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Increasing and Decreasing Inequalities of Power: A Processual View. A Response to Cas Wouters, and a Proposal for Clarification

Nico Wilterdink *

Abstract: »Zunehmende und abnehmende Machtungleichheiten: eine prozesssoziologische Perspektive. Eine Antwort auf Cas Wouters und ein Vorschlag zur Verdeutlichung«. Responding to an essay by Cas Wouters in this journal, this article aims to clarify historical trends of increasing and decreasing power inequalities. It criticizes Wouters's rejection of the notion of "functional democratisation," his claim that "functional democratisation" was a dominant trend in the whole of human history, and his idea that this process results from long-term trends of differentiation and integration. This paper specifies when and under which conditions processes of functional democratisation did occur, and when and under which conditions developments in the direction of growing power inequality were dominant. Explanations for trends in these different directions are advanced. The paper's final section argues that for the past 40 years processes of both functional democratisation and functional de-democratisation can be discerned, which take place on different integration levels and along different axes.

Keywords: Power balances, interdependence, social inequalities, functional democratisation, functional de-democratisation, integration, Norbert Elias.

1. Introduction

Back in 1976, Cas Wouters published a paper in a Dutch sociological journal with the title "Is het civilisatieproces van richting veranderd?" ("Has the civilising process changed direction?"). The question had been raised by two other young sociologists, who had published an article in the same journal in which they observed that behavioural and emotional standards in the Netherlands since the 1950s had changed in a direction that seemed to contradict, at first sight, Elias's theory of the civilising process: moral prescriptions had become less strict, the social space to follow personal preferences had widened, and the

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recognition and acceptation of formerly forbidden emotions – such as sexual feelings outside the confines of marriage – had increased. The authors concluded that Elias’s theory allowed for different interpretations of these changes: in some respects, they could be regarded as a continuation of the civilising process; in other respects, they indicated a change of direction (Brinkgreve and Korzec 1976a, 1976b, 1979). In his critical response, Wouters (1976) rejected this ambiguous conclusion: the civilising process, he argued, has *not* changed direction. The observed changes were part of a new stage in this process, for which he introduced a new concept: *informalisation*. The relaxation of behavioural standards implied by informalisation did not signify a decrease of self-constraint but, on the contrary, built upon levels of self-constraint that had been attained in preceding stages of the civilising process, and signified a continuation of this process according to the criteria advanced by Elias (2012a): more even affect control, more social constraint toward self-constraint, diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties (see also Wouters 1977; Mennell 1989, 241-6).

In the subsequent decades, Wouters elaborated the notion of informalisation in a number of interesting and insightful articles and books based on the study of series of manner books in several countries (e.g., Wouters 2004, 2007). Again and again, he repeated, confirmed, and illustrated his thesis that the dominant tendency in Western societies since the end of the 19th century has been one of informalisation, a process in which the rules of everyday social interactions have become less strict, less rigid, more flexible, less bound to status differences, and more dependent on varying social situations. Through informalisation, the process of civilisation has continued in the same direction. The strength of this *oeuvre* is that it sticks to one big idea, which is elaborated in various ways and illustrated with numerous empirical examples.

More than 40 years after his first publication, Wouters (2020) in an article in this journal raises the same question again: “Have civilising processes changed direction?” And again, as was to be expected, the answer is negative. As he concludes in the final sentence, “the direction of the civilising process has continued” (2020, 332). Like before, informalisation is conceived of as the continuation of this process. But now, another concept is put in the centre, which is supposed to be immediately connected with informalisation: *functional democratisation*. Instead of dealing with changes in manners, behavioural standards, social interaction codes, and emotional controls, the article focuses on macrosocial changes in power structures.¹ Here, Wouters seeks another, less direct confirmation of his idea of an ongoing process of civilisation-and-informalisation – by relating it to “functional democratisation.” He seems to

¹ Earlier papers with similar arguments are Wouters (2016; 2019).

assume that if and only if functional democratisation is the dominant trend, informalisation and, by implication, civilisation will continue.²

While Wouters addresses important questions in this article, the way he deals with them leaves much to be desired. The article abounds with vague and unclear statements, unfair and ill-founded criticisms of other sociologists who share with him the Eliasian approach, and generalisations that are at odds with accepted historical and sociological knowledge. I will not deal with everything in his essay that is, in my view, unclear or incorrect. My criticism will focus successively on three points: 1) Wouters's rejection of the notion of functional *de*-democratisation; 2) his claim that functional democratisation is a long-term trend in the whole of human history; and 3) his explanation of processes of functional democratisation as "side effects" of differentiation and integration processes.

This article is not only a response to Wouters's essay. It aims to clarify and specify Elias's notion of functional democratisation, to elucidate historical processes of increasing and decreasing power inequalities, and to propose explanations for these processes on the basis of a figurational, processual perspective. The final section focuses on recent developments in which, as I argue, processes of functional democratisation and *de*-democratisation go together.

2. The Concepts of "Functional Democratisation" and "Functional De-Democratisation"

When Elias introduced the concept of "functional democratisation" in 1970, the processes to which it refers were visible in all Western societies. The preceding two decades had witnessed not only unprecedented economic growth, but also decreasing income and wealth inequality, the formation and extension of the welfare state, and the growing significance of emancipation movements of ethnic-racial minorities, women and youth groups. These processes of postwar democratisation and dehierarchisation were accelerations of a historical development in which, as Elias (2012b, 61) put it, "societies oligarchically ruled by

² I will not discuss this assumption here; this would require dealing with much-debated problems concerning the assessment and interpretation of processes of civilisation and informalisation (cf. Wilterdink 1984; Mennell 1989, 227-50; Wouters and Mennell 2015). The main question in this context, which Wouters (2020) does not answer clearly, is how functional democratisation and informalisation are interconnected. While he contends that functional democratisation is a dominant trend throughout human history (see below in the text), he regards informalisation as a phase in the civilising process that has become dominant only since the second half of the 19th century, after a preceding phase in which "formalisation" was dominant (Wouters 2020, 294). Accordingly, functional democratisation would not always and automatically bring about informalisation, but only from a certain stage of development.

the hereditary privileged were transformed into societies ruled by the recallable representatives of mass political parties.” In general terms, power differences within Western state-societies had diminished over the past centuries. Two interconnected aspects of this development were crucial: “the reduction of power differentials between governments and governed” and “the reduction of power differentials between different strata” (ibid., 61-3). “Functional democratisation” was the term that Elias proposed to refer to this “overall trend” of decreasing power differences.

Elias did not assume or suggest that this process would continue forever. Some ten to twenty years later, counter tendencies in Western societies became manifest. From the 1980s, income and wealth inequalities started to grow, labour unions lost members and bargaining power, social expenditures were reduced, taxes for the rich were lowered, and national governments increasingly tended to bend their policies in favour of the interests of big companies and capital owners. Referring to such changes, Stephen Menell (2007, 250-4, 311-4) introduced the concept of *functional de-democratisation* in his book on the society in which these changes were most apparent, the United States. Indeed, many studies (such as Hacker and Pierson 2010; Volscho and Kelly 2012; Milanovic 2019, 12-66; Stiglitz 2019; cf. Menell 2014) since the publication of this book have shown how processes of increasing economic power inequality and increasing political power inequality have reinforced one another in this society. In a slightly different way, Behrouz Alikhani (2014, 2017) distinguished “functional” democratisation and de-democratisation from “institutional” and “habitual” (de-)democratisation, and applied these concepts to different societies and historical episodes, including recent developments in the United States. I have used the concept of functional de-democratisation occasionally to refer to interconnected tendencies of increasing economic inequality and increasing political power inequality in the United States and other Western societies (Wilterdink 2016; 2017, 31).

One might expect that this extension of Eliasian theory would be welcomed, or at least accepted, by other sociologists who are interested in long-term social developments and work in the same theoretical tradition. Wouters, however, sharply criticises Menell and, to a lesser extent, Alikhani and me for our use of the concept of “functional de-democratisation.” The grounds for his criticism are not very clear. In any case, his objections are not empirical: like the criticised authors, Wouters recognises tendencies of growing social inequality in Western societies and beyond, and at the end of his paper he even speaks of “a reversal of democratisation” – “de-democratisation” (2020, 325). Yet he sticks to the idea that functional democratisation continues to be the dominant overall trend in history, and he goes so far as to reject the very notion of functional de-democratisation. It is not easy to understand why, but his paper suggests a number of reasons: a) the concept remains unclear and unspecified; b) if there is de-democratisation, it is not “functional”; c) the criticised authors adopt

a “western-centred perspective” (ibid., 305); and d) it is a “theoretical error” to suggest that the concept has the same explanatory power as “its counterpart of ‘functional democratisation’” (ibid., 306). All these reasons are, in my view, insufficient, and manifest an inflexible, dogmatic, and essentialist interpretation of Eliasian sociology. And, as is often the case, the disciple is more dogmatic than his master.

(a) Contrary to what Wouters suggests, the meaning of the concept of functional de-democratisation is as clear as that of its counterpart: it refers to a reversal of functional democratisation, that is, to trends of increasing power disparities. Such trends are manifested and indicated by growing social inequalities, such as economic inequalities of income, wealth and work conditions, political inequalities in legal rights and access to decision-making bodies, and status inequalities.³ In the figurational view, these social inequalities are conceived as manifestations and indications of “underlying” power differences (cf. Weber 1978, 926-55). Wouters remarks that “‘functional democratisation’ is compatible with increasing social inequality” (2020, 303). This is correct if one reads this as: “‘functional democratisation’ in certain respects is compatible with increasing social inequality in other respects.” With the same provisions, one can say that functional de-democratisation is compatible with decreasing social inequality. Trends of functional democratisation and functional de-democratisation may go together. The question is when, where, and how they actually go together.

To use both concepts fruitfully, they need empirical specification. Elias introduced the concept of functional democratisation in his book on the fundamentals of sociology, *Was ist Soziologie?*, arguing that the emergence of sociology was connected with a basic transformation of European societies in the direction of decreasing power disparities. This process of functional democratisation pertained to “the development of most European societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Elias 2012b, 60) or, in slightly different formulations, to “the more developed countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” or to “the direction of social development over the last two or three hundred years” (ibid., 62). While somewhat imprecise and not wholly consistent in his empirical references, Elias clearly refers here to *specific* societies in a *specific* historical period. In contrast, Wouters *unspecifies* the concept and blows it up to universal proportions (see section 3 below).

(b) “In what sense is this *de-democratisation functional*?” Wouters asks (2020, 305; italics in the original). The same question, which he does not address, can be asked about democratisation: in what sense is *democratisation functional*?

³ In another paper I deal more systematically and extensively with the criteria for assessing trends of functional democratisation and de-democratisation (Wilterdink 2020).

Why did Elias use the prefix “functional”? First, it was a way to distinguish the concept from democratisation in the narrower, political or institutional sense. Political or institutional democratisation is not “in contrast” with functional democratisation (as Wouters writes on p. 299), but one of its manifestations. In seeking to distinguish functional democratisation from political democratisation, Elias was very far from using the terms “function” and “functional” in the sense that was current in mainstream sociology at the time he was writing *Was ist Soziologie?* (1970), when “functionalism” was the dominant theoretical approach. He does not use the concept of function to mean activities or tendencies that serve to uphold and maintain the prevailing “social system.” Elias explicates that later in the book, after he has already introduced the term “functional democratisation” (Elias 2012b, 71 ff.). Here he points out that

the concept of function must be understood as a concept of *relationship*. We can only speak of social functions when referring to interdependences which constrain people to a greater or lesser extent. [...] To understand the concept of “function” in this way demonstrates its connection with power within human relationships. People or groups that have functions for each other exercise constraint over each other. Their potential for withholding from each other what they require is usually uneven, which means that the constraining power of one side is greater than that of the other. (Elias 2012b, 73; italics in original)

Thus, a specific reason for Elias to use the adjective “functional” in connection to democratisation was that it relates directly to changing power ratios in a social figuration. It points to the basic explanation: functional democratisation is rooted in changes in the *Funktionszusammenhänge*, the “functional nexuses” among interdependent people (Elias 2006a, 84-90; 2012b, 60-5). Functional democratisation occurs when less powerful groups become functionally more important for more powerful groups – when the relations of interdependence become stronger, less one-sided, and more reciprocal, and as a consequence, the power balances more evenly.

For exactly the same reasons, we can speak of functional *de*-democratisation. The prefix indicates that the process comprises much more than political or institutional de-democratisation, which is one of its possible manifestations. And second, functional de-democratisation is rooted in changes in the functional nexuses among interdependent people. It occurs when less powerful groups become functionally less important for more powerful groups, or when relatively powerful groups strengthen their functions with respect to less powerful groups. In this process, interdependencies become more one-sided and less reciprocal, and power relations more unequal. There is no reason to reserve the adjective “functional” only for processes of decreasing power differences, unless one defines “functional” – in line with sociological functionalism (Parsons 1951; Merton 1968) but contrary to the figurational view (Elias 2012b, 71-4, 121-2; see also Goudsblom 1977, 175-80) – as good for the social system, or as intrinsically good.

(c) The three criticised authors adopt, according to Wouters (2020, 305), “a largely western-centred perspective on globalisation”: “they ignore the possibility that, when industries, capital, and commerce were moved to cheap-labour countries, functional democratisation continued on the corresponding higher (global) level of integration.”

Far from ignoring this “possibility,” however, I have advanced it in several writings (though without using the term “functional democratisation”). The tenor of the quoted statement is quite similar to what I wrote in my article in *Historical Social Research* to which Wouters refers. I noticed there tendencies of functional de-democratisation within Western state-societies since the 1980s, but:

The picture is different when we look at socioeconomic inequalities on a global scale [...]. To put it schematically: increasing economic inequality *within* countries (in Western but also most non-Western) countries is accompanied by a tendency of *decreasing* economic inequality between countries (Milanovic 2016). Both tendencies can be plausibly related to globalisation: the extension of interdependencies at transnational and global levels. The relocation of labour-intensive manufacturing industries and the growth of investment flows from richer to poorer countries weakened the position of workers in the rich countries and contributed to economic growth in poorer regions, thereby narrowing the gap with richer countries. (Wilterdink 2017, 31-2)

Wouters ignores this passage, as he ignores my previous work to which it is related (e.g., Wilterdink 2000b, 2002).

If there is a tendency of functional democratisation on a global scale, that does not preclude, of course, tendencies of functional de-democratisation within Western state-societies. It is not “Western-centric” to focus on Western societies, as Elias did when he proposed the concept of functional democratisation to characterize modern developments in European societies, or as Mennell did when he advanced the idea that there were recent tendencies of functional de-democratisation in the United States and other Western societies. It is Western-centric to generalise from these societies to all human societies without serious study. Wouters does precisely that when he declares the processes of functional democratisation observed in the history of Western societies to be universal in the whole of human history.

(d) While decreasing social inequalities reflect “functional democratisation,” its counterpart “functional de-democratisation” cannot be used, according to Wouters (2020, 306), to explain increasing social inequalities: to “link the dubious concept of functional de-democratisation to the rise of social inequalities, suggesting that it has similar explanatory power as its counterpart of ‘functional democratisation’ is a theoretical error that stems mainly from a one-dimensional view of the connection between lengthening chains of interdependence and social equalisation.”

This is hard to follow. Wouters does not explain why he thinks that Mennell, Alikhani, or I have a “one-dimensional view of the connection between length-

ening chains of interdependence and social equalisation,” and what kind of multi-dimensional view he wants to put in its place. Nor does he make clear what this might have to do with a supposed lack of “explanatory power” of the concept of functional de-democratisation. In fact, I have advanced an explanation of the transition from a dominant trend of decreasing social inequality within Western state-societies (functional democratisation) to one of increasing inequality (functional de-democratisation) that rests precisely on the assumption that there is *not* a “one-dimensional” connection between lengthening chains of interdependence and social equalisation or disequalisation. Drawing on Elias’s insights and concepts, I developed the thesis that the lengthening and intensification of chains of interdependence within Western state-societies since the 19th century led to *decreasing* inequalities, but that the subsequent lengthening and intensification of chains of interdependence at transnational and global levels that took the upper hand in the last quarter of the 20th century led to the weakening of interdependencies within these states and, as a consequence, to *increasing* inequalities at that level (Wilterdink 1993; 1995; 2000a; 2016; 2017, 30-1; cf. Mennell 2007, 253-4; 2014). While some remarks in Wouters’s paper come close to this line of argumentation, he does not discuss it or even refer to it.⁴ I will return to this in the last section.

3. Functional Democratisation: When and Where?

Wouters presents in his article the bold idea that functional democratisation has been a dominant trend throughout human history. “Notwithstanding counter movements such as the disintegration of the Roman Empire into the Dark Ages,” he writes, “processes of differentiation, integration, and functional democratisation have been dominant over the whole of human history, and with renewed strength and clarity from the 16th century onwards” (Wouters 2020, 308). Here and at other places, he mentions differentiation, integration and functional democratisation in the same breath, suggesting that these three processes are inherently interconnected, so that differentiation and integration *imply* functional democratisation. This is an erroneous assumption, as I will explain in the next section.

⁴ Thus, in reference to Mennell (2014) Wouters (2020, 304) remarks: “The observation that increasing global interdependence coincides with growing inequality in nation-states seems accurate, at least in some states. But Mennell backs this up with a rather casual moral argument.” However, Mennell does not merely contend that increasing global interdependence “coincides” with growing inequality in nation-states, but argues that there is causal connection between the two. And he backs this up not with a “rather casual moral argument” but with a sociological argument in which he explicitly refers to my work (Wilterdink 2000a).

There is no empirical evidence that functional democratisation is a dominant long-term trend in the whole of human history. On the contrary, there is a lot of evidence that power differences within and between human societies *grew larger* in the course of time, particularly since the beginnings of agriculture around 11,000 years ago.⁵ In the transition from hunting-gathering societies to agrarian societies, and in the development from relatively simple to more complex agrarian societies, inequalities of power, privileges, and social status increased. Systems of stratification came to develop in which power distances between rulers and ruled, landowners and peasants, rich and poor people, higher and lower status groups widened.⁶ It was also in agrarian societies that slavery, the institution in which power inequality was maximised, became widespread.

All this is nothing new. It is standard knowledge, presented and elaborated in numerous historical overviews (Mann 1986; Christian 2004), sociological textbooks (Lenski, Nolan, and Lenski 1995), books on social evolution (Sanderson and Alderson 2005) and stratification (Lenski 1966), and treatises on long-term trends in human history (Goudsblom 1996a). It is confirmed again and again by archaeological and historical research (Scheidel 2017). While there are disagreements about interpretations and specificities, there is consensus among scholars about the overall direction of the long-term trend. It is, of course, legitimate to propose a radical counter thesis, but it is not very productive to do so without giving any empirical evidence. Wouters does not give such evidence.

Processes of functional democratisation that did occur before the modern era can best be understood as temporary counter movements, which took place under specific conditions. The most famous example of such a movement is what happened in the region and period from which the word “democracy” stems: Ancient Greece from about 600 to 350 BCE. In Athens and other city-states, citizens acquired equal rights, got a say in political and judicial decision-making, and received payments in land and money for state-services, which contributed to a more equal distribution of wealth. This move toward “democracy” can only be understood in the context of intense competitive struggles,

⁵ One might call this “functional de-democratisation,” but it is better, I think, to reserve this term for trends of growing power differences that succeed functional democratisation.

⁶ Wouters (2020) took notice of the statement in my *HSR* article that since the emergence of agriculture, power differentials within and between societies increased (Wilterdink 2017, 29). He comments: “This perspective places too much emphasis on growing inequality, thereby idealising previous societies and their simpler organisations as exhibiting greater equality” (Wouters 2020, 308, note 10). However, it is not an “idealisation” of previous, less differentiated societies to observe that they were relatively egalitarian. By contending that I place “too much emphasis on growing inequality,” Wouters apparently recognizes that there *was* such a trend, but also suggests that there was yet another, contrary trend of diminishing inequality – without giving a clue to what this trend might entail, how it could be empirically assessed, or how the two contrary trends might go together.

often of a violent nature, among the city-states and with other powers (such as the Persian Empire), which required a high degree of military mobilisation among the adult male inhabitants. Their rights were connected with the obligation to fight for their community (Scheidel 2017, 188-99). Given the strong inter-state competition and the high military participation ratio (Andreski 1954), the interdependencies among the citizens of each city-state were strong and fairly reciprocal, resulting in relatively equal power balances. While cities like Athens around 400 BCE were in certain respects more “democratic” than liberal democracies today, as citizens had more direct access to political decision-making, in other respects this democracy was very limited according to modern standards, since women, slaves and foreigners were excluded from citizens’ rights. When the city-states lost autonomy as they were incorporated into larger state structures (from 146 BCE in the Roman Empire) these limited forms of democracy disappeared, and social inequalities started to grow again.

Similar moves of temporary and limited functional democratisation can be found in other places and periods. Thus, in the towns in mediaeval Western Europe, which were formed and expanded after 1000 CE and acquired a high degree of political autonomy due to feudal fragmentation (Elias 2012a, 224-58), citizens participated in political decision-making in various ways, such as through representative city councils, guild organisations, and the election of urban office-holders (Prak 2018, esp. 63 ff.). Sooner or later, however, these forms of partial urban democracy were undermined by state centralisation from without, oligarchisation from within, or a combination of both. Political de-democratisation at the local level usually went hand in hand with growing economic inequality – for example in the city-states of Northern and Middle Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries and in the cities of Holland in the 17th and 18th centuries, where poverty among the lower classes increased (van Bavel 2016, 97-207).

The process of functional democratisation in Western societies to which Elias referred when he introduced the concept was more enduring and on a much larger scale. But when did it start? It is difficult to answer this question. As noted, Elias was somewhat vague about it. In a paper on the “sociogenesis of sociology” he spoke of “a process of increasing democratisation” which “had started far back in the history of European societies” and which after the French Revolution “reached a stage where no section of society remained unaffected by it” (Elias 1984, 48). In his *magnum opus* on the civilising process in Europe he pointed out that “increasing constraints on the upper class” were conditioned by “increasing pressures from below.” Since the late Middle Ages the urban bourgeoisie had won power in relation to the nobility, who therefore felt increasing pressures to uphold their superior status through further refinement of manners (Elias 2012a, 464-8). As Elias put it in *The Court Society*, a shift in the direction of a loss of power of “the traditional monopoly elites” can be observed

not only in the period of manifest democratisation in conjunction with advancing industrialisation, but, in rudimentary form as a kind of latent democratisation, [already] in societies of the type of the *ancien régime*, especially in conjunction with the commercialisation that preceded industrialisation. (Elias 2006b, 286; 2002, 448)

Yet it is questionable, in my view, to conclude that overall functional democratisation was the dominant trend in Western Europe in this early modern period. The upper layers of the bourgeoisie – merchants, bankers, urban magistrates, lawyers, high civil servants – won power not only in relation to the nobility, but also with respect to less privileged segments of the population, the peasants, craftsmen, labourers, and their families. Whereas inequalities between the traditional upper class and the upcoming commercial elite diminished, differences of power and privilege between these dominant strata and the rest of the population widened. According to studies of different European cities and regions, economic inequalities increased with the extension of markets, monetarisation and urbanisation (Soltow and van Zanden 1998; van Bavel 2016; Scheidel 2017, 91-101). Merchants and wealthy capital owners stimulated these developments and profited from them, whereas the incomes of peasants and small farmers, craftsmen, and wage workers stagnated or declined. The relations of interdependence between these categories became more one-sided and less reciprocal, power balances more uneven. While the French Revolution was a revolt in the name of “the people” uniting different classes against the monarchy and the court nobility, it resulted in only a limited and short-time levelling of material living conditions. The revolution marked the transition to the new capitalist regime in France and other countries of the European continent (in Britain, this change took off earlier and was more gradual) in which the principle of equality before the law combined with a “proprietary” ideology which allowed for further increases of wealth and income inequality (Piketty 2020, 99-200). The Industrial Revolution from the late 18th century provided new opportunities of wealth accumulation to entrepreneurs and the owners of land and capital, whereas the living and labour conditions of the working classes worsened (Thompson 1968). It was only in the second half of the 19th century with further industrialisation that these conditions started to improve considerably, both absolutely and relative to other classes. It was from this period onwards that we may speak of an overall process of functional democratisation within Western state-societies, which remained the dominant trend until about 1980.

In short, the development of power structures and social inequalities in Western Europe since the 16th century was not one of unequivocal “functional democratisation,” let alone one of functional democratisation “with renewed strength and clarity,” as Wouters (2020, 308) writes. If this does not hold true for Western Europe, it is even much further removed from reality in the world as a whole. The 15th and 16th centuries witnessed the beginnings of the Euro-

pean expansion, which, through the combination of trade and violent conquest, created enormous inequalities on a global scale. It included the colonisation of vast territories in America, Asia, and Africa, and the annihilation, subjugation and exploitation of untold numbers of people in these areas (Diamond 1997; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 245-73). Part of this evolving “modern world-system” (Wallerstein 1974) was the trading and shipping of millions of slaves from Africa to the Americas and forcing them – if they had survived the journey over the Ocean – to work on plantations, where exploitation based on physical violence was driven to the utmost extremes (Meltzer 1993 II, 25-255). Coercive and extreme exploitation was by no means limited to slave labour on American plantations. A relatively late instance was the creation of the colony of “Congo Free State” in Central Africa by the Belgian King Leopold II in 1885, where indigenous people were forced to work on rubber plantations, and routinely killed or mutilated if they did not attain the requested production quotas (Breman 1990; Blom 2008, 92-121). Around 1900, as a result of the growing Western dominance in the world since the 16th century, global power inequalities were greater than ever before.

This illustrates that power inequality trends on different integration levels can go in different directions. Whereas trends of functional democratisation became dominant at the level of nation-states in Western Europe and North America in the 19th century, the growth of power inequalities continued at the global level, and even attained new intensity at the end of the century.

As to functional democratisation within Western state-societies, we may distinguish three phases. The *first phase*, from about the middle of the 19th century until the outbreak of the First World War, was characterised by a gradual (though limited) emancipation of the working classes, the introduction of mass politics, and the extension of state activities. In this period, parliamentary power in most states was strengthened, the franchise was extended, political parties representing the interests of lower and middle classes were formed, labour unions acquired bargaining power, working conditions and working hours were regulated, general public education was introduced, and pension schemes, insurances for employees, and state-guaranteed social provisions were set up (de Swaan 1988). It was also a period of intense rivalries and growing tensions between European states, resulting in the First World War.

The outbreak of this war marked the beginning of the *second phase* (1914-1945), characterised by large-scale collective violence, deep social and economic crises, and, at the same time, accelerating trends of functional democratisation. In this “age of extremes,” the two world wars made people within each of the involved nation-states more mutually interdependent than ever before, bringing about more even power balances between social classes. One indication of this development is the strong decrease of income and wealth inequalities in this period (Piketty 2014). The Great Depression of the 1930s also contributed to this levelling process. Everywhere, governmental control was

extended, aimed at the mobilisation, cooperation and loyalty of the whole national population. In Western liberal democracies, reforms to that purpose – such as higher and more progressive taxes – contributed to diminishing class inequalities.

More dramatic transformations took place in Russia, where the revolution of 1917 established a new order based on a radical communist ideology, and in countries in Southern and Central Europe, where fascist regimes took power in the 1920s and 1930s. The revolutionary transition from the tsarist Russian empire to the Soviet Union in 1917-1921 brought the elimination of the aristocracy and the capital-owning bourgeoisie and a far-reaching levelling of material living conditions, carried through by a central government that effectively crushed all opposition and monopolised not only the means of violence, but also the means of production and the means of orientation (Skocpol 1979, 206-35). Functional democratisation as indicated by economic inequalities went hand in hand with an enormous concentration of political power.

A comparable “totalitarian” pattern, in spite of all differences, could be found in fascist regimes. German National Socialism, in particular, combined an anti-democratic and anti-liberal stance with egalitarian and “socialist” elements, stressing authoritarian leadership and the superiority of the national we-group on the one hand, and the unity, mutual solidarity and basic equality of all members of that we-group on the other. The Nazi regime carried forward the break with the monarchical-aristocratic regime that had started with the Weimar Republic and took further steps toward a “classless” national society, while excluding and violently persecuting minorities who were defined as not belonging to the national we-group (van Doorn 2007). It is difficult to characterise this regime – just like the Soviet regime – in terms of either functional democratisation or de-democratisation, as it contained elements of both.

The *third phase* (1945-1980) that started with the end of the Second World War was characterised by strong tensions between the liberal-democratic-capitalist “West” (including the new Federal Republic of Germany) and the communist “East,” respectively under the leadership of the new “superpowers,” the United States and the Soviet Union. For the countries of the West it was a period of unprecedented economic growth and growing prosperity, in which income and wealth inequalities were further reduced, liberal-democratic institutions were consolidated, and welfare state provisions expanded, guaranteeing a high degree of material security for large masses of the population. For the first time in history, the overwhelming majority of the population in Western countries attained a standard of living far above subsistence level, consuming “luxury” goods that only the well-to-do could afford in previous times. Internationally, European states had lost power after the two devastating wars, which paved the way for political independence of the colonies. This decolonisation can be regarded as functional democratisation on an international scale, as Wouters (2020, 313) rightly remarks. In this same period however, international eco-

conomic inequality as measured by per-capita national income further increased (Bourguignon and Morrison 2002). In economic terms, Western populations as a whole developed into a global upper class with a standard of living far above that of the large majority of the population of poorer countries.

How can these various tendencies of functional democratisation and de-democratisation, decreasing and increasing power disparities be explained? It would be beyond the scope of this article to formulate an answer that suggests anything like completeness. In the next section, I will focus on the problems of explanation raised by Wouters's essay, critically discussing his proposition that processes of functional democratisation are "side effects" of social differentiation and integration.

4. Differentiation, Integration, and Changing Power Balances

When Elias introduced the concept of functional democratisation as a crucial aspect of the development of Western societies over the past centuries, he connected it with processes of differentiation and integration:

Central to this whole social transformation have been impulses towards growing specialisation or differentiation in all social activities. Corresponding to these have been impulses towards integration of the specialised activities [...]. Because of their particular specialised functions, all groups and individuals become more and more functionally dependent on more and more others. Chains of interdependence become more differentiated and grow longer; consequently they become more opaque and, for any single group or individual, more uncontrollable. (Elias 2012b, 63-64)

With these statements Elias probably did not pretend to give a full explanation of functional democratisation, though he may have given this impression to readers. In his essay "Towards a theory of social processes" he put forward a number of interconnected long-term trends that have been dominant in the whole of human history. Among them is functional differentiation, a "continuous trend which, despite numerous regressions and counter-trends, is observable as [a] dominant trend [...] from the earliest times of humankind to our own" (Elias 2009, 28). Complementary to this is "the long-term trend towards the integration of smaller social units [...] into larger and larger integration-units" (ibid., 32). Functional democratisation is not mentioned in this context.

Functional democratisation is not a process on the same level of generality as differentiation and integration, and the three are not intrinsically interconnected. The question then is, under which specific conditions are they interrelated? Or, in more general terms, how are long-term processes of differentia-

tion and integration connected with changes in power inequalities in the direction of increase or decrease?⁷

Rather than assuming that functional democratisation, or decreasing power differentials, is a corollary of differentiation and integration there is more to say for the opposite thesis: differentiation and integration are fundamental to *increasing* power differences. This is quite evident for the long-term trend of growing power inequalities since the introduction of agriculture, noted in the previous section. With the transition from hunting and gathering to farming and husbandry as the basis of food production, larger and more productive societies came into existence, in which both “horizontal” and “vertical” differentiation took place – division of labour between people who specialised in different productive activities, and growing differences of power, property, and prestige. Some people in these societies specialised in activities with which they extracted production surplus from the food producers and could accumulate power resources. Among the powerful and privileged groups were priests, who specialised in religious knowledge and rituals, and warriors, who specialised in the use of force based on the possession of weapons (Goudsblom 1996b). Warriors who exercised regular power in a given territory became the rulers of states, levying taxes or tributes from the subjected population. With the growth of markets in connection with the growing division of labour, some merchants too were able to acquire considerable amounts of property, which served as a power resource for further wealth accumulation. While these groups profited from the growth of networks of interdependence – integration – they also often actively contributed to it. Priests did so by spreading religious beliefs and practices (particularly since the invention of writing), warriors by military conquests, merchants by establishing long-distance trade relations (McNeill and McNeill 2003).

While processes of functional differentiation, integration and stratification – that is, growing differences of power, property, and prestige – were closely intertwined during large parts of human history, this does not mean that the

⁷ In a note, Wouters quotes my statement “If there is a connection between functional differentiation and growing networks of interdependence on the one hand and decreasing inequality of power and privileges on the other, it is apparently valid for only specific historical periods under specific conditions” (Wilterdink 2017, 29). He then comments: “The word ‘only’ suggests a deficiency, but a social science that aims for timeless universal truths is surely deficient. Social developments and connections can only [*sic*] be understood and explained from their specific historical period and specific conditions” (Wouters 2020, 305, note 9). First, I do not think that a social science that aims for timeless universal truths is “surely deficient”; it is perfectly legitimate and even inevitable that social scientists make statements on the highest level of generality. Second, it seems that Wouters claims a “timeless universal truth” by suggesting that differentiation and integration always and everywhere implicate functional democratisation. Third, as I try to make clear in this paper, it is precisely my aim to understand and explain processes of functional democratisation “from their specific historical period and their specific conditions.”

first two processes always and automatically lead to the third. Differentiation does not necessarily entail hierarchisation or stratification. Integration can have both equalising and disequalising effects.

It is particularly the concept of “integration” that needs clarification, since it has various, mostly vague meanings and strong positive normative connotations. It was a core concept in sociological functionalism, in which it was more or less equated with social order (Parsons 1951, esp. 36-7). In present-day popular and political discourse, the concept usually refers to ethnic minorities; a minority is regarded as “integrated” into the national society to the extent that its members behave like “normal” citizens – have regular work, do not drop out from school, have frequent contacts with non-minority members of the society, participate in non-minority institutions, and have taken over the culture (language, norms, customs) prevalent in the wider society. “Lack of integration” is defined as a problem. In Elias’s non-normative processual view, “integration” refers to processes by which more people over larger distances become more interdependent; or, in other words, to the growth and increasing density of networks of interdependence.

This is an acceptable terminology, but it is also problematic in view of the positive connotations of the term “integration,” which may easily lead to confusion. It is not far-fetched to suppose that Wouters has fallen prey to it. When integration is good, it must implicate developments that are regarded as good – civilisation and informalisation, functional democratisation and decrease of inequalities. Increase of power inequalities can then be only understood as resulting from *deviations* from integration – as “disintegration”⁸ or “defunctionalisation”⁹ (Wouters 2020, 306-12, 332). Actually, these “deviations” can have the effect of a decrease of power differences (see notes 8 and 9). And it is not difficult to see that integration in the broad, Eliasian, non-normative sense can lead to an increase of power inequalities – if one keeps in mind that “more interdependence” does not necessarily mean more reciprocal or mutual interde-

⁸ See, for example, Wouters’s assertion, quoted in the text, that functional democratisation was among the dominant trends in human history “notwithstanding counter movements such as the disintegration of the Roman Empire into the Dark Ages.” Actually, inequalities of power and wealth in the Roman Empire were near the possible maximum, and with its disintegration these inequalities diminished (Scheidel 2017, 264-9).

⁹ Defunctionalisation, or loss of functions of a particular group, may lead to either increasing or decreasing power inequality, depending on the initial power position of that group: when a group with little power resources loses functions (such as the handloom weavers in industrialising England around 1800), this results in a growth of power inequality in relation to more powerful groups; when, on the other hand, the group that loses functions is relatively powerful, this “defunctionalisation” will result in decreasing power differences in relation to other, initially less powerful groups. An example of the latter, described by Tocqueville (1967[1856]), is the loss of functions of the land-owning nobility in the French *ancien régime* and the concomitant weakening of its power position with respect to the bourgeoisie.

pendence, but may involve the extension and strengthening of one-sided, highly a-symmetrical interdependency relations.

A clear example is the integration of larger groups of people into an expanding state territory through military conquest. In this way, long chains of strongly one-sided and highly a-symmetrical interdependence are established, implying the extension of very uneven power relations. Thus, the military expansion of agrarian empires – the Chinese, the Roman, the Ottoman Empire, to mention a few – brought enormous inequalities of power and wealth within these vast territories. Another example, mentioned above, is the expansion of European power since the late 15th century through the combination of trade and force. Increasing numbers of people all over the world were integrated into an expanding global figuration dominated by European merchants, capital owners, and political rulers in which inequalities sharply increased.

How are, then, changes in the direction of *diminishing* power differences explained? The historical instances of temporary and limited functional democratisation that I referred to can be understood in connection with processes of both integration and disintegration. In Ancient Greece, the disintegration of the kingdoms of what is known as the Mycenaean civilisation since about 1200 BCE prepared the ground for the emergence of hundreds of politically autonomous city-states which developed relatively egalitarian power relations among the “free” male members of these local societies (Scheidel 2017, 188-9, 270-4). As pointed out, crucial conditions for this partial democratisation were strong inter-state competition and a concomitant high degree of military mobilisation in each of the city-states. The competitive pressures towards integration in these communities took the form of intense relations of mutual interdependence among the citizens, leading to relatively even power balances among them. When these small political units were integrated into larger states, the interdependencies within these communities became weaker and less reciprocal, resulting in growing inequality.

Something similar could be said about the partial democratisation in mediæval towns in Europe. Their emergence as communities with some degree of political autonomy resulted from the disintegration of the empire that had been formed in the reign of Charlemagne, followed by increasing division of labour (functional differentiation) and growth of trade (market integration) in which the towns had a central role (Elias 2012a, 224 ff.). Here too, competition between urban communities – though less violent than in the case of Ancient Greece – and conflicts with other powers (noble warriors in particular) stimulated strong and relatively symmetrical interdependencies within these communities. In both cases, it was not “integration” as such that was conducive to functional democratisation, but integration of a specific nature and on a specific level – within relatively small, dense, clearly bounded local communities that were confronted with strong competitive pressures.

The processes of integration that were conducive to trends of functional democratisation within Western nation-states from the 19th century show similarities as well as differences with these historical cases. Like then, these processes took place within bounded communities that strongly competed with one another. But the scale was very different: the communities were now national states that comprised many millions of people living in territories of tens of thousands of square miles. Integration on this scale involved the lengthening and intensification of chains of interdependence through commercialisation, industrialisation, increasing geographical mobility (facilitated by such technological innovations as trains and motor cars), increasing long-distance communication, and state bureaucratisation. While these processes, except the last one, also occurred on international and global scales, they were more intense within the borders of the industrialising nation-states. Thus, industrial firms in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century were usually “national” firms in the sense that they were located in one country and the owners, managers, and employees of the firm were citizens of that same country, which also constituted the firm’s primary sales’ market. An important driving force for national interdependencies to become not only stronger but also more mutual and reciprocal was the intense and increasing economic, political and military competition between the industrialising nation-states. Inter-state competition put increasing pressure on national governments and leading groups to discipline and mobilise the whole national population for national prosperity and power. With these efforts, governments and private organisations extended their control, but in turn became more dependent on the masses of the population they aimed to control. In other words, functional democratisation was strongly connected with increasing international tensions, accompanied and reinforced by intense national we-feelings and fiery nationalism (cf. Elias 2010, 184-8). One of its manifestations was the (re-)introduction of general military conscription in most European states in the second half of the 19th century, which extended government control but also made the government more dependent on armed citizens (Andreski 1954). In other respects too, increasing government control, bureaucratic regulation and disciplinary efforts on the part of leading groups – compulsory public education, “civilising offensives” (Flint et al. 2015), regulation of working conditions and working hours – went hand in hand with the growth of more mutual, less one-sided interdependencies between governments and governed, dominant and dominated classes. This was manifested in the extension of citizenship rights (Marshall 1963), including the right to vote for, and to be voted in, political bodies with decision-making power.

All this took place in what I called the first phase of functional democratisation in Western nation-states, from the second half of the 19th century to the outbreak of the First World War. In the second phase (1914-1945), the rivalry between European states culminated into two “total” wars in which all groups of the population of the belligerent nation-states were involved. The pressures

toward more reciprocal interdependencies on a national scale reached a climax in this period, resulting in accelerated trends of functional democratisation. In all European states – as well as, to a lesser extent, the United States – class inequalities strongly diminished in this period. In the third, postwar phase, pressures toward national integration on a reciprocal basis remained strong. There was a commonly felt urgency to “rebuild” the damaged national economies and to restore national industries. Another kind of pressure came from the “Cold War” tensions between the Western countries under US leadership and the Soviet bloc. Moreover, strong economic growth enabled governments to build a generous welfare state with equalising effects on disposable incomes.

These conditions in favour of functional democratisation have weakened since the 1970s. Industrial companies that had been national became multi- and transnational, spreading their investments and production facilities over different countries in the world. Cold War tensions became weaker and finally disappeared. And the costs of welfare state provisions expanded to such a degree that they evoked increasing resistance, particularly among economically privileged and powerful groups. These changes paved the way for the tendencies of functional de-democratisation that became manifest from the 1980s.

5. Back to the Present

In the last two sections of his article, Wouters (2020, 320-32) presents his ideas about recent developments in the world, the present state of affairs, and the future. This is perhaps the most interesting part of his essay, though it is quite unsystematic and very selective. In this final section I will try to give, in very broad outlines, a somewhat more systematic and inclusive view.

As noted, Wouters recognises a growth of inequalities during the past few decades. He relates this, correctly I think, to a shift in the balance of power between state politicians and business people in favour of the latter. This seems to be true for at least Western state-societies. But how is this shift related to globalisation? Though the word “globalisation” is part of the title of Wouters’s article, he does not say much about it.

Globalisation can be regarded as a continuation of the long-term process of integration – the lengthening and intensification of chains of interdependence on a global scale. This process accelerated in the 1970s, when cross-border investments and financial flows grew precipitously and industrial companies became more and more transnational, relocating parts of their production to low-wage countries (Dicken 1992). In this same decade, China started its reforms toward a capitalist and export-oriented economy. The fall of communist regimes in the area of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe around 1990 integrated these countries too into the capitalist world-economy. This whole development was instigated by private companies as well as national governments

and intergovernmental bodies, including the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and, on the regional level, the European Union. It was laid down in numerous trade agreements that gave freedom to cross-border capital movements and protected investments abroad, and it was greatly facilitated by technological innovations in information, communication, and transport. Neo-liberalism, as it came to be called, was the dominant ideology that legitimated these changes by proclaiming that free, minimally regulated markets would guarantee growing prosperity for everyone.

As a consequence of this process – in combination with the weakening of the pressures toward national integration noted above – inter-class interdependencies within Western national states became weaker and more one-sided. Owners and managers of transnational corporations and investments funds won power in relation to the majority of workers who remained much more tied to the nation-state. This shift was manifested in the weakening of labour unions (in terms of membership and bargaining power), the growing share of capital income and the decreasing share of labour income in national income, the increase of income and wealth inequality, and the strong growth in the number of “flexible” jobs with fluctuating and insecure incomes. Capital owners and company managers increased their power and autonomy in relation to national governments, which became more dependent on them for nation-wide prosperity and employment, and were increasingly inclined to adapt to their wishes and interests. One manifestation of this pro-business and pro-market orientation was the lowering of tax rates for corporations, entrepreneurs, capital owners and high-income earners since the 1980s in all Western countries (Piketty 2020, 448-9, 549-55). Political parties that claimed to represent the interests of the underprivileged classes – such as the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom or the Social Democratic Parties on the European continent – largely supported or even initiated such policies, severing or weakening their ties with labour unions. The far-reaching deregulation and globalisation of financial markets made investors and money traders more independent from controlling agencies and enhanced the opportunities for spectacular enrichment through financial operations, including tax evasion. It is apt to conceptualize this whole multi-faceted development as “functional de-democratisation,” as it represents a reversal of the previous dominant trend of functional democratisation and can be explained from the same theoretical perspective.

Yet that does not mean that there has been a complete reversal to functional de-democratisation in all respects and at all levels. The same processes of globalisation that had a weakening effect on inter-class interdependencies in Western state-societies tended to strengthen transnational interdependencies and to make them less one-sided, since these processes involved the transfer of technological, commercial, and organisational knowledge. The opening of markets in poorer countries provided new opportunities not only for Western (and Japa-

nese) companies, but also for native entrepreneurs. Whereas economic growth in Western countries slowed down, it speeded up in populous Asian countries such as, most notably, China and, to a lesser extent, India. The result is an overall decrease of economic inequality between countries since the 1980s, though with strong regional variations. At the same time, economic inequality within most countries increased.¹⁰ Among the “winners of globalisation” were not only the rich all over the world, but also broad middle groups in relatively poor countries, particularly in Asia; among the “losers” were the poor in the poorest countries and the working and lower-middle classes in the rich Western countries (Milanovic 2016). All in all, Western dominance in the world-economy diminished during the past 40 years, following the decline of European political power in the post-war years of decolonisation.

Related to this global development and in connection with preceding functional democratisation, power inequalities within Western societies along the axis of race and ethnicity tended to diminish. In the United States, this is a recent phase in a long, slow, and conflict-ridden development that started with the abolition of slavery after the Civil War in 1865. Official racial segregation, backed by legal rules and political authority, continued in the Southern states until the 1960s. Though informal and hidden racial discrimination remained widespread since then, opportunities for upward social mobility by people of colour widened, and this tendency did not stop when economic inequalities began to grow in the late 1970s. While African Americans and members of other ethnic-racial minorities were particularly hit by unemployment, reductions of welfare payments, and stagnating or declining wage levels from the 1980s, correlations between ethnic-racial identity and socio-economic position continued to weaken, even if slowly (Wilson 1987; Landry and Marsh 2011). A similar development took place in Western Europe, where many descendants of immigrants from poorer, non-European countries who had come to Europe to fulfill low-paid jobs improved their position in comparison to their parents, in spite of practices of negative discrimination.

Another, clearer, instance of a continuing trend of diminishing power differences in Western societies concerns the relations between the sexes. From the late 19th century onwards, women gained social strength in relation to men, manifested in the equalisation of formal rights, the expansion of women’s educational and occupational opportunities, and their growing share in positions of authority and prestige (de Swaan 2019: 80-125, 252-7; cf. Wouters

¹⁰ It is not quite clear what both trends together imply for global income inequality, conceived as the sum of income inequality between and within countries. While Milanovic (2016, 188 ff.) concludes that global inequality decreased from 1988 to 2011, the *World Inequality Report 2018* ascertains that global inequality since 1980 has increased (quoted by Wouters 2020, 329). Both sources agree, however, that overall income inequality between countries has decreased since 1980 (Alvaredo et al. 2018, 11, 13, 58-66).

2004). Relations of interdependence between men and women became less one-sided and more reciprocal, as also appeared in men's growing share in domestic work and child care among married couples.

Both of these ongoing tendencies towards functional democratisation are in tune with the widespread ideology of meritocracy, which is a central element of neo-liberalism. The ideal free market in the neoliberal image is non-discriminatory, an arena of fair and open competition in which the best will be the most successful. Entrance to this imagined market is open to everyone, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender. The meritocratic ideology justifies inequality on the basis of an assumed equality of opportunity – as the outcome of fair competition and the reflection of differences in merits, that is, personal capacities plus efforts. It therefore condemns discrimination on the basis of ethnic background, skin colour, gender, sexual preferences, or religious affiliation. And to the extent that meritocratic norms are put into practice, this contributes to decreasing inequality along these lines.

However, the neoliberal-meritocratic ideology denies or neglects particularly two basic sources of inequality of opportunities: class inequalities within countries which are, to a large extent, transmitted over generations¹¹; and the inequalities between the inhabitants of different countries, maintained by state borders and nationality rights, and reinforced by restrictions on migration. Growing inequalities in living conditions contribute to increasing inequality of opportunity, as has become most apparent in the United States, the country where the belief in equality of opportunity (the “American dream”) has been traditionally the most widespread (Mennell 2007, 249-50). Intergenerational class mobility in this country decreased over the past decades and became lower than in Western Europe (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 157-63; Stiglitz 2019, 44-5, 279-80). A second basic source of inequality of opportunity consists in the continuous importance of state borders. Formal and practical barriers to international migration contradict the neoliberal image of an integrated global market in which the production factors capital and labour move freely from one place in the world to another. In actual practice, economic globalisation from the 1970s meant primarily the increasingly free movement of physical and financial capital, whereas the international movement of labour – that is, of people – remained much more restricted.

It is remarkable that Wouters does not pay attention to the ongoing trends towards functional democratisation just mentioned, which could have given some empirical substance to his claim that functional democratisation has remained the dominant trend in the contemporary world, in spite of rising inequalities. Nor does he say anything about recent tendencies in the opposite

¹¹ Through what Bourdieu (1986) has termed economic capital (especially inherited wealth), cultural capital (especially educational opportunities related to parental upbringing), and social capital (access to advantageous social networks).

direction, toward de-democratisation, that are related to the emergence and growing impact of populist nationalism.

Populist nationalism that won strength in various parts of the world in the new millennium can be interpreted as a counter response of resistance to, on the one hand, the mentioned tendencies of ongoing functional democratisation (as it is nativistic and contains elements of hidden or open racism and sexism) and, on the other hand, the trend of functional de-democratisation related to globalisation. In the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States we see these elements combined. His nativistic nationalism, covert racism, and anti-globalism feed on emotions of discontent among the white American working and middle classes who feel that they are losing security and status in comparison to former outsider groups (Hochschild 2016). Trumpian politics is, on the one hand, a break with neo-liberalism, as it comprises the resurrection of trade barriers and a (partial) retreat from intergovernmental bodies such as the WTO that stimulate market globalisation; on the other hand it is a continuation or even radicalisation of neo-liberalism as it implies a breakdown of government control in favour of private companies and further tax reductions for the rich. The result is strengthened de-democratisation, a further growth of economic inequality combined with authoritarian political leadership that undermines the institutions of liberal democracy.

Similar developments can be observed in many other countries today, ranging from Poland and Hungary to Turkey, Brazil, India, and Russia. In all these countries, authoritarian leaders who claim to represent “the people” challenge, damage, or destroy liberal-democratic rules that protect cultural plurality and minority rights, and propagate an aggressive nationalism, often connected with a particular religion, which stresses sharp boundaries between the national we-group and other people, and is directed against supposed enemies inside and outside the borders of the state. These tendencies of political de-democratisation can be interpreted as manifestations of broader functional de-democratisation, in which the power differentials between governments and governed increase and economic inequalities among different social strata also grow. In Western European countries, parties with similar ideas have come to the fore, deriving inspiration from these authoritarian regimes (Mudde 2007; Wilterdink 2017, 35-9).

This world-wide movement can be understood as an outcome of the delegitimation of what may be called progressive neo-liberalism. After the fall of Soviet communism, the United States seemed to have become the unchallenged world hegemon. The Washington Consensus of the 1990s, embodied in the American president Bill Clinton (1992-2000), combined the neo-liberal goals of deregulation, privatisation, and market globalisation with a support of inter-governmental organisations (including the United Nations) and a defence of liberal democracy and human rights. This hegemonic international “consensus,” which was never unchallenged, has disappeared under the impact of a

series of events and processes. Among them were the disastrous consequences of the invasion in Iraq, the deep financial crisis of 2008, the emergence of China as a new world power, the effects of mass immigration, the threats of global climate change, and, not least, the ongoing growth of economic inequalities within nation-states. All these changes have undermined the neoliberal belief in “the market” as the basis of social progress, but also weakened the institutions of liberal democracy.

There is much unclarity and dissensus about what might come out of the present confusing situation. According to an optimistic progressive scenario, recently proposed by Piketty (2020, 966-1034), it is possible and desirable to extend the institutions of liberal democracy to supranational levels – the European Union, to begin with – in order to regulate and control markets, private companies, and wealthy capital owners much more effectively than can be done by national states, and much more in accordance with the interests and wishes of the less privileged classes. This positive scenario would mean a reversal of the present dominant development into the direction of renewed functional democratisation. According to another scenario, however, the forces of global integration will take a very different turn: China, with its enormous capacities for economic growth, technological innovation, and large-scale collective action, will surpass declining America and weak, divided Europe, and become the new world hegemon, the model followed by other countries. This would imply a strong movement in the direction of functional *de*-democratisation, as China exemplifies most clearly the combination of increasing economic inequality and increasing authoritarian state control. It is more likely, however, that neither of these two scenarios will become realised, and that different political and economic systems will continue to compete with one another. The best we can hope for, I think, is that increasingly transparent intergovernmental cooperation on the global level and increasing supranational coordination on the European level will enhance the capacity for collective action in order to solve common problems for humanity, ranging from tax evasion to climate change.

As I have argued in this article, processes of functional democratisation and functional *de*-democratisation do not exclude one another; they can go together, on different levels, in different respects, along different axes; they have gone together in different societies and periods, including the recent decades; and it is likely that they will continue to go together, in various ways, for the foreseeable future. It makes no sense to avoid and reject the notion of functional *de*-democratisation, and to assume, against all evidence, that functional democratisation is a fundamental, essential, natural, dominant process in the whole of human history, inextricably bound up with differentiation and integration (and civilisation and informalisation), and revealing the future that lies ahead. This assumption is a far cry from empirical and historical sociology. It is metaphysics in the Comtean sense (cf. Elias 2012b, 28-45).

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