

Memórias

29/08/2002

Representative democracy and participatory democracy

The central theme of this seminar has been present in humanity's political debate for at least two centuries. The roots of political systems of representation are found in the constitutional regimes of Modern States. The ancient and medieval political regimes, being slave or serf societies, cannot be identified with the situations which began with the Modern State. Even with Absolutism, where the idea of a 'contract' already appears, and the subject holds certain rights, his situation is far from the qualification of 'citizen'.

The origins of representative systems were born from liberal conceptions which expressed the development and maturing of mercantilist societies and the objective conditions for the rise of capitalism – the accumulation of capital and the existence of freedom of labour.

This process was neither linear nor simultaneous in Europe or in the New World. The contradictions and social conflicts that permeated the capitalist means of production were expressed through various theoretical schools of thought.

For effects of simplification of this presentation, we can reduce the bourgeois thoughts which justify the necessity of the State and give it legitimacy, into two broad ideological schools. These stem from the natural right of man to liberty and from criticism of the absolutist State, which justifies its existence from the divine right of monarchies, or from the "contract" whereby man – in order to emerge from the permanent state of war in which he naturally finds himself -, abdicates his sovereignty and transfers it absolutely to a king. For the absolutists, this was the only condition in which man could live in harmony: everyone would abdicate their sovereignty to an all-powerful State, which through fear and its coercive power, would guarantee peace and life in society.

The two forms of liberalism

The first of these schools, the concept of possessive, proprietary liberalism, is found in the thoughts of John Locke (1632 – 1704) who criticised Absolutism, not for its contractual character, (which had appeared before in the works of Thomas Hobbes), but for the justification of divine right with which the monarchs sought to justify their absolute power. Natural law for Locke is the right to liberty, which together with work, supports the right to property, which the State has an obligation to defend. What is more, this should be the essential function of the State, under the control of delegated representatives, with the right to make the laws and apply them.

The other school is the "egalitarian" liberal conception of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778). For him, the social contract implies the idea of a natural law of liberty, but also holds equality as a human condition. Thus, this introduction is not a theoretical aside. Its purpose is to situate the origins of our debate on the delegation of power, and allow us to understand that this is not a recent debate, but has constituted a challenge for humanity over centuries.

The different theoretical and ideological explanations of this process express distinct social interests throughout history, and to this day have different consequences in the political development of humanity. This debate expresses the distinct interests of classes and fractions of classes in the passage of a society of small producers, artisans and farmers from the feudal yoke, to the consolidation of a new dominant elite typical of capitalism. It presents the historical dimension in which these concepts provide answers for a moment of humanity and are not eternal, as neither were the explanations of the world of feudalism or the absolutist transition. They are relationships between society and the State which can be altered by the action of historic agents.

This was true for those times and, evidently, is true today. The proprietary conception was based on the idea that liberty is the right to property. The State is the "contract" which guarantees the maintenance of property and of other rights.

In this concept of the State of Law, according to Locke, as in the

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formulations of Kant (1724 – 1804) there is a presumption of citizens with unequal rights as a function of property, "independent citizens and non-independent citizens". To these last, the dispossessed non-proprietors, there could be no right to vote, to representation in the power of the State, or to parliamentary preference.

Locke, despite his worldly views and his defence of tolerance at a time of religious intransigence, saw the State (political society resulting from the contract) as that which expresses sovereignty and the coercive power of the state, even up to condemnation to death!

Rousseau's egalitarian liberalism

The other conception, Rousseau's egalitarian liberalism, was based on the vision that "men are born free and equal" although he also remarked that at the time, "everywhere they are held in irons".

If the phrase betrayed the world in which he lived, where men were not born free and equal, as Rousseau's thoughts 'wished', the principle is a rich expression of his thought based on small production and crafts, the reality of the small places and/or regions that were rapidly beginning to be overcome by capitalist accumulation.

This reality in the life of the author was strong enough for him to argue that the sovereignty of the people, made up of "free and equal" individuals, could not be transferred from necessity or by option to a monarch as the absolutists wished, nor be delegated by contract to the Parliamentary State.

Rousseau said that before the act of making a contract for a political society, where the people covenant a government, there is a previous moment which is when the people are the people and this condition is the primary condition, establishing a sovereignty which cannot be transferred, delegated or divided.

In order to maintain the conditions of liberty and equality, where no citizen loses his sovereignty in the process of forming the general will, this cannot be delegated or transferred, unless to those appointed to execute it, whose mandates should be revocable at any moment.

Rousseau's utopian conception was unrealistic in a world under the rapid transformation of accumulations of capital, but it foreshadowed the great challenge for any democratic advance within liberal conceptions.

Liberalism is not synonymous with democracy

From these great schools there developed, over these almost two centuries, representative political systems with their own characteristics, with differences, but based predominantly on the proprietary, possessive view of liberalism. They emerged in the form of republics or constitutional parliamentary monarchies where popular sovereignty delegated to parliament unified the legislative and executive functions from relationships of forces within the institution. They are also expressed in presidential republics where the division of power and competence is clearer and where the Executive and Legislative are elected according to distinct criteria.

In this long historical experience in liberal countries, we have an element for debate and exchange of information in our seminar: Electoral systems. These also express different stages of economic development and distinct degrees in the political organisation of classes and fractions of classes in the struggle for space and representation within the liberal system.

But especially, this historical process made crystal clear the fact that liberalism, throughout these two centuries, was not and is not synonymous with democracy.

Depending on the country, in the last century and even in this, the right to political party organisation and universal suffrage were won after long struggles. Throughout the period of liberalism, exercise of the vote was elitist, exclusive or limited: the vote based on a census of property and/or taxes dominated the XIXth century.

In the Brazilian Empire, among the excluded were black slaves, indians, women, the poor, that is, the great majority of the population – a situation that continued into the first decades of the XXth century. In fact, this amounted to all those who could not be considered "independent citizens" according to Locke and Kant, and this benefited the landholding oligarchy.

The social struggles for the right to form unions and political parties, and for the universal suffrage were complemented by struggles for better working hours and working conditions.

Socialism, and criticism of representation

New contradictions, new conflicts, new relations between classes produced new political – ideological conceptions of explanations of the world and the relations between Society and State. Along with demands and social

conquests, new concepts of the world develop: socialist thought. These also do not speak with one voice, but in the Marxist conception they criticise the liberal conception, affirming – schematically – the class character of the State and its relation and subordination to the predominant interests of society in the sphere of production.

Equality in the State of Law does not go beyond juridical equality of the citizen and merely attempts to hide the enormous inequality in civil society in function of private property of the means of production.

Apart from the indispensable condition that socialism requires, of overcoming class society, and therefore putting an end to private property, Marxism did not develop a concept of a socialist State, in the sense of theories of new institutions and political relations in the new society.

It was concrete experiences such as the Paris Commune (1871) and later the Russian Revolution (1917) that brought about the systemising of theories and proposals which again looked at the problem of political representation and delegation of power.

The short life of the Commune, suppressed after a little more than two months, did not allow the popular classes that impelled it to develop a new kind of State. There, at least, they sought to constitute new political relations where the main criteria were to lessen delegations of power, expand revocability of mandates, deconstruct the armed forces substituting them for armed citizens and lessen the differences in remuneration among public servants, in order to avoid creating privileges and favouring bureaucracies.

The victory of the Russian Revolution began a new stage in the history of mankind; it proposed to construct the political relations of a new State, whose great intention and objective was, among other things, to extinguish itself along with class society.

The Government, based on the committees (soviets) – that returned to the old theme of delegation of power – proposed to go beyond mere juridical equality and the distance between political power and the majority of the population. Through the committees (soviets) they sought to fuse producer and legislator into one person.

The soviet experience did not survive the civil war and the process of authoritarianism and bureaucratisation which prevailed in the internal struggle in the Soviet Union. The single party and its identification with the centralising and all-powerful State removed the possibility of self-government and self-organisation and of democratic control of a State serving as a leveller "of things" and not an instrument of class domination, "of people".

The "real socialism" from Eastern Europe and from China and their lesser followers smothered this debate on the left over the course of the century, and the long predominance of experiments with social democracy or liberal bourgeois democracy consolidated representative democracy as the apex of political advance for humanity.

The shine was tarnished, certainly, by the procession of military dictatorships and authoritarian populist regimes in America, Africa and Asia. Not even Europe escaped unscathed, confirming that the XXth century would still not be the century of civilization.

In the last decades, the end of the "cold war", the collapse of experiments in Eastern Europe and the bankruptcy of the "doctrine of national security" in Latin America, consolidated representative democracies in a large number of countries. In cases where they substituted dictatorships, they were important in political conquests for these societies.

The crisis of legitimacy of the system of representation

It is undeniable, however, that in most of these countries with liberal democracies, the system of representation is undergoing a crisis of legitimacy, which is expressed in abstentions at elections, apathy, lack of political-social participation and low levels of party affiliation.

The causes vary among different countries, but it can be said that the main causes are to be found:

- in the process of bureaucratisation and the authoritarian character of the administration and of elected representatives;
- in the lack of control of the voters and/or of the parties over those elected;
- in electoral systems which distort representation, defrauding popular will, through district mechanisms and/or barriers and obstacles to small parties;
- in lack of coherence between electoral projects and programmes and the practices of those elected;
- in the changing of parties without loss of mandate, in which Brazil must be world record holder where it is allowed by law;
- in the incapacity of these systems to guarantee the reproduction of

capitalism with legitimacy in face of evidence that it reproduces inequalities and social exploitation.

Our experience of participatory democracy

For us, this question is essentially one of programmes, constituting reflection and practice in the field of popular democratic policy, and which the socialist forces and parties intend to represent. The question of democracy is central to any process of resisting and overcoming the predominance of neo-liberalism. Participatory democracy, through its potential for mobilising and making people aware, allows citizens to reveal the State, engender it and establish a demonstration for other sectors of society to translate this method to their own spheres of political struggle and administrative areas. Our objective is to establish the link between theoretical-programmatic questions and our method of constructing an experience of participatory democracy in its constructive elements. Thus, the main characteristics of our experience can be summarised in a few aspects, which might serve as a reference to methods for other experiences, independently of the knowledge necessary for each particular experience.

The first of these is popular participation, directly or indirectly, as in the case of Porto Alegre where direct participation in the Participatory Budget is regional or thematic, which is not contradictory, with it having a network of municipal councillors made up of representatives from entities and associations which have strong influence in public policy.

The second characteristic is direct practice, the all important action of citizens at meetings, discussions and at times of viewing data, so that people can acquire the elements necessary to decide, to form control committees, to supervise and to find the space necessary to make demands and to criticise. The more this can be done directly, without transferring decisions to others, whether they be community leaders, unions or city councillors, the greater and the faster will be the advance of democratic consciousness.

The third characteristic of our experience is self-organisation, expressed in self-regulation constructed and decided upon by the participants themselves in a healthy exercise of popular sovereignty which is not always at the mercy of laws and decrees decided upon by others. The experience of self-regulation was very worthwhile, incorporating criteria which developed from practice, as for example, instituting peremptory councillors and delegates and substitution or revocation of mandates of councillors or their substitutes when they abandon or don't carry out their functions. In the same way, experience and debate among the participants lead them to establish that administrative public servants with consulting positions could not also be councillors unless they resigned the position.

The regulations also incorporated criteria of proportionality when the community does not arrive at a consensus and the dispute involves several candidates for councillor, as well as a spirit of solidarity when defining variables (population, lack of public equipment) to determine priorities for works and services.

To conclude, I would like to reaffirm that our experience is not a recipe or a model for exportation, but rather a practice which may be added to others, enabling us to debate and learn, in our search for new ways for our communities.

Our conviction is based on historical processes which teach us that there are no absolute or eternal truths in the relations between society and State. These are formed and re-formed by the efforts of social entities. The search for a substantive participatory democracy, ruled by the ethical principles of liberty and social equality continues to be our historical horizon and our utopia for humanity. Thank you.

Raul Pont was Mayor of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

(Translation : Paulo Fernando Selbach , M.Sc.)