THE END OF POLITICS

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We are living in a world with growing complexities, and decreasing means and tools to cope with these complex challenges successfully. This observation will be challenged, probably, not by many observers.

But the reasons for governments, International Organizations, markets, and Civil Society Organizations all failing to find and implement more efficient solutions are contested.

Classical answers look at diverging national interests of nation states, insufficient capabilities of national leaders and decision makers, and information gaps. None of these assumptions is convincing in a word of weakened nation states and public choice approaches to bureaucratic interests; a diminished role of individual leaders due to democratic checks and balances, and overloaded agendas; and an overflow of information constituting a problem in itself.

Neo-classical explanations for suboptimal political solutions ion the level of nation states are related to collective action problems, and to free-rider behaviour of governments. These suggestions deserve serious attention. Still, they cannot explain why some international organizations and regimes are more efficient, than others.

Looking carefully at today's problems with addressing core political problems on Waltz's second (state) image, we have to develop a fresh look onto these problems. The following reflections are intended to provide such a new perspective.

The end of politics that sounds dramatic, and it is dramatic because politics, especially national politics, is pushing against ever narrower boundaries. This is a disturbing realization. It goes beyond the often discussed weariness with politics, and it has little to do with happily debated, more obvious questions concerning the suitability of the political players.

It has to do, rather, with whether politics in the traditional sense can be organized at all —and in the case that it cannot — with how societal integration can then continue to be achieved. The conclusion that politics is structurally inadequate can be traced to a cluster of six causes.

Let us first make a couple of preliminary observations. One, politics is defined here as strategic action. Not every decision, not every tinkering intervention can be termed politics in the strategic sense. In the [West German] Republic, contested issues such as rearmament and re-integration with the West, the politics of detente, the so-called counter-armament, perhaps even the introduction of the Euro were characterized by structural intervention and mid- to long-term perspectives. In contrast, the collapse of the GDR was an event that called for swift reactions. And the answers to the global financial crisis given so far by the state have been, relatively speaking, localized fire brigade actions to extinguish wide-area fires. These ad hoc reactions were probably necessary to avert even worse scenarios, but they certainly were not planned, strategic measures, let alone an indication of the "return of the state."

A second preliminary remark: The dominance enjoyed by the national states for the last 2000 years or so, particularly since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, is waning. Globalization has proven to be far more than a slogan or catch-phrase. A global, border-dissolving capitalism in itself generates flows that cross borders with relative ease and are difficult to contain and control through state action. This is true for financial and capital flows, as the crisis which broke out in 2008 has made more than clear, and it applies as well to flows of human beings, that is, to migration. For example, the national state which is still the strongest in the world

relative to others, the USA, has serious difficulties in dealing with migration across its southern border. In addition to financial and human flows, we are inundated with flows of content information from the Internet as well as the currents of entertainment (music, films, soaps, social networks). Here, too, governments literally come up against the limits of their control; this is true even of China with its "great Firewall." In short, politics no longer resemble strategic measures so much as belated and often futile attempts to extinguish raging fires, large and small.

The main issues concerning this evidence of ever weaker politics can be grasped in six arguments, which focus on the origins of this disturbing phenomenon.

One: the challenges to national politics become ever more complex, while policy makers react in an increasingly short-winded and simplistic way. Inner, "outer" and transnational influences on politics are difficult to separate from one another. That makes targeted action much harder than it was in the "good times" of Adenauer, Schmidt and Kohl, who are retrospectively so popular. Similarly, many political problems can no longer be handled in a relatively focused and sequenced manner. Instead they are seized upon from outside (by the media) and from within (by the party or campaign precinct) and addressed in rapid succession or crammed together on the current agenda. Politicians rarely trust themselves to set priorities and stick with them. The result is that there is no longer a purposeful blending of the challenges to be worked through. Politics is stifled by an administrative overload. Problems are patched up rather than solved. Little time remains to think through fundamental issues, to examine options, and to react strategically. Working through issues simultaneously and political multitasking lead to half-baked measures with a short half-life. One health policy reform may replace the preceding one, but the core problems remain. The threat of collapse of a state budget is postponed with billions from other, more stable countries, but the fundamental problem is not solved. Moreover, problems related to individual factors (demographics, families, taxes, integration, migration, genetic engineering) become ever more intertwined and complex. Yet they are met with an insufficiently complex fiddling around in the political sector.

Two: Politics becomes ever more strongly defined by irrelevant aspects: layers of media, election cycles, and domestic political trends of every sort. Since the introduction of the so-called dual systems in radio and television at the beginning of the 1980s, the separation between news and information on one side and entertainment on the other has been lost. News programs today, including those in public broadcasting, resemble MTV video clips of twenty years ago. Info- and politainment formats are dominant. In my seminars, recordings of political programs of a previous era — Werner H fer's "Fr hschoppen" and G nter Gaus's "ZurSache" — elicit a fascinated astonishment. But even the seminars themselves must follow the suspenseful arc taken from more recent early evening programming.

Many societal activities have long been defined at levels beyond and across national borders through the EU, the WTO, and the aforementioned global flows. These are met with a silent yet stark disinterest on the part of citizens. It is still difficult to find attractive platforms and time slots for the classic "foreign programming." Foreign news bureaus have been reduced through cost-cutting measures, including the foreign offices of the publicly funded broadcasters. In the area of Infotainment the talk shows of Will, Plasberg, Illner, Maischberger, Beckmann "international topics" are hard to find because the sovereign viewer, the citizen, clicks away from such programs. "Foreign politics" is hardly even a part of the politics within the country. The people don't understand it and they also don't want to hear about it anymore: no longer cushioned or mitigated through the "great narratives" of the Modernism or Socialism the complexity of the news creates fear. The politicians, according-

ly, avoid it. Does Frau Merkel no longer attempt to explain the meaning of the monetary union and of German aid? Yes, she does. But the citizens no longer want to hear it.

Three: All subsystems of the postmodern society are subject to acceleration, but the political system experiences it least of all. In other words, politics chases after the economic and social problems ever more out of breath, so to speak; the half-life of "reform" is ever shorter. The new products of the capital market, especially businesses concerned with the future derivatives, futures, CDOs and short sells and the profits connected with them, are difficult for policy-makers to grasp and even harder to contain effectively, particularly on the national level.

As explanation gives way to sound bite and the news becomes flashier, how should complex interactions of the financial sector be analyzed? In addition, there is the overload brought about by thousands of signals to which members of the functional elite are exposed every day: cell phones, tweets, electronic news (breaking news), social networks, exchange markets, search machines, countless advertising appeals, telephone and even traditional visits and meetings. All of that must somehow (the operative word is indeed *somehow*) be ordered, sorted, channeled or ignored. Processing it all is no longer possible.

Four: Representative democracies in particular (but not exclusively) get tangled up in seemingly endless voting procedures. Numerous formal and informal naysayers want to be tied in, ever more actors make claims to participation, and all involved parties are caught up in a multilevel interplay that simultaneously demands national and supranational negotiations. Political responses to strategic challenges (the aging population, the final crisis of the welfare state, deficiencies in the education system, obstacles to integration, threats to identity, the relative decline of the USA, the relative ascent of China, the momentum of the EU, and so forth) either never materialize at all, or occur in mini-steps, or with a very short-term effect.

Politics in a representative system (and in other systems as well) requires tedious voting, negotiations, integration. By the time a decision is made, the original problem has migrated or transformed itself elsewhere, or opinions have changed and the formal regulatory mechanisms are no longer effective (Stuttgart 21 is one example).

It often seems as if the desired democratic-theoretical enlightened discourse has been replaced by endless chatter, which as a rule is inadequately informed and too simplistic, but still manages to block or water down strategic political decisions. Added to that, in Germany especially, are not only a multitude of elections but also many election dates. Sixteen state elections, a Bundestag and Europe-wide election each and several important local elections keep politicians in a permanent condition of decision-inhibiting election stress. The media do their part too, as they too often raise banal personalities and regional topics to the federal level or stage polls everywhere over supposedly fundamental issues.

Five: there are blocks to learning that are difficult to overcome. That applies not only to political figures, of course, but for them it does seem to be especially consequential. The emerging and exceedingly fruitful vision between social sciences and life sciences is especially illuminating here. Evolutionary biology and neurophysiology point to conditions of social and political actions that are not conducive to learning. The findings concerning cognitive consistency indicate that individuals unconsciously admit, above all, the signals and information that confirm their existing positions and beliefs. Contrary signals are unsettling and are unconsciously filtered out this is not a good precondition for the learning process. So learning often takes place under conditions of external shock (such as that brought about by Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Lehmann Brothers, etc.). That is a costly form of learning, one that we can afford only to a limited degree.

Six: politics is noticeably in a survival mode rather than addressing itself to the solu-

tion of structural problems. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the structural debt burden of many nations by no means restricted to the so-called underdeveloped nations, rather now including the core of the OECD countries. The USA is so indebted, nationally and internationally, that they are hamstrung in their ability to negotiate within and across borders. Therefore the country that has up to now been the major world power is no longer able to play a hegemonic role. The obvious solution for any impartial observer, a solution that has been directly demanded by the Chinese government in an unfriendly way, consists of "living within one's own means" that is, to carry out massive austerity programs. However, in a representative democracy that is not possible elections will be lost, and each new government will avoid the same hard decisions and cuts, and on the same grounds, as those previously in power. Thus politics stands still, and the debt burden increases. The same effect can now be observed in Europe (as well as in Israel). In Ireland and Portugal, governments were ousted as austerity measures that could not achieve consensus domestically were imposed from outside; Spain and Greece can be expected to follow this pattern, sooner or later. The austerity programs required to achieve political stability would change the core of the welfare state model that has been developed over decades but which is no longer capable of winning majority support, and thereby in a democracy, is no longer politically feasible.

As we observe this cluster of issues or trends in the global picture, it is not so surprising that democratic politics has a structural performance problem. Democratic politics comes up against its limitations, and indeed we are thus approaching the "end of politics." It is also not easy to see how this trajectory can be changed, particularly in the framework of the traditional nation state.

Thus for better or worse, we must deal with the question of what, then, is to be done. If politics cannot satisfactorily meet the still high, although decreasing expectations of the electorate, then perhaps the expectations must change, that is, they must be scaled down. These questions of what to do should not be confused with a neoliberal program, which largely remains arrested in politics in a negative sense and which overestimates the capacity of markets. Perhaps politics now, after 2000 years as well as political science must make a stronger endeavor toward very different concepts.

In any case in the area of inter- and transnational relations, politics is subject to a fundamentally new order, a new cartography of political action that is compatible with global flows. Something similar is occurring in other political fields.

The problem is grounded in the modern idea, actually owed to the Renaissance, that humans are in a central role with regard to their destiny. For over 500 years, this role has been dynamically and inventively shaped and used. Modernity has been overwhelmingly a success story. But politics has thereby also approached an engineering-technical vision. That we have for a short time (since the "dialectic of the Enlightenment"), however, been able not only to sense, but also to know, that human action is structurally contingent, today (in the "society of risk") more than ever, the engineering concept has lost some of its luster. Other concepts may now be considered — the moderation of societal subsystems and transnational currents through politics, or the navigation of trends and currents — that at their core cannot be directly influenced. That presumes the readiness and capacity to bear continuing disorganization (it will persist) and to get by without a great, plausible narrative (it will no longer be provided).

There are no simple solutions. Better counsel never hurts but is restricted by the aforementioned conditions. The expectations for salvation of the civil society will be effective, if at all, only to a limited degree there is no superior solution waiting to be applied here. Problems of legitimacy also enter into the picture. Shifting responsibility to other levels appears more promising some to the cities (which in actuality is already hap-

pening—not nations but cities have become the nodes of *flows*), or to the often unjustly derided and despised European Union.

The debate over the "end of politics" will tolerate no delay. It will be uncomfortable, but it is unavoidable.