

Radicalizing Democracy

Democracy is a fundamental theme in political science. And it is a theme that is as provocative as it is inexhaustible, because it is basically linked to the permanent problem of defining what makes a good society, to the problem of the ability of men and women to create institutions that will ensure liberty and justice. In our times, however, concern over the manner in which democratic regimes are able to face the major contemporary issues is particularly relevant. As Anthony Giddens teaches us, from a somewhat different angle, some of the factors that favor the expansion of liberal democratic institutions contribute themselves to the creation of new challenges that appear to bring into question the ability of those institutions to act.

Some elements that were identified with the functioning of modern democracy, such as political parties, the use of the State as a mechanism for the promotion of social well-being and, at a more basic level, the idea that the State must be in full control of the processes that affect its people, have weakened. I shall mention just some aspects of the problem:

1. First, in relation to institutions, the mechanisms for the aggregation of interests, particularly political parties, find it difficult to keep up with the demands of representation made in the context of the thematic fragmentation that characterizes contemporary political life, which reflects the fragmentation of constituencies along the lines of specific sectional interests, which go far beyond the mere position occupied by the individual in the production system. Political parties share the arena with the NGOs, which offer a different perspective, a nonencompassing and deliberately segmented perspective.

2. Second, due to the fiscal restrictions faced by the State in a situation where international involvement is inevitable and increasingly competitive, new limitations tend to affect the effort towards social inclusion, for the construction of that intelligent combination of formal democracy and substantive democracy that has been the program of European social democracy. In the developed countries, this has led to the rethinking of the structures of social welfare. In the developing countries, this issue becomes even more complex because we are starting from the situation of an "ill-fare state" if I may say so and the challenge is even greater, because advances in communications and transport techniques, as well as in the process of urbanization itself, have brought within everyone's reach, not prosperity itself, but the image of the prosperity of others in their own country and in countries abroad.
3. Third, the process of globalization makes it more difficult for national projects to be carried out even when they have popular support. Several issues that affect people's daily lives involve transnational factors outside the control of governments. International financial flows are an obvious example of this, as they show the extent to which the structures of governance existing at the global level fall short of what would be required for this type of phenomenon to be dealt with within the framework of the democratic process.
4. Finally, in Latin American countries there is often the perception that the re-establishment of democracy in the 1980s did not bring about solutions to social problems, and this sometimes gives way to a certain nostalgia for authoritarian rule. Although not calling for its return, such nostalgia leads to impatience with the negotiating process that is an integral part of democracy and to entertaining the notion that the executive branch of government could hold powers similar to those of an autocratic regime. Having thus outlined the elements of the problem, we may now ask what solutions are available for democracy today. I believe that the answer lies not in less but rather in more democracy. I maintain that it is necessary to radicalize democracy, to go to the roots of the processes that permit a sovereign people to control its destiny in the new context created by contemporary mass society. We should view democracy not only as a point of arrival, but also as a point of departure.

We are going through a unique historical opportunity with reasonably stable international conditions; at the same time, we do not have a clear road map to help us chart the problems. For example, a complete economic theory accounting for the effects of globalization does not yet exist. As regards social relations, it is difficult to know how to carry out a process of change in contemporary society in the absence of all-embracing ideologies and in a situation where society often moves ahead faster than those who are trying to lead it. It is also difficult to know which can be the historical forces behind transformation processes when the state is becoming weaker and when so many new forms of social identity are superimposed on traditional class divisions.

Too often have those who discuss these themes resorted to old concepts in an attempt to understand new situations. However, the fact that the issues are complex does not mean that we cannot have ideals or a sense of direction. Ideals include striking a balance in the process of listening to numerous fragmented demands. The key to this balance that is central to the idea of the radicalization of democracy is the idea that the State must serve all citizens effectively. How is that possible?

1. First of all, it is necessary to work with a broad concept of citizenship, which while retaining the old bases (essentially the notion of participation in politics), goes further and incorporates local and individual demands. The citizen is no longer simply a voter. He or she acts also as a member of a class, an ethnic group, a sexual minority, as an unemployed, a landless peasant, etc., and this multiplicity of points of view must be reflected in the functioning of the political system. The State must be prepared to enter into a dialogue with the diverse groups that reflect the plurality of identities of the individual in contemporary society.
2. How can the citizen have any control in an economy in which the market is central and privatization a necessary course? One must overcome the simplistic notion that what is in the best interest of the citizenry has to originate necessarily in the State. The mechanisms for regulating "privatized public" activities (communications, electricity, transport, etc.) must be guided by the needs of the people and, to that end, the direct participation by representatives of civil society in the bodies concerned is fundamental. The State must be porous and permeable to the needs of its citizens. The identification of the State with national interest cannot be assumed, but it is a political construction work that requires major efforts to reach consensus.
3. Democracy entails the need to ensure universal access to essential public services, as one of the main conditions for bringing about an effectively participating citizenship. And naturally, the first such services are education and health. More than ever, education is a decisive factor in the building of citizenship, particularly in a country like Brazil where so much remains to be done in this respect. Health is an equally indispensable element in the dignity of the citizen. Under present conditions, the solution to social problems calls for a creative partnership between state and society. There is an arena for new forms of dialogue and combined action that could make a fundamental contribution to bringing about what has already been termed "substantive democracy."
4. We face the task of renewing the political dimension, the task of giving a voice to all, under conditions of effective liberty. The public sphere should be really public and, under the conditions of contemporary democracy, this requires a sphere of debate and dialogue, a sphere of tolerance and respect for others. Radicalizing democracy means ensuring the right conditions for effective liberty, so that all citizens, even those who are not formally organized, are able to have a say in the process. There is an important role here for the State in ensuring freedom of expression and in seeking to contribute to the building of the public arena.

5. Finally, it will be necessary to find answers to the challenges posed by the globalization process to democracy. This issue must be examined outside the traditional framework of autarkic schemes. We shall not return to an international system on the Westphalian mold. Interdependence between States, today, is a fact of life and ignorance of this fact would condemn our efforts to the realm of fantasy. However, we can examine the question of what can and what must be regulated in the international field in order that the will of citizens may be exercised democratically. It is necessary, for example, to consider the role of the Bretton Woods institutions and the composition and the procedures of the United Nations Security Council.

The consideration of these challenges to democracy could appear to suggest a task of such enormous complexity as to place an excessive burden on political systems that are already responding with difficulty to the daily needs of government and which are seen to be even less effective when it comes to carrying out major reforms. However, not everything depends on the political system, the parties or the State. In our times society often anticipates transformation and experiences processes of changes that arise straight from social movements at the grass-root level.

This has been the case in Brazil. In the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, a veritable democratic revolution took place within Brazilian society, with the emergence of new players (organizations and social groups) and the defining of a new pattern of relations between society and the State, characterized by the demand for transparency, openness and access to the decision-making process.

More recently, this substratum of social democracy was what enabled the Brazilian people to exercise a clear and conscious option in favor of the economic stability achieved with the implementation of the Real Plan. As a matter of fact, for the Brazilian people, the success of economic stability has had a very important political significance. Quite obviously, controlling inflation has not been the magical solution to all Brazil's problems. However, the Real Plan or rather, economic stability, has united Brazilians and created a consensus on a national objective that has been defined and brought about through democratic means.

These brief observations on recent Brazilian history illustrate, in my view, the fact that the goal of radicalizing democracy cannot be achieved from top to bottom, by government decree, but it involves the mobilization of society itself. It is largely a matter of removing obstacles to the strengthening of democracy and to its unimpeded exercise. Some of these obstacles are to be found within the state apparatus itself hence the decisive importance of proposals aimed at reforming the State.

We are multiplying and consolidating collective channels of expression, further decentralizing discussion and decision-making processes, making them more open to participation, bringing public authority closer to the people and the people closer to public authority. In essence, we are going to the Latin root of the word power, by conveying to the citizens the certainty that they can voice their opinions and it is worth the effort, that they can contribute to change and that, again, it is worth the effort. This spells out the full meaning to the term "citizenship." Although under

different circumstances, I find the same perspective in the concept of a “stakeholder society,” so ably elaborated by Prime Minister Tony Blair.

When I am asked if this radically pluralist democracy, this increasingly democratic democracy, will resolve the problem of exclusion, my answer is a clear yes, all the more so because there is no alternative.

In addition, if society is many-sided in its essence, the solutions cannot but reflect this fact. The plight of the poor who are marginalized from the development process is not the only form of exclusion. Important as it is, it is only one form. In fact, there are several forms of exclusion: that of women, children, the elderly, the uneducated, the unemployed, the disabled, victims of violence, the landless, and those affected by pollution and environmental damage. It is not enough, therefore, to politicize just one line of exclusion, following the model of class struggle.

All forms of exclusion must be politicized and in all these areas mobilization must be encouraged, organizations must be formed and the channels between such organizations and the State must be expanded. Maintaining that the simplistic dichotomies between left and right, workers and capitalists, should be replaced by an acknowledgement of the complexity of our societies does not mean being conservative, as some “fundamentalists” would have us believe (in the sense in which Professor Giddens uses the term).

On the contrary, it means accepting change and seeking even greater change; it means being prepared to participate in the building of something really new.

It is in the spirit of this intellectual challenge that I sincerely wish the young students of the London School of Economics and Political Science, that they may have the good fortune to contribute to the building of a world that is more democratic, more prosperous and more inclined towards solidarity—a radically better world.