Chapter 15
Rereading 'Quasi-messianism and the disenchantment of politics'

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The rise and fall of modern politics in less than 30 pages

'Quasi-messianism and the disenchantment of politics' is the grand title of an under-appreciated article. One explanation for its under-appreciation lies in its schizophrenic character. It is an article that does not dare to speak its name: it is inspired as a philosophy of history but cast in the format of comparative political science. Thirteen years after its publication, I try to (re-)position the article's argument in the philosophical context in which, in my view, it belongs.

Two claims are at the heart of 'Quasi-messianism and the disenchantment of politics' (van Kersbergen, 2010).[1] One is that modern politics has been built on the structure of Christian belief. Modern politics is, in many respects, an extension of the Christian faith, notwithstanding all claims that the state (as the domain of politics) has come to be severed from the church (as the domain of religion). Specifically, modern politics adopted Christianity's 'visionary anticipation of a better world' while moving the focus from the afterlife to the here and now (32).

The second claim is that this religious inspiration of politics is running empty in the present days and that people turn away from politics as a consequence – this is the 'disenchantment' that the title refers to. What we witness is 'the gradual elimination of politics as an instrument of this-worldly salvation' (34). The upshot of this development is that 'it is the complete elimination of even the remnants of political religion from democratic political projects and missions that seems to be undermining the very political vigor of the democratic politics of the West' (35).

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1 All subsequent references with page numbers only refer to this article (van Kersbergen, 2010).

Ultimately, the process of political disenchantment leaves nothing but a 'void in contemporary democratic societies, an emptiness of collective power' (49). This void may well invite 'anti-political entrepreneurs and hazardous political experiments, including (xenophobic) populism and (utopian) fundamentalism of various sorts' (35). Reluctantly, van Kersbergen is led to the conclusion that the disenchantment of politics puts the future of democracy at risk.

Essentially, then, in less than 30 pages, van Kersbergen captures the rise and fall of modern politics. He highlights how modern politics was born from the transfer of the religious ideal of salvation to the this-worldly domain. With this transfer, modern politics put society on a linear road to progress, breaking the prevalent cyclical conception of history that is inherent to most religions. At the same time, as politics progressed down that road, the distance with its religious roots increased. Disenchantment very much appears as a function of that process.

Apart from its brevity, the parallels with the work of Max Weber (1905) are obvious. Weber is of course the source of the term 'disenchantment' (47). Building on Weber, van Kersbergen defines the disenchantment of politics as 'the gradual elimination of politics as an instrument of this-worldly salvation' (47); it involves 'the gradual disappearance of the enthusiastic belief in the *quest to what promises to overcome the flaws* and the fading of the conviction that the *deliverer of salvation and release* is known and immanent' (47, original emphasis).

The historian Wolfgang Mommsen (2021[1974]) famously characterized Weber's state of mind in post-WWI Germany as 'a liberal in despair'. This characterization also very much comes to mind in reading 'Quasi-messianism and the disenchantment of politics'. The article celebrates the achievement of modern politics while laying bare how its very logic is destined towards a political void, leaving van Kersbergen as our contemporary 'liberal in despair'.

A liberal in despair but a reluctant philosopher

However, such a Weberian reading pushes the argument in a philosophical direction in which the actual article is reluctant to go. Instead, van Kersbergen develops his argument around two social scientific tropes. The first of these involves the four major political

projects that he identifies as having animated the promise of modern politics: nation-state building, democratization, the welfare state, and European integration. Building on the quasi-religions of humanism, nationalism, and Marxism, each of these projects involved a 'diagnosis' of flaws in the world, a 'quest' for interventions that promise to overcome these flaws, and a subsequent state of 'salvation and release' (45). In fact, van Kersbergen claims that it is exactly the remnant of religious vigour that 'aroused political enthusiasm and passion; it led to zealous devotion to leadership (not necessarily a leader), the cause, and the movement' (43). As these projects were felt to be 'worth believing and even participating in' for the prospect of a better world that they offered (40), they were able to unite people behind a common purpose and to extract the mutual concessions needed for that. However, by now, these projects have become exhausted. They are no longer able to inspire. Their achievements 'are neither recalled nor appreciated', and no new political projects are in sight (39).

The second social scientific trope that van Kersbergen develops is that the effect of political enchantment must be understood through the concept of 'allegiance'. Allegiance is the willingness of political subjects to approve their government (regime) and its decisions (41). Notably, in a series of publications (van Kersbergen 2000, 2003; de Vries and van Kersbergen 2007; de Vries 2023, this volume), van Kersbergen has adopted and developed 'allegiance' as a measure for popular sentiment about politics instead of more established concepts such as 'legitimacy' or 'political support'. What distinguishes the concept of allegiance is that it presupposes that citizens' approval of their government directly relies on a generic calculation in which this loyalty is exchanged for a set of tangible rewards and benefits that the government realizes for them. Thus, the concept of allegiance implies that the willingness of citizens to respect and obey the government breaks down once this calculation is no longer perceived to obtain. Building on this logic, van Kersbergen opposes any suggestion to blame the present political malaise on the citizens. The cause of the problem rather lies in the exhaustion of the political projects on offer.

It is exactly at this point that the social scientist takes over from the philosopher. Instead of developing the Weberian suggestion that

disenchantment – as the logical complement of rationalisation – is a historical driving force, with the political projects as its contingent manifestations, as a social scientist, van Kersbergen identifies the four concrete projects as the primary drivers and disenchantment as the result (rather than the cause) of their logic: 'Disenchantment occurs, because of the failure, the growth beyond limits, the success, and the unintended effects of the projects' (49).

Of the four mechanisms that he distinguishes here (failure, growth beyond limits, success, and unintended effects), the most prominent one is the argument about the perverse interaction (unintended effects) between the four projects. The main culprit in this context is the (elite) project of European integration, as it emerges as a political response to the market-driven process of internationalization. Logically, European integration directly threatens to undo the achievements of the political project of nation-state building that historically preceded it. While overcoming nationalism may still be a price worth paying from our present point of view, the tensions are more painful once we recognize that European integration also undermines the political projects of democratization and the welfare state, as these have been institutionalized first and foremost in the context of the nation state and the societal conditions in which it is embedded. Here, van Kersbergen echoes insights that can be found in the contemporary work of Peter Mair (2013: Ch. 4) and Fritz Scharpf (2011; 2015). He also comes to share the rather fatalistic tone that characterizes much of the later work of these authors, even if he desperately seeks to identify 'a gleam of hope' (51).

Taking disenchantment seriously

The philosophical road not taken at this point is the one in which disenchantment is not reduced to being the effect of the exhaustion of the major political projects but where – in a true Weberian fashion – disenchantment is seen as the overarching historical driving force under the shadow of which the classical political projects were bound to lose their quasi-religious appeal. Such an interpretation is very much suggested if we read the continuum from religion proper to political projects that van Kersbergen sketches (p. 30, Figure 1) from a historical point of view. We can then recognize how the prevalent forms of politics have increasingly shed their religious roots

over time. Thus, disenchantment appears as the inevitable process of rationalization in which ever more transcendental elements are traded away for more instrumental, contemporaneous ones, but where the latter eventually can no longer exist once all elements of the former have been lost. Or, as van Kersbergen (47) puts it, disenchantment 'concerns the progressive abolition of quasi-messianism in politics and attempts to depict the demise of the transformative *vista* in these political projects as redemption and revelation, and, with it, the loss of the fervent commitment of both the rulers and the ruled'. This suggests that disenchantment is a much more autonomous historical process, of which the major political projects are mere manifestations rather than determining the course of the process.

If we look at the argument from this perspective, the mechanism that comes to the fore is not so much the one that suggests that the big political projects have come to undermine each other or that they have failed or grown behind their limits. It is rather the mechanism that suggests– 'ironically', as van Kersbergen (47) puts it – that disenchantment is what is left once the major political projects have been essentially fulfilled, 'as a result of which they are largely, but erroneously, taken for granted' (48).

In this idea, there is an echo of Fukuyama's argument in *The end of history*, where the success of liberal democratic capitalism eventually removes all sense of political heroism and agency. Following Alexandre Kojève, Fukuyama (1992: 311) explains it in this way: 'If man reaches a society in which he has succeeded in abolishing injustice, his life will come to resemble that of the dog'. In the article that preceded the book, Fukuyama (1989: 18) is very pointed in asserting that this is

a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.

Indeed, such is very much the sentiment of the disenchantment of politics in the absence of major political projects that van Kersbergen sketches.

Despite Fukuyama, history has not stopped. However, the question is if there is a way in which we can envisage the disenchantment of politics to be stopped or, better even, reversed. Can the egg be unscrambled? Can we summon ourselves to commit to political actions that history has robbed of their mysterious allure and the promise of a transcendental quality? Can enchantment be summoned or regained once it has been lost? I guess not. But whether that commits us to the conclusion that the end of democracy is near depends much on how we look at the void that disenchantment leaves behind.

Celebrating the void

Notably, disenchantment is a negative process. It means that something disappears. Thus, van Kersbergen's argument eventually issues in the conclusion 'that the disenchantment of politics causes a political void in contemporary democratic societies, an emptiness of collective power' (49). The notion of a democratic void echoes the analysis that Peter Mair had published four years earlier (Mair 2006) and that would gain general currency in the title of his posthumous book *Ruling the void* (Mair 2013) (without the question mark that was still attached to the article title in 2006). As far as the political diagnosis goes, Mair and van Kersbergen very much overlap. They rely on the same kinds of indicators of the declining allegiance to the traditional institutions of modern party democracy. They share the same reluctance to simply blame the voters, putting a bit more responsibility on politicians, but also recognizing that there is something inevitable and self-sustaining to the process taking place. And they share most of the same fatalism, a fatalism that was even more pronounced in an earlier draft of van Kersbergen's paper that was then still entitled 'The disenchantment of politics':

> Politics now seems to have deteriorated into an entirely secularized pragmatic and disengaged practice of professional politicians, administrators, and civil servants, who are submerged in the routine exercise of power over a populace, which is – at best – increasingly indifferent to

any collective project or – worse – more and more engaged in voicing futile protests against a, by now, autistic leadership or – worst – entirely disengaging from democracy and cynically protecting purely private interests (van Kersbergen, n.d. draft, document on file with the author p. 15).

The element that van Kersbergen came to foreground in subsequent drafts is the element that ultimately distinguishes his analysis of that of Mair, namely that he adds a spiritual dimension to this process that prevents party politicians from claiming and sustaining the kind of promises they once made. However, if disenchantment is indeed interpreted as the inevitable accompaniment of rationalizing societies, then it only goes to reinforce the fatalism of the conclusion.

Yet, it very much testifies to his character that van Kersbergen seeks to resist such fatalism. The one 'gleam of hope' that he turns to is the *deus ex machina* of a benign and inspiring political leader like, at the time, Barack Obama (35). Echoing Weber again, in turning to charisma, van Kersbergen essentially projects the quasi-messianism that was previously associated with projects – and the political parties and societal movements that carried them forward – on individual political leaders (cf. Schumacher, 2023, this volume). Immediately, however, he adds two qualifications. One is that, beguiled by their personal charisma, it is easy to overestimate such political leaders. Van Kersbergen (40) signals that it is 'doubtful that [Obama's] agenda is of the same calibre as the enchanting projects I identify'. In any case, Obama's promises 'may have generated expectations that are hard if not impossible to satisfy and are therefore bound to disappointment' (49). Second, such political leaders are bound to remain rare, and the present political conditions are certainly not conducive to producing them. On the whole, then, he reluctantly concludes that 'most political enterprises that are filling the democratic void seem to be endangering democracy' (51).

There is something ironic in that, in his refusal to accept the fatalistic conclusions to which the diagnosis of disenchantment leads him, van Kersbergen turns to the closest of a messianic impersonation that one can think of. Notably, it has become individuals rather than parties that can still, occasionally, call up the kind of

widespread enthusiasm for politics that we wish for but that is often difficult to summon. In recent decades, such enthusiasm may have been summoned by politicians such as Blair, Obama, and Macron – and maybe even, in her later days, Merkel – but, as these examples also show, it has been hard for them to keep their promises and to sustain the popular enthusiasm. In fact, arguably, Obama and Blair only deepened the void, which, then, came to be exploited by Trump and by the Brexit advocates, exactly the kind of malign political forces that van Kersbergen fears. Notably, the same prospect very much looms with Macron, with possibly even more disastrous consequences for France and Europe.

There is another use of the notion of a 'void' in political science that van Kersbergen does not reference, namely Claude Lefort's (1983) idea of modern democracy being essentially organized around an empty space of sovereign power that no single actor can ever claim to fill. From Lefort's perspective, the democratic void emerges as a political achievement rather than a loss. The empty place very much represents the place that, in pre-democratic times, was occupied by 'the king', embodying absolute sovereignty (cf. Kantorowicz, 1957). With the king overturned, the void signifies that no single actor can claim sovereignty over society and that the political process remains inherently indetermined. Lefort recognizes that this indeterminacy also comes with risks, but such risks are inherent to having an open and free society.

Post-secular democracy

The Dutch historian and writer Geert Mak has written a book with the title *How God disappeared from Jorwerd* (2001 [1996]). This book documents how the demise of the church in the Friesian village stands for 'the death of the village in late twentieth-century Europe' (the subtitle of the book). Kees van Kersbergen's oeuvre can be seen as chronicling 'how God disappeared from modern politics', with a special focus on Christian-Democracy as His last torchbearer (van Kersbergen, 1995). God is indeed disappearing from modern-day politics. The process of disenchantment is being completed. In other words, our politics has become 'post-secular' (Habermas, 2012), and as rational citizens, we have no other option than to seek the motivation within ourselves rather than to rely on some external

source of enchantment. Chronicling this process is bound to make one nostalgic. However, there is no need for it to turn into fatalism.

On the contrary, extrapolating from Lefort, I would suggest that only after our politics has been fully disenchanted can it become truly democratic. As long as our politics still hinges on some other-worldly promise, we, the people, cannot fully claim it as our own responsibility (cf. Rorty, 1991). For sure, a fully disenchanted politics leaves little space for political heroism or even the projection of it. The realization that neither God, nor Obama, or even 'Mutti Merkel', will save us politically may be daunting. But it also means that, ultimately, the people will have to make do with themselves and that each of them shares political responsibility.

A fully disenchanted politics will indeed not invite the grand political ideals of the past, such as the promise of a communist revolution or even an 'end of history' in a nicely pacified liberal market democracy (the closest one gets to that is probably in Aarhus). Still, the post-secular certainly need not be devoid of ideals. To a large extent, these ideals are inscribed in the political condition itself in which citizens recognize each other as different but equal (Rorty, 1991) and commit to collaborating on the basis of mutual respect. In socio-economic terms, this ideal may be captured by the value of 'solidarity'; in political terms, it is all about the maintenance of an active democracy.

These ideals are certainly not secure. They, and the way they are best interpreted, indefinitely remain at the centre of contestation in all (post-)modern politics. At times, democracy and (international) solidarity may suffer, as they did with Trump and Brexit. Some of our political science colleagues quickly followed up on these events with books about *How democracy ends* (Runciman 2018) and *How democracies die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). However, as we know now, 2016 did not mark the beginning of an unstoppable political decline. While the democratic void certainly invites many malign 'anti-political entrepreneurs and hazardous political experiments', democratic systems show themselves resilient because of the institutional guardrails that they have in place, the structure of (civil) society and, ultimately, the good sense of many citizens (Crum and Oleart, 2023). It is a prime task for political science to chart the dynamics between these forces and counter-forces.

Ultimately, the lesson here is one of the philosophy of history: we have to abandon the quasi-messianic promise of a linear, progressive trajectory of politics. Our societies are not destined to become ever more democratic and solidaristic, even if that promise may have obtained for a brief spell of time (say, the post-war generation who were born around 1958). That does not imply, however, that the trend inevitably turns into the other direction, in which our societies are bound to become more autocratic and unequal. By its very nature, politics is a stochastic process, without a messiah pulling the strings but only people steering through their ups and downs together – while political scientists take notes.

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