

*HISTORICAL-SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH HUB AT HAMBURG INSTITUTE
 FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH (HIS) 2026-2027*

FAULT LINES OF DEMOCRACY

VIOLENCE – SOVEREIGNTY – TERRITORIALITY

Democracy in Europe is currently facing challenges that many interpret as an imminent rupture with this presuppositional form of government. An essential feature of liberal democracies is the institutionalization of a self-governing people that exercises and controls state power within a sovereign legal space. A central characteristic of liberal democracies is that they resolve conflicts in a channelled form, for example by delegating political decision-making powers after free elections. However, key elements of this model of order have recently been challenged: Political disputes quickly become polarized, the willingness to engage with the arguments of political opponents dwindles – they become the enemy, which can even make recourse to violence possible or indeed make it seem necessary. At the same time, liberal democracies experience themselves as militarily threatened, arm themselves and debate their ability to defend themselves both internally and externally – for some the order of the day, for others the affirmation of an increasing illiberalism of the liberal West. The European present is thus characterized by a new presence of democratic fault lines.

It remains questionable though, whether a diagnosis of decline can be derived from this. There is no guarantee for a democracy to become ever more “progressive” and somehow continue to develop as a matter of course. What exactly is to be democratized and to what extent has never been a foregone conclusion, but has always been contested. It therefore seems to make little sense to merely put up for discussion ever more sophisticated normative models of democracy that either evoke the good old days or sound all too utopian with a view to the future. In contrast, the Historical-Sociological Research Hub at HIS adopts a historical-sociological perspective that asks and distinguishes which fault lines have always been inscribed in (European) democracies and which are new, where fault lines come under tension and where they threaten to break. By focusing on **state power and democracy**, **monetary and democratic sovereignty** and **democratic territoriality**, it concentrates on the fault lines of central elements of democracy.

On the Relationship Between State Power and Democracy

Democracy is not only based on the containment of violence, but also on its exercise in the form of state power. In particular, democratic state authority must act in strict compliance with the constitutional order. However, state practice has always contradicted this idea. This applies above all to the intentional or deliberately accepted violation of the constitution by state institutions. The Hub focus of research is therefore the excessive use of force by state security organs - secret service and police forces as well as the military – which, for the most part, disregard the constitution and the law in secrecy. Examples of such actions range from the violent suppression of political protests and the promotion of violent overthrow abroad to the targeted killings of so-called “enemies of the state”. As the state apparatus reacts violently to - actual or alleged - violent threats from society, two forms of violence come together that are capable of mutually reinforcing each other. The following key questions arise at this fault line: Under what conditions does not only violence within and from society, but also excessive, illegitimately exercised state power call the democratic order into question? When and why does the confluence of these two, often mutually dependent forms of violence lead to the destabilization of democracy?

On the Relationship Between Monetary and Democratic Sovereignty

The eurozone is regarded as a prime example of a technocratically structured monetary order that is shielded from the primary routines of democratic decision-making. The common currency was created under the mantra of financial and political actors of the late 20th century, who wanted to ensure the protection of private property by decoupling monetary design capacities and democratic sovereignty in order to realize the individual freedom essential to the liberal model of democracy. This created a fault line at which monetary sovereignty in Europe not only appears to stand in opposition to the people's claim to self-government. The eurozone also bought into socio-economic and political-economic imbalances, which are currently intensifying and could lead to a further break-up of the union. These imbalances can be seen in crisis-induced and structurally overstretched national budgets that fall back on “Sondervermögen” and shadow budgets, in the central bank's difficulties in mediating between the return of inflation and financial stability, in Europe's delayed reactions to the challenges of the digitalization of money and in the heated ad hoc responses to the geopolitical world disorder, whose power struggles are fought not least via the payment infrastructure. How has the relationship between monetary and democratic sovereignty changed historically? Where does it lead to political-economic tensions and what future does the euro have as a common currency in view of its structural deficits?

On the Relationship Between Territoriality and Democracy

Democratic sovereignty currently appears to be called into question in several respects by the erosion of its claim to a nationally determined territory. In this perspective, globalization and Europeanization are dissolving the fixed borders of democratic nation states, because people, goods and finances are increasingly oriented towards a new transnational order. However, this overlooks the fact that the boundaries of democratic territoriality have always been ambivalent and therefore fragile. On the one hand, European democracies did not emerge in opposition to, but together with supranational forms of rule (colonial empires, European Community). On the other hand, their claim to territorial sovereignty was never unambiguous, even internally,

given the continuing legal, economic and social diversity. Against this background, we explore the question of whether the reference to spatial concepts in the current struggle for democratic order lends a new quality to the territorial ambivalence of democracies. To what extent does the claim to “rurality” in the protests of the French yellow vests or the European farmers reveal a fundamental fault line of democratic order? In what way does the political mobilization against “Europe” in the name of national or regional identities represent a new challenge to European democracies?

The Research Hub will organize a series of international conferences on the three “fault lines of democracy” mentioned above. Along with these conferences, there will be calls for applications for short-term fellowships primarily aimed at postdoctoral researchers and established scholars. Successful applicants will be given the opportunity to work with the academic staff of the HIS, generally for a period of 4-12 weeks, to give their input to the planned conferences and also to initiate publications that are within the thematic scope of the Research Hub. The scholarships will also include accommodation in guest rooms located in the HIS building.

A first conference on “Excessive State Power and State Killings in Democracies” will take place in March 2026, further conferences on the topics of “Politics of Payments in Transition. On Fault Lines of Money and Sovereignty” and “Mobilizing Rurality. Fault Lines of Spatial Order in European Democracies” are planned for the course of the same year. For 2027, further conferences on the three fault lines will be developed in collaboration with the prospective fellows.

For questions concerning fellowships please contact
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