

POPULISM AS A PHENOMENON OF DEDIFFERENCIATION

By Jean-François Kervegan, Paris

When, in 1989, the “human rights revolution” (*Gauchet* 1989) was celebrated, the bicentenary of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen were not the only ones in mind. We were also thinking of the major event that was taking place in Eastern Europe and that would, in the following years, change the face of the world, it means the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its satellites. One could reasonably think that what was emerging was the end of the bipolar world resulting from the Second World War, it was above all the undisputable victory of democracy and what appears to be its necessary correlate, human rights, it was even, perhaps, the end of history (*Fukuyama* 1992). Even if we feared a possible “clash of civilizations” and the arrival of new political frontlines (*Huntington* 1996), the dominant belief, at least in the former “Western bloc”, was that the fundamental values of modern democracy, enshrined in major founding texts such as those of 1776, 1789, 1848 or 1948, no longer had credible competitors, except for the barbarism of the new absolute enemy of civilization, whether it is called Al Qaeda or Daesh. The “society of individuals” whose genesis has been described by Norbert Elias (*Elias* 1987), the reign of *homo aequalis*, whose singularity Louis Dumont demonstrated by comparing it with the *homo hierarchicus* of caste societies (*Dumont* 1966; *Dumont* 1983; *Dumont* 1985; *Dumont* 2013), all this is based on the idea, first formulated as a purely theoretical hypothesis by modern theorists of natural law and social contract, that human individuals “are born and remain free and equal in rights” (Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, Article 1). This normative hypothesis has also become the outline of a social and political agenda, that of what has been called first and foremost the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), then, under pressure from the working class, the republican, democratic and social rule of law (*republikanischer, demokratischer und sozialer Rechtsstaat*), as defined, for example, by the Federal Republic of Germany in Article 28, al.-1 of its Basic Law. With variations of interpretation that are not insignificant in fact, this programme was that of the liberal-democratic states of the post-war period, at least until the “neo-liberal revolution” of the 1980’s shook some of its main pillars. This “revolution” undermined, it seems, what was called the “social-democratic model”. But, in any case, nothing seemed to call into question the absolute weight accorded to the liberal principles embodied in the very structure of democracy: We acknowledge here Habermas’ thesis of co-originary of human rights and democracy (*Habermas* 1992, p. 155). In other words, according to the mainstream view, and con-