Definition of the Term "Parties" from the *Staats-Lexikon* (1845–48)

Abstract

The author of the following entry on "Parties (political)" in the *Staats-Lexikon* (1845–48), a twelve-volume encyclopedia of political terms and concepts, argued that political parties should be differentiated according to the concrete interests they served and not merely positioned on a static left-to-right continuum.

Source

[…]

Therefore, before I proceed to my account, I shall look more closely at [Friedrich] Rohmer's theory for a few moments. Rohmer deduces as follows:

First, he attacks the prevailing concepts about parties, which, operating under the well-known headings "radical," "liberal," "conservative" (also "aristocratic"), "absolutist" (or "reactionary"), and "juste milieu," originate in the view that we are "living in a period of transition from an old to a new era." One party wants the new era, the party of "progress" (liberal); the other clings to the old, the "retrograde" (conservative) party. In between are those who want to mediate—the "juste milieu," loved by the one side for its inclination toward reconciliation, hated or despised by the other for its drift toward weakness. These two major parties, however, contain gradations and varieties. What clings to the old can either stand still (conservative in the narrow sense) or move backwards (reactionary or absolutist). Friends of the new want either progress with the preservation of existing conditions (liberals in the narrow sense), or progress without regard to them—unsparing and from the ground up (radicals). Liberals and radicals are the same in terms of principle, but different in terms of execution. Radicalism is for some a mistaken extreme, for others the loftiest consequence of liberal principles. One is radical, according to liberals, if one applies the principles of "progress" imprudently and without knowledge of [existing] conditions; or, according to the radicals themselves, if one knows how to implement said principles in an uncompromisingly forthright and energetic way. These are the prevailing concepts, says Rohmer […].

The only way for us to acquire a standard for the proper assessment of parties is to answer the question: What is the immediate aim of partisan struggles, and what, in the first place, does each party want to achieve? Certainly nothing more than the chance to organize the state according to its concepts and wishes. And when this chance has been won, what axiom, what principle, what guiding thought determines this organization? Simply, nothing other than their interests. Every party wants to organize the state according to its interests; every party, once it has seized power, gives society a form that corresponds most closely to its own interests. It is their interests, the different interests around which parties revolve, that form the focal point for all impulses and movements in the realm of the state. The nature of these interests also determines the nature of the parties, gives them their content, their principles, molds them into what they are, determines their characteristic features, distinguishes them from each other.

There are two kinds of interests, special interests and general human interests. The former are liberties, privileges; the latter is the law. The fundamental characteristic of privilege is discrimination against the whole in favor of a few. The fundamental characteristic of justice or law is respect for the rights and

needs of each individual.

There are, corresponding to these two kinds of interests, two kinds of parties: representatives of privilege and representatives of human interests.

In substance, parties of the first kind are similar to each other; they have a common principle, the same aims and interests. In form, they are divided into three main classes, whose difference is determined by the methods each employs to realize its aims. Since privilege represent nothing more than favoring some at the cost of the whole, a subordination of general interests to special interests, a degradation of the whole into a means and instrument for some, parties of privilege belong to one of these classes, depending on how they exploit the whole for their purposes […] .

The first class represents the party that uses the power of the state directly in order to compel the whole to act in its interest, i.e., to work, to produce, to hand over a portion of its products to the holders of state power under whatever forms and pretexts. This party represents political absolutism. Political absolutism vests in the representative of this party the right to organize the state, i.e., to formulate the manner of applying state power, such that the private interest of the holder of this power, and of those whom he has drawn into his interest, whom he makes his accomplices in order to use them as tools, is thereby placed above the interests of the whole.

The second class represents the party that uses people's religious sensibilities to keep them in a condition in which they are inclined to work, to produce, to relinquish a portion of the fruits of their labor in the interests of the privilege holders. These are the priests, the representatives of the church, as they have developed in the course of time and especially as they were trained by [Pope] Gregory VII and the Innocents.

The third class, finally, represents that party which uses the institutions of production and commerce in order to have the whole work in its service, to compel it to relinquish a portion of the fruits of its labor. These are the representatives of capital, the so-called bourgeois.

The common characteristic of these parties is therefore the representation of interests that are opposed to the interests of the whole, the use of the whole as a means for purposes outside of it. They differ only in the methods they use to achieve their aims. The representatives of political absolutism coerce directly through variously ascending means of force. The representatives of the "Church" achieve their aims by a peculiar cultivation of human emotion, and the representatives of capital use the general medium of commerce, money, to get those without property to serve their interest. These parties are all conservative in nature, i.e., they seek by all means to maintain the state of affairs which they have either found or created and which corresponds to their interests. Therefore, they seek at any price to prevent the whole, the people, from achieving a position in which it destroys privilege and gives society a form corresponding to the interests of the whole. These parties are unconditionally conservative, i.e., they seek to maintain the status quo. They seek to preserve what already exists, even if that is absurd, corrupt, and unnatural, contradicting the interests of the community. For them, not the reasonableness, the expediency, the essence, or the core is decisive for the preservation of the status quo, but alone the fact that something exists, that it has come into being, in other words the empty form, the outward appearance, the lack of content, i.e. they "moderate," as Rohmer says, "principles with history and law"; they make the cult of form, of the formal, of positive law, into the highest purpose.

Confronting these parties, the representatives of privilege, is the party that represents general interests. This is the democratic party. Because it wants to look after each individual's right, it seeks to put the entirety of these individuals, the people, into a position to adapt the form of the state to its interests, i.e., to the popular interests, the interests of the whole. Just as the parties of privilege are essentially conservative in nature, the democratic party may be characterized as reformatory, creative. The former

lack productivity, the capacity for education; their interests operate in complete, self-contained forms; their activity is thus restricted to the maintenance of these forms as their living conditions. The latter, the democratic party, represents the organic development from old to new, from what has become unusable to what is better, for its interests are those of humanity, but humanity finds itself in a permanent process of rejuvenation that involves shedding forms which have become obsolete. The parties of privilege are stable, their movement is only apparent, mechanical, ever restricted to the same circle that contains once existing forms. The democratic party is progressive, developing from within, forming itself organically, alive. The former defend evident infirmities in public life, even when such are detrimental to the general interest, if they are conducive to privilege. The latter recognizes as its highest purpose only the welfare of all individuals, and destroys whatever is opposed to that, even if it has been sanctioned and affirmed by a thousand-year existence, by the thickest rust of centuries. By contrast, that which accords with the highest purpose is respected by the democratic party, which is therefore likewise conservative, but not unconditionally so, instead critically, thoughtfully, scrutinizing. It conserves only the good, the true, that which serves the general purpose, but not the bad, the erroneous, the unusable. It conserves, in a word, not because something exists, but rather because it is reasonable and good; it views not merely the form but the essence, the core, the content.

The democratic party constitutes the directing principle in political struggles, it is what assigns the other parties their positions toward each other and itself, and the other parties orient themselves in relation to it.

As long as the democratic party still slumbers, the others fight for supremacy, i.e., each seeks to turn the privileges it represents into the dominant ones. Thus, initially, political absolutism and the Church fought with each other for dominance, and the democratic party forced them to make peace and forge an alliance, for the parties of privilege never fight each other on principle because they represent a common principle, whereas the principle of the democratic party is fundamentally opposed to theirs. Thus, in France, the representatives of capital fought against political absolutism, and the democratic party, or rather its principle, led both opponents into each other's arms and brought about a common regime, the rule of the bourgeoisie. Political developments in Switzerland from the fall of the patricians to recent times offers the most convincing proof of the reconciliation, gradually brought about by the democratic party, of the representatives of privilege who had originally fought each other and later merged into one party.

In the same way, it is the democratic party that, as the one principally opposing the others, brings its own principle into consciousness and pushes the others toward its consequences.

Thus, it was the democratic party in the ecclesiastical sphere that more or less forced the principle of Catholicism out of the Catholic Church and compelled the latter to manifest itself in Jesuitism. For Jesuitism was brought about by Protestantism and is nothing more than consistent Catholicism, representative of the principle of the Catholic Church, as it underlies its entire effectiveness and positive statutes. And in the broader sense of the word, Jesuitism in general represents the principle of subordinating the interests of humanity to special interests, which instinctively underlies the parties of privilege, i.e. everyone is a Jesuit who deliberately, and conscious of the misanthropic nature of his interests, applies the proper means for his aims, i.e., the maintenance of his privileges. The diplomat who implements the system of bondage with satanic subtlety is just as much a Jesuit as the representative of the Catholic Church who deliberately seeks to dull the minds of the people, or the selfish bourgeois who turns the maintenance of his privileges into the guiding idea for his effectiveness as statesman and human being.

From the preceding it should thus have become clear that the true, correct standard for assessing parties according to their principles and their characteristic features cannot be something that exists outside of any immediate causal relationship to them, but rather must reside in the relationship in which they place

themselves in their aspirations and tendencies toward the “generally human,” toward the interests of humanity. This standard, precisely because it designates the highest, the general, can be reasonably applied only to the subordinate, to the particular; and compared to the whole, individual parties are subordinate. In putting an end to the indeterminacy of the prevailing terms and restoring to their true meanings the political labels radical, liberal, conservative, absolutist, and juste milieu, this standard, must also expose the nakedness of a theory that rests on playing around arbitrarily with phrases. The radical, if he makes special interests the ultimate end of his aspirations, has just as little value as the liberal who has lapsed into the same error, or the conservative or the absolutist, who must also lapse into this error. That standard alone is the correct touchstone for the parties, of radicalism, liberalism, conservatism, absolutism, juste milieu, for it proves the authenticity of every party, shows the extent to which they are alloyed with false components. That standard alone also contains the justification for rule by any one party. It does not depend on whether it calls itself liberal or conservative, radical or mediating, whether it has a minority or majority on its side, but only on whether it fights for privilege or general human interests, whether for the advantages of individual classes or the welfare of the whole, whether it defends the rights of individuals or the rights of all individuals. Factually, any party can rule, but only the democratic one can do so lawfully.

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Source: “Parteien (politische),” in Carl von Rotteck and Carl Welcker, eds., *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämmtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. Altona: Verlag von Johann Friedrich Hammerich, 1845–48, vol. 10, pp. 480, 493–96.

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Recommended Citation: Definition of the Term “Parties” from the Staats-Lexikon (1845–48), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-380> [April 26, 2024].