



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

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Opening of the Conference

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Dear friends of Academia Engelberg,
ladies and gentlemen

I would like to give you a warm welcome to the 9th Conference in Engelberg.

“Challenging Democracy” has been chosen as the topic for this year’s conference. It is not directly evident why we approach a national-political issue within the larger range of “Science and Trust”. The Foundation Council has made this decision knowing that the citizens’ participation in decision-making processes on state level faces new challenges or – more precisely – new difficulties, especially

- in times of globalization
- in the era of growing media possibilities of IT
- in a time when citizens have increasingly more difficulties to understand certain issues and options they have.

“Democracy” is one of the most abused terms. Recently, there was an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (11.9.2010) titled “Medwedew defends Russia’s democracy”: In the article, it was written that “the word “democracy” is used by *Medwedew* in an inflationary way. He could not find any defects in its Russian version – except the fact that it is young and immature. But according to him, the development pace of the Russian democracy is exactly correct. In an approving way, he stated that democracy in Russia is better today than five years ago.”

The disastrous people’s democracies in the former communist states embodied the perverted democracies.

If we go back to the beginning – to the highly praised democracy of Ancient Greece –and ask ourselves who were those who could exercise democratic rights back then, we receive the answer that rather few people possessed the invaluable gift of democratic participation in the time of *Pericles*. It was only the right of adult men fit for military service, born as free citizens of Athenian fathers and mothers. Moreover, those who did not have any properties were not granted full political rights. It should not be forgotten that the proportion between free citizens and slaves was one to four.

Swiss citizens automatically associate democracy with direct democracy even though there are several other forms of real democratic participation, as we learned in political education in school.



The very definition of democracy requires time and effort. But nevertheless, it is crucial to use the same definition of democracy in order to be able to hold a prolific discussion.

It is definitely true that we should not just look at *one* form of democracy as the correct one. But we should find the least common denominator and base our discussion on it.

This year, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Geneva philosopher *Jeanne Hersch*. In 1988, she reflected on the qualitative content of democracy in a pioneering article and wrote: "Citizens of democratic systems cannot expect the gift to receive their freedom. No political regime is able to provide this; the citizens have to cope with the task themselves. But what they can expect is a common order of life offering each of them the best conditions for their own search for freedom".

Democracy is a means to an end. It serves the purpose to protect the respect of the highest human secret: the individual freedom. It establishes ways and means to change institutions and laws peacefully without using violence.

Democracy is though a special form of peaceful arrangement of political systems. It requires time. Decision-making processes often include long-winded discussions to find suitable compromises between different convictions or interest groups and state institutions which control each other. But in today's globalized, mediatised and commercialized, modern societies, the speed with which ground-breaking news and innovations reach customers and citizens is of utmost importance. And due to this, the understanding for the specific rhythm of political processes is also disappearing in traditional democracies in the Western world, according to the German journalist *Richard Herzinger*. Even politics should offer rapidly available convenience products. In the media's perception, the half-life of attention towards political events is increasingly reduced. And this increases our feeling that politics lag behind real facts which have already been established somewhere else.

Democracy is a form of government which requires patience! Does it not stand in contradiction with all current trends? Now and then, there are voices claiming that we already live in era of "post-democracy". However, many factors which are a problem for democracy today, are, paradoxically, the consequence of comprehensive democratization of society, which mostly freed itself from traditional strict hierarchies: Increasing influence of lobbyist groups, entitlement mentality of societies, political sullenness, voting abstinence and others. But together with threats, chances to renew democracies also grow. Innovative approaches of self-organizations and punctual interference in political decision-making processes can be observed. Civil societies, basic initiatives, free voter and para-institutional groups and others are very popular. As a well



established political power, we face the dilemma that we should not consider such groups as inconvenient competitors which have to be kept away from the political field, but they should be regarded as possible partners to establish dialogue and cooperation, with the aim to encourage the citizens to participate more actively in the political life or even to more democratize the established political power.

Can these approaches shape the future of democracy?

Otfried Höffe focused on the future of democracy in two recent main works. On the one hand, he evaluated its weakness when it comes to the lack of long-term approaches and sustainability. On the other hand, he examined the question of whether a federal world republic should be established through a democratic revolution in order to cope with the increasing globalization. However, this should be done carefully, because each part of the world republic, each individual, has its own value which should not be put at risk during changes of the world order. I ask you: Is it just an unworldly utopia – even taking into account the clear call for action made by the manifold globalization processes and the limitation made by Prof. Höffe that a world order might only claim a subsidiary, federal rank?

Höffe comes to the conclusion that democracies are not very sustainable for the future. But they have their own resources which make it difficult or even impossible for non democracies to compete with. These resources include committed citizens, high education levels, cultural fundamentals and, last but not least, a political order which makes it possible to face new challenges and react in a flexible way. That is why democracies have a leading edge in the global competition of political systems. The enlightened, liberal and participative democracy enjoys an advantage in terms of legitimacy, science and economy which might further compensate the deficits of sustainability in the future.

Dear participants

The range of topics related to democracy is extensive and multifaceted. It is not possible to discuss it exhaustively during this conference. That is why we decided to focus on the following three areas: Science and Democracy, Freedom of Choice and the Future of Democracy in a globalized World.

We hope that this structure allows us to have in-depth discussions and reach conclusions in all three areas.



I wish you three inspiring days in the Alpine village of Engelberg and hope that there is enough time for social gathering and relaxing – apart from the scientific discussions.

I now declare the 9th Engelberg Conference open.