

# Let them Democratise themselves? The Common dilemmas in the Mediterranean Regarding the Processes of Democratic Deepening and Social Transformation

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We are used to observing countries along the south shore of the Mediterranean with critical eyes regarding the effective working of their democratic institutions.

We know that elections take place in those countries. We know that they have parliamentary institutions. We know that a plurality of parties that operate in the respective territories exist. But, in spite of everything, we doubt that all this is not, on many occasions, more virtual than real, more nominal than effective.

And these comments often originate from the conviction that the countries on the north shore already have consolidated democracies, with full exercise of liberties and rights, with highly institutionalised representative assemblies, and with party systems that are capable of including the whole range of political options and which interaction also guarantees periodical processes of alternation in power.

In this context, the relatively recent elections in Morocco or those held in Egypt in 2005, have been useful in demonstrating the limits of democratisation processes in the region, but also their encouraging progress.

In this article, we are not trying to dig deeper into these electoral processes, neither do we want to ponder over the complications of the system of parties' evolution and the electoral chicanery that characterises the specific developments within this or that North Afri-

can political regime. Instead, we want to concentrate on the aspects that both shores of the Mediterranean have in common regarding the need (undoubtedly different, but nevertheless shared) to examine in greater depth the respective situations and evolution of democracy in each region.

To this end, we will look instead at the current inadequacies of Western democracy in relation to the values it brings, the limitations carried by an exclusively regulatory conception of this democracy, and the possibilities of confluence between both shores in relation to potential in-depth processes in a perspective that recovers the transforming aspect of democracy.

## **Democracy in a Change of Era**

From a European or Western perspective, it is probably not advisable to enter into the debate on political representation channels' improvement, the necessity or not to modify the running of institutions of representative democracy, or to give greater or less value to experiences of social participation in such and such a place, without socially and historically contextualising the issue.

Can we seriously discuss the matters mentioned here without trying to relate them to the great changes that our societies are undergoing? If we socially decontextualise the debate on representative democracy, are we not falling into the political "autism" that presently afflicts many of the democratic institutions in Europe?

These reflections attempt to position the debate on democratic innovation and citizen participation in the wider

debate of social transformation, relating current deficits of the running of representative democracy in the general framework of the change of era that we are going through and the need to look for alternatives to the serious social problems caused after more than a decade of neoliberal dominance.

Many of the parameters which encompassed the institutions of representative democracy have changed considerably. The liberal rules of the game were changing (democratising themselves) in a way that opened up more opportunities of access to sectors and social levels that were not "inscribed" in the coordinates of the game. The political institutions of liberalism based themselves on a subsidiary relationship in relation to the demands of the liberal economic order, and in that design, as we know, the possibilities of political participation were limited to those fully considered as "citizens", that is, owners, whose income threshold allowed them to participate or not in processes of political representation, according to whether the hegemonic political powers of the moment were more or less conservative, more or less liberal.

The preoccupation with political participation was not an issue that would appear on the institutions' agenda for debate. It was an extrainstitutional matter, raised precisely by those who were specifically excluded from political institutional life.

To talk about democracy at that time was to speak of a revolutionary and contradictory desire with the prevailing institutional logic, basically because to speak of democracy was to speak of equality.

The transformation itself of the economic system was accompanied, and not

without tensions and conflicts of all types and magnitudes, by the democratising transformation of the political system. We could say that in Western Europe, and after the overwhelming popular protagonism in the outcomes of the great wars, hitherto unknown heights of political democratisation are reached and, not by chance, of social participation in the benefits of economic growth in the form of social policies from 1945 onwards.

Democratisation and redistribution appear connected once again. This model, in which coincided territorial scope of the state, population subject to its sovereignty, production system of masses, economic exchange market and rules that established all kinds of relationships, from a logic of citizen participation in its resolve, acquired dimensions of a canonical and apparently undisputed model.

In recent years there have been many changes regarding this matter. The main socio-economic and cultural parameters that were used as the basis for the industrial society are rapidly being left behind. And many of the analysis instruments that we had been using to understand the transformations in Europe of the liberal state to the Fordist/Keynesian welfare state, are now clearly useless.

This is not the time to repeat many of those elements of change, but we are tracing some of the brushstrokes. Economic globalisation and technical change have totally modified the coordinates of industrialism. Increasingly seldom are there productive situations in which great concentrations of workers produce vast quantities of products for massive consumption at affordable prices, on the basis of a Taylorist work organization and at the expense of a notable homogeneity in the range of goods produced. This was probably only true in a few parts of the world, but in such areas the impact of the changes has been tremendous.

We can no longer talk of stability, continuity, unique professional specialisation, regarding working conditions increasingly more precarious and ever-changing. Changes in work (a job that is more and more intermittent, precarious, with neither scope nor strong ties) have changed and are changing

peoples' lives considerably, affecting and destructuring their social bonds, changing the way of understanding norms of reciprocity, or of implication in matters that go beyond the mere individual.

The impacts of this transformation are not small in the field of social relationships. We have been moving away from relatively stable social orders, with known scales of inequality which allowed for relatively homogenous and collective redistributive treatments, which were established moreover with notable guarantees of continuity, to situations characterised by heterogeneity, fragmentation, and with complexities only explicable from a vertiginous process of individualisation.

The inequality continues to exist, but its descriptors have changed considerably. There is no predominant core, rather, a multiplicity of cores of inequality and vulnerability. The historical accumulation of risks in certain social sectors, had enabled them to develop a wide variety of collective solutions, which looked for both the capacity to make themselves heard in a political scene designed for other collectives and problems, just as they also tried to find a specific solution to problems related to collective living and working conditions.

Compared with the previous social structure of great groups and important continuities, today there is a mosaic, increasingly more fragmented and fluid, of situations of poverty, wealth, failure and success. The massive arrival of immigrants has also caused significant ruptures in the traditional dynamics of social reciprocity, fragmenting and diversifying to infinity conditions of life, work, citizenship, and hampering considerably the easy articulation of solutions which carry a collective sense of belonging and strategic perspective felt spontaneously and naturally. The area itself of primary coexistence no longer presents the same appearance that it had in the industrial era. And if that produces very positive changes of feminine emancipation through training and access to the labour market, it also has an impact on the debilitation of instances of primary socialisation and transmission of common implication criteria.

This series of changes and profound transformations in the productive, social and family spheres, has undermined the fundamental bases on which the public powers of European democracies rested. The market and underlying economic power have become globalised, while representative institutions, and the power that emanates from them, to a great extent continue to be anchored to the territory.

Globalisation has imposed new logics of political relationship between economic power and institutions, noticeably reducing the political ability to condition an economic activity which is presented in an increasingly "naturalised" way. And it is in this context that the problems produced by economic globalisation and the processes of individualisation are evident on a daily basis.

Institutional fragmentation increases, the state losing weight towards the top (suprastatal institutions), towards the bottom (processes of decentralisation, "devolution", etc.), and sideways (with a large increase in public-private partnerships, with private management of public services, and with increasingly greater presence of non-profit organisations present on the public scene). At the same time, the hierarchical logic that has always characterised the exercise of power, is no longer useful for understanding the processes of public decision, based more and more on logics of interdependence, of capacity of influence, of relational power, and less and less on organic statute or on the exercise of formal hierarchy.

It is in this new context that we have to situate the debate which is arising in Europe on the possible deficits of representative democracy. Relating changes in the political system to changes in ways of living and working.

Understanding that today the political dynamic moves in the context of a deregulated and dissociated salary earner, with serious material, family, educational and healthcare instability. And this is what we are not used to doing. We discuss the health of democracy, its vitality and ability to take up popular feeling, as if democracy was an undisputed and undeniable "*acquis*" from any territorial or collective sphere, and accessible to anyone.

And furthermore: as if everybody un-

derstood the same thing when discussing democracy. It is precisely at this point of arrival for Europe that we can find many similar points to what is apparently happening on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, although from there it is seen as a point of departure.

## Democracy?

It is not easy to enter into the debate on democracy and its significant past, present and future, without clarifying a little what it is we are referring to. Neither is this simple considering how much has been and continues to be written on the subject.

We accept that there must be some minimum rules on which to base a democratic exercise. According to the most generalised convention (Bobbio, 1990) these formal rules would be: a representative assembly, chosen by the citizenship and with regulatory capacity; non-discrimination in the citizenship condition and voting equality for adults in any condition; freedom to choose between the different candidates and parties that compete with each other with various alternatives for forming national representation; decisions made by a majority, with respect and guarantees for minorities; principle of government responsibility regarding the people's wishes/will expressed in the assembly or in the leadership of the State also elected.

But knowing that the existence of these rules does not imply the achievement of the ends that have always inspired the struggle for the democratisation of our societies. These are, not only legal but also social and economic equality. This aspiration has been the *raison d'être* of democratic movements since theocratic and authoritarian principles of power were altered. The "*levellers*" in England or the "*égaux*" of Babeuf, to go back to the origins, did not conform to the representative principle as a constituent element of new regimes, rather, they tried to make egalitarian aspiration, the democratic aspirations, a reality. What has been occurring in many North African countries (as well as in several Latin American countries), is that the hopes that had been waking up

the democratising processes, have not been fulfilled. Large sectors of the population do not perceive that the growing institutionalisation of democracy understood as the incorporation of electoral rules, the competition between parties and the reinforcement of parliamentary institutions, has been accompanied by a fundamental improvement in their living conditions. They have democratic rules, but they do not see that the egalitarian power, that improves living conditions, accompanies this democratising effort. Corruption continues, poverty continues, and consequently scepticism regarding the transforming power of democracy increases. So that, understandably they end up thinking that the same dynamics continue as always, only that now they have a different appearance and "apparel".

All over the world there seems to be a growing feeling that the great change of era we are witnessing, is increasingly draining our ability to influence government action. And this is the case, in spite of our formally keeping more or less intact, many of the formal elements of our condition as citizens that live and exercise their rights in a democratic state.

With this growing disempowerment in the Western world of the ability to influence and condition decisions, or with this lack of preciseness of democracy in living conditions in developing countries, a large part of the legitimacy of a democracy that only keeps open the doors of formal and institutional rites is lost.

Hirschman (Hirschman, 1991) says that a democratic regime achieves legitimacy when its decisions emanate from a complete and open deliberation among its groups, organs and representatives, but that is increasingly less certain for citizens and increasingly more certain for entities, corporations and economic lobbies that escape from the state-market-sovereignty logic, and take advantage of their new capacities of global mobility.

Public powers are less and less capable of conditioning economic-business activity, and instead, corporations continue to have influence and put the pressure on certain institutions that do not have the same mechanisms avail-

able for balancing the game as those they used to have (Crouch, 2004).

The evolution itself, of liberal-democratic regimes in the West has always kept out of the political system those social sectors that did not have the minimum vital capacities and conditions to be able to exercise their citizenship fully. This political exclusion was carried out normatively (assigning the previously mentioned income thresholds that converted the vote and political life in the work of quite a few people; manipulating electoral districts; keeping out the young, women, or those who went around the country looking for work, prohibiting the existence of certain parties or making their operation difficult,...), or by means of actions, not bothering about those who, although able to do so, do not exercise their political rights, concerned as they are about more urgent matters, such as survival, where to shelter or find work. What has been happening in recent years, after the end of what is referred to in France as the "thirty glorious" (1945-1975), is that this sector of politically excluded has not stopped growing. And thus is the situation because circumstances of social exclusion are increasing (which always entails processes of reducing the exercise of citizenship), and because there is a growing feeling of the futility of democratic-institutional exercise in this "low intensity democracy", by increasing awareness on the limitations of the real capabilities of institutions' government on the new scene of economic globalisation or because the political-institutional actors are increasingly enclosed in their self-sufficient universe. The reserve of legitimacy of democracy is running out, just when its apparent hegemony as a "unique" viable and acceptable government system seems greater than ever.

In this context, this series of transformations and changes to which we have been referring, have contributed to democracy today being just a word, an expression, a term that seems to explain less and less. The use and abuse of the word, its apparent unattackability, make it more redundant and less politically defining. The great international organisations, the great world powers (apparently responsible on many occa-

sions for situations of severe global and local inequality), states and political players anywhere, use the term and wield it to justify their actions or to criticise actions they consider unacceptable. And certainly if we try to recover its original and complex meaning, democracy, and the egalitarian aspiration it contains to make its full exercise a reality, is not exactly something that can be assumed peacefully and without contradictions by this enormous, mixed group of actors and institutions.

The institutional actors, along with the political parties and great union organisations, who are more and more inextricably woven into the institutional-statal network, if they do detect the signals of disconnection and disaffection of citizenship, they try to adapt to the new situation, looking with greater or lesser emphasis for new ways of survival, in a game that can become evil, with the media as the receptacle of extra and intra-institutional interaction.

Social movements either strengthen their clientelistic links with the institutional structure or they try to look for alternatives that immediately distance them from the conventional political game. The European citizenship increases its scepticism-cynicism regarding political-institutional activity, and we could state that it has simply "discounted" the existence of the system of political representation as one more burden to be endured in societies where living is increasingly more complicated. And it is along these lines that the relationship with politicians and institutions tends to become more utilitarian, more disposable, with little hope of influence or "authentic" interaction.

But, faced with this collection of problems and discoveries how can progress be made? Democracy continues to be the answer in both the North and the South. What we need to recover is our ability to redefine the question.

### Social Transformation

There is no reason why democracy should be considered as an end in itself. That which is at stake, that which could be the question to ask oneself

would be: How can we progress towards a world in which ideals of freedom and equality can be achieved satisfactorily, while also maintaining the acceptance of diversity as a structuring element in an indefectibly globalised environment? The answer continues to be: democracy. A democracy that recovers the transforming, egalitarian, and participative meaning that it had years ago. And thus overcomes the view now held in many parts of the world: utilitarian, formalist, minimalist and concealer of grave inequalities and exclusions. A democracy as an answer to the new economic, social and political challenges we are facing. Let us remember that capitalism and democracy have not always been terms that have coexisted easily. The egalitarian power of democracy has been quite ill-matched with an economic system that considers inequality as something natural that inevitably has to be lived with, since any effort in the opposite direction will be seen as distorting the optimum operational conditions of the market.

By this we do not mean that democracy and market are incompatible, rather, that they cannot coexist without tension. A tension that arises from the eminently conflictive and antagonistic character of politics that cannot break away from social division, when instead on many occasions it is a question of minimising this conflict or silencing discordant voices with an apparent universal consensus with "democracy". There may be consensus with those who defend the political-ethical values of freedom and equality for everyone, but there will still be political conflict on the specific interpretation of those values, and there will still be destabilisation of subordinate and unequal conditions from the start (Moufle, 2005).

We have to look for new formulas of economic development, recovering government capacities that balance and lay frontiers to that which today is an expansion without visible limits of corporate power on a global scale, with growing levels of inequality and despair for many people and groups. And for this we need different things. On the one hand, we need to strengthen the existing formulas of social economics

and look for new ways of creating wealth and individual and group welfare. Taking the debate of democratisation to spheres that currently appear shielded: what is understood by growth, what we understand as development, who defines costs and profits, who wins and who loses up against each apparently objective and neutral economic option. On the other hand, looking for formulas that regulate-arbitrate-tax the international economic and financial transactions that presently follow roads and routes that make their supervision extremely difficult for governments, even in the hypothetical case of them wanting to really exercise that control.

Furthermore, exploring and promoting forms of social organisation that favour the reconstruction of ties, the coordination of collective senses of belonging respectful of individual autonomy. In this sense, the strengthening of rapprochement and community experiences in the processes of formulation and implementation of public policies, is something undoubtedly to follow and consolidate. Likewise, the organisation of frameworks and platforms that facilitate the linking together of local experimentation frameworks, enabling crossed fertilisations and reflections on the practices carried out in different places. Recovering the political and transforming sense of many social experiences that today seem merely "curious" or resistant to dominant individualisation. Understanding that there is a lot of "politics" in what could apparently simply be defined as "new social dynamics".

From a more strictly political point of view, the first thing is to understand that politics does not end within institutions. And the second thing is that politics means ability to find a solution to collective problems. Therefore, it seems important to make progress in new forms of group participation and democratic innovation that do not separate from the specific change in the living conditions of people.

There is little sense in continuing to speak about participative democracy, new forms of political participation, if we confine ourselves to working in the narrow institutional field, or on how we improve the channels of relation-inter-

action between political-representative institutions and society. Especially when these institutions are based on a principle that finds every day new verifications of its non-fulfilment. The principle according to which all citizens have the same conditions of access to any form of legally established political expression, when on the contrary, these conditions of access are socially determined and differentially distributed. To advance towards the universalisation

of capacity and tendency to act and think politically we must universalise the real means that allow access to that historical preciseness of exercise of citizenship that we have called democracy (Wacquant, 2005).

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