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In the Name of the People:

Critiques of Political Representation in Protestant Thought

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I.

The rise of the “Pirate Party,” culminating in several successful showings in state elections, is as surprising as it is unprecedented in the history of political parties in the Federal Republic of Germany. It is too early to say whether the German Pirate Party—unlike its forerunner counterpart in Sweden—will be successful in the long term. From the point of view of political theory, the young party is mainly of interest because it campaigns not so much on a central theme but rather on the promise of re-organizing democracy: The “LiquidFeedback” voting software is designed to involve the party “base” in all decision-making processes all the time. It is the party’s promise that the systematic and consistent use of new communication technologies will replace the concept of representation with a more direct democracy. It is doubtful, however, whether we can do without the idea of representation. Participating in elections and electing representatives to parliament are practices that remain bound to representative democracy, as does the use of LiquidFeedback itself: members may “delegate” their voting rights, so a prominent member at times was able to submit 167 votes simultaneously.¹ This arrangement constitutes a pragmatic solution to the problem of not every party member being able to vote on all issues all the time;

¹ See Becker, “Digitale Eminenz.”

however, it fails to deliver on the identity of “base” and “leadership.”

From the perspective of cultural history, the call for a complete identity of “people” and “ruler” is the most urgent demand of modern democracy—a demand that invariably resists realization. The classic formulation of this strict call for a complete identity between ruler and ruled can be found in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762), which ultimately prohibits any kind of representation of the *volonté générale* (general will). “Sovereignty ... cannot be represented,” wrote Rousseau, “it lies essentially in the general will, and will does not admit of representation: it is either the same, or other; there is no intermediate possibility.”²

Carl Schmitt made approving mention of this sentence in his *Constitutional Theory* of 1928:

Where the people as the subject of the constitution-making power appear, the political form of the state defines itself by the idea of an identity. The nation *is* there. It need not and cannot be represented. This is an idea that gives Rousseau’s oft-repeated arguments (*Contrat social*, III, 15) their democratic irrefutability. (emphasis in the original)³

In this perspective, the desire for the identity of the people as ruling subject and ruled object is the core of democracy; this desire contradicts the principle of “representation” which entails a dictatorial separation of ruler and ruled. “The absolute monarchy is, in fact, only absolute representation,” wrote Schmitt.⁴

So far, scholars have paid only little attention to the fact that the democratic critique of the principle of representation was first formulated in the context of a religious discourse, that is, the Protestant critique of Catholicism.⁵ There exists no

² Rousseau, *The Social Contract & Discourses*, 83.

³ Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, 239.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Hamacher, “Skizze zu einem Vortrag über Demokratie,” 7.

systematic study of the link between Protestantism and democracy—although this link was, in fact, a central theme of nineteenth-century historical analyses. In 1802, the French officer, travel writer and philosopher Charles François Dominique de Villers received a prize from the Académie Française for his *Essay on the Spirit and the Influence of the Reformation of Luther*.⁶ In this essay, Villers argued that his contemporaries owed their increase in political freedom directly to the influence of Luther's reformation. "The Reformation then, which at first was a recurrence to liberty only in religious things, became ... a recurrence to liberty in political things also," he wrote.⁷ Postulating a direct link between the French Revolution and the religious upheaval in sixteenth-century Germany, he asked: "[M]ay not the French revolution be considered as a remote but necessary consequence of the Reformation?"⁸

A few years later, Hegel provided a similar assessment. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he posited that it was with Luther's Reformation that "this principle of Christian freedom is first presented and brought to a true consciousness"⁹; this emphasis on the Reformation as the discovery of a new freedom, in fact, led him to declare that it "was in the Lutheran Reformation that the great revolution appeared."¹⁰ The Reformation here appears as a revolutionary principle that ushers in modernity as a whole. In his lectures on *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel talked emphatically about "Christian Freedom," which in his opinion "is actualized" in Luther's teachings: "In the proclamation of these principles is unfurled the new, the

⁶ See Graf, *Der Protestantismus*, 93.

⁷ Villers, *An Essay on the Spirit and Influence of the Reformation of Luther*, 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 190–91.

⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on The History of Philosophy*, 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146–47.

latest standard round which the peoples rally—the banner of *Free Spirit*, independent, though finding its life in the Truth and enjoying independence only in it. This is the banner under which we serve and which we bear.”¹¹

The question remains, though, what we understand by “Christian Freedom.” Luther’s 1520 treatise “Concerning Christian Liberty” may elucidate key links. In this treatise, Luther focused on the Reformation’s starting-point: his vehement rejection of “good works,” which for him are merely an attempt to buy one’s way into heaven.¹² On that condition, all church institutions and rituals diminish in value. No works on earth—no prayer, no ceremony, no church office, no pilgrimage, in short: none of the Catholic rituals can help attain salvation once they are exposed as calculating actions of a still sinful individual. “And so it [the soul] will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred offices,” wrote Luther.¹³ Responding to what he sees as worthless “good works,” Luther postulated that faith alone—*sola fide*—would lead to salvation. This argument was made possible by his distinction between “the Law” and “the Gospel,” which is crucial for Luther’s interpretation of Christianity as a whole.¹⁴

The “whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: precepts and

¹¹ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 416 (italics in the original).

¹² See Luther, “Concerning Christian Liberty,” 361: “But those who pretend to be justified by works are looking ... only to the works themselves; thinking that, if they can accomplish as many works and as great ones as possible, all is well with them, and they are justified.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁴ In his New Year’s sermon of 1532 on “The Distinction between the Law and the Gospel,” Luther said: “Both of them are the word of God: the Law (or the Ten Commandments) and the Gospel. Both were given by God: the Gospel originally in Paradise, the Law on Mt. Sinai. That is why it is so important to distinguish the two words properly and not mingle them together. Otherwise you will not be able to have or hold on to a correct understanding of either of them.” See Luther, “The Distinction between the Law and the Gospel,” 153.

promises,” wrote Luther.¹⁵ He pointed out that the laws that God had laid down in the Old Testament were by no means meant to be obeyed. In Luther’s conception, the ethical law has the “almost diabolical characteristic”¹⁶ that it does not show the way to God’s salvation, but mercilessly reveals to man his inability to live without guilt. “Never does man commit a more terrible sin than when he starts to feel and comprehend the law,” he wrote.¹⁷ At the nadir of his despair about his failure to fulfill God’s laws, man recognizes that he cannot achieve salvation on his own—“then, being truly humbled and brought to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself no resource for justification and salvation.”¹⁸ It is at this very moment that “that other part of Scripture” comes in—the gift of salvation through faith alone in the Gospel: “‘Lo! believe in Christ, in whom are promised to you grace, justification, peace, and liberty.’ All these things you shall have, if you believe, and shall be without them, if you do not believe.”¹⁹ Christians cannot earn their salvation through deeds and good works, but they can receive it as a gift from God “that had nothing to do with their own sinful actions.”²⁰ Luther sees Jesus’s words in the New Testament as a promise of this gift. However, abolishing the “works,” i.e. the link between salvation and good deeds on earth, does not mean that worldly deeds are completely irrelevant and must not be an “invitation to licentiousness.”²¹

From God’s granting of salvation, irrespective of good works, Luther

¹⁵ Luther, “Concerning Christian Liberty,” 349.

¹⁶ “... geradezu diabolische Eigenschaft”; Kittsteiner, *Die Entstehung des modernen Gewissens*, 163.

¹⁷ “Niemals sündigt ein Mensch schrecklicher als darin, wenn er anfängt, das Gesetz zu fühlen und zu begreifen.”

Luther, *Luther Deutsch*, Vol. 4, 298.

¹⁸ Luther, “Concerning Christian Liberty,” 349–50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁰ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 116.

²¹ Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 22, Vol. IV, 253.

concluded that the Christians were an elect people, following the Jewish tradition of the “chosen people.” All Christians “who believe on Christ are kings and priests in Christ,” he wrote.²² The idea of a universal priesthood of all believers comes from Judaism. When Luther quoted St. Peter—“Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people ... (1 Pet. ii. 9)”²³—he took his cue from the Book of Exodus: “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). It is almost an exact quotation, only the verb tense has changed: Whereas God’s law in the Old Testament simultaneously promises and demands the equality of all under the rule of God’s laws after the Israelites’ return to the Holy Land²⁴, St. Peter’s statement is no longer put forward as a demand for the future, but for the present: The Christians are in the Holy Land here and now, because Christ has come down to earth. Luther tears down the boundaries between laypeople and priests in order to turn all people into priests (though not into laypeople). For Luther, priests are not simply defined by the fact that they are “worthy to appear before God”²⁵ (which is an aspect of salvation): in their lives on earth, they also meet the highest ethical standards. Luther’s treatise on liberty formulates a comprehensive program of self-disciplining, which is close to what Max Weber describes as “worldly asceticism.”²⁶ In Weber’s words, “Sebastian Franck struck the central characteristic of this type of religion when he saw the significance of the Reformation in the fact that now every Christian had to be a monk all his life.”²⁷

²² Luther, “Concerning Christian Liberty,” 355.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 109.

²⁵ Luther, “Concerning Christian Liberty,” 356.

²⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 120.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

With Luther, the designation of the Christians as a “holy nation” of priests assumes not only ethical but also political significance, to the extent that Luther derives from it a vehement critique of the idea of “representation” in the context of church hierarchy—thus challenging this hierarchy on principle. For Luther, neither a bishop nor the Pope is a representative of the world beyond. “Therefore a priest should be nothing in Christendom but a functionary; as long as he holds his office, he has precedence of others; if he is deprived of it, he is a peasant or a citizen like the rest,” wrote Luther.²⁸ As a “functionary,” the bishop is not a representative (of Jesus), but only somebody who performs a task, an office, a service in the original meaning of the German word *Amt*.²⁹ Luther explicitly translated this definition to the political sphere:

Therefore the bishop's consecration is just as if in the name of the whole congregation he took one person out of the community, each member of which has equal power, and commanded him to exercise this power for the rest; in the same way as if ten brothers, co-heirs as king's sons, were to choose one from among them to rule over their inheritance, they would all of them still remain kings and have equal power, although one is ordered to govern.³⁰

Since this paragraph refers to the political role of the bishop, its explosive power for “worldly” politics becomes apparent only at second glance. The bishop here is not a representative of a *dignitas*, but merely “elected” from “out of the community” of equals—“each member of which has equal power”—who have assigned to him the task to “govern.” This assignment is not conferred by a

²⁸ Luther, “Address to the Christian Nobility,” 267.

²⁹ In its original sense, the word “Amt” means service, servitude (from the Old High German *ambaht*, which probably derives from the Celtic word *ambiaktos*, meaning servant, messenger). Seen this way, rule can also be understood as a service (the ruler as *minister omnium*). See Dreier, *Das kirchliche Amt*, 128.

³⁰ Luther, “Address to the Christian Nobility,” 266.

transcendent power, but by the community itself: They “command” one of their own to act “for the rest.” It seems obvious to transfer this analogy back to “worldly” politics: If *all* Christians are equal “brothers”—the political formula of “fraternity” in the French Revolution obviously had Christian roots—then they “remain kings and have equal power” also in a worldly sense and need no longer recognize a government they have not “chosen.” Even though Luther himself did not draw this conclusion, it explains the consistent affinity between the Protestant revolution and the political revolutions and uprisings that have accompanied it since the sixteenth century. The English Puritans, who beheaded King Charles I. in 1649, took their anti-monarchical fervor largely from a Protestant re-reading of the Bible, explicitly applying Luther’s rejection of representation to the political sphere.³¹ If one follows Hegel (as well as Villers and others), however, the Protestant skepticism about the idea of representation has also inspired revolutions that no longer have any direct link to Protestantism. To the present day, the fundamental rejection of representation has remained a dynamic principle of democracy—even though a democracy without representation has yet to be realized.

³¹ See Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*.

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