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DEMOCRACY & ELITISM OF ANCIENTS AND MODERNS.

Essays

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***A Enrico Berti e Danilo Zolo
Con imperitura gratitudine
(in memoriam)***

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a concept so worn out by intensive use and polysemy of meanings, and at the same time so essential to contemporary political theory and practice, that it deserves to be continually revisited and reinterpreted.

That's what we want to do in this book, raising some questions and confronting different theories about democracy, without any claim to completeness. Our aim is not to cover the entire discussion about democracy, but to restrict itself to the debate between democracy and elitism.

According to Abraham Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg in 1861, the most common definition of democracy is: "government of the people" (because all citizens can vote and be voted through universal suffrage), "by the people" (because citizens can run to public positions and exercise some type of participation and control in the management of public affairs) and "for the people" (because the people are the recipients and final beneficiaries of all government actions).

Elite theory, in its most radical formulation, states exactly the opposite, that is, that every form of government is an oligarchy or aristocracy, but never a democracy: it is never the people who govern, but always an elite. Government is substantially the exercise of domination by a minority over a majority.

Our central working hypothesis is that a compromise between democratic and elitist theory is possible, through the so-called **democratic elitism**, which embraces elements of both theories and promotes a synthesis. From this perspective, democracy, realistically, is not the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people", but the government of elites by competing among themselves for popular consensus, to achieve power.

This does not mean denying the possibility of popular participation if this is understood not as an alternative to representative democracy, but as its necessary complement.

This thesis is developed through a history of the main concepts in dispute: people, elite, government, citizenship, representative, direct, plebiscitary, participatory democracy, which change according to different historical, political, economic, and social contexts.

Lincoln's description, due to the generic nature and vagueness of the concepts, corresponds to an ideal democracy. The rhetoric that supports the legal and political framework for justifying democracy is based on these assumptions. Democratic elitism, by contrast, refers to democracy as it realistically is, rather than as it should ideally be; although the elitist theory is not merely descriptive as its authors intend, but also prescriptive.

The historical analysis of the concept shows that for most of Western history, democracy was considered a degenerate form of government and only recently, in modernity, did the word acquire a positive meaning, as a better system of government.

What permeates the march of democracy, despite setbacks - from the first reformers of ancient Athens with a type of exclusivist democracy, to its contemporary version that Jacques Rancière defines as "the kingdom of desires of individuals in modern mass society"¹ - is the notion of freedom and equality

¹ RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *O Ódio à Democracia*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2015, p. 8.

that it includes, as Aristotle already stated:

The first type of democracy is that which is determined mainly based on equality. Now the law of this kind of democracy confirms equality: neither the rich nor the poor are superior to each other, nor does any of them have more control over the government than the others, but both are similar. In this sense, if freedom is a preponderant condition in democracy – as some people admit – just as equality is, then these two principles will be more powerful when all citizens, without exception, truly take part in the life of the city, to the greatest extent possible. possible extent. Now, as it is the people who have the majority, and given that the decision of the majority is supreme, it is necessary for this to be a democracy. (*Politics*, 1291b 30-40)²²

Thus, even with all its controversies and contradictions, democracy continues to be the North for all who enjoy it and for those who dream of enjoying the freedom and equality possible within their nations.

One of the aspects that corroborate democracy's bad reputation, especially about its modern version, is the notion that it is only proceduralist, based on rules and norms: the rules of the game. However, to achieve the full exercise of democracy it is essential to understand it as a “worldview”, a “circumstance”, as Ortega y Gasset would say, a type of moral imperative. Therefore, it must be introjected into the consciousness of each citizen, thus becoming an individual, rational option.

Each of the participants in a democratic State need, in addition to being part of political spaces, to base their relationships within society on “democratic values”, seeking the “democratic spirit”. A spirit that respects the will of the majority, but that protects the basic and fundamental rights of minorities, that defends, above all, freedom and recognizes and respects differences equally. This “spirit”, instilled in consciences as an imperative, would make it difficult the emergence of demagogic, totalitarian, or dictatorial forms of government.

Democracy, as a political regime, is not perfect and infallible, on the contrary, it is riddled with flaws: those who are part of it, whether politically active citizens or those who are alienated, whether those who defend it or those who clearly or surreptitiously attack it, whether the representatives or the represented, in short, everyone recognizes it as fallible. In this sense, democracy appears to be imperfect, and perennially unfinished, it can always be improved and adapted and, if it preserves its foundational values, it will continue to be recognized as the best way of living in society, at least in western societies.

This thesis which, until recently, was almost a universal consensus, and which today is seriously threatened by the global crisis of liberal democracy and the emergence of populism, which is the modern name for the deviated form of democracy that the ancients called it demagogy. In fact, this is another theme common to ancient and modern democracy: ancient democracy was also

²² For the *Politics* text we used: ARISTÓTELES, *Política*. Trad. Introd. e notas de Mário da Gama Kury. Brasília: UNB, 1997 e ARISTÓTELES. *Política*. Edição bilingue. Tradução e notas de Antônio Campelo Amaral e Carlos de Carvalho Gomes. Lisboa: VEGA, 1998; ARISTÓTELE. *Política*. A cura di Carlo Augusto Viano, Milano: BUR (testo greco a fronte), 2008. The Greek text used is that of ROSS, WD, *Aristotelis Politica*, Oxonii, and Typographeo Claredoniano, 1957. The translation is made by comparing the three texts with modifications by the authors when necessary.

susceptible to falling into demagogy, in the same way as modern democracy. The difference between the two forms of government is subtle, just as it is subtle the difference between monarchy and tyranny, aristocracy, and oligarchy: the systems and forms of government are neither pure nor stable, but in continuous transformation. To circumvent this perennial cycle, a mixed form of government was proposed as a compromise, always unstable, between different forms of government and political regimes. In the course of the work, we will address the conceptions of the ancients and moderns about the “mixed government”, not as a panacea, but as a possible “realistic” solution to the dilemmas of democracy.

Throughout the text, working on some conceptual historical aspects of democracy, we will seek to show how the elitist element, previously called aristocratic or oligarchic, was present in Athens also during the majority government. The basic assumption of elitist theorists is that in each political organism, a minority holds power and commands the majority. This assumption was present from the beginning of the history of democracy, warns Luciano Canfora, who identifies (according to Thucydides) classical Athens as a type of “principado” (*principality*) and not a democracy during Pericles' rule.

The democracy of the ancients.

We open our exhibition with the democracy of the ancients, starting with the beginnings of democracy, originally called *isonomia*, before the classical period of its historical affirmation in Athens. We continue through the debate between different positions: the radical criticisms of democracy raised by the sophists Thrasymachus and Callicles; Pseudo-Xenophon's criticism of Athenian democracy; Plato's criticisms, in *The Republic* and *The Statesman* and his option for an intellectual and moral aristocracy of philosopher “guardians”; the defence of democracy, made by Protagoras, through the “founding myth”, exposed in Plato's dialogue of the same name; Socrates' position, which we interpret as faithful to Athenian democracy, and Pericles' speech in defence of democracy; Aristotle's political conception, highlighting the affinities and, above all, the differences in relation to Plato. Although the philosopher considers democracy a deviant form of government, his stance is not a criticism of democracy, but of demagogy, being much more favourable to it than the master Plato.

We then continue to present the interpretative debate on some central themes. Initially, on Plato's supposed totalitarianism, based on the debate raised by Karl Popper, in his controversial work *The open society and its enemies*, using Mario Vegetti's book on the different interpretations that Plato's political thought has had from Antiquity to today.

Next, we discuss whether Athenian democracy was a myth or a reality, using two great interpreters of ancient history with antagonistic readings: Moses Finley, defender of Athenian democracy as a true direct and participatory democracy, and contrary to an elitist interpretation; and Luciano Canfora, who proposes an elitist reading; according to which, the Athenian aristocracy, unlike those of other cities, accepted the challenge of governing with the people and not against the people, despite their contempt for them.

We also look at another great city-state experience, the Roman Republic, accepting the thesis of Moses Finley and Norbert Rouland, according to which Rome was not a democracy, but a landowner aristocracy, centred on the power of the Senate. We also dedicate our attention to the theme of mixed government as

an element of longevity and stability in Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius; the latter taking Rome as an example, which brings together elements of monarchy (the Consul), aristocracy (the Senate) and democracy (the Tribune of the Plebs).

This thesis is also accepted by Machiavelli, in the *Discorsi sulla Prima Decada di Tito Livio*, in which he praises the stability of Rome, but with an important novelty: he considers that the greatness of Rome is due to the “tumults”, which allowed the plebeians to make feel their voice and their demands against the optimates, thus inaugurating a positive reading of social conflicts and of the role played by the crowd.

The republican Machiavelli thus forms a bridge with the modern conception of democracy, which will re-elaborate the themes and questions inherited from ancient democracy.

Modern democracy.

In the second part of the work, we analyse some of the modern forms of democracy: representative, elitist, plebiscitary and participatory.

We begin our analysis with the “classical elitists” (Pareto, Mosca and Michels) who substantiate political analysis on Machiavellian bases, and on the dichotomy between political realism and idealism. The foundation of elite theory, laid down mainly by Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, indicates that democracy, since its emergence, is not a majority government, as we are led to believe both regarding its history and the etymological origin of the concept. Democracy is rather the government of the minority that governs in the name of the majority. It is a very complex and, to some extent, contradictory system of government. In this sense, we defend the thesis that the best form of democracy is the mixed form, where elements of elitism and popular participation coexist.

We will therefore accept a realistic definition of democracy presented by authors such as Weber, Schumpeter, Dahl, Kelsen, and Bobbio, according to whom democracy is not the government of the people, but of competition between elites (political, economic, social, cultural), with a view to disputing popular consensus.

In relation to the interpretative debate, we will comment on Bobbio's reflection on the main characteristics of ancient and modern democracy, that is, representation and individualism, as opposed to the direct and organicist democracy of the ancients. We will raise some questions about this thesis.

In relation to elitism, we will defend the thesis that it was not exclusively a right-wing ideology, having also influenced the left – such as the Leninist conception of the revolutionary vanguard –, as well as the Gramscian theory of organic intellectuals, and the party as a modern prince, whose function is to elevate the proletariat to the understanding of its historical-revolutionary role.

We conclude the interpretative debate by dedicating an essay to the political thought of a central author to our debate: J. J. Rousseau, using Milton Meira Nascimento's book on *A farsa da Representação Política* (the farce of political representation), which defends the thesis exactly opposite to ours, resuming and updating Rousseau's radical critique of representation.

The comparison between ancient and modern democracy was one of the central axes of our discussion: we showed the elements of divergence between the two forms of democracy, but also those of convergence, which are perhaps more relevant. The arguments that differentiate democracy in Antiquity and

Modernity are largely summarized in the direct character and restricted citizenship of ancient democracy and the representative character and expanded citizenship of modern ones. However, within this debate, some contemporary thinkers add that it was not only direct, but also representative, to the point that, as Gaetano Mosca draws our attention, it was nothing more than “an aristocracy with a greater range of members”.

This question will guide us, provoke us from the narrative of Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, through the Athenian reformists and Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian criticism, using Luciano Canfora's arguments as a bridge to reach the elitists, first the classics, then the democratic ones. This is not about enumerating the criticisms of democracy, but about showing that democracy is still an ideal of fair government, and that its effective form does not dispense the idea of a governing minority.

At this point it is important to remember that philosophical investigation needs to preserve, above all, its sceptical character. This memory makes us alert about the interpretative polysemy in the use of the concept of “democracy” and we realize that avoiding the tendency of a homogeneous vision; it is an effort made in choosing each author, with each line written, with each reading and especially, with each introduction and conclusion.

The book is a systematization, deepening and expansion of the classes taught by Professor Giuseppe Tosi in recent years, at Graduate and Postgraduate Program in Philosophy and in Human Rights of Paraíba's Federal University. The book is also a result of the debates promoted in the CNPq Research Group on “Theory and History of Human Rights and Democracy”, linked to the Citizenship and Human Rights Centre of UFPB.

This text was evaluated by the committee of concourse for full professor (*professor titular*) composed of professors José Gabriel Trindade Santos (UFPB), Marco Aurélio Nogueira (UNESP), Michel Zaidan (UFPE) and Maconi José Pimental Filho (UFPB); that I would like to thank for their valuable collaboration.

The book was written in collaboration with Rubens César Guimarães Salles, through the inclusion of the text of his master's thesis in Philosophy entitled *Democracy and Elitism*.

The book has a didactic character and is intended, above all, for a university audience of students, teachers and researchers in political philosophy and related areas. The goal is to debate the topics clearly, without the intention of exhausting the subjects or writing a treatise. Some topics are more in-depth, while others are no more than a roadmap for further research. From this derives its essayistic character.

The method used consists of bibliographical research with citations and references, as direct as possible, from the works of classic authors. An interpretative debate follows, using indirect sources and commentators, with a political philosophy approach.

The reader will perceive the influence of the Italian philosopher of law and politics Norberto Bobbio (1909–2004), and from the thought of Bobbio's interlocutor and defender of a realistic vision of democracy, Danilo Zolo. The part dedicated to ancient thinkers owes a lot to Professor Enrico Berti, my tutor for the PhD in Philosophy at the University of Padova.

