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Is Mass Society a Threat to Representative Democracy? Revisiting David Riesman's "Other-Directed Character"

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Is Mass Society a Threat to Representative Democracy? Revisiting David Riesman's "Other-Directed Character"

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Abstract

Representative democracy has been based on the idea that interest groups form parliaments through competitive elections, and legislate in favour of their supporters. Declining electoral participation, rise of populist right-wing parties, contingent coalitions, personalized electoral success and scandal-driven politics indicate a crisis in representative democracy. Mass society theories after the Second World War predicted a decline of democracy on the basis of homogenisation of mass consumption societies. The threat was seen to involve totalitarian rule, combined with bureaucracy serving the interests of elites. This paper examines the underlying presuppositions of mass society theory, and argues that the homogeneity argument is insufficient to fit the realities. Following David Riesman, it is argued that the other-directed character grows from unstable interest group identities, but its determinant is not sameness but agency and therefore difference. To have agency is to orient oneself to others as a self, as unique, separate and autonomous subject. This is vindicated by trends in public administration since the 1980s, which stress citizens' self-control, autonomy and partnership rather than conformity. Political disputes arise around contradictions between difference and autonomy in societies where agency is a principle of justification. Universal autonomy requires homogeneity but agency stresses difference and uniqueness.

Keywords: democracy, mass society, political representation, totalitarianism, David Riesman

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The demise of representative democracy has been predicted since the very birth of the idea in the early 19th century, and especially after its institutions were universally established in Western countries by the end of the Second World War¹. Representative democracy is based on the principle that subjects of a political system, e.g., a nation, naturally have what Rousseau called a general will, *volonté générale*, which can be articulated in agreements and compromises through debates and votes, ideally in town meetings of small societies. In large societies elected persons are expected to represent the political constituency in legislative and administrative bodies to formulate and implement the general will in law and its application. The democratic problem, at its core, is how to guarantee that the policy outcomes from negotiations among elected representatives correspond to the general will of the electorate.

The democratic problem gives rise to the need for both trust and control. No electoral democracy is possible without trust, but it varies in degree and extension. Low trust leads to what [Pierre Rosanvallon \(2008\)](#) calls organized distrust: high precision and hierarchy of rules and controls, which is very expensive and counterproductive for formulating the content of the general will and implementing it². On the other hand, unlimited trust leads to terror of the elect. Therefore organized suspicion has been a concern for political theorists since the beginnings of representative democracy at the time of the French Revolution.

Theories of democracy have suggested two regimes, liberal and democratic ([Mouffe, 2005](#)), that may be applied to guarantee that power represents the will of the people. The first, theorized by Montesquieu in the early 19th century, strives to ensure that power handed over to the elite is controlled by a counter-power³. It stresses the importance of constitutional procedures, fair and free regular elections, the role of courts, and transparent, rule-based governance. This view of democratic control has been represented by liberal political theorists such as [Robert Dahl \(1961\)](#), [Seymour M. Lipset \(1960\)](#), and many others. The second, “democratic” type of control aims to ensure that the elite keeps its commitments to its electorate, especially keeping its own self-interest in line. No constitutional guarantees are sufficient to satisfy this aspect of democratic suspicion. It requires *continuous* negotiation, supervision,

resistance, and judgment by “the people” of those in power. This approach has been promoted by Jürgen Habermas (1996), Seyla Benhabib (1996), and Pierre Rosanvallon himself (2008), and it is the foundation of what is called deliberative democracy (Elster, 1998).

Today, neither liberal nor democratic mechanisms of control seem to guarantee that parliamentary politics translate interest-based group wills into a general will. An important stream of concern about democracy was articulated by American mass-society theorists in the immediate post-war decades and continued in European postmodern social theory. The mass-society thesis has argued that if and when, for some reason, the political communities that politicians represent dissipate or are blocked from controlling their envoys in power, the mediating role of counter-balancing institutions breaks down, political apathy follows, combined with distrust in the elites expressed by right-wing populist movements; moreover, rational interest articulation is replaced by individualized media attention to symbolic moral and emotional issues, and real power falls into the invisible hands of a power elite. In the worst case, the political order falls into the hands of totalitarian rule. This seems to have happened since the 1980s, if by totalitarian rule we understand a hegemony of neoliberal politics that does not seem to be much influenced by the political coalitions in governments. In short, the issues concerning representative democracy in mass society are four in number: 1. Declining voter turnouts and rising right-wing populism; 2. Incapacity of the political system to turn group wills into political agendas, with the consequent mediatization and moralization of politics; 3. New forms of elite-driven governance replace public administration supervised by parliamentary bodies and courts; 4. Extra-parliamentary supervision of power becomes both more important and less efficient at the same time.

A less dismal view (Rosanvallon, 2008) argues that control of power can and does take other forms besides the procedural legitimacy of the electoral apparatus. Counter-democracy, as he calls it, operates directly through surveillance, control and judgment. Other versions of this view have been pronounced in different forms by American Communitarians such as Bellah et al. (1985), Etzioni (1998), Putnam (2000) and others. Another critical view has been put forward by Chantal Mouffe (2005),

who has argued that defense of democracy invites and necessitates resistance or “agonistic conflict” with neoliberal hegemony, outside and beyond parliamentary institutions.

Such critical assessments and counter-assessments can be supported with empirical evidence, but they nevertheless fail to explain why representative democracy is not up to its promise today, if it ever was. Nor do they explain why, how, in what form, and for what purpose counter-power either does or does not get mobilized to bring the elite back into line, and in what way essential interests in society are or are not represented in political decisions. They see democracy only as society’s capacity to control power elites. To understand what representative democracy is, and how it does or does not function as the mediator between political power and society, we should look at how it is embedded in society’s structures of justification in a broader and historical sense.

Mass society theories themselves already included interesting elements to this effect, as I will show regarding David Riesman’s diagnosis of the new middle-class consumer society. Embedding these elements in the theory of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999/2006) will offer a new perspective on the debate. Democracy is not limited to the legitimacy of, and trust in, power. It also involves principles of justification for its subjects in the Foucauldian double sense of being both its subordinates and its sources. If read in this light, Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, often seen as the epitome of the mass society thesis, strongly suggests that the mass society character structure is not alienated and apathetic. To the contrary, many of the phenomena that tend to be interpreted as the decline of representative democracy – distrust of the state, moralization of politics, new modes of governance, and extra-parliamentary forms of resistance – express in fact the urgent sense of agency, even anxiety about it, felt by contemporary electorates.

The Mass Society Thesis

The root of American mass society theories was not concerned about representative democracy directly, but about the fate of the individual in rapidly de-traditionalizing modern society, echoing a household theme in classical sociology such as Durkheim’s views on anomie, or Simmel’s

writing on metropolis, money, and modern sociability. According to Simmel, for example, the autonomy granted by anonymity and distance in the differentiated metropolis upholds the free individual, but it also takes away the prop of other individuals that is necessary to recognize and pursue one's own interests. To experience individual freedom, we need detachment from personal ties, especially from traditional dependencies on authorities and families, but we also need other people to rely on. Theodor Adorno (1964/2004) criticized Existentialist declarations of the original authenticity of man (destroyed by modernity) as merely empty jargon, since they did not recognize that the individual itself was a product of modern society. In his "immanent critique", he stressed that the passion for authenticity and difference in the end becomes indifference and sameness in mass society.

The post-war years made it plain that all American traditions existing, including rural Puritanism, urban working-class collectivism, and old middle-class identity, were being challenged. New individually based ties to replace them appeared hard to find. Adherence with others presupposes that people experience distinctness and difference, but at the same time are not indifferent towards each other, even when interest in others serves no utilitarian purpose. Destruction of this capacity induces the sameness of everything, or to use an expression of Gilles Deleuze (1968), indifference of differences; it damages the social bond itself. The mass society theorists came to dismal conclusions: the full autonomy of modern individuals leads to their own destruction. Adorno's (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) authoritarian personality, Erich Fromm's (1941/1991b) automaton, Charles Wright Mills' (1959) cheerful robots and other similar "character structures" cling to a conformity that allows little room for autonomy and self-determination. Such societies are readily governed by powers that might not be seen themselves but that operate through charismatic leaders, usurping well-known laws of mass psychology (Borch, 2006).

European and Russian totalitarianisms in the recent past were the primary scare⁴. The central question was how to explain the rise of Nazism, Fascism, and Stalinism, and how to avoid them recurring in

America, a risk brought very close to observers' eyes in McCarthyism. The paradigm work on this subject was Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she advanced the view that supporters of totalitarian movements were either isolated, apathetic individuals of the lower middle class, or members of the mob, the *Lumpenproletariat*. The acquiescent family man followed the crowd to keep his head down for the sake of those near him, unable to defend his interests in class-based political organizations. Totalitarian movements and regimes grow in the seedbed of politically classless societies (Arendt, 1951/1973, p. 305-340). William Kornhauser (1960, p. 33) summarized these views noting that "...mass society is a condition in which elite domination replaces democratic rule. Mass society is objectively the atomized society, and subjectively the alienated population".

Mass society theories, as described above, fall short of explaining why, in fact, democracies have not turned into totalitarianisms. This failure results from two limitations. First, like theories of representative democracy in general, they only examine democracy in terms of controlling power through legitimating procedures and trust, predicting that individualized societies lack the capacity for both. Totalitarian rule is assumed to follow as the only alternative. Second, the implosion of differences that results from quasi-universal autonomy of modern individuals – the theme so dear to many more recent European postmodernists such as Baudrillard, Maffesoli, Featherstone and even Giddens – is a problematic assumption in much of the mass society theory. This is precisely where Riesman's work will be helpful, as we will look at it closely below.

To recover the problem we also need some basic sociological theory on how societies of autonomous individual agents hold together in the first place. This is what I call the theory of justification, following the French sociologists Luc Boltanski & Laurent Thévenot (1999/2006). Its scope is wider than mechanisms of controlling power. It extends the analysis from how the dominated justify domination, to how *they justify themselves* in their subordinate position. We need to understand representative democracy as being itself part of the historical process in which modern structures of justification have been created.

Justification

According to Boltanski & Thévenot (1999/2006), any society must justify its existence and hierarchical order to attract the loyalty of its members and maintain their sense of belonging in three different ways. First, people must be able to tell who belongs to their society, and they must accept that, according to some well-known principles, members of the society are unequally rewarded and positioned in it. These are the principles of belonging and differentiation. Secondly, people must have common understandings of the “meaning of dignity and worth” in society. In traditional society, human worth depends on family lineage, or relationship with authorities. In modern societies individual freedom and autonomy are a person’s most valued characteristics⁵. Thirdly, there must be some agreement on the common good. In modern industrial society common good has been understood as social change, progress, the long march to “modernization.” Different groups in society have of course had conflicting views of what actually serves it and whose interests get in its way, but the idea of human improvement has been largely shared.

My argument in this article is that the institutions and practices of representative democracy are not the end result of but part of the process in which the modern principles of justification have progressed to a point where they now have become saturated. They are still the same principles as before but, just as a solution of salt in water returns to its crystalline form when concentrated, so too the modern dynamic principles of justification now take on a new form.

Representative Democracy and Justification in Modern Societies

It must be remembered that although the theory of representative democracy has its roots in the time before the French and American revolutions, parliamentary institutions and practices were historically established much more recently, only in the course of the class struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These institutions and practices are rooted in late nineteenth-century popular movements, which later became political parties or were incorporated into them. The institutions, including universal suffrage, were established in Western

Europe, only in the course of the turbulent class conflicts after the Second World War, very unevenly and with many sidesteps and exceptions, as exemplified by the Spanish and Portuguese dictatorships, or the personalized presidential regimes of President de Gaulle's France and President Kekkonen's Finland.

Parliamentary institutions were not only the realization of individual autonomy and freedom in the political sphere. In the framework of nation-states they also provided a platform for struggles over these principles of justification in other spheres of life, notably work, consumption, family and sexuality. It is essential that these principles of dignity and worth, although almost universally accepted, were very incompletely realized still in the post-war western societies (Sulkunen, 2009).

Parliamentary politics was an immensely efficient mechanism to pursue these principles of justification. It was a great paradox that modern societies in the early twentieth century stressed individuality and self-control but turned to state-centered solutions in producing them. Educational policies were expressly designed to supply an adequately skilled labor force for the growing industrial economies, and consequently for maintaining high mobility both vertically and horizontally. Universal autonomy involves an assured degree of economic and social equality. Welfare benefits were designed to eliminate dependencies on family ties, and public services were developed to enable women to participate in the labor market. Several remaining defects of the *Rechtstaat* were corrected, and legal regulation of sexuality was liberalized to allow individuals more choice and freedom on the sexual market. All these reforms materialized in a massive wave of new legislation, passed through representative democratic institutions, in all Western countries between the late 1960s and the end of the 1980s, and some of it continues still today. Parliamentary politics towards the freedom and autonomy of individuals from personal and traditional ties was itself part of the social bond, as a major instrument to advance the common good of the nation (Sulkunen, 2009).

Riesman revisited: agency in mass society

David Riesman (1909-2002) became an emblem of a generation of post-war liberals worried about the fate of the individual in mass society with his book *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, 1950). His work appeared when the USA was already approaching the peak of its industrial development, the consumer society was at hand with individual, well-equipped homes, cars and cheap consumer goods, and the non-productive urban new middle class was rising. Individual autonomy centered on the private family was already the norm. All this was to happen in Western Europe only about fifteen years or two decades later (Sulkunen, 1992; Therborn, 1995).

As the classical sociologists had done, Riesman saw modern society as inherently anti-traditional, breaking down the old social ties, but his take on this theme was unique and still instructive. For him, anti-traditional individualism may be of two types. The first, 'inner-directed' character, corresponds to Max Weber's understanding of the spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism. The second, 'other-directed' character, develops when industrial capitalism becomes a society of consumption, dominated by the middle classes and mass culture. Other-directness means that pursuit of self-interest and internalized patterns of conduct are replaced by yearning for approval by peers. Etiquette for maintaining class boundaries becomes less important than conformity within one's own group of reference. When class-based communities erode, as they must in consumer society, individuals become isolated ('atomized' was the evocative term), and unable to defend their interests. Growing autonomy turns heroic individualism into its opposite, cravenness of the many⁶. This has an impact on the individuals' psychological constitution called *character*⁷.

Even working-class people aspire to be inner-directed in the pursuit of their interests and in their respect for the "hardness of the material," which they take pride in crafting to form good objects for use. In contrast, the new middle class works with the "softness of humans," for example as salespeople trying to assume the perspective of the consumer, or when they act as foremen juggling with the management's interests and the interests of the employees. Instead of orienting

themselves directly toward the task at hand, they adjust themselves to other people⁸.

Work orientation is in tune with a person's orientation to consumption and leisure. The inner-directed character either takes no great interest in them at all, or relates to them, too, as an area of achievement. The escape they offer does not have value in itself, it signifies recovery from the fatigue of work, but even better if leisure activities can be conceived as self-improvement through culture, acquisition of valued objects, or improving the home. In contrast, other-directed consumers yearn for experiences. The instrumentality of the inner-directed is replaced by what might be called experientiality – a kind of addiction to experience itself, an objectless craving. Experience has no ulterior objective or purpose; it is satisfaction as such and as useless in fact as it seems to be in appearance⁹. Experience itself, of sexuality or of food, for example, becomes public and openly displayed to others.

Riesman's analysis from more than a half century ago applies to contemporary consumer societies remarkably well, but unlike other mass society theories, it highlights agency rather than passivity. Other-directedness *does not* imply apathy and alienation. In this respect it anticipated “the return of the actor” (Touraine, 1984; Sulkunen, 2009) especially in European social theory three decades later. Experientiality comes not from satisfaction alone but from its display to others, as also more recent European analysts of consumer society have stressed. Riesman associates consumerism with the cult of bodily adornment, much like the French postmodern sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1996; see also Falk, 1994), who has talked about the epidermic consciousness. Concern for body shape and color in mid-century America for Riesman, and end-of-the-century Europe for Maffesoli, opens the personality for inspection and articulates the desire to share leisure agendas of the peer group. However, epidermic consciousness is not the same as collapsing one's identity with those of others; on the contrary, it is awareness of being one's self, separate and different from others but open to their approval, even admiration. In other words, it is an important aspect of what I have elsewhere called a sense of intimacy, as important for a consciousness of agency as

autonomy of the individual¹⁰.

Furthermore, as Pierre Bourdieu has stressed (1979/1984) experience, however unmediated in the Kantian sense, is not taste-free (although it might appear as tasteless in critical reflection). Even in mass society people are not indifferent to what they believe others to consider as good taste; on the contrary, approval by others is for them the most important source of meaning and emotion.

However, peer groups in consumer societies do not form taste communities with group boundaries. Training children to tolerance leads to the minimization of barriers and to lack of distance between child and adult. Boundaries around class and any social roles tend to wear out: businessmen may wear informal clothes to work, evening dresses are worn in graduation parties in working-class as well as in upper-class schools; adult and child roles tend to be mixed up, and social configurations in families become increasingly personal. Parents and teachers no longer require kids to comply with their authority; they must persuade and argue, which they also expect of children. For middle-class adults it may even be difficult to distinguish work and play, as the sociability in both is much the same talking and gossiping. Riesman's account strongly suggests that other-directed individuality places much *greater* stress on individuality than inner-directedness, which is oriented to serious and essential group memberships and differences *between them*, not between individuals within the groups.

The stress on agency has two consequences for Riesman's analysis of mass society politics. First, for him the lack of intermediary groups does not automatically imply strong centralized power, as was often assumed in mass-society theories (Kornhauser, 1960). On the contrary, Riesman's model of mass society is vested with a large number of more or less arbitrary veto groups – trade unions, the National Rifle Association, religious groups, many kinds of moral advocates, and so on. They do not necessarily have solid common interests but sometimes they may. Power gets dispersed, but resistance becomes devolved and de-centered.

Secondly, the other-directed character is not in itself authoritarian, indignant, ultra-conservative or apathetic. It is anxious about being

accepted by others, and this anxiety bonds the individual to others in tolerant approval. Even the conservative press aimed at other-directed audiences avoids taking a fast and strong stand on social issues that might have to be reversed tomorrow. Tolerance is not indifference; on the contrary, other-directed publics are keenly involved in political events and debates, not as spectators but as insiders. Riesman calls them inside-dopesters. Other-directedness means that one has a great deal of social skills, of which the most important is to hold one's emotional fire. Whereas inner-directed politicians and moralizers aim to influence others, other-directed politicians aim to be acceptable and change their views to suit their publics. This everyone can do, or can at least try: one does not have to be a great orator or a social philosopher to feel part of the game. The important thing is to know what key people are doing and thinking in great-issue politics – and beyond! Politics is a spectacle of consumption with glamour, no longer the dour sphere of power and its consequences (Riesman, 1950).

Other-directed character and new politics

Riesman concluded his analysis with a happy ending, a section on 'autonomy' where he paints a rosy utopia of a new kind of individualism in the middle of mass society. Critics thought that this was incompatible with the analysis that went before it, and the worst part of the book (McClay, 1994). It is true that the connection is not well made, but nevertheless there are insights in his thinking that help us overcome the theoretical stumbling blocks in mass-society theory and make us better understand the phenomena related to the decline of representative democracy. As suggested at the beginning of this article, four of them call for special attention: 1. electoral non-participation itself and related right-wing populism; 2. mediatization and moralization of political agendas; 3. new modes of governance; and 4. changing forms of resistance.

Non-participation and right-wing populism

The persistent or recurrent electoral success of extreme right or ultra-conservative parties in European and North American politics has often

been attributed to the rise of the new middle class (Crawford, 1980). Evidence has not supported these theories. Val Burris (1986) was obviously right when he concluded that no theory that ascribes either a liberal democratic or a conservative, even reactionary political attitude to the whole or lower new middle class, however defined, can be empirically correct. The political cleavage in contemporary capitalist societies cuts through the middle of the white-collar ranks. Where and how the line should be drawn is a complex matter, although Burris himself believes that it is the lower middle class that ends up on its liberal side rather than vice versa¹¹.

Also Riesman was wary of totalitarian movements like most liberals in post-war America (McClay, 1994), but not because the other-directed middle class would be disposed to join them. Political apathy, or right-wing populism, is not for Riesman, unlike for C. Wright Mills, Erich Fromm, or William Kornhauser, a direct consequence of the new-middle-class and its inclination to conformity. Instead, it may generate indifference and anger in other groups. It may result from side-tracked traditionalism of moralizers in decline, i.e. inner-directed people who see their values in peril by social change and pluralism. Such persons feel indignant¹².

The same applies to those who are indifferent because they are deprived of the sociability of the inside-dopesters. Indifference may also arise from situations that may be too depressing to raise any hope for improvement. Such people experience their lack of fortune as unjust because they do not understand it; the principles justifying differentiation are no longer within their comprehension. They feel bitter towards the city slickers because they envy their success and sureness of grasp, which they overrate and misinterpret as snootiness and slap-happiness towards their values. Especially suspect to them are intellectual liberals, whose tolerance is both a direct threat to their values and an indirect blockade to their efforts to set things back and right (Riesman, 1950).

On the other hand, if the other-directed character itself is mistrustful of the state, there is a reason for it. This mistrust, which easily translates into electoral absenteeism, is often interpreted as conservatism, also

by middle-class people themselves (Sulkunen, 1992). But what could conservatism be for people who celebrate their experience for the sake of experience and display it for others to see, and for whom no lifestyle can claim the status of continued normality? If no pastoral authority can define the good life for everybody, what is there to conserve? Is the conservatism of mass society only a desire to restore an imaginary tradition that has never existed, an attitude that Appadurai (1997) has called nostalgia without memory, a longing for something nobody ever lost?

We must see it against the modern state's role in advancing the common good in the recent past. State-driven Progress towards autonomy of the individual now appears as state paternalism to the individuals who emerged from it. As described above, the educative welfare state was normative and stressed uniformity, whereas other-directed individuality stresses autonomy and difference. Other-directed persons want to be accepted by others but resist being directed by authority of the state, which they experience as threat to their agency and insulting to their dignity and worth as free and autonomous individuals.

Moralization of political agendas

Despite its tolerance, even the other-directed character has its problems with difference. As I have argued elsewhere (Sulkunen, 2011), to respect intimacy – the sense of the self as a unique and separate individual – means to respect difference, but the difference of one person tends to cut into the autonomy of others. This contradiction takes three principal forms. First, one's choices – smoking, drinking or drug use for example – often inflict costs on others for the health, environment, and policing of the social order. Secondly, it causes third party victimization such as passive smoking, violence, accidents and child neglect. Thirdly, difference may violate the integrity of the other and can be considered a threat to institutions, such as homosexual families questioning the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, the Muslim scarf violating the principle of laicism, or forced marriage violating the norm of individual freedom of choice.

These are the kinds of conflict we observe daily in politics and in there seem to be no general solutions for them – they appear as moral conflicts between victims and perpetrators. Moral fury in politics and in the medias is aroused by violations of the rights of the innocent. Universality is replaced by an emphasis on difference, and difference can only be respected in contractual consent. The sense of justice will be transformed from considerations of equity to considerations of the negative freedom of the other. We are no longer asked to respect the positive right of others to be like us; we are asked to respect their negative right not to be constrained by our actions. We are at liberty to do whatever we like with ourselves and our lives, as long as we are not taxing the liberty of others to do likewise. Even if parliamentary democratic systems cannot translate group wills into a general will about the good life, at least it serves as a platform for negotiations between interests and issues of justice, as representative democracy should. Moralization of politics does not result simply from media banalization, but corresponds to the full maturity of the principle of individual autonomy as the measure of dignity and worth of individuals as free and autonomous agents.

New forms of governance

Representative democracy is supposed to express the general will in law. Its implementation should be assured by a loyal and bureaucratic public administration. The issue about representative democracy has questioned its capacity to serve the general will in this way. Especially mass society theorists such as C.W. Mills have predicted that an invisible power elite will replace transparent structures of power (Lukes, (1974/2005)). Indeed, profound changes in the modes of governance have occurred since the last third of the twentieth century, when representative democratic politics were the platform of the modern principles of justification. New forms of governance grant new powers to appointed officials and ministries. Consent of the public is sought not by electoral means but through direct consultations, contracts and other means, whereas law tends to thin out into programs that promote abstract goods such as welfare, health and security, on which all can agree.

The doctrine of *New Public Management*, advocated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since the 1980s, emphasizes devolved responsibility, local initiative, increased civic responsibility, competition, budgeting by results, and the use of private-sector service providers (OECD, 1995; OECD, 2002). Public management is seen as offering a flexible and effective alternative to old-fashioned bureaucracy (Clarke et al., 2000; du Gay, 2000). It is expected to neutralize and resolve conflicts in domains where there are radical differences of opinion, among experts and among citizens (Newman, 2000). Many public services such as transportation, energy, communication and health care, have been privatized. But also in preventive social and health policy, and many areas of social control, public management stresses partnership, community development and cooperation. This requires a new form of administration: participation and partnership.

This form of organization replaces traditional command structures with *contracts* between *partners* and the funding agency. To supervise the contract, the agency needs *evaluation*, and to set the targets and a standard of evaluation for the projects, a *policy program*, is necessary. Contract is the foundation of the institution of the market. Therefore it has been commonly explained by the ideology of neo-liberalism that stresses the supremacy of the market over public bureaucracy, and also over electoral power. This hegemonic interpretation, as we might call it (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), tends to be circular, however: imitating the market within public administration is a consequence of an ideology that favors the market. I have shown elsewhere (Sulkunen, 2010) that the contract in public administration is largely an illusion, a form without actual content. The real question should be, *why* are these new forms of governance replacing the hierarchical structures that are necessary for electoral democracy, thus giving way to the illusion of contractual power?

Seen from the Riesmanian perspective, the new forms of government have moral dimensions far beyond the merits of the market as compared to the bureaucratic state. The contractual form solves two problems for the other-directed character anxious of its own agency. First, it reinforces symbolically the weak link between interest-based

constituencies and the legislative process by offering direct channels of representation for “stakeholders.” Abstaining from the use of these channels is also a choice, a symbolic act of agency rather than apathy, at least from the power-holders’ point of view. Secondly, constituencies need not be binding and stable (as in representative democracy, where elections can only occur with much longer intervals than the issues to be legislated on); they change from one issue to the next and therefore allow for difference and continuous participation. In both ways the contractual form, including the deliberative legislative process, serves the principles of justification in modern societies that are dearest for the other-directed character: to be respected in its autonomy, and to be free and worthy in its difference.

The two functions of the contractual form, stressing autonomy and respecting difference, lead to abstraction rather than apathy in politics. Solving contradictions between, on one hand, individuals’ right to be different and, on the other hand, other individuals’ right not to be restricted in their autonomy, turns politics into a discourse of abstraction. The public good gets to be defined as general consensual benefits for all, such as well-being, health and security, rather than as totalitarian visions of the ideal world.

Democratic resistance

From the point of view of democratic participation, however, the devil is in the abstract. Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that the age-old necessity of supervising power to make sure it keeps its commitments to electors now emphasizes the “democratic” form at the expense of the “liberal” tradition. Rosanvallon concludes that the decline of representative democracy is not a problem; it is more than well compensated for by counter-democracy that operates directly and continuously through exposure or surveillance, control and judgment. Forms of “non-political democracy” flourish in the streets, NGO action, different forms of deliberative democracy, local action groups, media exposure of political, but also personal, misbehavior of elite members and many other forms of suspicion, mistrust and protest. Trust is no longer based on procedural legitimacy alone, it is replaced by reputation, and therefore mediatization of personal failings is not a sign of political weakness but

a form of the democratic process.

Juridification of politics is a logical result from counter-democracy. Court decisions are final and concrete, whereas political decisions are always ambiguous and open to reformulation. Therefore court cases combine the particular and the general in a concrete way, whereas political judgments turn concrete problems of everyday life into abstractions (Rosanvallon, 2008). Therefore representative politics and counter-power are, in a paradoxical way, alternatives. “The controlling citizen gains where the electoral citizen loses. The negative sovereignty of the citizen to judge undermines the positive sovereignty of the elected, and organized distrust undermines the assumption that trust is founded on elections” (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 201). The operations of counter-power distance it from the electoral institutions; its efficiency indicates the weaknesses of decision-makers.

Half a century earlier David Riesman came to similar conclusions. The other-directed character may not enthusiastically participate in interest-based political parties but this does not automatically imply strong centralized power, as was often assumed in mass society theories (Kornhauser, 1960). On the contrary, Riesman’s model of mass society is vested with a large number of more or less arbitrary veto groups – trade unions, the National Rifle Association, religious groups, many kinds of moralizers, and so on. They do not necessarily have solid common interests but sometimes they may. Power gets abstract and vague, but counter-power becomes concrete. Riesman’s mass society, like Rosanvallon’s counter-democracy, is devolved and decentered¹³.

Neither Riesman’s model of mass society, nor Rosanvallon’s counter-democracy, see the decline of representative parliamentary institutions as an indication of political apathy, ready to be taken over by invisible totalitarian elites. In this respect their analyses are convincing and, in a way, support each other. They share another important view: the negativity of political participation in democratic action, and see this as an indication of the importance of agency in contemporary individualistic society.

Conclusion

Both Rosanvallon and Riesman give a convincing answer to the question in the title of this article: is totalitarian mass society a necessary alternative and a threat to representative democracy? The answer is negative. Low voter turnouts, rise of right-wing populism, moralization and mediatization of politics, new forms of governance and resistance *seem* to be symptoms of the dismal predictions of mass society theory but they *do not really* signal the end of representative democracy and a threat of totalitarian rule. Riesman goes even further to explain why: the dominant character structure of mature modern society is tolerant and its principle of human dignity and worth is agency; both sides of it: autonomy *and* difference, not sameness and conformity. The other-directed character is not easily seduced by authority, although it is oriented towards others and seeks their acceptance.

Both Riesman's and Rosanvallon's answers are negative in the double sense that they do not see the end of democracy coming, but they also think that democratic reactions to power are always negative, reactive rather than proactive. Also Laclau's and Mouffe's call for agonistic conflict is *anti-hegemonic*, not progressive.

This may appear to be an unwarranted assumption, based on little else than wishful thinking. However, we can and must consolidate and qualify the conclusion by looking at representative democracy as a *vehicle* as well as the outcome of the modern process. If we place the apparent symptoms of decaying representative democracy in the perspective of justification in modern society, we can see their sociological significance more precisely and fully. Distrust towards the state is not just a negative attitude; it is a historical reaction to the normative educational state. What used to be its progressive role in the modern process now appears as paternalism, a threat to individual autonomy and difference. These principles of dignity and worth are no longer distant ideals; they have come to their full being *not in spite of* but *because of* the very same modern state that promoted them as the common good.

Acquiescence, even to the point of accepting neo-liberal hegemony, is not necessarily a sign of indifference, nor of decaying political

communities, but of self-commanding distance from public affairs that do not concern my autonomy and my difference. Intolerance and indignation arise from a sense of injustice and weakness, not from hegemonic projects. Moralization and mediatization of politics should not be seen simply as functional alternatives to interest-based issues and conflicts. Partly it may be this too, but another part of the phenomenon is the perpetual conflict between autonomy and difference. Contractual forms of governance are, albeit largely an illusion, also symbolic recognition of the value of agency as a principle of justification in contemporary society. Resistance, finally, should not be seen only as counter-power to keep the elected in line; it should be seen in the context of justification as a whole in terms of its *substance*, not only its form. But this is the topic for another paper.

Notes

¹ Often ignored is [the fact] that this was a long process reaching [its] completion even in Western Europe only quite recently. For example, women gained the right to vote in national elections in France in 1945. Spain and Portugal became democracies only after 1975.

² A similar regularity of policing the social order generally was observed by Adam Smith who, in his “Lectures on Jurisprudence,” compared Paris and London in this way: “Nothing tends so much to corrupt mankind as dependency, while independency still increases the honesty of people.” The remains of the feudal manners and dependencies explains that “in Paris with a large number of police, scarce a night happens without somebody being killed, whereas in the larger city of London this occurs only a few times in a year although the number of police is much smaller” (Smith, 1778/1982, p. 486).

³ Montesquieu (1758), *De l'esprit des lois*, book XI, chap. 4: “It is an eternal experience that any man who wields power is likely to abuse it; he will proceed until he encounters limits. Who would have guessed? Even virtue needs limits. If power is not to be abused, things must be arranged so that power checks power.” Quoted by Rosanvallon (2008, Note 6).

⁴ Mass-society theory was influenced by the German intellectual émigrés to the USA before and at the beginning of the Second World War, especially by members of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, established to continue their work in America (Tilman, 1984). The most widely read mass-society theorists, Riesman and Mills, were Americans and had American roots as well, notably Thorstein Veblen and the Pragmatists, of whom John Dewey was important for Mills, and Georg Herbert Mead’s interactionist social psychology for Riesman. Their critical awareness of the present was curiously backward-looking. Mills diagnosed their contemporary American society as ‘over-developed’ (Gerth & Mills, 1954), even ‘postmodern’ (Mills, 1959, p. 166, p. 183). Although Riesman declared himself free of value judgments, his

description of other-directed “inside-dopesters” divulges a profound dislike for their trivial taste (Riesman, 1950, p. 302).

⁵ Boltanski and Thévenot (1999/2006) chapters IV and VI, The reference in the case of Theocratic societies is to Saint Augustine. Human worth deriving from family lineage is the foundation of domestic societies as described by La Buyere in 1688. The model of societies of honor, or of opinion, is taken from Thomas Hobbes, and the society in which human worth is assessed by one’s relation to the sovereign (*civic society*) refers to Rousseau’s philosophy of the social contract. The opposition between industrial society and market-oriented capitalism is inspired by Veblen’s distinction between producer and predator mentality.

⁶ The editor gave Riesman’s book its title, *The Lonely Crowd*, not used in the text. But it is a good title for the content, anyway.

⁷ The old Victorian concept of character became rampant in American critical social thought in the post-war years. It was widespread in psychoanalytical literature already, since Sigmund Freud’s use of the term at the turn of the century. Its introduction to social theory owes much to Erich Fromm, who in an early paper (Fromm, 1932/1991a) was the first to apply Freudian psychoanalysis to sociology, in subject matter no less prominent than the spirit of capitalism.

⁸ Riesman’s distinction between working-class and middle-class characters reverberates in Thorstein Veblen’s analysis of producer and predator mentalities. Veblen (1899/1961) had argued that producers have the “instinct of workmanship,” an inclination that develops later in human evolution than the instinct of appropriation, since it involves creation and learning.

⁹ This point has been made later in criticism of Bourdieu’s analysis of the ‘anti-Kantian aesthetics’ of working-class culture, as ‘virtue made out of necessity’ by Gerhard Schulze (1992). He argues that the immediate satisfaction one gets, for example, from the effortless working-class sociability (*Gemütlichkeit*) with beer drinking, simple solid food, and songs, is as far from necessity as can be.

¹⁰ Riesman uses the term ‘peer groups’ for the collectivities of comparison, Maffesoli calls them tribes. Both stress the voluntarily chosen quality of such collectivities, as well as the fleeting superficiality with which they commit the loyalty of their members (despite Maffesoli’s misleading term).

¹¹ Several authors maintain that the middle class is in fact the principal support of the welfare state against neo-liberal politics (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Olsson, 1990). Furthermore, several studies indicate that the new social movements – antinuclear, feminist, environment, local, regional and ethnic – are mainly supported by new middle-class groups, especially in France (Bidou et al., 1983; Monjardet & Benguigui, 1982; Touraine, 1968) but also in other European countries (Lash & Urry, 1987; Offe, 1985; Kriesi, 1989). Inglehart (1977, 1989) even suggests that the affluent middle class would turn the blurring class-based political system on a new course with two lefts instead of one: the traditional working-class materialist left and a new left that promulgates the values of post-materialism. Empirical research partly confirms this hypothesis (Offe, 1985; Kriesi, 1989), although the relationships between class, party and post-materialism seem to be quite complex (Weakliem, 1991). There are some new middle-class groups who participate in progressive movements and organizations, but others could not care less or would be openly hostile to them.

¹² Thomas Frank (2004) gives an excellent and detailed description of the kind of indignation that Riesman refers to, in his book on contemporary American Bible-belt conservatism in his book *What's the Matter with Kansas*.

¹³ This theme is close to Horkheimer's theory of rackets (Schmid Noerr, 2002), bureaucratically organized groups with no idea of the society as a whole, only pursuing their particular interests, or protest groups with no clear aims whatsoever (today we would speak of the 'street'). In a wider sense, the concept of de-centralized society has been important in late twentieth-century European social science literature such as Offe (1985), Lash & Urry (1987), and Boltanski & Chiapello (2005). In a different way, the dissolution of power in late modern society appears in the neo-Foucauldian literature, for example by Nikolas Rose (1999).

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