing big companies and thus only know this system of organization rather than the market mechanism which coordinates the actions of the singular big companies“* (Hayek 2003: 385)¹¹. Consequently, a smaller community makes grasping of social processes easier – be it political, economical or other ones. Political fabricated nonsense is easy to conceive even for the average citizen.

The second aspect of personal responsibility and solidarity was already mentioned. The understanding and participation at the political process means being responsible for other people in the community. Often it is said that Liberalism and responsibility belong to each other. This also applies to democracy. Responsibility can be carried or not. However, in small communities it is much more likely to assume responsibility oneself rather than push it off to an unpersonal organ. On the one hand, individuals understand social processes better, on the other hand, they know each other. Nobody – this is human nature - has to like each other always, but everybody can interact with each other. Consequently, littleness leads to an internalization of conflicts. Trust is a

11 Corresponding translation of: *„Wir hatten schon Gelegenheit von der Gefahr zu sprechen, die sich aus der Tatsache ergibt, das immer größere Teile der Bevölkerung in immer größeren Großunternehmen arbeiten und deshalb mit dem Ordnungssystem Organisation vertraut sind, aber nichts vom Marktmechanismus wissen, der die Tätigkeiten der einzelnen Großunternehmen koordiniert“* (Hayek 2003: 385).

high good in this regard, which, once broken, will be known in the whole community soon. Nobody can push off his responsibility easily. Essentially this forges a feeling of community – an identity – which is beneficial in littleness, but can become illiberal in an overgrown way. Connected to this is the pride on oneself and one's community, which however weakens itself in a self-reinforcing process, because the effort to conserve this democratic communities of littleness diminish. In this regard already Thukydides remarked something about democracy: *„Its administration favors the many instead of the few, this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they effort equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does povert bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition“* (Thukydides 2, 37).

Solidarity in a small community is mainly voluntary and not *„mechanical anonymous collective care“* (Röpke 1944: 250)¹². Everyone knows everyone, thus helping each other with problems. Robert Nef, a Swiss Liberal, thinks that solidarity is naturally confined to little circles under anthropological aspects. No one should force common people to help someone, who belongs to another culture and language, because this will overstrain common people. However, it is self-interest of people that their neighbors are well and their quarter won't become a slum. Where they cannot be solidaric themselves, there are still churches and other private organizations. In last consequence there is the community, which can care for those, for whom no one is there. F.A. Hayek can conclude this results well in his following quote: *„If we would confide most government services again to more little units, this probably causes the reappearance of a sense of community, which is mostly suffocated by centralization. The largely felt inhumanity of modern society is [...] that political centralization has robbed man the possibility to participate at the composition of his known environment“* (Hayek 2003: 453)¹³. Democracy, thus, harmonizes with Liberalism in small communities regarding personal responsibility and solidarity. Democracy needs responsibility to participate within her and makes collective solidarity possible with direct democratic votes, but

12 Corresponding translation of: *„mechanisch-anonyme Kollektivfürsorge“*(Röpke 1944: 250)

13 Corresponding translation of: *„Vertraute man die Ausführung der meisten Dienstleistungen des Staates wieder kleineren Einheiten an, so würde das wahrscheinlich zu einem Wiederaufleben des Gemeinsinns führen, der durch die Zentralisierung weitgehend erstickt worden ist. Die weithin empfundene Unmenschlichkeit der modernen Gesellschaft ist [...], dass die politische Zentralisierung ihm weitgehend die Möglichkeit genommen hat, an der Gestaltung der ihm bekannten Umwelt teilzuhaben“* (Hayek 2003: 453)

does not necessarily lead to it. This seems to be the ideal of all Liberal-“isms“: responsibility and voluntary solidarity!

The third aspect is the protection of individuals against authority. In a small community there is no anonymous authority in form of bureaucracies. Such a bureaucracy is not necessary at all because everyone knows and probably trusts each other. Elected politicians can administer their tasks, which they should have done in the original sense: to advocate the community instead of command it. Politicians carry responsibility for their political decisions, for which they can be made accountable. In a big society this accountability would probably lead to stagnation, because nobody can survey the consequences. However, this seems to be possible in a surveyable measure of a small community. Politicians there also live together with their peers instead of playing out their hubris with other godplayers in the Olympus of parliament. They are much closer to the sorrows and needs of their peers and have it difficult to accomplish special interests. Lobbyism is commonplace, but originates from everyone rather than being limited to a minority far away. To avoid that Socrates has to drink the cup of hemlock once again, politics needs its limitation by law. This can evolve over many generations in a small community. Law is not arbitrary, but rather it is grown in competition with other communities. F.A. Hayek names this a „*discovery process*“. At all, the fact that small communities naturally are surrounded by other small communities, makes escape over the border much more easier and faster if there is danger. As recently as the scattered regionalism on the area of today's Germany facilitated its flourishing, which brought it its name „Land of the poets and thinkers“. Or, to give an analogy by David D. Friedman: *„One day, the president of France announces that because of troubles with neighboring countries, new military taxes are being levied and conscription will begin shortly. The next morning the president of France finds himself ruling a peaceful but empty landscape, the population having been reduced to himself, three generals, and twenty-seven war correspondents.“* (Friedman 1973: 154).

The fourth aspect deals with the higher dynamics of small communities under psychological, economical-political and moral aspects. Psychologically spoken we already considered Hayek's argument that small communities promote the grasp of market processes due to the nonexistence of big organizations. Also, interpersonalities like trust are essential for this category. Moreover, small communities avert opportunism, because the consequences of individual actions can be

reproduced by other members easily. This essentially is the problem of big societies: the more intransparent the consequences of individual actions are in a group, the higher is the incentive to become opportunist. A last point worth to consider is the sociology of knowledge by F.A. Hayek, because knowledge is shared easier and faster and passed over generations much better in small communities.

In case of economical-political aspects economics of scale need to be considered. However, where there are „Economies of Scale“, there are also „Diseconomies of Scale“. Until a certain size efficiency rises, but will decelerate then due to difficulties of coordination. Thus, the right human measure between increasing and declining scale earnings need to be found. Even if this is not successful: in comparison to an efficient centralist mass state living in a small community is much more livable, even with trade-offs with efficiency.

Concerning moral dynamics, a small community is double-edged. Precisely in connection to democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville warned 1835 about a tyranny of the majority. This is not merely numeric, but rather a mental despotism originating from the conformism of the masses. Whereas this conformism will originate much less probable in small communities, the consequence of a mental tyranny of majority is conceivable, described by Tocqueville with the following words: *„Majority embraces thinking with a distressing circle. Within its limits the writer is free; but woe betide him, if he breaks through it. He rather has not to worry about a court for heretics, but he is exposed to all possible troublesomenesses and daily chases“* (Tocqueville 1835: 382)¹⁴. Littleness in this regard also causes in this case that it is hard to avoid each other. A dissent with few can be a dissent with a conceived majority. Only option might be the escape to another location – which will however be easy. Moral dynamics can discipline in positive cases, but causes in extrem cases the origination of reactionary islands of moralism, which do not tolerate other styles of life deviating with their norms. This rather does not sound liberal, but liberal competition between the small communities guarantees everyone to find his place.

To conclude this essay about the reconcilability of Liberalism and Democracy, we give F.A. Hayek

¹⁴ Corresponding translation of: *„Die Mehrheit umspannt [...] das Denken mit einem erschreckendem Ring. Innerhalb dessen Begrenzung ist der Schriftsteller frei; aber wehe ihm, wenn er ihn durchbricht. Zwar hat er kein Ketzergericht zu befürchten, aber er ist allen möglichen Verdrießlichkeiten und täglichen Verfolgungen ausgesetzt“* (Tocqueville 1835: 382)

another credit. He warns to condemn democracy per se, which only was applied wrongly (Hayek 2003: 404): *Democracy rather is not similar to liberty [...], but it is one of the most important guarantors of liberty [...]. We hardly recognize her as long as she functions, but her absence can be deadly*“ (Hayek 2003: 311)¹⁵. Democracy harmonizes with liberalism in human measure, in small communities which have different, better dynamics than big ones. This liberal Democracy however should not be confused with the political philosophy of communitarism, dealing mostly with social justice. Of course, discussing the reconcilability of Democracy and Liberalism theoretically can create communitarist conclusions. However, Liberals are no atomists – just the opposite – they value community highly. Whichever one thinks about Liberalism – be it a personal virtue, individual liberty or free markets – they all are compatible with a democracy in human measure, whatever unrealistic a return seems to be in case of today's situation.

A concluding plea for this small communities comes from Gilbert K. Chesterton (1904), who argues that if someone loves something deeply, he will emphasize its littleness – like couples in love call each other with diminutives like „sweety“ or „bunny“. He recommends: *„At any cost we have to return to smaller political units, because we have to return to reality at any cost. We have to come nearer and nearer to love, hate, mother instincts, personal decisions and openly pronounced truths*“. Finally, philosopher Nicolás Gomez Dávila stated: *„Societies with many heads tend to the flatness of a muddy puddle.*“ (Dávila 1992: 149)¹⁶. He may be right: great things can only evolve within littleness. Democracy and Liberalism only harmonize in human measure.

15 Corresponding translation of: *„Demokratie ist zwar nicht dasselbe wie Freiheit [...], doch sie ist einer der wichtigsten Garanten der Freiheit.[...] Wir bemerken sie kaum, solange sie ihre Wirkung tun, ihr Fehlen kann aber tödlich sein*“ (Hayek 2003 311).

16 Corresponding translation of: *„Vielköpfige Gesellschaften tendieren zur Flachheit der schlammigen Pfütze*“ (Dávila 1992: 149)

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