

Justifications of Representative Democracy

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Abstract

The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century - Nazism, fascism and Stalinism - in the same way as the dictatorships of South America and Africa, gave the human community a profound reflection on the future. This literature review problematizes the justifications and limits of representative democracy. It discusses the mechanisms of improvement of the democratic process for greater popular participation in the decisive spheres of political life. The lack of popular participation and a possible disbelief with political representation deserve to be addressed in order to continuously actualize democracy as a political regime.

Keywords: democracy; representation; participation; politics

Initial thoughts

Given the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the dictatorships of South America and Africa, the configuration of the future has become a central theme for the reflection of the human community. The construction of mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights were fundamental in post-war society. Democracy has been recognized as the most propitious political regime to promote a political and social organization to guarantee individual and collective rights. Only with democracy and popular

political power can one prevent the perpetuation of a despot.

This literature review highlights, firstly, different configurations of democracy and, secondly, proposes a discussion about the limits of representative democracy and the reduction of the spaces of the democratic process and the exercise of citizenship. Due to the limits of the system of political representation, one understands that an active popular participation promoted by self-government devices is fundamental for the full exercise of citizenship and for the construction of social justice.

1. Discussions

The origin of the democratic political regime dates back to ancient Greece, at the heyday of Athens as a regional political and cultural center. The word democracy, derived from the Greek language, is composed of the combination of the terms “demo” and “kracia”, which means “government of the people”. The main principle of democracy, in this way, is the sovereignty of the people in the making of decisions of public interest.

Greek democracy was participatory or direct, guarding the conditions of the time, which excluded most of the population from the right to participate in the city administration. The citizens gathered in the agora, in assemblies, agreed on the future of the polis. In Greek conception, the city is seen as the common good; the exercise of citizenship is an ethos of which the Greek citizen was proud. The strong debate and discursive skills were remarkable among Athenian citizens. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were excluded from public debates. However, citizen participation is the element of legitimacy of politics and democratic regime.

Concerning Roman civilization, Dahl (2001) points out that the patricians called the people’s government a republic. The republic, for the great speaker Cícero (1980), represented a congregation of men. The basis of this form of government took place at the meeting that legitimized legal consent and common utility. Freedom was only considered true when exercised by the government of the sovereign people. The right to participate in the public thing, in Roman government, was initially limited to patricians and aristocrats. Only later, the commoner acquired the right to political participation. As in Athens, the right to participate was limited only to men, not unlike what occurred in modern democracies centuries later, which until the 20th century limited women’s right to participate.

Unlike the monarchical regimes of his time, Rousseau (1999) proposed a social pact founded on popular participation, which would legitimize the sovereign power. This political power should emanate, for the philosopher, from the general will, which is not confused with the particular wills: “Each one of us puts in common his person and all his authority, under the supreme command of the general will, and we receive together each member as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau, 1999, p. 81).

For the Genevan thinker, the social contract should guarantee citizens the natural rights, including the freedom and equality of associates: “To find a form of association that defends and protects the person and the property of each associate with all common force, and by which each one, uniting with all, obeys only himself, remaining as free as before” (Rousseau, 1999, p. 79). The social pact would be based on a democratic and republican ideal, ensuring the active participation of citizens in the public sphere. The philosopher considered, however, that the size of the population should be taken into account for the functioning of a free society. Therefore, for a larger contingent of citizens, the representative democratic

regime would be more reasonable, as modern societies have become even more complex and populous.

For Mill (1981), there is no difficulty in demonstrating that the ideal of a sovereign government would be one in which, ultimately, control belongs to the people; in which the mass, gathered in community, gives voice to the exercise of supreme power. This does not mean that the people should participate directly in decisions, but that they should be called, at least occasionally, to be part of the exercise of a civil service, whether at the local or general level. Thus, the philosopher advocated a government that, from the ideal point of view, could only take place in a representative system, as circumstances would allow a greater number of beneficial consequences in the social and political constitution of a country:

[...] it becomes evident that the only government capable of meeting all the demands of the social state is the one in which the whole people participated; that all participation, however small, is useful; whereas participation should be everywhere in proportion to the general degree of community development; and that one cannot desire anything less than the admission of all to a part of the sovereign power of the State. But since, in communities that exceed the proportions of a small village, it is impossible for everyone to participate personally, except in a very small portion of public affairs, the ideal type of perfect government can only be representative (Mill, 1981, p. 38).

In modern society, especially from the 18th century on, after the bourgeois revolutions, new forms of democracy were spread. Representative democracy, as a form of mediation between civil society and government, has become widespread as the only morally accepted model of a country's social and political organization. Thus, a process of dissemination of the democratic ideal was promoted as a safeguard for the justifications that opposed the old regime. With the rise of capitalism and a new form of market relations, there arises the need for a system that allows its unfolding and protection.

Representative democracy, founded on the record of liberalism, has given citizens civil and political rights. Rights such as freedom, equality and private property were considered essential as the State, in its absolutist configuration, did not provide the political and social participation of individuals. On this point, Bobbio (1992, p. 41) maintains that: “[...] the affirmation of human rights within each State was accompanied by the establishment of representative regimes [...]”. For this understanding, the recognition and protection of rights would only be possible in a democratic society.

Thus, a legal framework was established, which guarantees, from the legislative power, the management of business and private property. At the same time, a system of national sovereignty was established. From the perspective of a government of laws, constitutions establish the vectors of public administration, the functionality of public institutions and the fundamental rights of citizens. The citizen is understood as a subject of rights and universal suffrage as a condition of legitimacy of the government.

It is observed, nowadays, that there is a tension between the conditions of being a citizen of law and of being a de facto citizen, which has repercussions in the form of political participation. It is understood, next to this, that there is an emptying of public spaces, which directly interferes in the context of citizenship, because its exercise takes place, initially, in the public sphere. It is also noteworthy that nowadays there is

a strain in the perception of citizens in relation to political representation, which has been attached to the figure of the politician, resulting in a feeling of dissatisfaction with politics in general. Given this, it remains to be questioned whether there are alternatives to democratize, so to speak, democracy, and whether there are solutions that allow a more effective participation of citizens directly involved in matters of public interest.

The configurations of representative democratic societies, according to Santos (2007), usually reduce the citizen's participation in the public sphere, making him/her a passive entity of the decision-making process. The author stresses that there is a blockage in the current scenario of democracy that prevents the effective participation of the citizen, observing a simulacrum of participation, which often does not ensure the material conditions for its actualization. The process of democratic participation is trivialized, since it is provided to participate in what is not important:

The situation from which we start, really very difficult, has these general characteristics: a blocked citizenship, as many people - which is the characteristic of the representative democratic system - have no guarantee of conditions to participate, that is, a citizenship that is based on the idea of participation, but does not guarantee its material conditions [...] It seems to me that, with this citizenship blocked, participation is being trivialized; we participate more and more in less important issues, more and more we are called to have an opinion about things that are increasingly banal for the reproduction of power (Santos, 2007, p. 93).

At the same time, Dahl (2001) considers that there is a dark side to representative democracy. For him, political and bureaucratic elites in democratic countries are more powerful than the average citizen, which represents a problem for the process of political participation. If, on the one hand, the citizen ends up participating little in democratic deliberations, on the other hand, he/she delegates important decisions to the political authority for the population as a whole. Moreover, these delegations, within the framework of public administration, for example, assume even more indirect levels:

The dark side is this: under a representative government, citizens often delegate immense arbitrary authority to decisions of extraordinary importance. They delegate authority not only to their elected representatives, but, in an even more indirect and tortuous journey, the authority is delegated to administrators, bureaucrats, civil servants, judges and, to an even greater degree, to international organizations (Dahl, 2001, p. 128).

In view of this, it can be inferred that, in representative democracy, the common citizen does not participate in the deliberation process, since the idea of representation delegates a mechanism of indirect action. Today, this phenomenon becomes even more evident.

Bauman (2001) argues that, in liquid modernity, society has acquired new forms of configuration. Safety and assurance in relation to traditions and concepts gradually weaken. If solids largely represented

the fixed postulates that constituted the European industrial civilization, because they lasted for a longer time, in our context this no longer occurs. In liquid modernity there is a deconstruction of the whole idea of solid. One of its consequences, in the political sphere, is the emptying of public space. The citizen no longer argues in the agora. There is a weakening of what is public. In liquid modernity, the citizen became an individual, beyond that, the process of individualization transformed the citizen into a consumer.

Rancière (2014), in the book entitled “Hatred of democracy”, analyzes postmodern democracy, presenting the concept of “consumer individuality”, according to which the citizen has become a consumer alienated by commercial production. As a result, this process of individualization disintegrates citizenship and raises a serious problem for democracy, as the “[...] de jure individual cannot become a de facto individual without first becoming a citizen” (Bauman, 2001, p. 55).

From this perspective, a “de facto individual”, in social interaction, should, before becoming a mere “individual of right”, go through a process of formation for the exercise of citizenship. The principle of isonomy, observed only in terms of form, does not guarantee the substantiality of the right. The high rates of social discrepancy attest to the importance of both the guarantees that are constitutionally covered and for the conditions that allow citizens to actively participate in the decisions concerning them. For Bauman (2001), it is in politics that public order issues must be resolved. It is in this sphere that the public interest must be agreed upon. Becoming a “de facto individual” and not just “of right” is a central theme for the scope of life-politics, which causes significant problems when we think of democracy:

I repeat: there is a great and growing abyss between the condition of de jure individuals and their chances of becoming de facto individuals – that is, of gaining control over their destinies and making the decisions they actually desire [...] This abyss cannot be transposed only by individual efforts: not by the means and resources available within self-administered life-politics (Bauman, 2001, p. 53).

Upon examining one of the problems surrounding representative democracy, Santos (2007) considers that, in this model, the relationship between the authorization of the citizen and the accountability to the population, or what is expected of State power, ends up conflicting. For there is, in fact, no adequate transparency, and there is still great difficulty in the control mechanisms. This model has two dimensions, as the sociologist says:

[...] representative democracy is, on the one hand, authorization and, on the other, accountability. In the original democratic theory, these two ideas are fundamental: authorization, because with the vote I authorize someone to decide for me, but on the other hand, he has to account to me. What is happening with this model is that there is still an authorization, but there is no accountability in the current democratic game; the more we talk about transparency, the less transparency there is (Santos, 2007, p. 92-93).

As a consequence of this scenario, two decisive concepts for representative democracy come into crisis:

on the one hand, representation, and, on the other, participation through suffrage. For Santos (2002), as citizens do not feel represented by those who should represent them, these voters end up discouraged from political participation to the point of not wanting to exercise the right of suffrage. The high rate of abstentions corroborates this circumstance, which ends up weakening the democratic system.

In an article published on the subject, Jamil (2010) states that the lack of confidence of citizens in their representatives compromises the democratic system towards their political legitimacy, since the representatives do not feel that their interests are included in the political agenda. Added to it is the fact that the high rate of corruption linked to political institutions ends up fostering a feeling of powerlessness and lack of interest in participating in political praxis.

Santos (2002) argues that it is necessary to reinvent democracy, expand the spaces of public participation, enable the citizen to praxis to make decisions in the public interest. For the Portuguese sociologist, there are three necessary conditions for a more forceful participation process to occur, that is: to have survival guaranteed, to have freedom and information. Once these conditions are met, the opening of the public space for new forms of participation is necessary, thereby raising the possibility of exercising citizenship. In this sense, participatory democracy is a system that allows expanding discussions in public spaces, fostering more effective control with involvement and popular participation in the political and social sphere:

In summary, (social) movements conceive participatory democracy as a parallel policy of social intervention, creating and maintaining new spaces for decision-making (i.e., for self-government) by populations in matters that affect their lives differently. As a form of praxis, participatory democracy is for them a political and social process that is intended to create a new system of government, multiple and overlaid, that works through participation and more direct control of the decision-making of the populations involved (Santos, 2002, p. 128).

It is in the political spaces located in the popular bases that the democracy is actively reached, Santos (2002) points out. In this sense, it is understood that, through the political clashes of everyday life, participatory democracy must be inserted as a form of social and political organization. Thus, three characteristics of democracy are listed below, understood as political practice: a) at the base, at the local level, populations engage in political struggles to establish rights and manage their autonomy; b) at the provincial and national level, participation takes place from alliances and coalitions between popular movements; c) at the global level, it is worth highlighting the construction of international movements, in which activists seek to promote liberating policies.

In Brazil, in cities such as Porto Alegre, community movements have come to fructify the participation of the community in the public sphere. The participatory budget, for example, produced positive results in order to enable the population directly affected to produce proposals, discuss and choose in which areas public resources should be invested. Thus, a closer relationship was developed between the government and the citizens. For Santos (2002), there are three main characteristics of participatory budgeting, namely:

[...] (1) participation open to all citizens without any special status assigned to any

organization, including community ones; (2) a combination of direct and representative democracy, whose institutional dynamics attributes to the participants themselves the definition of internal rules; and (3) allocation of investment resources based on the combination of general and technical criteria, i.e., matching the decisions and rules established by participants with the technical and legal requirements of government action, also respecting financial limits (Santos, 2002, p. 64).

Santos (2002) adds to this three elements he considers essential in the process of implementation or application of the participatory budget: first, the budget must be the subject of regional assemblies; secondly, it is necessary to seek space in public policies to reverse existing inequalities; and, finally, there must be a mechanism that would make the process of participation compatible with the public authorities. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, according to estimates of the period between 1997 and 2000, about 140 municipalities, in their management, prepare the budget in a participatory way.

Final thoughts

In view of the previous considerations, it is emphasized that there are several possible configurations of the democratic political regime. It is not easy to conceptualize them. This article aimed to review the literature on the subject and to analyze the democratic system in general terms. Representative democracy has established itself as a predominant form of political regime in the complex societies of modernity. However, it is essential to guarantee and expand the spaces of popular participation, especially in the agendas in which the public interest is directly achieved.

Examples of participation such as those that occur in participatory budgeting, social movements, discussion in local assemblies and even in student associations of basic schools are conditioning factors that affect the sphere of citizenship. Thus, it is encouraged to treat what is public responsibly, because this is the common world in which the life politics are produced. Despite the problems discussed in the text, it is recognized that, throughout the 20th century, and at the beginning of the millennium, some advances were achieved from popular actions, especially when social participation represented the path of defending individual rights and freedoms.

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