

# Bernardo Sorj

## WHAT WORLD IS THIS WE ARE LIVING IN?



**PLATAFORMA  
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Democratic Platform ([www.plataformademocratica.org](http://www.plataformademocratica.org)) is an initiative of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation and the Edelstein Center for Social Research dedicated to the strengthening of democratic institutions and culture in Latin America through the pluralist debate of ideas on the transformations in society and politics in the region and the world.

**Collection:** *The State of Democracy in Latin America* directed by Bernardo Sorj and Sergio Fausto

**Translation from Portuguese:** John Wilkinson

**Graphic project:** Bruno Ortega

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São Paulo: Editorial Plataforma Democrática, 2020

ISBN: 978-65-87503-04-2



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For Rafael and Beatriz

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# INTRODUCTION

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We live in uncertain times when our collective cognitive maps present symptoms of failure. Such maps bring together reasonings, values, and beliefs which allow us to explain events and help us define our expectations in relation to the future of our societies.

Various factors converge to generate fears and frustrations leading to a lack of confidence in progress and democracy: changes in income distribution, in work relations, in the capacity of political parties to represent citizenship, in our habits and in global geopolitics. We are faced with a horizon in which technological transformations provoke insecurity about the future of employment and where apocalyptic climate change is a scenario that comes ever closer. We are living in an epoch where the connection between individuals and history, the personal and the collective, have become more tenuous, creating a sensation of exclusion from the process of constructing a common future, as nations and as humanity.

This is not to say that before individual subjectivity was integrated into a national community, but, with greater or less intensity, people lived a common timeline, fed by a shared belief – in a variety of different ideological versions – in society’s progress, which was generally confirmed by the experience of an improvement in the quality of life both for themselves and their children. Today, by contrast, we live in a world where the accumulation of uncertainties produces a sensation that the future has collapsed.

Sociological analysis is as much an exercise in explaining how we have arrived at the present situation as it is in understanding where we are headed. **Visions of the future generally do not materialize or do so only partially. Nevertheless, they create a sense of control over our lives and functions as a compass to guide our actions, whether going forward towards a desired state of the world or avoiding what we reject.**

Difficulties in visualizing how the future will be, affect our understanding of the present. Why is this so? When people stop having hope about what the future will bring, they turn to an idealized past; when political parties no longer offer perspectives, demagogic political leaders who present themselves as anti-political become lionized; and when the elites who personify the values of reason are discredited, lies and ignorance are promoted.

Politics has always been permeated by sentiment and loyalties but moments of dissatisfaction and social malaise provide a fertile terrain for demagogic and Manichean solutions that despise the confrontation of ideas based on facts, and reduce “solutions” to messages that fit into a twit. We live in dangerous times when societies risk sliding towards undermining the foundations of democratic life, which depends on informed debate and respect for the pluralism of ideas.

The social sciences are ill-equipped to analyze political processes in which destructive psychosocial factors prevail – the dark side of the human condition -, and which drive societies forward on to what Barbara Tuchman has called “The march of folly”. The attack on rationality affects even those sectors from whom we would expect a defense and leads many liberals to accept a pact with authoritarian politicians in the name of “markets demands” and many intellectuals to close themselves up in self-complacent bubbles.

A paradoxical situation. Science, in the form of the most diverse technologies is present in almost all our activities, whether individual or collective. It would be difficult to find a single context in which the application of scientific knowledge does not permeate our relations with ourselves, with others and with the environment. In politics, by contrast, the winds are blowing in the opposite direction. Dominant discourses feed on irrationality, a questioning of the knowledge of experts (the “elite”), and a cult of absolute values. It would be a matter of curiosity if it were not so dramatic to see that many professionals trained in scientific thought – and conscious of the complexities of the areas in which they act – slide into magical thinking when they participate in the public arena, adhering to simplistic solutions and to messages which only purvey lies and prejudice.

\* \* \*

This book analyses the complex relations of complementarity and conflict between democracy and capitalism. Both constantly revolutionize productive and social systems, which periodically demands changes in institutional arrangements. In the case of positive solutions, new levels of civility and peaceful co-existence and improvements in the quality of life are achieved. When destructive polarization rather than constructive negotiation prevails, the risk to democracy and the threat of the installation of authoritarianism increases.

If we direct our attention especially to the international context and to dynamics in Europe and the United States this is because we, in Latin America, mirror ourselves on these realities and are influenced by them. This does not imply that we can

simply deduce appropriate diagnoses or solution to be applied to our own reality, nor does it mean that we should resort to nationalistic rhetoric, which is as empty as it is retrograde. The question is not whether we can stop being a part of the globalized world, but how we can respond in a creative way to the challenges that it poses.

We do not believe that any single interpretative line of analysis is capable of explaining current social dynamics and even less of predicting the future. What is to come is a product of many interconnected settings – individual, family, economic, political, cultural, national and global – that increase the complexity and instability of contemporary societies. The intensification of technological innovations that are disruptive of current societal organizations and the challenges posed by our relationship with nature only accentuate these trends. In such a context we should keep our distance from theories and interpretations which purport to explain everything and offer single and across the board solutions to the problems which afflict us. This does not mean that we should abandon the search for answers to guide action geared to building a society on desirable lines, which would minimize existing evils in the world, such as social inequality and the risks of catastrophic climate change, and lead to the strengthening and improvement of the quality of our democracies.

The texts which comprise this book, and which are all previously unpublished – with the exception of one which has been substantially revised and extended<sup>1</sup> – are designed to elucidate some of the conflicts over values and the dilemmas which citizens face in contemporary capitalist democracies. The basic underlying question is whether the values of the Enlightenment, which have made possible the advances in democracy, are still valid or whether we are living on the threshold of a new historical period in which the rise of authoritarian tendencies in the world is a sign of the new times.

Capitalism is the only mode of production in which liberal democracy has thrived, but this has never been a necessary nor a harmonious relationship. In the first chapter, we examine the diverse conflicts – economic, political and cultural –, which have constantly pervaded capitalist democracies.

In the second chapter, we focus on the confrontation between tendencies to commodify and de-commodify social relations as the central axis defining the relations between capitalism and democracy. We show, in particular, how the decommodification of a series of services and social policies led to the creation of the Welfare State.

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1 Sorj, B. *A convivência democrática como politeísmo de valores*. 2016. Revista Estudos Avançados. vol 30 no 86. São Paulo.



The third chapter analyses how the Welfare State entered into a crisis and was accompanied by the rise of neoliberal discourses and practices that led to a partial re-commodification of labor relations and the supply of public services and to an increase in social inequality. Although a large part of their innovations persist, the Welfare State shows signs of fatigue and needs to be reinvented if it is to rise to the challenges of the contemporary world.

In the fourth chapter, we point to some of the most important socio-cultural conflicts that have marked the history of capitalist democracies. The focus here is on secularization and nationalism. The transformations of social structures and values – in particular those which question the organization of the family, the subordination of women and the repression of sexuality – open up opportunities for the rise of authoritarian leaders who present themselves as the expression of “order”, the “nation” and the “family”.

The fifth chapter deals with the structural problems of the political institutions of capitalist democracies, both national and international, which allow for the rise of political narratives that question the legitimacy and viability of democracy.

In the sixth chapter, we consider the patterns of action of the extreme right, showing how a number of their characteristics, their contents, and their communication strategies have similarities with fascism, even though the historical context and their proposals may be different.

The seventh chapter analyses the new environment of the public space created by the internet, the crisis of traditional journalism and the role of traditional knowledge elites in the dissemination of a culture that questions scientific thought.

The dilution of the frontiers between the different social sub-systems under the impact of social transformations is the subject of the eighth chapter. This new scenario poses difficulties for the various social science disciplines whose mode of analysis has depended on the relative autonomy and separation between the various subsystems, which organize contemporary societies.

In the ninth and final chapter, we explore the role of values in society, counterpoising the “polytheism of values” of democratic life to the religious and secular monotheisms. We argue that although the values which guide us tend to be conflictive, none, on its own, is sufficient to organize individual or social life, and the acceptable mixing of these values needs to be negotiated at an individual and collective level by the political system.

This book has been written in essay format and contains a minimum number of bibliographical references. The moral value of citations lies in the author's recognition of his/her intellectual debt to his peers, and such a debt I fully assume. After all, there is no activity more solitary and at the same time more dependent on others than intellectual work.

Mention is appropriate here of some colleagues with whom over a long period of time I have frequently exchanged ideas, but who should not be held responsible for the book's arguments or eventual errors: Antônio Mitre, Danilo Martucelli, Joel Edelstein, John Wilkinson and Sergio Fausto.

# 1. THE CONFLICTS OF DEMOCRATIC CAPITALISM

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Political conflicts in democratic capitalist societies occur within three spheres: the socioeconomic, the sociopolitical and the sociocultural<sup>2</sup>. This does not mean that these are isolated one from the other. On the contrary, they are mutually influential, superimpose themselves and interpenetrate in the most varied ways.

Socio-economic conflicts are associated with the unequal distribution of patrimony and income and with the position occupied by people in the production and distribution of social wealth. Historically, in very general terms, they are expressed as confrontations between social classes, although the corporative interests of social subgroups play an important role. Socio-economic conflicts have a clear identifiable focus: the wealth produced by society and its distribution between social groups. As in the case of all social conflicts, socio-economic conflicts express themselves as a struggle of collective values and identities, and confront those who consider that the market (and inheritance) should be the principal if not the only mechanism responsible for distributing wealth, against those who defend a greater intervention of the State in the regulation of the market, in the provisions of social services and in the distribution of wealth.

Cultural conflicts are related to the predisposition to accept new customs, values and beliefs, and they cut across all sectors of society and do not follow the social cleavages of distributive conflicts. They are quite varied and refer to the relationships between people and lifestyles, the structure of the family, status, religious beliefs, social recognition, the role of women, sexual freedom, relations with the body (birth control, abortion, suicide), artistic expressions, prejudices and social stigma, relations to immigrants, use of drugs and the significance of nationalism, among others.

Socio cultural conflicts do not present the same unity and clarity as those concerned with distribution and have an enormous plasticity. Fundamentally, they pit those who identify with emerging values, forms of relationships and cultural expressions against those who defend beliefs, norms of conduct and visions of society

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2 All social institutions, including the economy are political and cultural phenomena. We will use the concept of culture in a restrictive sense in line with its ordinary everyday usage.

identified with the real or imagined past, which is seen to be crumbling away. Those who oppose cultural change see themselves as the defenders of religious values and/or the nation and promote fears of a breakdown in the family and society. For those who stand for cultural change the dominant language is that of rights, whether collective – human and social rights, the rights of minorities and of the environment –, or individual, where each person is free to choose his/her own way of life–.

If from an analytical perspective we can talk of two poles – conservative and/or reactionary on the one hand and progressive on the other – people´s realities are very much more nuanced. Some issues affect citizens more than others, and there may be concordance in one sphere but not in another. Sentiments and thoughts are often in conflict and people can feel attracted simultaneously to one pole or the other. Only a small number, with high levels of religious, ideological or intellectual commitments, try to justify or deduce all the positions they adopt based on a single explanatory matrix. For the majority, different forms of subjectivity – a variety of beliefs, values and interests – lived together in a contradictory manner.

Political conflicts reflect and elaborate the socio-economic and cultural conflicts, but they have their own dimensions given the need to build institutions which respond at the same time to the demands of particular interests and to the need to ensure social cohesion and the common good, – that is, to incorporate values and rights having a universalist vocation and at the same time only applied to the citizens of a given nation –.

Socio-economic, cultural and political conflicts are elaborated, translated and channeled by actors operating in the public sphere and particularly by political parties and State powers (legislative, executive and judicial). Although these actors are not dissociated from these conflicts, they have their own interests and their own way of operating, with corresponding narratives and forms of organization that ensure the development of loyalties and collective identities.

To the extent that these conflicts are produced within democratic regimes those who place cultural themes at the center of their concerns in general identify with parties to the right of the political spectrum that support economic liberalism, creating an alliance of convenience among those who try to limit the rhythm of cultural transformations and socio-economic reforms. On the other hand, those who give priority to distributive policies normally operate through parties of the left that generally have a greater openness to changes in customs.

If at certain moments in history there was a greater affinity between economic liberalism and moral conservatism, or on the other hand, between distributive demands and cultural change, such affinities do not imply that sympathizers of particular political parties share the same sets of values in every sphere. Those favorable to distributive policies can be racists, misogynists, anti-Semites and xenophobes, in the same way that those who support liberal economic policies do not necessarily identify with reactionary positions in socio-cultural conflicts.

The history of democratic capitalism is that of the unfolding and interaction between these large fields of conflicts. During the second half of the XX century socio-economic conflicts predominated which up to a certain point implied leaving cultural conflicts in the background, which then reemerge with great force, in the current century and can, as we will see, have a devastating impact both on nations and the international order as a whole.

When the political system shows itself incapable of processing social conflicts this leads to revolutions and coups d'état and to authoritarian regimes whether of the right or the left. Today, in many countries in the world, we find ourselves confronting the rise of authoritarianism and the aim of the following chapters is to contribute to an understanding of how we have arrived at this crossroads.

## 2. FROM ECONOMIC LIBERALISM TO THE WELFARE STATE

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Capitalism revolutionized forms of production and distribution and transformed most relations of exchange into contractual mercantile relations. The “pure” capitalist model valorizes the obtention of profit and personal interests and considers that market mechanisms should account for all activities involving the exchange of goods and services, with the State being obliged to restrict its functions to the protection of life, property and law enforcement.

In a democracy, on the other hand, it is the figure of equal citizens mobilized around political projects that promote the common good and the national interest that is to the fore. In the last instance, the *res publica* should predominate over the *res privada*, whether it be in the imposition of compulsory vaccination, the decreeing of a quarantine, the protection of the environment or the ensuring of basic living conditions for the population. There is a permanent tension, therefore, between the demands that a community feels necessary for the maintenance of liberties and social cohesion, and the expectations of the individual to enjoy his autonomy without external coercion.

Political liberalism is not opposed to economic liberalism but qualifies this latter to ensure that individual liberties have an effective content. Great liberal thinkers who argued in favor of the role of the market did not consider that it could deal with all the complexities and demands of social coexistence. Adam Smith, for instance, concerned himself with the living conditions of the workers and with the role of emotions in social life. John Stuart Mill recognized that in the real world a person’s chances are very much dependent on the family he/she was born into, a recognition which led him to defend universal education (in addition to the abolition of slavery, the rights of women, and the defense of the environment), and to question the role of inheritance.<sup>3</sup>

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3 “The laws of property have never yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests. They have property of things which never ought to be property, and absolute property where only qualified property ought to exist. They have not held the balance fairly between human beings but have heaped impediments upon some, to give advantage to others; they have purposefully fostered inequalities, and prevented all from starting fair in the race”. *Private Property has not had Fair Trial, de John Stuart Mill*. Disponível em <http://sites.middlebury.edu/econo45ofio/files/2010/mill-private-property.pdf> Acesso em: 7th May. 2020.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal philosopher Karl Popper, in his *Open Society and its Enemies* argued that economic power could be as oppressive as the physical violence of the State.<sup>4</sup> At the same time that he denounced communist and fascist totalitarianism, he put forward the idea of the “paradox of freedom”, according to which unrestricted freedom, including economic, ended by destroying freedom itself, because it allowed the strongest to mistreat the weakest, demanding State institutions which protect citizens susceptible of being oppressed by those who hold economic power.

Over a long historical process, which is still underway and is never stable, **capitalism adapted itself to democracy and democracy in turn adapted itself to capitalism.** This convergence, mediated by the political system and public institutions, led those who struggled for an end to economic inequality to accept the market and private property; and led the defenders of capitalism to accept that the State intervene in the regulation of labor relations and appropriate and redistribute part of the social wealth, creating an operative environment not determined by the relations of private property.

The existence of property has been a constant in history but the notion that something is “mine” or “ours” includes a wide variety of acceptations with each society exhibiting a number of various types. In Roman law, for instance, the distinction between *res publica* and *res privatae* was formulated (the former including common property belong to citizens as a whole, with the second restricted to individual property). In the Middle Ages, there were dozens of variations in landed property, interconnected in hierarchical systems binding the king to his vassals, in addition to a large number of communal properties.

In spite of the emphasis on private property in modern society, property forms are hugely diverse and have important social consequences as regards both the *res publica* and the *res privatae*. The right to bequeath goods is quite different in anglo-saxon law (*common law*) where individuals can choose to whom they leave their patrimony, and in the tradition of codified civil law, in which discretionary power over the distribution of inheritance is limited by law.

One of capitalism’s characteristics is the constant innovation in forms of property, including the separation between the legal responsibilities of people as individuals and as legal entities and the diverse forms of commercial property. Alongside the diversity of types of private property, public property also exhibits varied forms of contractual relations, such as those established in the public and the private sector, as in the case of the concession of public services.

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4 Popper, K. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. London, Routledge. 2002. pp333-4

Socio-economic conflicts concerning wages are a daily occurrence but the conflicts with the greatest consequences for the organization of society are those which have as their epicenter struggle against or in favor of the decommodification of specific goods and services, such as health and education. Such decommodification may be limited to the regulation of markets or contractual conditions – as, for example, in the case of worker or consumer rights, public concessions, and the conditions for marketing medicines –, or control over levels of pollution in factories.

It occurs also through the levying of taxes, through public programs for basic income and subsidies whereby a portion of social wealth is withdrawn from market relations. In other case it can lead to the prohibition of trade in certain goods and services – as in the case of certain drugs, human organs, and euthanasia for example –, or the exclusion of market exchange in certain types of activities – the maintenance of law and order, public health or public education.

The conflicts between commodification and decommodification are not reducible to a zero-sum game. The challenge facing democratic capitalism is that of finding negotiated solutions which ensure the good functioning of the economy and at the same time respond to the social demands for greater redistributive justice, while distancing itself from fundamentalism, whether of the market or the State.

The questioning of the commodification of social relations was, to a great extent, the product of social movements linked to the values of solidarity and equality and more recently to those of the environment. Nevertheless, the placing of limits to commodification were and continue to be defended in the same way by religious groups opposed to gambling, alcoholic drinks, drugs, prostitution, pornography, birth control pills, and even, in the nineteenth century, to life insurance.<sup>5</sup> In all these cases we are dealing with perspectives that consider that some aspects of social life should not be reduced to market relations based on the free negotiation of private agents.

## THE COMMODIFICATION AND DECOMMODIFICATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

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In democratic capitalist societies, conflicts over the distribution of wealth occur at two levels: in the form of wages (within firms), and through taxes (how much and who will pay for State expenditures and whom they will favor).

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5 Zelizer. V. A. "Human values and the market: the case of life insurance and death in 19<sup>th</sup> century America", in Granovetter Mark & Richard Swedberg, (orgs), *The Sociology of Economic Life*. Boulder. Westview Press. 2001



Since the nineteenth century, labor relations were at the center of decommodification. The history of labor rights is an unfolding of the process of recognition and regulation of the figure of the worker and the labor contract.<sup>6</sup> This process is associated with the struggles of social movements, trade unions and socialist political parties, but also with Social-Christian parties, and at times supported by sectors of the dominant elites preoccupied with social cohesion.

A long trajectory of social struggles and political reforms have made it possible for us to see rights which were non-existent in the majority of countries a century ago as natural, such as the limitations on working hours, universal and free schooling, the right to vote independently of sex or property, consumer protection or the prohibition of monopoly practices. Not only did these rights not exist but also the demands were seen and denounced by the “propertied classes” as leading to the destruction of capitalism, or in the case of conservatives to the collapse of the social order. For many of those who denounced capitalism these struggles were seen as expressions of a radical conflict which would lead to revolution and the elimination of private property. It was the practice of democratic politics that allowed for a change of perspective, opening the way to reformist political narratives which, in their turn, allowed for advances towards a socially responsible democratic capitalism.

The coexistence of democracy and capitalism transformed the radical opposition between left and right (ideological positions that valued above all the market and the private sector in the case of the right, and those that emphasized the need for public intervention to limit the negative effects of social inequality and poverty, in the case of the left). Today, acceptance of the social responsibility of the State is no longer questioned as such, with debates and conflicts being limited to the extent of the State’s intervention. In Europe, no party of the liberal right questions the existence of a public universal health system. In the United States, on the other hand, access to the health system depends on private insurance, in some cases associated with benefits provided by an employer.

In times of confrontation between the demands of capitals and those for greater equality, where one side makes no concession the results can be perverse. A classic example would be in the heyday of economic liberalism in Europe in the XIX century when children were forced to work long hours without access to health services or education; and in the twentieth century, at the other extreme communist regimes

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6 The social construction of the worker as a social category is analyzed in Karl Polanyi’s classic, *The Great Transformation*

in the name of equality repressed basic freedoms. By contrast, in societies where the conflicts between economic liberalism and the demands for social justice became the object of negotiation, improvements in the quality of life for the whole of society were the result.

Despite the confrontations, when viewed from a historical perspective, capitalism and democracy are strongly aligned and complementary in an, often, non-intentional form. Until modern times, birth, for most of the population, was destiny. Capitalism became the driver of urbanization, occupational, social and spatial mobility, individualizing and corroding traditional patterns of social control. Innovation was stimulated, together with expectations of upward social mobility and access to the consumption of new products, which in turn created pressures for higher wages.

Thus, if capitalism of itself does not produce democratic regimes, it constantly promotes social transformations, mobilizes initiative and individual autonomy, demands ever higher levels of formal education, transmits scientific values, separates generations (with children less and less following in their parent's footsteps), stimulates expectations of improved conditions of life and freedom of choice, all of which converge to weaken traditional systems of social norms and power. Although it may be the desire of conservatives, it is virtually impossible to separate individualism understood as the freedom to participate in the labor and consumer market from other areas of social and cultural life.

In addition, many democratic demands – such as universal access to education, greater purchasing power of the population, the struggle against monopolies, abuses against the consumer and the irresponsible speculation of the financial system – are in line with the interests of a well-functioning capitalist system.

## QUESTIONING CONTRACTS AMONG UNEQUALS

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It took a long historical process to recognize that a labor contract could not be dissociated from the laborer, that work has to do with a person (which means recognizing his/her biological and psychological existence: age, health, maternity, the need for periods of rest etc.), all of which extend beyond the “moment” of work itself. Such recognition was possible because, in contrast to what Marx thought in his theorization of capitalism in which work is one commodity relation among others, work possesses unique qualities and is realized by persons with consciousness and, in democratic societies, with the ability to impose themselves as political agents.

The first focus of labor legislation dealt precisely with this relation of the worker to his body, with the aim of protecting him/her from the effects of work and the conditions under which work was carried out (this medicalization of the body was initially associated with long periods of work which resulted in an epidemic of labor accidents in 19<sup>th</sup> Europe).

Behind the notion of the right to work was an idea which was to revolutionize the legal system, the same idea which was behind the antimonopoly laws and consumer protection legislation, namely, that a contract is only valid when it is celebrated between two equally free parties, in equal negotiating conditions. This led to a recognition of the legitimacy of trade unions, which were initially outlawed in most developed countries until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were regarded by business as an affront to free contractual negotiation rather than as a mechanism whose aim was to compensate the power asymmetries between employer and employee.<sup>7</sup>

This recognition of labor relations as a contract with special characteristics produced a profound transformation in capitalism. The labor contract came to be mediated by a system of social regulation, which standardized the conditions of its validity and thereby redefined the limits of market agreements between the parties. With labor rights social relations of production became mediated by a differentiated political legal system which meant that the interests and objectives of wage workers came to be recognized by the capitalist system in the form of trade unions, which provided a collective representation of individual interests.

The extension of rules governing labor relations to other areas of social life led to the notion that citizenship implied “social rights” which in their turn should be guaranteed by the State. In this way an “objective solidarity” emerged (in contrast to the “subjective solidarity” of philanthropy) – which was guaranteed by the State, thereby creating a responsibility of solidarity which extended beyond the private sphere and a sphere of citizenship which became expressed in the form of social rights, public services, and a minimum of socioeconomic security.

This “objective solidarity” would become constituted as a rational legal structure based on the initial recognition of the “world of work” as a specific sphere of law. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least in the developed countries, interpersonal solidarity was to a great extent substituted (although never entirely, given the continued importance

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7 On the creation of the worker as a legal category see Alain Supiot, *Critique du Droit du Travail*, (Paris. PUF, 1994) whose argument we largely follow in this section.

of the family as a source of support), by social policies based on public responsibility which was legally regulated. This transference of responsibilities implied a transformation of a certain liberal classic ideal that while recognizing the importance of solidarity, considered this a moral responsibility of the members of “civil society”, separate from the tasks of government.

## FROM DEMANDS AT THE PLACE OF WORK TO PUBLIC GOODS

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The integration of new rights and the recognition of collective actors, such as trade unions, broke through the limitations imposed by the system of private contractual arrangements as the only means of access to a series of goods fundamental for the welfare of workers and their families.

A new perception of rights, which had previously been limited to civil and political rights, emerged from this recognition of labor rights, and now extended to include “social citizenship”. In addition to the specific rights associated with the world of work, the existence of common citizenship involving the minimum rights for existence irrespective of employment was now recognized. In a non-linear process, new goods and services came to be included in what was seen as necessary provisions, independently of whether a person was in receipt of wages or not (health, education, pensions, and direct monetary transfers for those in need. This extension of rights shaped the emerging welfare State.<sup>8</sup>

If the law transformed the nature of labor as a commodity, the expansion of social rights led to certain social rights being considered “universal”, with the State now being obliged to guarantee, or facilitate access to to all its citizens.

## THE SOCIAL WELFARE STATE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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The transfer of responsibility for guaranteeing minimum welfare levels to the State led to an increase in fiscal charges, which placed the financing of the public sector and the State’s role in the distribution of goods considered essential to citizenship, at the center of ideological and political conflicts. The political history of capitalism in the XX century was to a large extent one of struggle over the expansion of the State’s capacity for wealth extraction.

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8 On the provisioning State see Celia Kerstenetzky, *O Estado do bem-estar na Idade da Razão*, Rio de Janeiro, Elsevier 2012.

In democratic capitalist societies, the quality of life and social (in)equality came to depend on two sources: personal income and the public goods to which citizens had universal access (education, health and subsidized transport) via the State. In advanced countries, between a third and a half of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), is appropriated by the State and distributed via public services. Inequality as determined by individual income from the market, depending on the country, may diminish considerably if we consider the distributive impact of social policies.

The Welfare State reorganized the basis of social stratification and the distribution of goods reducing levels of inequality and living standards at least in part no longer depended on integration into the market. As a corollary, increasing the number of public sector workers whose contractual terms (which in general included employment stability and a unique employer, the State), created a social stratum with differentiated corporative characteristics.

In the case of developing countries, the redistributive role of the State is less. In addition, here, social inequality cannot be gauged using only measures of financial flows. While a part of the population has access to drinking water, gas, electricity, garbage and sewage collection and paved streets, - all provided by the State - a significant portion of the population is excluded from these basic services.

## FROM CONSUMER PROTECTION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

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Consumer protection has a similar juridical framework to that of the labor rights in that it also questions contracts in which the parties have very dissimilar power. Such inequality can lead to the monopoly control of markets, with the imposition of contracts where the consumer has no option but to accept the stipulated terms, or where firms sell products that are not in line with the promised qualities.

The movement in defense of consumer rights had its origin at the end of the XIX century in the United States in the struggles against the political power of large economic groups and their influence and favored position regarding the State. Initially the focus was on the fares charged by the leading railway firms and the ceding to them of public land on very favorable terms. Later in the XX century the energy companies became the target, especially the Standard Oil Company which controlled a large part of the petroleum, lead and whisky markets. The Antimonopoly Party of the United States created in 1884 and lasting only a few years, together with various movements which at the time were called populist, in addition to this struggle

against monopolies included other demands in their platforms, such as the direct election of senators (at the time elected by the State deputies), progressive income tax, and workers labor rights.

In the following decades, legislation for the protection of the consumer was extended to all sectors of the economy. Consumer protection became the object of a wide range of government bodies which regulate public concessions, limit monopoly practices, monitor the liberation of medicines and hygiene products and the content of food products, and control the quality and accordance of products with their technical specifications.

Consumer protection does not set itself against the market but aims to domesticate the terms in which economic exchange occurs, limiting the capacity of firms to simply impose their own conditions of quality and sale.

More recently, the protection of the environment has come to be integrated into the activities regulated by the State. For environmentalists, the preservation of nature requires control over firms and economic activity so that they become subordinated to the demands of sustainable growth. Rather than focusing on the contractual relations of social actors, the objective is to preserve the common good and to make firms accountable for damage to the environment. The aim is to ensure that commercial logic does not determine the use and employment of non-renewable or toxic resources, which implies the partial decommodification of decisions that affect their use.

As a result of the increase in preoccupation with the environment over recent decades, this confrontation over levels of commodification has acquired new dimensions, with production and consumption being evaluated in terms of their material, social, ethical and symbolic qualities. The objective is to increase or modify the ethical content of the products consumed and the behavior of consumers, whether in terms of ecological footprints, fair trade, animal welfare, and the consumption of animal products. If workers' rights were associated with trade union and political party demands, struggles over the environment and the ethics of the products produced and marketed are led mainly by NGOs (Non-Government Organizations).

## ACTIVITIES OF STATE COORDINATION

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In addition to the impact of social struggles, systems of regulation, of control and public monitoring of the activities of the market expanded with the increasing complexities of modern societies, whether democratic or not. The Modern State carries

out a series of functions which go beyond the mediation of distributional conflicts and which lead to the creation of new specialized bodies, including in authoritarian States, whether they be the military Government in Brazil in the 60s and 70s of capitalist China today under the control of the Communist Party.

In addition to social services, such as education, health and public works which the State itself either carries out or sources to third parties, there are numerous situations in which public action is called on to intervene, to organize, to authorize, to inspect and to coordinate economic activities. Some of these functions include: health surveillance, the development of infrastructure, the organization of public transport and air space, urban planning and services, control over medicines, the regulation of the supply of money and the financial system, civil defense and public health. All these without mentioning science and technology development that in every country depends largely on public funding.

To express this in the language of economics, capitalist societies, to the extent that they increase in complexity and introduce new products and technological innovations, increase exponentially externalities, which must be regulated are taken on by the State. Externalities – costs or benefits affecting a third party who has not participated in the transaction that are not predictable a priori – and depend on the perceptions of the citizenry and their political expression. For instance, vehicles are produced by the market, but the regulation of the emissions of polluting gases, driving licenses, the locations of roadways, traffic lights, speed controls, the ensuring of strategic supplies of fuel, all of these depend on the public authority.

Business itself needs to be regulated, from technical standards, classifications and norms regarding procedures and protocols, many of a global nature, as those carried out by ISO, the International Standards Organization, in addition to a variety of national and international certifications – geographical indications or quality labels. Capitalism, and even more so democratic capitalism, needs a permanent expansion of the State if it is to function.

The exercise of these activities implies that the State's range of economic influence is much broader than that indicated by the public budget, affecting almost all economic activities. As a consequence the State becomes the target of business interests which try to influence decisions by means of lobbies, the financing of political campaigns, the "revolving door" (the circulation of public sector officials from the public to the private sector or vice-versa), and the direct bribing of public servants.

The minimalist State of classical liberalism exclusively oriented to the market is a purely theoretical construct. In the practical history of nations, the “invisible hand” of the market has been a very visible hand using the State to push forward business interests.

The coordination activities of the State indicate that economic liberalism, which believes in the ability of the market to organize on its own relations of production and distribution, is a mirage, an intellectual model that has little to do with the demand of functioning capitalist societies.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RISE OF THE WELFARE STATE

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The processes leading to the universalization of “basic goods” in the developed countries were in no way linear and followed different trajectories in each society. We should speak, therefore, of various models of democracy and capitalism or types of democratic capitalism and Welfare States.

The expansion of Welfare States or “social market economies” – a concept introduced by the German Christian Democratic Party –, both in Europe and the United States, was an extended process marked by exceptional circumstances which together with trade union and social struggles was influenced by other factors such as the impact of the mobilizations of whole populations in two World Wars, and the need to provide a counterpoint to communism. A people which fought for its country in war demanded recompense in times of peace. We may remember that Winston Churchill, despite his prestige in leading the country in the Second World War, was defeated in the general elections of 1945 by the Labor Party, which promised social security and national health system.

The Welfare State consolidated society around the nation State, which offered a series of collective goods, including labor relations, public services, and social policies providing a functional substitute to individual property, and ensuring the basic needs of life for individuals and families, together with a social safety network in times of unemployment or incapacity.

In the United States, a society which was born capitalist, and therefore without the inherited weight of European’s feudal societies, social distance in social relations was less pronounced (among the white population). The predominance of an ideology of the self-made man and the virtues of the market was the product of a dynamic economy, the expectation that the judicial system would provide equal



treatment to all, together the pioneering introduction of mass consumption production – allowing to a certain extent for the incorporation of industrial workers into styles of life associated with the middle classes –.

Notwithstanding, the State played a fundamental role in the formation of contemporary society in the United States. The social policies of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, under the impact of the great recession of 1929, guaranteed a minimum income for the poorest sectors of society, introduced a minimum wage, shortened the working day, and created unemployment and retirement insurance. Lyndon Johnson expanded these measures in the '60s although the coverage of social policies did not reach the levels of European countries and the market and associated values continued to be fundamental in the construction of the national narrative and for the legitimation of the political system.

In Europe after the Second World War the rural population became incorporated into social policies which now reached the population as a whole. The social model in the United States, by contrast, remained more precarious and segmented, especially as regards health and education.

These differences between the US and Europe are reflected in the administration of large firms. In the United State, the logic of the shareholder, concerned with the maximization of gains in the short term through the increased value of the shares or through the distribution of profit, predominates. In European capitalism, particularly that of Germany, and in Japan also, each country with its own characteristics, the logic of the shareholder was tempered by the logic of the stakeholder (the interested parties), involving the participation of workers and/or their unions in the administration with the survival of the firm over the long term as the strategic goal.

## THE "MARKET"

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The market and private property are fundamental instruments for the coordination of economic activities, for the determination of supply and demand and the fixing of prices, for decisions on investments and for the motivation of the different social agents. The market should be considered as an instrument at the service of the society and doubtless a very useful instrument, but should not be taken as a theological dogma from which we should take a distance only in exceptional circumstances. The free play of the market does not of itself ensure a social acceptable distribution

of social wealth, nor does it provide solutions for distributive conflicts, or ensure growth automatically, much less indicate the way out in crises.

Political decisions were responsible for turning education, health, insurance, public transport, urban services, electricity, water, to name only the most important sectors, into services provided by public bodies or firms, or whose prices were controlled by the State (with enormous variations from country to country and at different moments in time, involving concessions with regulated prices and crossed subsidies).

The market and the varied interests that operate in it are dependent and organized by legal norms, institutions and public policies. In this way, the distribution of social wealth is always associated with the mechanisms of contractual negotiation and institutional arrangements that reflect the political culture, the structure of the State and the firms, together with the balance of forces between different interests.

Markets, therefore, are not in either virtuous or pernicious entity, nor does they reflect ideal theoretical models. They assume the most varied forms, are fragmented, riddled with internal power relations and are subject to permanent changes through the actions of social and political agents. The models idealized by some economic theories, which represent markets as impersonal mechanisms in which a myriad of actors operate in equal conditions of competition and information, are very distant from the reality. Markets are social entities where power deriving from economic concentration prevails, where there is a sharp asymmetry in access to information, and in the ability to influence State decisions by the different social actors.

In principle, the market does not determine the type of property of the parties involved, despite the tendency to treat private property as a synonym for the market. In more recent times, when the press refers to the "opinion of the market" they are in fact referring to financial markets which do not represent the whole group of sectors involved in commercial activity. Some of their positions may be relevant for the business community as a whole, but the policies they promote in most cases have a specific focus, the profitability of shares and "financial products" in the short term. This means that the "markets" may be satisfied with an economic situation in which prices on the stock exchanges rise exponentially although the economy shows little growth and inequality increases.

The greater efficiency of private compared with State firms is not applicable to every situation, particularly those where markets assume special characteristics as in the case of those sectors where universal and equal access needs to be ensured,

such as public education and health. In certain cases, public services may be conceded or outsourced to the private sector without placing the common good at risk, but this requires regulatory mechanisms, which ensure transparency and controls to prevent the formation of public-private gangs involving business, politicians and public functionaries.

Between the demands of different groups regarding the appropriation of a part of the social wealth and the limits imposed by economic reality there exists an enormous variety of possible arrangements.

## 3. RECOMMODIFICATION: THE NEOLIBERAL COUNTER REFORM

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What is generically termed – often imprecisely and almost always in negative terms – neoliberalism is in practice a large historical process which began in the 1970s and continues until today, in which social transformations and the active intervention of diverse political agents converged in the aim to achieve a recommodification of social relations which were either totally or partially decommodified.

As in all historical processes, neoliberalism has experienced advances and retreats – with characteristics specific to each country – and has to share the stage with new tendencies, particularly those associated with the environmentalist demands.

The new impulse of economic liberalism began towards the end of the 1970s in the Thatcher government in England, followed by the government of Ronald Reagan in the US – and was precociously promoted by the Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile –. It has endured now for some four decades, during which time new political, economic and social realities emerged which did not exist in its early years. We will indicate its principal features, many of which are inter-related, and examine the consequences of this neo liberal counter reform, expressed in the current political crises of democratic capitalism

### THE FISCAL CRISIS OF THE WELFARE STATE

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As from the end of the 70s, Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party in England and Ronald Reagan, the US Republican Party President were the proponents of a political narrative centered on the return to economic liberalism. Among their principal proposals were a reduction in taxes, lower levels of regulation for the labor market, the financial market and urban land-use, the promotion of individual entrepreneurship and meritocracy, and the transfer of responsibility for the care of the elderly, the sick and the handicapped to the family and/or to civil society organizations.

Economists, particularly those linked to international organizations, who diagnosed a fiscal crisis of the Welfare State, theorized this new orientation. as the product of demographic changes (increase in longevity and decline in births with

the resulting transformation in the age pyramid making the system of social security whereby the young assume the costs of the elderly unsustainable) leading to an exponential increase in public expenditure on health, which was aggravated by the increases in the rates of unemployment. They proposed the privatization of certain public services, the lowering of taxes, changes in social security legislation, less public regulation, the breaking up of the public monopolies and the privatization of State firms, the transfer of the public social security to a private and individual based system of insurance, the reform of the public sector inspired by the management experience of the private sector, and the measurement and evaluation of the efficiency of public sector workers.

Liberal economic policies were the fomenters and at the same time the products of the profound changes within societies, the globalization processes and the collapse of communism. The end of communism weakened the willingness of the ruling classes to concede concessions to labor through the fear that it might be attracted to another ideal of society, which despite the enormous limitations of communism still exerted a role in the imagination of wide sectors of the population. We should not forget that ever since Bismarck implemented social reforms in Germany as an antidote to the advance of socialism, a fear of communist revolutions in the XX century was one of the motives for the willingness of dominant economic groups to accept advances in social rights.

The Welfare State faced a dual challenge as from the 70s: a) from the search by firms for greater international competitiveness and the growing influence of international finance pressuring national States to adopt balanced budgets; b) the increasing distancing of the middle classes from the Welfare State as a result of higher taxes and the loss of political support for the social democratic parties – affected by the decline in the influence of industrial workers with the expansion in importance of the service sectors and the consequent reduction in power of the trade unions -. In the United States, as an example, the percentage of the industrial workers in the labor force declined from 25% in 1946 to only 8.5% today.

In the developed countries, what came to be called neo-liberalism was, from the political perspective, a movement to promote economic liberalism as a reaction to the advances of the Welfare State and the increasing regulation of the economy by the State. Neoliberalism aimed to undo the social pacts that had supported the construction of the Welfare State through the promotion of possessive individualism. At the center of its critique were the “excessive” increases in public spending.

There is clearly a potential conflict between the fiscal demands of the State and those of business, since the high fiscal demands affect both investments and profits. This relation, however, is not automatic. In the first place, part of the public resources returns to the private sector in the form of productivity gains through the supply of more qualified workers, through investments in science and technology, through consumption and through the development of infrastructure. Secondly, although at some point increases in public spending can hinder the private sector, there is no fixed point at which this occurs, as can be seen from the very diverse situations in different developed countries. In Denmark, Finland and Belgium, for example, the State appropriates more than 50% of the national product and the public sector represents between 20-30% of total employment.

## CONVERGENCE AND CRISIS OF THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES

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Social democracy domesticated the revolutionary impulse of the popular sectors and the liberal right achieved similar results in relation to nationalism and religious fundamentalism which in Europe at the of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century aligned themselves in authoritarian crusades and nostalgia for traditions. Both seemed to have been destroyed by the winds of progress.

The advance of neo-liberalism and the balance of forces that supported it led to a reorientation in, and to internal divisions in, both the parties of the traditional right and the left. The diagnosis of a crisis of the Welfare State was accepted, with differences of emphasis, by almost all the main traditional parties in the political spectrum (for instance, the reform which led to the liberalization of the labor market in Germany was carried out by Gerhard Schröder, a social democrat). In addition to a reduction in fiscal deficits, it was argued that it was necessary to adapt to the demands for a competitive integration into international markets, which in addition to reforms in the fiscal weight and structure of the State, required changes in labor legislation to make work contracts more flexible.

This convergence in the economic policies of parties both of the right and the left led to both becoming a transmission belt for the adjustments which increasingly open economies required, ensuring the international competitiveness of its firms and able also to attract foreign capitals. This new context led to the predominance of a “technocratic” discourse which transformed government action into the executive arm of specialists (normally economists), whose knowledge was presented as

involving “scientifically neutral” knowledge, and came to occupy a central place in the discourses, the agendas and the actions of a wide range of parties.

The promotion of values associated with neoliberalism placed the theme of “efficiency” at the center of political agendas. Efficiency, understood as the best use of available resources, is a fundamental instrument for the improvement of administration, for transparency and the control of expenditures and for the quality of the services and the work of the public sector. However, efficiency is an instrument, and cannot be dissociated from the values and the type of activity to which it is applied. If the search for greater efficiency in the expenditures and the services provided by the State is a necessary and praiseworthy objective, the results should be measures in terms of their impacts on the common good, in contrast to the private sector where the aim of efficiency is competition and the maximization of profit. In other words, on the improvement in the living conditions of the population.

In the same way, while the monetary rewarding of initiative and persona merit should not be excluded, nor should it be the only criterion for the distribution of social wealth. Areas that are fundamental to society and to economic growth, such as scientific research and personal care, do not operate according to the same pre-suppositions and to the same market motivations. They involve sustained effort over long periods of time whose reward is not essentially monetary. In the last instance, how much should the person who discovered penicillin or who created the vaccine against poliomyelitis gain? Or yet again what of the case of public sector workers who dedicate themselves to their functions way in excess of formal requirements, or statesmen who promote policies which allow for a substantial improvement in the society’s quality of life, or who puts an end to historical conflicts?

Furthermore, “merit” is outside the possibilities of a large part of the population for whom the experience of the labor market is like that of a funnel in which success is often predetermined by the family into which you were born or by a range of factors out of the control of individuals, such as the fortunes of the firms for which you work, or the difficulties of finding work as age advances. While merit should be rewarded, it is equally valid to argue that people with merit should share their rewards with society, whose collective force created the conditions which makes individual enrichment possible.

## THE POLITICS OF FINANCIALIZATION AND RECOMMODIFICATION

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The transformations promoted by “neoliberalism” cannot be dissociated from what has been called the “financialization” of society. Monetary calculation has been a characteristic of capitalism from its outset, and the central role of financial relations is expressed in the most diverse institutions of the political, juridical and economic system: State monopoly over the emission of money and the regulation of the financial system, commercial law and the banking system which organize credit and savings and irrigate monetary circulation.

The “politics of financialization”, however, is a new phenomenon, characterized by the centrality that financial markets, institutions, products and earnings have come to assume in the economic policies of the State and economic agents. This has been associated with the deregulation and the internationalization of financial markets together with the expansion of financial intermediaries which act on the margin of the financial system. This sector, known as the shadow banking system (a parallel financial system which includes investment banks, insurance and investment fund administrators), in 2019 controlled values significantly higher than the banking system itself.<sup>9</sup> These actors are specialized in creating financial products, which promise higher than average returns and which are themselves leveraged and often, opaque to the investor, and which were at the origin of the great global recession that began in 2008.

If financialization is promoted by sector which profit from it, the phenomenon is also linked to the existence of an increasing amount of private financial resources which face only a limited demand for credit in the real economy of the advanced countries, given the slow economic growth, the tendency to demographic stagnations, and to the widening of social inequalities which determine the expansion of consumption. These tendencies may lead to the consolidation of low interest rates (even lower than inflation), over the long term.

In such a situation, small savers, who face negative real interest rates, increasingly look for “innovative financial products”, promoting the shadow banking system and the formation of new speculative bubbles. Some of these bubbles, as in the case of the art market, are irrelevant for the majority of the population, but this is not so

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9 See the FMI Report, available in [www.imf.org/en/Publications/GFSR/Issues/2019/10/01/global-financial-stability-report-october-2019](http://www.imf.org/en/Publications/GFSR/Issues/2019/10/01/global-financial-stability-report-october-2019). Accessed in May, 2020



when finance capital becomes directed to the property market, making house purchasing unviable and increasing rents in the major cities, or yet again when a life's savings disappears in the wreckage of failed financial products.

Financialization, above all, acts in the sense of recommodifying social spaces which were entirely or partially de-commodified and operates along three lines: a) in the search for new areas for the operation of finance capital; b) in the maximization of the financial profitability of firms in the shortest time possible, eliminating other criteria of social interest; and c) in the creation of new areas of commodification.

Financial capital looks for investment opportunities in public services (such as health, education, infrastructure, social security), with a view to administering them within a logic of profitmaking. This penetration of private capital into sector of the public services is justified in the name of the need for the investment resources and the greater efficiency of the private sector. If not controlled these incursions can have very negative results. Given the financial sums involved and the affinity with the know-how of the sector, social security is extremely attractive to the private sector. One of the most radical case of the privatization of social security was that carried out in Chile under the military dictatorship, in which the principle of a solidary security based on collective responsibility was substituted by a system of individual capitalization proved to be a disaster (but was not applied to the Chilean Armed Forces, then in command of the country which preferred to remain within the old solidary system...).<sup>10</sup>

When basic public services, such as the supply of water or electricity, become organized on a purely commercial basis, those with payments in arrears are often cut off without any consideration for the problems that they may be facing. Similarly, privatized transport or postal systems often eliminate "non-profitable" localities. In the case of health, privatization may play a complementary role but, if care is not taken, a selection process may be adopted whereby it is transferred to the public sector on in the cases where treatment is more costly. Private sector forms of

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<sup>10</sup> "In December 2018, 50% of the 684 thousand pensioners who received their pension in accordance with their age (the most frequent category), received less than 151 thousand Chilean pesos and (135 thousand if the State Contribution to the Solidarity Pensions is included) (that is around US\$ 200, BS). 50% of those who had contributed for 30-35 years received a pension of less than 296.332 pesos, slightly more than the minimum wage. (In 2018, the Chilean peso was exchanged at 700 to the US\$). The pension system is even worse for women, since 50% of the 394.463 pensioners by advanced age receive a pension which is less than 138.000 Chilean pesos (and only 107.000 pesos if the Solidary Contribution for Social Security is included) and the median pension for one who contributes between 30-35 years, or in other words almost the whole of his/her working life) only amounts to 281.722 Chilean pesos. Available in: [www.funacionsol.cl/estudios/pensiones-bejo-el-minimo](http://www.funacionsol.cl/estudios/pensiones-bejo-el-minimo) Accessed in 7 May 2020.

management can certainly be made good use of in the public sector, and in many areas, such as infrastructure the presence of private capital is often necessary. It is not a question of expecting acts of charity on the part of the private sector, but rather that of creating mechanisms of regulation, contracts and monitoring which ensure that the search for profit does not lead to deviations in relation to the objective of supplying a universal “social good”, founded on the values of solidarity. This task faces the challenge of limiting the enormous penetration of private service providers in the political system.

In a similar way, financialization leads to the predominance of purely financial calculations in the organization of the private sector. In the administration of firms, it implies the dominance of the shareholder logic over that of the stakeholder, rewarding executives with the firm’s shares whose main goal is ensuring that profits enhance the value of shares and pay greater dividends.

The second form of decommodification takes the form of transforming the world of work, eliminating from the labor contract the co-responsibility of the firm with regard to its functionaries (such as guarantees in cases of ill-health, the sharing of social costs, investment in training and the promise of a career). Initially this was promoted through out-sourcing and substituting wage contracts for the per-service of autonomous suppliers. This was accelerated with the phenomenon known as *uberization* or the Gig economy. In Gig-style jobs the firms present themselves as technological platforms on which those registered make their working equipment available, (moto, car, bicycle, specific knowledge) and the platform then distributes the demand and defines the value of the services offered and the charges a fee for intermediating between the person registered and the user of the service.

In order to avoid any form of labor responsibility, these platforms have carried out a veritable Orwellian revolution. Rather than being called functionaries the service providers are treated as “partners”, there is no guaranteed wage but instead a “share in the takings” and eventual dismissal becomes “the end of the relationship”. The platform eschews responsibility for any accidents during the performance of the service (which are frequent in the case of deliveries since income depends on the number of deliveries completed), for social rights, or for medical expenses. Such a

system transfers the social costs to the State and leaves the “partners” and the consumers at the mercy of circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

The Gig economy is a phenomenon in expansion and with increasing automation and a reduced offer of jobs, the use of platforms in which people sell “portions” of their time to carry out the most diverse services is becoming a dominant form of work. In this new work model, the service provider has the status of a freelancer and generally earns less than a contracted employee for the same service, while in addition receiving no social benefits. A system in which the workers (or should we call them partners?) have little or no relation among themselves, have no access to the contact data of those who work on the same platform (data which the firm clearly does not share), provides minimum opportunities for them to come together to defend their interests. We have, therefore, on the one side large-scale firms (many of them global players), and on the other isolated individual in no condition to negotiate.

Is this the realization of economic liberalism’s dream of the labor market where firms assume no responsibility at all for the workers, nor any social obligations in relation to the State and which in this way speeds up the concentration of income? In place of negotiation and the search for agreements between trade unions and employers, we will have social explosions with unpredictable results because this system engenders a fiscal crisis of the State, which is unable to pay for the costs of social security.

On the other hand the internet has not only made possible this globalization of the supply of services which can be carried out on-line, it has also transformed the workings of the product markets, creating global “marketplaces” such as Amazon and Alibaba, which allow small firms to reach customers who would have been previously inaccessible, while traditional street commerce enters into decline.

Profound social transformations produced by technological revolutions require institutional solutions that update the pact of social co-existence, associating the promotion of entrepreneurialism with social policies adapted to the new circumstances. Current labor relations should lead to the reinvention of trade unions (as in

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11 On the first of January, 2020, I lost an object on a trip using Uber. I tried to get into contact with the driver through the firm’s site but they asked me to leave a telephone number. No-one contacted me. I entered the site again in the section Correspondent in which it was written: “The drivers have no contract with Uber and so are not responsible for any item left behind during a journey.” In addition to the fact the sentence is illogical (Uber has no contract with the driver and therefore the latter is not responsible for the users’ property!), it does not explain why Uber does not provide the drivers’ telephone. The objective is clear: Uber has no responsibility for either the driver or the client.

the Freelancers Union in the United States),<sup>12</sup> and to a recognition of work rights, certainly with different formats to those which have preceded them, but which remain crucial for compensating the asymmetries of power and for retaining the viability of the edifice of the Welfare State.

And finally, we cannot fail to mention the emergence of a recent area of commodification, that of personal data, which we transmit every time we navigate the internet or use software applications which stores up the users information without their knowledge. The right to privacy and the use and access to data banks, as we will discuss later, will be at the center of debates on the future of democracy.

## CRISIS OF THE WELFARE STATE AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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The Welfare State continues to occupy a central place in all countries, however in various countries forms of copayment or complementary plans for the use of social services, together with increases in rates for university matriculation have been introduced, and, in some cases, sectors such as public transport have been privatized leading to an increase in fares. Tax policies have had the most regressive effect, increasing the importance of consumption taxes and lowering taxes on rich individuals and firm profits.

Nevertheless, the distributive role of social policies in Europe continues to be quite effective despite increases in income inequality and wealth concentration. In 2017, inequality of income between the richest 10% and the 50% at the base of the income pyramid decreases after taxes and transfers are taken into account; this decrease was 29% in Western Europe, 23% in Southern and Northern Europe (in these latter two regions the initial inequality of income is lower).<sup>13</sup> The concentration of income and patrimony among the top 10% and the stability in the levels of wealth going to the bottom 50% has meant that the remaining 40% has seen its income decline and a consequent thinning out of the middle class.

The increase in inequality was much more accentuated in the United States, particularly the concentration of income in the richest 1% of the population. Between 1980-2017, the income of this 1% went from 10% to 20% of total national wealth. In the same period, the bottom 50% saw their share in national income diminish by

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12 See > [www.freelancersunion.org](http://www.freelancersunion.org) Accessed 7 May.2020.

13 Blanchet, T., Chancel, L. & Gethin, A. "Has the European Social Model withstood the Rise in Inequalities?". Paris. 2019. See: <https://wid.world/document/eurean-inequality-wil-summary-2019-en-o-pdf> Accessed 25/07/2019.

almost a half and have seen almost no benefits from the increase in wealth over the last forty years. The increase in income for the middle class (40% of the population), in this same period has been less than the average increase in the national wealth. Ninety per cent of the population, therefore, experienced lower income growth than the average for the national economy.

The dramatic impact of this increase in inequality in the U.S. becomes apparent when we consider that the life expectancy of the population has declined in this period, and that the difference in life expectancy between a poor and a rich woman has increased in the last thirty years from 3.9 to 13.6 years.<sup>14</sup> If we take into account that social expectations with regard to consumption are defined by the level of a country's wealth, this growth in inequality implies a significant increase in the feelings of relative deprivation.

If we consider patrimony rather than income, inequality increased as much in Europe as in the US with 50% of the population with the lowest income had almost no participation in total family wealth, while the richest 10% concentrated 75% of total wealth in private hands as indicated in recent reports by Deutsche Bank and McKinsey.<sup>15</sup>

Although of fundamental importance, these data do not fully explain the tectonic shifts occurring inside these societies, between generations – with the majority of young people now earning less than their parents do at a comparable age –, the rise of a sector of the chronically unemployed, or groups who have lost their relative social positions, either in terms of income or status. Among these, the industrial and service sector workers eliminated by the shift of production to other countries, by automation and the impact of new technologies, or the disappearance of certain services such as the travelling salesperson now substituted by a software application which links sales directly to the distributor.

The great recession of 2008, which led to an increase in unemployment and to greater inequality, continues to affect large sectors of the population. In countries which have managed to lower unemployment such as the United States or the United Kingdom, a large part of new jobs created have been of low paid and of low qualification. The impacts of the recession converge with long-term tendencies associated

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14 "Inequality: A Persisting Challenge and its Implications", McKinsey Global Institute. See: [www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/inequality-a-persisting-challenge-and-its-implications](http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/inequality-a-persisting-challenge-and-its-implications) Accessed. 07/05/2020

15 Hooper, P. et al. "US Income and Wealth Inequality". New York Deutsche Bank. 2018. See: [www.db.com/newsroom\\_news/Inequality\\_Jan2018.pdf](http://www.db.com/newsroom_news/Inequality_Jan2018.pdf) Accessed 07/05/2020, and McKinsey Global Institute, op.cit.

with the demographic stagnation and an increase in life expectancy, both of which have slowed down economic growth.

The young constitute the most affected group since they confront a dual problem: the cost of accommodation – whether through purchase or renting – and the uncertainties of the labor market with the limited offer of qualified jobs. As a result, they are led into a greater dependence on their families for support, increasing the number of those who either stay or return to their parent’s home, when already adults. This leads to paradoxical results, since the arguments in favor of a reduction in pensions given that costs will be unsustainable in the future, which have to be borne by the younger section of the population, is in stark contrast to current reality whereby the elderly are economically supporting their children and grandchildren

The failures of the neoliberal economic discourse has come to occupy center stage in the political and ideological debates in democratic capitalist countries. The international financial crisis of 2008 led many countries into debt from which they have still not recovered, and the promotion of policies of fiscal austerity has worsened social inequality and increased the size of the low-income population.

The implosion of the traditional party system which will be analyzed in the next chapter is to a large extent the result of neoliberal policies which have increased inequality through the ability of the richest groups to appropriate the greater part of the gains of economic growth, especially in the period from 1980-2019.

## ECONOMIC GROWTH AND INEQUALITY

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Although considered as a means and not an end, the evaluation of governments in modern societies depends largely on their capacity to generate economic growth, and in the case of democracies these results should as far as possible follow the electoral calendar. Distributive policies are possible without growth, but they are not sustainable without it. Economic growth may of itself have no distributive impact, but when it is sustained it allows for an increase in the individual income of the whole population.

Economic growth brings about social changes that transform the threshold of what is considered to be a “common minimum” to which everyone in the population should have access. The income that defines the “level of poverty” is not the same in Angola, as in Brazil, or in the United States. This “civilizational minimum” includes goods and services which in general incorporate scientific and technological

knowledge (especially as regards health, communication, and education), which evolves in accordance with the country's level of wealth.

The "spill-over" effect produced by economic growth, particularly in situations of increased social inequality, may not be sufficient for sections of the population to earn the "civilizational minimum". In the United States, as we have seen, economic growth had as its result an increase in inequality to the point at which the purchasing power of the basic wage level remained almost stagnant. Furthermore, the situation is more dramatic once costs for service, which were until then inexistent (telephones, cell-phones, internet, cable TV), are taken into account in addition to the fact that health insurance, higher education, and new medicines, all increased in price well above inflation.

In addition to these increases in expenditure, living costs have come also to include: a) care services for a population with ever greater longevity, expenditures on children who enter the labor market much later; b) the higher costs of many services (from dentistry to a range of personal services in a service society where appearance is fundamental and has to be borne by the service worker); and c) the increase in housing costs – especially in the large cities which offer more job opportunities –, where rents and housing prices have increased far more than the wages of the majority of the population–, with greatest impact on the poor and the young.

Access to good quality education and health services have a positive impact on productivity, on job opportunities and on levels of income. Inequality affects both economic growth, political stability and the quality of life of the population. Economic growth with distribution ensures improvement in living conditions and leads the population to have an expectation of social mobility, both intra and inter generations. Social mobility provides a horizon of hope in democratic capitalist societies, and when this mobility is frozen or even reverses, as currently in many advanced capitalist societies, it produces a deep social malaise.

## NEOLIBERALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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Depending on the way it is used, neoliberalism can designate a specific political phenomenon – an ideology which drives to push back advances in social policies and the regulation of the labor market-, or it may be simply a political slogan to discredit and demonize whatever economic and social policy is being opposed, which is a frequent use in Latin America.

The term neoliberalism is often employed on the left to denounce any type of measure with which they disagree, even those whose aim is to improve the functioning of the State, rationalize State expenditures or limit unacceptable privileges accumulated by some public sector functionaries. In a region where inflation has negatively affected the poorest sectors of the population, where State firms have been sources of corruption and employment for those favored by politicians, policies of fiscal responsibility, of monetary stability and many privatizations – with each country having its own specificities – have represented a democratic advance.

The modernization of the State includes effective controls over working hours for public functionaries, the elimination of unnecessary bureaucracy, the strengthening of systems of accountability and transparency in public accounts and diminishing the opportunities for corruption. This modernization of the State is a necessary if not sufficient condition for it to become a vehicle for income distribution and the provision of more effective public services.

What is called deregulation is often a new form of regulation of economic activities and the environment that favors business interests. However, in some cases, as in Latin American countries where large sectors of the economy are colonized by oligopolic corporations, deregulation and privatization in certain areas represents an advance which makes it easier to concentrate the resources of the State on priority social areas and facilitate the functioning of the market.

The Latin-American left was never sensitive to the need to modernize the State, in part because it was (and still is) tied to the corporative interests of public sector workers, to the use of the public machine to create jobs for their militants and to an ideology that equates Statism with social justice.

If we emphasize the struggles for decommodification, we do so because they have been central to the history of democratic societies. However, as the history of Latin America shows, not all struggle against the market are progressive, nor is greater commodification necessarily regressive. Many political positions that are against the market are tied to romantic reactionary visions, or to the defense of corporative interests or of groups that have benefitted from State subsidies and tariff protection. Promotion of market relations may lead to greater production, income and an improved distribution of social wealth.

The legitimacy of political parties is based on the capacity to provide better social services and ensure economic growth, increases in income and improved social services. In Brazil, where the formal labor markets only integrates a portion of the



population and offers wages which are insufficient to cover basic needs, the poor sections of the population looks to the State for protection while the middle classes feel that their taxes do not result in the benefits of public services. Although this situation has some similarities in all democratic societies, the great distance of the middle classes from public services (especially education and health), and their dissatisfaction with public security, reaches qualitatively different proportions, increasing the political polarization. Sectors of the middle classes feel attracted to a discourse which demands “less State”, when what should be at stake is a State which taxes in a more adequate and progressive form, and provides universal social services.

## PERSPECTIVES

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Despite the neoliberal policies, **the Welfare State remains the desirable horizon and defines the expectations of most citizens in advanced capitalist societies and is the ideal for a large part of the population in the most varied corners of the world.** The current challenge is to lessen the social inequality created by pro-market policies, thereby allowing for a more equitable distribution of social wealth, an increase in controls over efforts to colonize the State by private sector interests, and the development of alternative employment and income sources, given the transformations in productive structures and employment.

Between the demands of the market and social demands there exists a space of discretionary power in which policies can lead to innovative responses. Discussions and experiences of a minimum universal wage, in its varied versions, are now part of an intense debate in Europe. A level of consensus is emerging which suggests that if it were implemented it would only represent a partial solution given its relatively low amount, and the fact that it might be used to make acceptable chronic unemployment, excluding a considerable part of the population from the sense of social relevance, the sociability and the learning which is provided by work.

Denmark, now followed by other countries, has advanced the proposal of flexi-security, which combines a flexible labor legislation that makes it easier for employers to dismiss their workers with a system of public security for the unemployed which stimulates the search for employment, offering training courses and promoting a constant dialogue between firms and unions.

There already exist, and there are likely to be more, local experiences in organizing forms of exchange which aim to avoid exaggerated consumerism and promote

respect for the environment. Without ignoring the fact that many such experiences based on grassroots initiatives, may well have a greater weight in the future, unless they are able to influence the top of the political system - that is, become an articulated social movement with a vision of government able to incorporate society as a whole-, they will remain niches unable to modify whole social systems.

The history of capitalism shows how political action affects market relations, modifying the role of the State which comes to regulate the most varied spheres of private exchange, limiting the principal of the sacrosanct character of private property and the unfettered rights of contract, at the same time as it has domesticated the egalitarian impetus of revolutionary movements.

The dilemmas of the greater or less commodification of social life has given rise to ideological polarizations, sometimes under the cover of scientific explanations. As we will argue in the last chapter, no society has been built based on a single value. On the contrary, it is the counterweight between values which allows for, ever precarious, the negotiation of equilibriums between the different desires, expectations and interests and opens the way for innovative solutions. An unavoidable criterion is that solutions must be economically viable, which does not resolve how the costs and benefits should be distributed.

Political imagination, as expressed by intellectuals, social movements and political parties has to date been unable to produce satisfactory solutions. Within the tradition of the right, the mixture of economic liberalism and conservatism has revealed itself to be increasingly precarious and has resulted, as we will see, in the growth of an authoritarian right. This precariousness expresses itself equally in the difficulties of confronting new challenges, demanding responses which go beyond liberal-conservative pragmatism: preservation of the environment, the regulation of data banks which invade privacy - a fundamental value of classical liberalism -, automation and its social impacts, or yet again the ethical dilemmas posed by the uses of artificial intelligence and gene therapy.

The panorama is equally frustrating if we consider the tradition of the left. In the developed countries. The traditional parties of the left, depending on the levels of deregulation reached in each country, have to deal with labor market reforms which directly affect their classical bases of support and weaken the unions in those areas where the reforms have been carried out. The growing influence on the left of social movements which focus on identity issues (sexual orientation, gender and ethnical relations), the environment and human rights, has created a diverse electoral base

and one which to a large extent diverges from the traditional working class base, in that they no longer focus centrally on the distributive problems of society as a whole. The most radical of these movements talk of post-capitalism, as a way of indicating what is not desired without explaining in which direction society should go, which is inadequate intellectually and irresponsible politically.

Although the space to increase taxes is limited, there are various areas – given the specificities of each country – where it is possible to change the tax structure, as for instance increasing capital gains taxes (which in general are lower than the taxes paid by wage earners), or limiting the speculative gains from investments in real estate. These latter become a store of value which benefits from public sector investments in infrastructure, leading to social and urban transformations which increase the price of rents and house purchases at the expense of the citizen, especially the young and the small businesses.

## 4. THE CULTURAL CONFLICTS OF CAPITALIST DEMOCRACIES

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### SECULARIZATION

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Until modern times, political values and power legitimacy found their support in religious narratives and in tradition, and innovations themselves were justified in the name of sacred texts. This was the case even in the case of life in Athens in the period of direct democracy (to which only a minority comprised of free men had access). Socrates was sentenced to death because he defied the gods of the city and because he was a philosopher who questioned the existing order and led the youth to question established values.

The ideal of a society in which individuals are guided by choices made freely based on reason and sentiments only emerges in modern times. This is not to say that values – that is codes of conducts which determine what is right and what is wrong, good and evil – do not exist in societies oriented by religion or by any other sacred tradition, but these are justified in the name of a reality which is external to the individual, a transcendental narrative the expressions of a divine will, associated with sacred, unquestionable texts.

In principle, the secular ideology was associated with a deist, agnostic or atheist vision of the world. In practice, this radical distancing from religion was concentrated only in the elites, while for the ordinary citizen the advance of modernity implied a diluting rather than an abandoning of beliefs and religious practices. In fact, the secularization of societies was not a process that occurred finally at a given time. Even today, the relations between religion and the public authority present challenges, which may be more or less pronounced, for all democratic societies, and secularization suffers advances and retreats, even though in most developed countries the number of those with active religious practices has diminished especially among the young.<sup>16</sup>

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16 See the research carried out by the Pew Institute. At: [www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world) and [www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-veles-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-veles-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country) Accessed: 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Secularization was concomitant with the construction of national States, which maintained many traditions and values embedded in the religious past. With exception of a short period during the French Revolution – which attempted to create a calendar in which the days and the months represented moral virtues and natural phenomena, the Gregorian calendar was maintained which defines the beginning of “our era”, with the birth of Christ, as were a range of religious festivities, and Sunday as a day of rest, not to mention the presence of religious symbols in public buildings. In education, the battle between public and religious control has been long and conflictual, with religious institutions in a number of Western countries keeping their control over networks of educational institutions.

The distancing of people from religious universes has been a long-term tendency in westernized societies. At least in everyday life this has been true, whether in explaining natural, social and personal phenomena in general, or more specifically in the abandonment of norms of behavior defined by the religious establishment, as in relation to sexuality and marriage. This has been a complex process, which has not implied a complete rupture with religious sentiment. If the number of those who are “non-believers” and “non-affiliated” to a religious current has constantly increased, in most countries the greater part of the population maintains some type of relation to supernatural beliefs. Faced with feelings of chaos and lack of meaning, it is common for people to go in search of religion, including oriental spiritual currents.

The expectation that institutionalized religions would cede their place because their theologies were unable to resist rational critique, is based on an intellectualized vision of religiosity. The accomplishments of modernity, albeit monumental, do not provide answers to the fragility of human condition, and when faced with adversity, whether bad luck, illness or death, the hope for a “miracle” or a life hereafter readily makes itself felt, if only in the form of a doubt.

Even though many abandon religious beliefs because their narratives do not withstand either historical analysis or rational argument, for a considerable part of the population religious beliefs are based on the need to confront the fears, which arise in the course of one’s life, and especially to confront death. For these, study of the sacred texts is no real part of their lives, and theological narratives are almost unknown. Religious feeling did not disappear and survives in an everyday environment dominated by modern values.

Most persons’ religiosity is often distant from erudite versions and is fundamentally nourished by rituals – often in relation to specific event such as marriages,

death and festivities – and mythical figures who transmit a feeling of unity with an ancient past and an eternal temporality that modernity is unable to provide.

## RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

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The influence of beliefs and religious institutions on the public space continues to be the source of much conflict. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we have already noted, religious groups who argued that death was a spiritual issue, which should be left in the hands of the Church and not the market, questioned life insurance. More recently, the anti-conception pill was - and continues to be - challenged by Christian groups that refer to it instead as the “abortion pill”. Most modern legal systems maintained, until recently, norms on sexuality and the functioning of the family, which are rooted in religious values, including such issues as divorce, abortion and suicide.

The continued existence of patriarchal and repressive values in relation to sexuality associated with religion has influenced legal structures and social practices from the outset and continues to do so. During the French revolution, Olympe de Gouges drew up the Declaration on the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen, which proclaimed equal rights of property and political participation for men and women. This Declaration was not approved by the Convention although some new rights were accepted, such as divorce on an equal footing between men and women. The Napoleonic Code, in addition to reintroducing colonial slavery, which had been abolished by the French Revolution, reaffirmed Roman law in relation to the *imbecillitus sexus*, including restrictions on the ability of women to initiate divorce proceedings.

It took almost two centuries for the rights proclaimed by Olympe de Gouges to become effective in France (in 1907 women were allowed to receive their wages directly; in 1938 the civil incapacity of women was abolished; in 1945 women got the vote; in 1970 the civil code substituted “parental authority” for “paternal authority”; in 1984 equality of the spouses was extended to include the family’s property; in 1992 conjugal violence was criminalized).

The rejection of women’s rights, whether in relation to inheritance, to the vote, to powers over children’s upbringing, or to punishments in the case of matrimonial infidelity, were a constituent part of all legal systems from the beginning of modern times until recent decades. These systems did continue to punish “the sins of the flesh”, outlawing the most varied types of sexual practices, without mentioning homosexuality which could carry the death penalty or be punished with chemical

castration which was still practiced in England in 1952 and led the mathematician Alan Turing to commit suicide. Turing was one of the founders of cybernetics, and a Second World War hero for leading the team that broke the Enigma code used by the German army. It was only in 1958 that homosexuality was decriminalized in the United Kingdom, and in the United States, where the different States legislated on the types of permissible sexual practices, it was only in 2018 that the Supreme Court of the United States declared that consensual sexual relations between adults was a private matter.

The cultural conflict between secular values and those promoted by religious institutions has accompanied the history of modernity. These conflicts have as their epicenter the structure of the family, the position of women and sexuality. In many countries, divorce is a right only recently recognized: in Brazil, it was approved in 1977, in Chile in 2004, and in Ireland in 1995 (with restrictive clauses). In the area of sexuality, the criminalization of homosexuality, family planning, ambiguities in relation to prostitution (“the prostitution of some preserves the virginity of others”), and the definition of marriage as an institution exclusive to hetero affective couples, are issues of constant attrition between the lay State and religious institutions.

Discrimination against women has been both formal and informal, involving professions which were not considered appropriate for women, and institutions which they were not allowed to participate in. It was only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women, both in the advanced countries and in Latin America, were accepted in law, medicine or engineering faculties, and began to occupy positions as judges and exercise position of responsibility in public or private institutions.

It was only in 1979 that the first woman was accepted in the French Academy of Science, more than three centuries after its creation. In Brazil, women’s football was prohibited in 1941 in Brazil by a presidential Legal Decree: “Women are not allowed to practice sports which are incompatible with the conditions of their nature, and the National Sports Council should relay the necessary instructions to the country’s sporting bodies.” This decree was only revoked forty years later.

Equal rights for women and the legalization of diverse sexual practices are contemporary phenomena, and have still not been completed in most countries, and in some cases, gains have been reversed. The recognition that women are the subjects of rights in the same way as men was the result of feminist struggles for equality. From the suffragettes – who struggled for the right to vote during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of them being persecuted and imprisoned – to contemporary movements, which have

been strengthened by the massive integration of women into the universities and the labor market. The sexual revolution, a phenomenon that has accelerated in recent decades – side by side with the feminist struggles – has been promoted with the rise of new practices on the part of youth, which have been especially facilitated by the anti-conception pill.

What in various parts of the world today appears to be a political reaction inspired by religion is, to a varied extent, a patriarchal reaction against womens rights justified in the name of religion. If the Bible were to be taken literally, it should be proposed that unfaithful wives be stoned to death, as it is declared in the book of Leviticus.

The, often fierce, opposition of religious groups to modern values needs to be qualified. Religions have been affected by social advances and have suffered profound transformations. In many instances, religious groups were in the front line for instance in the struggle against slavery and against the inhuman working conditions at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The Vatican Science Academy recently accepted the theory of evolution as not being in contradiction with faith, and in recent decades the catholic Church and Protestant Groups have embraced human rights and environmental causes. Similar tendencies of openness to the values of modernity can also be found in the majority currents of Judaism. Evangelical groups, for their part, grow based on promoting a “theology of prosperity” which emphasizes individual success on earth. There are no areas of social life that can escape these new syntheses between religion and modernity.

## THE PERMANENCE OF RELIGION

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Even though science has made great strides in increasing our knowledge of nature and technology has similarly led to improved living conditions, they are not able to eliminate the fundamental insecurity of the human condition, nor offer answers to the meaning of life. To accept that we live and die without having answers to the secrets of the universe remains a minority position, even in secularized societies.

Religion has been a blind spot both for the liberal and the socialist traditions. Both have operated on the assumption that progress and the roles of reason and science would reduce the importance of atavistic beliefs. For the liberals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religion was still seen to be necessary for the poorest and less instructed classes until they benefitted from the effects of progress. Socialists generally



adopted a more hostile attitude against the clergy, which was considered to be an ally of the ruling classes and the promoter of visions of resignation in the face of privation. In opposition to religious messianism which transferred to the after-life the compensations for this world's sufferings, socialists promoted a secular messianism, the construction of paradise on earth, a vision which has been almost extinguished with the end of communism.

Belief in the illuminist vision that reason would be a sufficient basis for the organization of public life, and that its principal methods and tools – science, economic growth and democratic institutions – would lessen the role of emotions, affections and religious beliefs in private life has proved to be unsustainable. Feelings, affections and other non-rational components of the psyche have a fundamental place in people's lives and constantly spill over into public life.

Marcel Gouchet, a leading French analyst of secularization in the European context argues that the Welfare State was possibly the most important factor in distancing people from the religious universe.<sup>17</sup> Rather than trust in divine providence and resignation in the face of fate, people turned to the State for their basic needs. In this sense, the Welfare State would be more than a mechanism for social and economic organization but an ontological support in individuals' lives. To the extent that the Welfare State retreats, political spaces are opened up for paternalist figures who promise to protect the defenseless.

Today, rather than the privatization of religion we are witnessing a period of religious revivalism in which religious and political groups try to influence the political agenda and religious identities are mixed with nationalist and reactionary discourses. The diverse forms and rationalities in which this phenomenon expresses itself would require a detailed analysis of regions and countries (Islam in the Muslim world, Judaism in Israel, Hinduism in India, Buddhism and Confucianism in East and Southeast Asia, the diverse Christian currents in Europe, Latin America and the USA), which is beyond the scope of this text. What we are concerned to point out are the challenges that religious revivalism and its return poses to the public sphere in democracies. It is not so much a question of the old religious elites attempting to recover a monopoly of truth, although this phenomenon exists, but of a new conservative agenda controlled, to a large extent, by secular leaders who make use of

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17 To a great extent Gouchet's intuition has been confirmed by the global research carried out by the Pew Research Center which shows a strong correlation between greater inequality and religion. See: [www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/pf-06-13-18\\_religiouscommitment-01-04](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/pf-06-13-18_religiouscommitment-01-04) Accessed 07/06/2020.

religious symbols. On the one hand, the religious tradition is mobilized to express the unease of sectors of the population with the “new customs”, especially those relating to sexuality, to reproductive rights and to the presence of immigrants. On the other hand, xenophobic nationalism is associated in various formats with religious identities, so that the defense of patriotic values is fused with the defense of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic or Buddhist “civilization” and the promotion of diverse forms of ethnocentric States.

With different characteristics in each country, this phenomenon represents a conservative and xenophobic wave which defends “tradition” and a glorified past, present as much in Putin’s Russia as in Trump’s United States, and continuing with Orbán in Hungary, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Salvini in Italy, Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India and Netanyahu in Israel. In the West, this wave fed on the terrorist attacks that stimulated an anti-Islamist and xenophobic discourse.

The relation between religious revivalism and its political usages is complex and plastic and what we are concerned to highlight here is the limited correlation that exists between the enormous, scientific advances and the role of reason in the political sphere. This limitation is reflected in the difficulties of producing and mobilizing sentiments of community through the values of knowledge founded on recognition of uncertainty and refutable empirical facts. In poor countries, religious groups act as a default welfare state, delivering effective forms of material support and supportive networks in the search for employment or some public service.

If religion continues to have an impact on political life, how should it engage religious groups and their public agenda? Is dialogue with a secular vision possible? How should the religious agenda address the values of individual liberty and respect for diversity?

The answer must involve ensuring that any community demands (whether religious, ethnic or nationalistic), do not violate fundamental individual rights. The defense of the basic principles of democratic life, which includes the separation of the State and religion, are non-negotiable, because without these the very possibility for dialogue disappears. The criticisms of reactionary groups who question the intervention of the State in “customary practices” are clearly unsustainable. The State has always intervened, but it has traditionally done so to defend values and customs based on religious traditions.

On the other hand, efforts should be made to understand the demands of religious groups, taking them into consideration without, however, allowing them to be

imposed on those who do not share the same beliefs. Above all, it should be recognized that religious groups do not constitute a homogeneous entity nor should they be treated as such. Within every religion, there are values which remain valid and which can contribute to peaceful and solidary co-existence.

## CAPITALISM, DEMOCRACY AND NATIONALISM

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There is a constant tension between the universalism of democratic and capitalist values and their anchoring in the national State. If on the one hand modern democracy is upheld by a universalistic vision of human rights and capitalism by free initiative, the national State limits the rights of citizenship and frames commercial transactions within the legislative structure of the country.

Both capitalist and democratic institutions were forged in a constant, and never completed, effort to domesticate family, tribal and regional loyalties with a view to creating a community that shares the norms of universal co-existence, based on legal codes and common values. In the construction of this new national community, education had a central role, and, more recently, the means of communication.

The national State has been a destroyer of languages and local cultures, in spite of the appeals of a romantic nationalism for a return to the past and to “authentic roots”. There can be nothing more anachronic than a Brazilian chancellor recently reciting the “Hail Mary” in the Tupi Indian language, in the name of national values, when the Tupi were converted by force, had their language extirpated by colonial power and the national State, and for whom “Brazil” would have been a concept foreign to their culture.

The “nation” is the product of an international system created in modern times, a model of political organization that has nothing which is “native”. The nationalist far right which claims to reject “foreign” influences and which emphasizes “national values” is, in fact, completely globalized, since in each country it repeats almost the same themes and uses the same tactics to weaken democratic institutions.

Although the definition of a nation is a legal concept, in social practice it is associated with the formation of a national culture, with its language(s) and accents, its literature and its forms of artistic and culinary expressions and its identification with a common history. Between the legal definition of citizenship and the sentiment of belong to a national culture, there have always existed levels of tension, at least in the day-to-day life of social democracies. When immigrants arrive

with their languages and cultural baggage, the “natives” (often themselves the descendants of immigrants) do not consider them equals even though they may be formally citizens. The xenophobic discourse exploits these tensions between the formal requirements of citizenship and something that is regarded as the “essential qualities” of the national culture, from which groups defined as foreigners are excluded. This type of xenophobic nationalist discourse aims to construct an ethno-democracy, creating an unbridgeable barrier, a state of war, between the “authentic nation” and the “foreign bodies” which must be eliminated, thereby undermining the foundations of democracy.

Nationalism is a challenge to the main political traditions, both liberal and socialist, and both have constantly succumbed to patriotic appeals. Freud referred to nationalism as the narcissism of small differences, but no ideology in modern times has shown itself as powerful and as capable of mobilizing broad sectors of the population, even to the point of dying for it. Nationalism may have mundane roots, as when business protects its domestic markets or its sources of external supplies in order to promote exports, or when workers try to limit the entry of immigrants who compete on the labor market. Nevertheless, the force of nationalism’s appeal cannot be reduced to material interests. The attraction and the need to feel part of a community, a filiation that binds the individual to a larger group, to a tribe that is different from the rest, has deep roots in collective psychology.

From the beginnings of modern times, and particularly as from the French Revolution, along with the advance of the belief in Reason, the autonomy of the individual and in progress, many intellectuals promoted a reactionary romantic vision, nostalgic for a harmonious world that was being destroyed by modernity. In varied formulas, they counterpoised community to the individual, the search for transcendence to mundane concerns, feelings to science, heroic virility to feminized mediocrity, the national identified with “blood and soil” to cosmopolitanism, harmony to change, the world of the sacred to that of reason, and destiny to liberty.

If reactionary romanticism is an idealization of a past that in reality was shot through with controls, widespread misery, oppressions and physical punishments, it nonetheless touches on real difficulties in the capacity of modern society to produce meaning of life. This explains how values and sentiments lauded by reactionary romanticism persist in a great variety of forms, even when the values attached to rationality are dominant in individual and social discourse. Constant change produces a sense of insecurity and leads to a loss of references, which leads every generation at a certain age to feel nostalgic for times past. Behaviors based on sentiments

are preserved in the family, friendships and the ideal of romantic love (decided by “destiny” and not by rational choice), in addition to the most varied forms of community identity (religious, national, ideological and even support for football teams). These are collective identities in which the participants share a sense of belonging to an atemporal community of equals.

The great political traditions – liberal and socialist – each by different paths, and in spite of their emphasis on the rationality of their proposals, base themselves on a vision of history as progress, which allows reason to be united with faith and individual with collective destiny. This is nevertheless a fragile union since reason can never guarantee that history will advance in the desired direction. This weakness comes to the surface at every moment in history – such as wars, economic stagnation or crisis, or increasing inequality – in which democratic capitalist society does not seem capable of delivering the progress promised.

In these contexts, a degenerated version of romanticism emerges, political nihilism, which appropriates the themes of a conservative tradition for destructive purposes, centered on messages of hate. The critique of rationality is transformed into an attack on intellectual life and contempt for rational argument, and the value of national culture is metastasized into xenophobia and racism. Since a return to the past is not possible, political power manipulates religious symbols, sentiments and beliefs for its own ends, transferring to the leader a sacred and uncontested aura so that his power can be exercised without obstacles. They are not at the service of God but put themselves in the place of God. Already in 1934, the Confessional Synod of the Barmen German Evangelical Church in the face of the rise of Hitler declared: “We reject the false doctrine that the Church, possessed with human arrogance, can put the Word and the Work of the Lord at the service of whatever arbitrarily chosen desires, proposals and plans”.

## INCLUSIVE AND EXCLUSIVE IDENTITIES

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No one is born as an autonomous person making use of rational faculties and available information to make choices with regard to values and beliefs. Our identity is built up from childhood from a world of communication – ideas and affections - which comes from outside and is a central component in our ways of thinking and feeling.

Growing up in democratic societies, we come to reflect and dialogue with the world we received, allowing us to take our distance, to modify, extend and redefine

our choices. Even so, dialogue between the external world and our interior lives continues to be marked by our initial experiences, even when we react against beliefs considered “sacred” by our family and later by other reference groups.

In this way, our personal identity is constituted by pieces of inherited identity and identities constructed reflexively, by components of tradition (or “traditions”, because in different phases of our lives we are linked to different collective identities), or by “reforms” and “revolutions” which our reflexive ability and life experiences introduce into our way of being.

To be part of collective identities (family, religion, nation, ideology, professions, hobby, sports team) is constitutive of individual identity, and consequently of our choices and ways of thinking and feeling. Collective identities are unavoidable and essential for our involvement in the world, giving us a perspective from which to view society and relate to it and to ourselves.

Collective identities can be equally inclusive and exclusive. Either they are a starting point and a lever for expanding our knowledge and sensibilities or they can be straitjackets which lead us to lose our autonomy, our ability to think for ourselves, and to reject, if not demonize, those who think differently, creating a prison, closing ourselves off cognitively and emotionally from the riches and the diversity of human culture and from the experiences of others.

The ideal of the rational, reflexive individual open to dialogue is constantly confronted with the reality of collective identities. The passage from individual to collective identity limits the space for autonomy, since belonging to a community demands loyalty and sentiments which restrict autonomy, the capacity for judgment and critical reasoning.

Inclusive collective identities provide us with a reference that associates us with communities, real or imagined, with whom we share common worlds that make up part of our personal identity – references where we encounter experiences, feelings, knowledge and the wisdom which are part of our individuality. If our collective identities are not to become a trap, they must be open for expanding the capacity for learning and relating with other collective and individual identities.

Exclusive identities, on the contrary, lead us to despise and exclude what is different, to confine the horizon to knowledge and experiences which confirm what we already believe, to limit solidarity to those who form part of our group, to create rigid frontiers and close ourselves off from listening and learning from others. Exclusive identities transform family solidarity into family amoralism – confining solidarity

to the family circle - transform love for country into xenophobia, convert religious beliefs that give meaning to our lives into fundamentalism which disrespects other beliefs, and use ethnic or sexual identity to devalue and despise others.

Political life is never reduced to the “aggregate of individual interests”. It generates collective identities – whether around values or social distinctions – which lead to a greater or lesser loss of the individual capacity for judgment, and, in the extreme case, to blind fanaticism. In the political history of modernity, the left as much as the right, religious as much as atheists, slide by different roads towards exclusive identities which lead to extreme polarization and to the destruction of the public space and democracy.

## 5. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALIST DEMOCRACIES

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When social conflicts are not worked through and contained within the institutional system, lack of confidence in democratic institutions increases, strengthening leaders and governments with authoritarian tendencies. In this chapter, we will deal with the constitutive weaknesses and contradictions of democratic life, which reemerge at historical conjunctures, and the challenges these, pose for democratic political imaginations and practices.

### THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF THE WORD DEMOCRACY

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To understand the current crisis of democracy, it is necessary to identify a number of its structural problems, since in addition to the continued presence of fundamentalist religious currents and patriarchalism, new phenomena, such as nationalism and authoritarian ideologies, emerge from within democratic regimes as an expression of its conflicts.

Both in daily life and in political theory, democracy has a variety of meanings. Democracy is a system of institutions that gives priority to freedom of expression, the rule of law, periodic elections, pluralism and the respect for minorities. Institutions work as social regulators and mechanisms of transmission and articulation – in relation to social pressures, allowing for the emergence of majority consensus that enables governments to operate.

However, democracy also refers to a state of spirit – values and expectations that go beyond formal institutions and that can manifest themselves under authoritarian regimes – which demands the recognition of each person dignity and liberty, and involves the sentiment that “we are all equal”. It can also assume a negative form of dissatisfaction with democratic institutions, which leads people to position themselves against the current state of affairs but without formulating a political agenda on how to remedy the situation.

Whether as a state of spirit or as an institutional system, democracy is articulated with a particular form of production and distributions of goods and services, namely capitalism, which can exert the direct pressure of economic power on the political



system, and whose social and technological transformations generate new forms of inequality and social heterogeneity.

There are no democracies that are independent of economic systems. They are never “pure”. If existing democracies are capitalist, the inverse is not necessarily the case. This, however, does not imply that capitalism can function without a political regime, which supports it, from democracy to the most varied types of dictatorship, including under the command of communist parties. Democracies are influenced by and must become operable within the limits imposed by the capitalist system, whether through relations of economic forces – at national or international level – or in the form of technological change and cyclical crises.

Democracy and capitalism have complex and conflictual relations, which are reflected in the very values promoted by capitalist democracies. The defense of “freedom” may have liberty and the inviolability of property rights as its central preoccupation; or it may be identified with freedom of expression and organization; or the struggle for justice and against the excesses of economic power; or yet again the struggles against diverse forms of oppression and discrimination in social relations.

The relation between the varied dimensions of democracy is complex and non-linear. In recent decades, for example, while egalitarian expectations have grown social inequality has increased in most countries. The strength of the working class may be in decline but citizens’ consciousness of social rights has continued to grow. The results are paradoxical: **advances in democratic values produce dissatisfaction with systems of democratic government, leading sections of the population to become attracted to authoritarian responses.** As we will see, the lack of confidence in governments and the traditional political party system opens the way for discourses that present themselves as apolitical, feed on the frustrations of the population and channel this in the form of hate against those seen as responsible for the evils besetting society.

## IDEAL AND REAL DEMOCRACY

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Aristotle stated that the different forms of government are subject to degeneration. In reality, no system of government reaches its ideal, and in the case of contemporary democracies, which are systems in which citizens have the right to struggle for new rights, the ideal itself is in permanent mutation. The question, therefore, is not whether there is a distance between ideal and real democracy. This distance

exists and will continue to be so, because social aspirations are constantly evolving, presenting new challenges and objectives. The question, therefore, is not whether a society can achieve ideal standards of democracy, but in what direction it is moving, and whether it is moving towards an increasing consolidation of the quality of its democratic culture and institutions.

Real powers of influencing the political realm are distributed unequally. Authorities legally constituted to exercise public functions, people with public prestige able to make their opinions felt, people with de facto power (generally economic) to directly influence political decisions, all these have more power than “common mortals”. For these latter, effective political participation, beyond the right to vote, depends on collective action, (civil society organizations, trade unions or political parties), while for the majority this is limited to the diffuse feelings of identification with a specific group which is active in the public arena.

## POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

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The contradiction between the grounding of the final legitimacy of political power in popular sovereignty and the latter’s effective exercise through intermediary institutions that act in the name of the population, is a source of constant tensions between the representatives and the represented. The distance between the ideal of a government of the people and the real exercise of power by specialized organizations, (political parties, the legislative, the executive and judiciary), means that most of the citizens, to a greater or less extent, have a constant sensation of not being really represented. In the same manner, the proclamation of the equality of the political rights of all citizens is confronted with the differential power of the richest sectors of the population in comparison with the vast majority of the population, in particular when those with power receive privileged treatment in the judicial system and have direct influence on the political system, putting into question the principle of equality among all citizens.

Those who govern do so in the name of the nation, but the “people” are not a homogeneous entity; they are plural whereas the government represents a circumstantial majority. Governments are simultaneously the expression of society as a whole and of the fraction of that society which elected it, which obliges democratic leaders to navigate between the agenda of their respective parties and the recognition that they represent at the same time the whole nation. The authoritarian leader attempts to “overcome” this dilemma positioning him/herself as the only legitimate

representative of the people through his authentic “voice”, whereas eventual opponents – political parties, the judiciary, parliament, and intermediary organizations such as civil society or the means of communication – are considered enemies of the people. The discourse of the homogeneous nation or people involves at the same time the construction of an equally homogeneous image of the “enemy of the people”.

Political life is by its very nature agonic, a space in which collective proposals are elaborated in opposition and conflict with those of others. Liberal democracy, therefore, does not imply the exclusion of conflict. The specificity of political conflict in democracies is that it recognizes the legitimacy of *pluralism*. Democracy creates institutional mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and recognizes the legitimacy of different visions and the confrontation of ideas. The only conflict that is foreign to democratic politics is that promoted by those whose aim is to destroy these institutions, presenting the opponent as an enemy to be destroyed, and making the co-existence of different ideas impossible.

## THE ROLE OF MYTHS IN DEMOCRATIC LIFE

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Capitalism and democracy are founded on the principles of co-existence maintained through rationality and negotiation, that is, through communication between the parties involved. However, it does not eliminate the persistence of myths whether in private or in public life. The identification with myths, (symbols and narratives about events, human or otherwise, groups, ideologies and sacred texts), transmits a sentiment of loyalty and of the union of a people with something “greater”, creating a community of devotees. To the extent that one believes in such myths, they produce, as Ernst Cassirer has argued, a sense of union between the believer and the object of devotion, which is outside the field of rational analysis or debate founded on logic and empirical data. The world becomes organized around those who follow the myth and “the others”.

The growth of secularism, accompanied by the extension of the basics of scientific thought and a public sphere based on rational argument, has not eliminated the mythological and magical components from either private or political life. Whether it is in the form of believing in miracles in situations of desperation or explaining fortuitously favorable situations as the result of divine intervention, or even the projection in the public sphere of exceptional qualities onto fallible individuals, mythological thinking is continually present in social life.

Modern myths involving unconditional loyalty either to people or to parties are the basis of authoritarian regimes. In democratic societies, devotion and a fusalional relation with political myths incarnated in individuals that project the figure of the paternal protector are limited by pluralism and free political debate, and the freedom to criticize and to question.

In democratic contexts, governments which are unable to directly repress their critics, develop a dual strategy of isolating and demonizing oppositional groups, and promote the idea that the credibility of information and facts depends on who is speaking. In this way, the search for truth no longer has data and arguments as its reference but relies on sentiments of devotion, or hatred against discordant voices.

## DEMOCRACY AND VIOLENCE

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The use of collective violence to promote political projects amounts to the negation of democratic life. Political democracy and violence are opposed ways of resolving the divergence of interests and values. Political democracy presupposes institutional mechanisms that ensure the free expression and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, (periodic elections, respect for pluralism, weights and counterweights between the different powers of the State, an independent press and a vibrant civil society).

Both the extreme right and the extreme left question the liberal democratic solution, and fascists and communists, with different objectives and variations between countries, have used armed civil groups to take over power, in some cases counting with the support or the neutrality of the armed forces. In all these situations, the goal is to reduce politics to the logic of friends versus enemies, propagating fear and demonizing opponents who should be eliminated.

For the extreme left, liberal democracy is a mystification because it is at the service of maintaining the capitalist system, which in the final instance is sustained by military force and the police. For the extreme right, State power is above the opinion of individuals and groups, because it represents the ideal of the "nation", which must be protected from its enemies (that is, all those who disagree with the way in which this ideal is defined), who should be banished and if necessary exterminated.

Even though they follow different trajectories and objectives, both the extreme right and the extreme left result in authoritarian or totalitarian States at the service of groups who control political power. Moreover, it could not be otherwise. Both start from the presupposition that parties or individuals, with an "idealistic" discourse

and authoritarian practices are able to “purify” the political system and the society of its problems and vices.

Even so, State violence is not absent from democratic societies. In principle, violence is considered the monopoly of the State with its use regulated and subordinated to what the law stipulates. In practice, the reality is more changeable. The monopoly of the use of force in the hands of a group, the police added to the judiciary’s power to penalize through the loss of liberty, opens the way for eventual or systematic excesses (as in the case of the repression of political demonstrations, or discrimination in relation to the poor, or ethnic and racial minorities). At the same time, this monopoly of power can ensure that powerful economic sectors are kept free from punishment.

The State’s instruments of violence are controlled by specific corporations, which therefore have a disproportional power when compared with the population at large. Democracy requires that these groups, including the secret services, be subject to systems of supervision and constant monitoring. The increasing availability of ever more information on the lives of ordinary citizens is one of the greatest challenges facing democratic regimes. Information on the most intimate details of the private lives of every citizen will be at the disposal of the public authority and the potential for improper use is incalculable.

## DEMOCRACY AND THE ELITES OF KNOWLEDGE

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Capitalist society is a society of specialists in the most diverse areas who possess specialized knowledge and social positions that allows them, at least in their areas of expertise, to emit, what are considered to be, opinions that are more qualified when compared with the population as a whole.

Until recently, there was an expectation that the universalization of education and the expansion of university teaching would lead to a valorization of specialized scientific knowledge. This, however, has not occurred. Current questioning of scientific knowledge in the United State has reached disturbing levels. As much as a third of young people there have doubts whether the earth might be flat or not<sup>18</sup> and 40% of the population in the Unites States believe that the earth was created by God

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18 See: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/do-people-really-think-earth-might-be-flat/>. Accessed on 07/06/2020

between 10.000 and 5.000 years ago,<sup>19</sup> without mentioning those who argue that vaccines should be avoided and that nobody ever went to the moon.

Old authoritarianisms, (Nazism, fascism, communism), wanted to impose a unique source of truth which emanated from the political power. However, given that the reactionary right today operates in democratic regimes their objective is to destroy confidence in the knowledge produced by groups specializes in the production of information backed up with data and arguments. The central characteristic of the authoritarian political narrative is not simply a generic confrontation between the elites and the rest of the population, as a good portion of the literature on this issue would have us believe, but a confrontation with and an effort to delegitimize a specific type of elite. These groups professionally depend on the freedom of expression and pluralism: journalists, scientists, artists, civil society organizations, politicians.

To understand the roots of this political discourse we must go back in time, even if only in a very summary manner. The modern world was the product of a convergence between different, and up to a certain point, opposed dynamics. On the one hand, the values of free and equal individuals implied that in the public arena everyone was equal. On the other, the scientific world reserved to a group of specialists, with highly specialized knowledge, that the population at large often could not even understand, the power to determine what is right and wrong in their spheres of competence.

Until recently, respect and even veneration for professional and scientific knowledge coexisted in a relatively peaceful way with beliefs of a religious nature, and with the notion of equality among all citizens. Questionings of science arose as the results of the practical consequences of applied science, such as the atomic bomb, or when these results directly affected economic interests, as in the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine research findings on the impact of smoking on health, or yet again when some business sectors which exploit natural resources raise doubts about global warming.

If the infinite distance between specialized knowledge and common sense contains the germs of a revolt against scientific elites, the social processes it unleashes has causes that are more concrete. Firstly, specialized knowledge has allowed for unimaginable realizations, but it has not resolved the challenges posed by physical and psychological illness, and by death. Science falls short of individual anxieties and existential dramas.

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19 See: [www.livescience.com/46123-many-americans-creationists.html](http://www.livescience.com/46123-many-americans-creationists.html)-. Accessed in 07/06/2020

Secondly, as we approach areas of “social engineering”, the scientific elites are not unattached (nor could they be), to the social values and interests in confrontation. The social sciences enjoy an autonomous space associated with the rules of scientific research, but every time this knowledge is applied to concrete situations, it assumes partisan positions that associate it with values and interests that affect the credibility of scientists’ impartiality.

Finally, there are specialist groups who are even closer to social life, such as journalists, and who, by their decision on what is relevant information, are directly influenced by the ideological divisions of society. While their professional ethic ensures certain standards of quality, they have been overtaken by the new means of virtual communication.

This set of phenomena, once combined with the political activism of religious groups who have never attempted to integrate science and faith, added to the possibilities that the internet offers to empower ignorance. Especially when is appropriated by extremist anti-intellectual groups it creates a vast movement in the social networks which rejects any commitment to scientific methods and to the notion of truth based on verified facts.

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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Societies need to construct consensus on desired futures, bringing together particular visions, and political parties are still the principal instrument for relating the majority of the population to the political power.

Pluralism and the confrontation of ideas, values and interests is of the essence of the public space. Politics has always been a field of contested truths. The system of representation by political parties is the principal vehicle through which the myriad of personal opinions converge, produce consensus, and are transformed into shared collective loyalties.

Parties suffer tendencies to bureaucratization and a hardening of the arteries, but they fulfil a fundamental role in the formation and selection of people able to act in the political arena, which demands a particular vocation and set of skills. Although the parties become transformed over time, with some disappearing and others being created, their permanence and durability are factors making for the stability of political systems.

Democratic political parties emphasize certain values more than others (and in general play down the great amount that they have in common), and it is natural that they do so since parties are the expression of different currents of opinion. They produce “tribal” communities with which individuals identify, but at the same time they are internally plural, which requires debate and negotiation to consolidate agendas able to represent broad sectors of society.

The ability of political parties to maintain loyalties, to mobilize and enthuse people has declined in recent decades in the majority of democracies. The reasons are multiple, and we will concern ourselves with the most important.

The social base of political parties, to a great extent, accompanies the socio-economic divisions of society. In general, some have greater support among the workers and trade unions, and others among the middle and upper classes. With the Welfare State, there was a transfer of the distributive conflict from the workplace to the State (whether in the form of whom and how much should be taxed or how fiscal resources should be distributed). At the same time, the working class and the industrial unions lost much of the political weight, and new forms of employment associated with the expansion of the service sector and the existence of a mass of workers in precarious conditions of employment have led to a fragmentation of interests that makes political representation much more difficult.

As the middle classes diversify with the growing importance of the service sector and with the continuous creation of new specializations often formed by autonomous professionals, success becomes associated with the capacity of self-promotion rather than collective action. These sectors often declare only a portion of their income and feel themselves invaded by the tax system, a sentiment that they share with the small business sector.

New sectors of autonomous workers in the service sector also see the improvements in their standard of living as less dependent on collective action and more the result of individual effort. Among wage workers, can be found those with the perspective of a professional career within a firm from which they will enjoy a range of benefits, and those with no career expectations, and dependent largely on the protection of a minimum wage and the State social services.

Public sector workers, for their part, are tied to the evolution of the State budget. Some of their demands include narrow corporative interests, while others converge with improvements in public services as for instance when they demand better treatment in hospitals and improvements in educational services.



These transformations have led to a weakening of the “world of work” as a generator of collective identities, social recognition, and feelings of belonging. As a result, the “defense of the workers”, to which was associated an agenda of demands and visions of a desirable society, lost its capacity to command broad electoral support. This process accelerated with the increasing preeminence of cultural issues on the left as from the 1970s, when a new generation of youth began to revolt against symbols of authority, to promote the sexual revolution, and to launch a new wave of feminist struggles. Children of the Welfare State and the period of postwar capitalist expansion pushed forward a profound transformation in the social norms of democratic capitalist societies, whose impact was felt globally.

A part of the militancy dedicated to social causes which had previously been channeled into the political parties, was now transferred to civil society organizations, (NGOs), whose demands were in the field of rights, distant from the distributional conflict and in general dissociated from political parties. This is a world of a myriad organizations and militants (voluntary or professional), from which principles and ideas are irradiated. They are especially attentive to cosmopolitan agendas, which often have only tenuous roots in large sectors of the population. They complement the representative system but are no substitute for it since they have no electoral or any type of representative mandate.

The role of civil society is fundamental in a democracy and allows for advances in the most diverse areas of citizen rights and environmental protection, which in their turn influence political parties. Parties, however, need to represent a broad social spectrum, and so they must keep their distance from civil society organizations. The fusions between both would lead to an isolation of the political parties and to a loss of autonomy on the part of civil society.

The rise and the strengthening of civil society organizations in a context of a “crisis of imagination” in the political parties has been central in the shift of public debate towards cultural themes. Civil society organizations are based on a style of action centered on specific issues, which does not demand negotiation to create broader consensus, but favors a dynamic of closure in “defense of the cause”, which makes it more “pure” the more radically it presents itself. Instead of the inclusive political programs, each NGOs offers a different option, where each individual can choose his/her own cause *à la carte*, in line with the general tendency towards individualization and away from all-inclusive ideologies.

Because of their *modus operandi* they tend to promote their agendas by influencing opinion makers, the communication media, and winning support from the Judiciary. Democracy must protect minorities at the risk of becoming a dictatorship of the majority. Nevertheless, the excessive judicialization of the demands of specific groups would seem not to be the best strategy for achieving social change. The effort of convincing and transforming political culture and creating broader consensus, is certainly a slower process, but its results are more solid, given their stronger roots in society.

## CORRUPTION

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Political and politicians corruption has been one of the themes most in evidence in political life in recent decades. In Latin America led to the impeachment of more than a dozen of presidents. A number of different socio-political issues are hidden behind this phenomenon.

- a. Denunciations of corruption are generally mixed up with a variety of activities, some defined in the penal code, others in the grey zones of favors, support for political campaigns, and the privileges enjoyed by public functionaries. When it is appropriated in political discourse, each chooses the “corruption” and the privileges that are of most interest, especially those that implicate political opponents.
- b. It is difficult to gauge whether corruption is comparatively greater than in the past given the increasing size of the State. Three converging processes are responsible for the importance of corruption in the political debate: a greater transparency in public spending – made possible by new mechanisms of control and the publicity provided by the internet –; the loss of *aurea* for politicians; an egalitarian sentiment that no-one is above the law; the increase in taxes which is combined, particularly in Latin American countries, with a feeling that public money is badly spent and does not return to the contributor in the form of good quality services.
- c. The use of corruption as part of political narratives, however, goes beyond these issues. Candidates who launch themselves as the standard-bearers against corruption, denounce other politicians as corrupt and present themselves as someone outside the “system” have chances to mobilize the support of broad sectors of the population, in particular from the middle

classes. This is the case, because while no section of the population approves corruption, disapproval does not have the same weight in every stratum. For the poorer groups in society, the most important criterion for evaluating a politician is the expectation, or the prior experience, of an improvement in living conditions.

In this way, the political appropriation and uses of “corruption” is mixed with broader political agendas and with electoral manipulation. The simplifications of common sense, supported by the discourse of certain politicians who argue that fiscal problems and the lack of economic growth are fundamentally caused by corruption, are clearly false. Problems of inequality, public health, education, the absence of sanitation and running water, for example, are clearly much more complex and cannot be reduced to a single cause, even though corruption clearly worsens these problems. To focus only on corruption is to draw attention away from the need for tax reforms that ensure greater distributive justice, and decreasing corruption and privileges does not imply less State expenditure, but rather the possibility of more resources for social policies and public investments.

In other cases, when corruption is not only stimulated by an ideology that aims to reduce the action of the State to a minimum, it is charged to democracy itself. On this view, it is necessary to eliminate politicians, “who are all corrupt” in favor of an authoritarian government which would put an end to corruption. In fact, authoritarian governments do not eliminate corruption. They only ensure that it is not denounced while in fact increasing its possibility.

## THE PATHS OF POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

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Liberal democracy was the great victor after the Second World War and weakened the extremes of the political system. The success of political liberalism, however, was not the result of “pure” liberal political parties but was based on the attraction of liberal democratic principles, both on the right and the left.

The fate of political liberalism has been paradoxical. Its values, centered on the freedom of expression and organization, the division of powers, political pluralism and the representative political system, changed or neutralized both the authoritarian right and the revolutionary socialist tradition. Its political destiny within the party-political system, however, was more complex. Once the right to vote was extended, the liberal right, in general associated with the business class, came to depend on an

alliance with culturally conservative sectors – some of them distant from the values of individual liberty or the autonomy of each to choose his/her style of life –, values which are characteristics of the liberal ideal.

The relation between political liberalism and moral conservatism in the parties on the right was always one of tense co-existence. Political liberalism is libertarian, and transfers to the individual the right to choose how one should live, whether that means consuming alcohol or drugs, choice of sexual preference, the type of family one wishes to form or not, and even the choice of ending one's life. All of which are positions which clearly diverge from those of moral conservatism.

This co-existence was consolidated after the Second World War, since the defeat of fascism led to the almost complete elimination of right wing reactionary parties from the political scene, and liberal-conservative parties (many of which did not exist previously, such as the Christian Democrats in Germany and Italy, and the Gaullists in France), came to represent a heterogeneous group of "rightwing" voters. Reactionary and authoritarian tendencies in general were excluded, until recently, from party-political representation and their militants were marginalized or hibernated in civil society organizations acting on the fringes of the political system.

Leftwing parties, most of which were different versions of social democracy, mobilized their electorate around socio-economic demands, largely independently of their socio-cultural orientations, although the leadership was generally open to the adoption of progressive cultural agendas in spite of the greater conservatism of their "base". In recent decades, social democratic parties have had to adapt to the decline in their historical support base –the industrial proletariat and the trade unions – while increasingly absorbing the socio-cultural demands of identity groups. In part, this had the benefit of not interfering in any relevant manner with the left wing parties economic agenda, which adapted the demands for lower taxes and the introduction of liberalizing economic reforms.

By not clearly questioning the neoliberal discourse and by transferring the political confrontation to the cultural field, social democracy no longer established the agenda on its traditional terms. In so doing, they opened space for new parties on the left and lost votes to the extreme right, because the same people who had once given priority to "socio-economic interests" now began to define their political loyalties in terms of "socio-cultural identities".

This transfer of confrontations to the cultural sphere was intimately related to the diffusion of a **culture of victimization**. On the left, groups that considered themselves

the victims of history began to demand recognition and equality of rights, often associated with the politics of affirmative action and migration. On the right, sectors, which felt themselves left out and marginalized by the dominant progressive political discourse in the cultural sphere, also developed a discourse of victimization by the political systems and the cultural elites. In this manner, the political debate shifted to a “competition of victimhood” a struggle over who would be “to blame”. In this process, the extreme right explored this sentiment of victimhood, which was shared by broad sections of the population, creating a unifying nationalist narrative.

The referendum on Brexit in the United Kingdom, resulting in a vote that traversed political parties is an exemplary case of the new social fragmentation and the impacts of nationalism and regionalism for bringing together identities that the traditional national political parties are not able to integrate in a consensual manner into their agendas.

To the extent that new parties emerge and manage to break up the biparty system, the diverse tendencies which had sought shelter in the large traditional parties tended to fall away, and voters were left to look for options closer to their (often changing) sentiments. This is not a question of a return of the repressed, although this aspect may be present, but rather the democratic parties’, both of left and right, inability to contain the increasing disaffection of sectors of the population with the established order and the capacity of extreme right wing parties to “normalize” behavior which before was considered unacceptable within the rules of the political game.

The traditional parties’ inability to produce new answers increased as new forces on the right and the left emerged, fragmenting the political set-up, and, in many countries, led to the formation of center-left or center-right coalitions to ensure governability, and in the process erasing even further the differences between them. This fragmentation increased the veto power of social sectors with the greatest influence, further blocking up the political system.

Paradoxically this political fragmentation often favored political polarization. Rather than vote for the party of his/her preference, the elector now opted to vote opportunistically, against the candidate who should not be allowed to win. Electoral publicity followed this trend and focused on the criticism of other candidates and their eventual “defects”, rather than discussing a program for government.

## THE DIFFUSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Since the beginnings of modern times we have lived under the aegis of “civilizing” empires, or perhaps more appropriately, under political and cultural systems promoted by imperial powers. **The fact that democratic capitalism has become implanted in so many countries in the world is not only the result of national endogenous processes.** After the Second World War the hegemony of the advanced capitalist countries, in particular the United States, was a central factor in the diffusion of democratic regimes, especially from the second half of the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century, the British decided to pay the price of losing their empire to obtain the support of the new world power, the United States in the Second World War, which in turn had entered into a struggle for world hegemony with the Soviet Union. This latter, in an unprecedented measure, peacefully dissolved its political system which had proved incapable of competing with the economic and military power of the United States.

A considerable bibliography, especially since the 1960s, has demonstrated how the international economy constituted itself as a world system since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Organized around an international division of labor, in which the countries on the periphery fulfilled the role of producing raw materials while the countries at the center of the system transformed these into industrial products and services with greater added value, based on their control of technological innovation.

This vision, of an international a division of labor between the center and the periphery, which acts as a strait jacket determining the destiny of nations, although valid as a broad generalization, oversimplifies extremely varied national and regional trajectories. In a classic book, Cardoso and Faletto<sup>20</sup> criticized this analysis in relation to Latin America, for not recognizing the relative autonomy which national sovereignty, especially in favorable international conjunctures, allowed the State to influence the direction of economic development, and in this way, modify, even if only partially, its terms of insertion into the international system.

Although the economic structures of the international system may be rigid, political systems are able to inject a certain flexibility into them. However, ideas and values which come from abroad are “liquid”, and penetrate into all the pores of society, with profound and, at times, dramatic consequences for modern and contemporary history.

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20 Cardoso, F. H.; Faletto, E. *Dependencia y Desarrollo e América Latina*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1977.

The political history of modern Europe can only be understood from the perspective of a common space through which the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and socialist ideas all circulate. The Russian Revolution was only possible because the local elite, in spite of the very different social context, appropriated the ideas elaborated in the most industrialized countries. The anti-colonial struggles were carried out in the name of the ideas disseminated by the imperial power, and generally led by an elite which studied and lived in the countries at the center.

This is the case also for the independence struggles and the liberal constitutions of Latin America in the nineteenth century. During the history of this region, the State structure and the world of political ideas was always influenced by events in the countries of the North. The distance between ideas which have emerged in a specific context and the particular social fabric in which they are applied often leads to grotesque situations – so well described by Latin-American writers such as Augusto Roa Bastos and Alejo Carpentier – in which caudillos are immersed in reading the writings of Enlightenment authors as they order the execution of their opponents.

The impact of this propagation of ideas and institutional innovations, however, cannot be reduced to the mismatch between hard local realities and foreign “out of place” ideas. These imported ideas produce social mobilizations and political transformations, which affected the destiny of countries and of the world. Italian fascism inspired the corporatist trade unionism of presidents Peron in Argentine and Vargas in Brazil. In the twentieth century, the idealization of the United States by some and the Soviet Union by others were determinant factors in both national and international political life. Latin America countries attempted precociously (if compared to countries with a similar level of economic development) to imitate forms of the Welfare State, with varied levels of success.

As from the nineteenth century varied elites in Latin America who led and interpreted the region’s national identities, did so from an international perspective, whether of the left or the right. At times, this involved a mimetic tendency aiming to be “equal to them” while at other times it led to the assertion of national specificities, which, in reality, were inspired by European romanticism, idealizing indigenous pasts to which no one in fact intended to return. Although no two countries are similar, because all have specific historical trajectories, the international setup is responsible for influences and convergences, often imperceptible but fundamental nonetheless, which become stronger and in certain areas overwhelming, as in the case of the sciences or the arts.

The first experience of a non-Western country that managed to achieve levels of development equal to the United States and Europe was Japan. This country did not have the economic and even less the geopolitical weight to alter the international relation of forces or the self-image of the West, although as from the 1970s various books were published whose theme was the "Japanese challenge". Even though it is still a long distance from the developed countries in terms of income per capita, the rise of China, is positioning itself as a player able to call in question the hegemony of the United States, through its demographic and economic importance, and its geopolitical power.

The United States' loss of relative importance in the world economy is dramatic. In 1945 this country came to represent almost a half of the gross world product and today it does not account for a quarter, or a sixth if we consider parity purchasing power, (PPP). The United States has been knocked off its first-place status and has similarly lost its position as the world's leading producer and exporter to China.

The United States is facing a crossroads in its attempt to maintain its hegemonic role in the face of a continuous decline in economic importance. It remains the leading military force and the only one with a global reach, but since the Second World War its military interventions ended in defeat, as in Vietnam, or disastrous for its own interests as in the case of the invasion of Iraq.

Nothing indicates that capitalist democracy is more efficient than authoritarian capitalism, or that China is moving in the direction of increasingly open societies. In the twentieth century, authoritarian capitalist regimes were defeated militarily (fascist Italy and Nazi Germany), or had to accept democracy as part of belonging to the geopolitical space where liberal democracies were hegemonic (as in the dictatorships of Spain, Portugal and Latin America).

Since the Second World War, Europe has played a secondary role in international affairs. The European Union, which represented an enormous historical achievement, has, with its integration of East European countries, increased its heterogeneity, and at the same time decreased its possibilities of becoming a geopolitical actor of weight.

This loss of international influence has increased the insecurity and the uncertainties of a region that has defined the direction of human history. Countries in Europe feel confronted by Muslim populations, of whose members are locked in a spiral where difficulties of economic integration reinforce the rejection of values associated with the host's national identity, which in turn feeds racist and xenophobic discourses.



The characteristics of the confrontation between the United States and China with its increasing presence in Latin America represents a very different challenge when compared with the period of the Cold War. At that time it was a question of choosing between capitalism and communism, between blocs which had hardly any commercial relations and which confronted each other at the political-ideological and military levels. Today all Latin American countries are profoundly engaged with the Chinese economy and business groups have no interest in an automatic alignment with one of the geopolitical poles, as was the case in the Cold War era. The challenge will be to develop national and, if possible, a regional diplomacy that maintains greater levels of autonomy in negotiations and protects national interests in relation to the pressures of the two great powers, which doubtless will continue to increase.

At the international level, China is reproducing the center-periphery growth model, in which the central countries produce the industrial goods with technological content and the countries in the periphery produce raw materials. Yet, it is difficult to know what its political and cultural role will be. From the ideological perspective, it is unlikely to repeat the phenomenon of Western expansion, with its universalist vocation leading to the conversion of a part of the colonized population to Christianity and the dissemination of its political values. This is so also the case even in Asia, where, China's immediate geopolitical space. On the Asian continent there are a variety of strongly rooted particularistic traditions (from Hinduism – which includes the most diverse visions of the place of the gods and goddesses – to Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, and Confucianism, in addition to the presence of Islam and Christianity). Together with this cultural heterogeneity, Asia is riddled with frontier problems and historical conflicts with neighbors, which has a negative impact on the geopolitical panorama facing China.

Still, the argument that China has a tradition of isolation and respect for cultural diversity is anachronistic and an idealization of the past. China accepted cultural diversity on its frontiers to the extent that its neighbors recognized their subaltern role and their position as vassals in relation to the emperor. Times, however, have changed. The traditional Chinese system was part of a politics of isolation, not the politics of a global power as it is today. Contemporary China, with its authoritarian system, resorting increasingly to sophisticated technological methods of vigilance and control over the internet, provides an example of an alternative society, apparently much more efficient, which the regime will undoubtedly try to promote.

We live a more complex world than that of the Cold War, where military powers with opposed economic and ideological systems confronted each other, each isolated

from the other and in a profoundly asymmetrical relation since the Soviet Union was economically much weaker than the United States. Currently the situation is very different because the Chinese economy is very integrated with the rest of the world economy, the ideological conflict does not occupy the same position, and the real conflict is at the economic and technological levels, with the military tension localized around Asia.

Furthermore, today geopolitical confrontations include weapons which previously did not exist: cybernetic attacks where the source is not able to be identified but which are capable of paralyzing vital sectors – from the electrical to the banking system –, and which can be carried out with relatively limited financial resources; a new generation of supersonic missiles, which are virtually impossible to destroy and which can reach their targets in minutes and no longer in hours; new forms of electronic espionage; lethal autonomous weapons systems, (LAWS, a paradoxical designation for weapons which research, choose and deliberate on the elimination of their targets). All of these make military decisions more complicated and increase the likelihood of mistaken evaluations.

While capital has become global, societies and their political systems remain national. The movement of capital and ideas knows no boundaries, but people have clear frontiers. Statistics show that poverty and inequality have decreased throughout the world in recent decades, particularly as a result of the rise of China, but this is a statistic which has little relevance for the national political realities of other countries, since the living conditions and opportunities of most citizens is defined by their national frontiers.

The transition of the axis of world power towards Asia, and particularly China, will weaken the influence that the democratic model is able to exert. Capitalist democracies always gave priority to their economic and strategic interests, establishing alliances and supporting countries with authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, democracy and human rights have been integral to their international policies and to the values that they have promoted.

Today China has assumed the banner of globalization and the environmental agenda while the United States under Trump retreated and attacked the system of international institutions of which it was the principal architect.

Optimists may argue that the Chinese model is transitory, and that at some moment democratic institutions will emerge. While it is impossible to predict the future, what we are seeing is a regime with an enormous capacity for mobilizing

information technologies to monitor and control its citizens with an efficiency of which past totalitarian regimes would have been jealous.

As an economic power on the rise, free trade and economic globalization are convergent with Chinese interests, but China does not have clear commitment to the current system of values promoted by the international system. For them it is a system developed without their participation, and the way in which China deals with its border problems suggests that it does not intend to subject itself to international adjudication. Clearly, it can be argued that this position is not too different from that of the actual hegemonic power, the United States, which refuses to participate in the International Criminal Court and which has always been flexible with regard to the political regimes of its allies.

China's has a growing influence in the sphere of soft power and has become a model for countries with a fragile democratic tradition. The dislocation of the international regime and the possibility that China may become a global leader in frontier technologies is creating unease in consolidated capitalist democracies about the positions they occupy in the world, and is strengthening nationalist, neo-mercantilist and reactive tendencies.

The sociology of modernization which predicted that all countries after a phase of transition would advance in the direction of stable, consolidated democratic regimes has proved itself to be wrong. There is no point of arrival, because even the advanced countries are in permanent transformation. The viability of capitalist democracy is not predestined. It will depend on the ability of social actors to develop creative social policies, able to confront the forces that limit the national States' scope for maneuver.

Although in many ways the world is becoming more homogeneous and interconnected, we are far from any convergence in political models and even less are we free from xenophobic nationalisms and wars. Neither liberals nor Marxists in the twentieth century had any doubts that all societies were advancing towards a common destiny, capitalist democracies for some and communist societies for others. The nationalist revivalism in the West captures the current sentiment of uncertainty about the future, especially in Western societies that have led the world over the last centuries.

The contradictions, today, between national sovereignty and the global threats with an unimaginable power of destruction, such as the challenges of new pandemics and especially those of climate change, demand an international effort and

regulatory frameworks. Beyond their direct impact on the lives of individuals and economies (from ecological disasters which threaten food security in wide regions of the planet to the geographical shifts in the production of grains), climate change will produce increasing social, economic, political and military conflicts.

The impact of environmental transformations is already in evidence. The melting of the North pole is changing international trading and investment routes and allowing for the exploration of natural resources located in what were previously inhospitable regions. The increase in droughts and the lack of water in various regions of the world, where water resources are often shared between countries and are to be found only outside national frontiers, is already provoking border tensions and increasing the possibilities of military conflicts between countries, of civil wars and migratory movements. All these challenges require international agreements, and at present clash with the dominant tendency towards a disorganization of the international stage.

## 6. THE RISE OF AN AUTHORITARIAN RIGHT

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Citizens of contemporary democratic capitalist societies, for some time now, have lived with a sense of loss of collective political identities, a questioning and an uneasiness in relation to politicians and political institutions. As we have seen, increasing social inequality accompanied by the expectations generated by consumer society, is in direct conflict with the advance of egalitarian values.

Within the political system government initiatives remain tied down and limited by the demands of insertion into an international economic and financial order, reducing their scope for action. The different traditional opposition parties, has increasingly distanced politics from the feelings and expectations of large sectors of the population, and has led to a discrediting of democracy as a mechanism for the renovation of political life; a discrediting which has fed on the scandals of privilege and corruption in the political system.

At a sociocultural level, the questioning of traditional elites responsible for the production of knowledge and information and for the appreciation of customs and values has permitted the emergence of new political actors assuming the banners of national “regeneration”.

Frustration with the present and above all a lack of confidence in the future have affected the legitimacy of capitalist democracies and overrun the traditional political system. The convergence towards the center created a space on the extremes that is now being occupied by politicians who count on radical polarization. The collapse of communism and the discrediting of possible alternatives to the capitalist system favors the occupation of this space by parties of the extreme right.

In this context, antidemocratic groups came to the surface which were previously in the shadows with no legitimacy to present themselves openly but who represented the dark side – the prejudices and the authoritarianism - of many citizens who now felt stimulated and authorized to “change sides”.

## POPULISMS?

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A specter haunts democracy, the specter of populism. Contrary to the assumptions of past decades when populism was considered a product typical of Latin American countries or of underdevelopment, today the concept is employed to designate a great variety of political leaderships and governments from the most diverse corners of the planet.

In general, we avoid using the term “populist” since it is employed without rigor to describe a myriad of leaders and parties and a diversity of political practices. Normally the word is used pejoratively, often referring to leaders who makes irresponsible promises from the perspective of the management of the economy. In reality, almost no politician is able to fulfil all the promises he makes, and exaggeration and unfulfilled electoral promises are the staple of politics. Furthermore, irresponsibility in the management of the economy is not a monopoly of leaders described as populists, and not all of the so-called populist leaders conduct irresponsible economic policies.

Our focus, therefore, is restricted to leaders and to parties participating in elections, but developing narratives and political practices that erode, attack and question the institutions of liberal democracy. In Latin America, what is called “bolivarianism” is a leftwing version, (it should be remembered that the contemporary “inventor” of this strategy was Hugo Chaves, so that the new reactionary right might well be called “rightwing Chavism”).

## THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF THE AUTHORITARIAN RIGHT

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The key features of this new right from the point of view of its narrative are its demonization of “elites”, a xenophobic nationalism, the transformation of opponents into enemies, and politics into war, and the search for scapegoats responsible for the evils affecting the nation (such as immigrants, NGOs, Islam, the “antipatriots” or “cultural Marxism”).

Xenophobic nationalism, with varied tones of nativist, ethnic, religious and racial versions is a constant characteristic, as also are the attacks on the independent press and the intellectual and artistic elites. Nostalgic for the past (a time when there was “order”), this new right defends macho, authoritarian and repressive values. Feminism and the LGBT movement are denounced as responsible for the destruction

of family life, and civil society organizations, which defend the environment and human rights, are similarly denounced for being at the service of an agenda to undermine national sovereignty.

The new reactionary right idealizes the past, particularly in relation to culture and behavior - when, “women knew their place”, and homosexuals were marginalized and mistreated – and draws on religious symbols. Above all, it promotes an anti-intellectual and anti-pluralist discourse, which substitutes arguments with defamation, transforming politics into a war, in which the opposition is mistreated as an enemy at the service of conspiracies aimed at destroying the “nation” and where those who disagree are considered traitors. The systematic use of conspiracy theories is, primarily, to identify external culprits for the problems which the country might be passing through, and, in this way, divert attention from the real difficulties of the society and, particularly, from the errors of their leaders. Blame is always placed on “the other”.

The authoritarian right combines a nationalist and reactionary discourse with the aim of winning the support of those groups who feel themselves harmed by different socioeconomic and sociocultural processes. The authoritarian language promotes a Manichaeian view of the world, a way of looking at the world deeply embedded in our culture, and from which none of the different political ideologies are free.

*“Western democracy today is the vanguard of Marxism, which would be unthinkable without it. It provides this worldwide plague with a culture in which its germs can spread. All propaganda must be popular, and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence of its target population. The receptive abilities of the masses are very limited, and their understanding is weak [...] they quickly forget [...] all effective propaganda must be confined to some essential elements, and these must be expressed as much as possible in stereotyped formulas. Our human world would be unthinkable without the practical existence of a religious creed. The great masses of the population are not made up of philosophers. For the masses of the people, above all, faith is absolutely the only basis for a moral perspective on life. The various substitutes that have been offered, have not shown any results which would lead us to think that they might be capable of substituting the existing denominations. There may be some hundreds of thousands of superior individuals capable of living with wisdom and intelligence without depending on the general standards that prevail in daily life, but for the millions of others this would not be possible. Now, the place which general custom fills in daily life corresponds to the general laws of the State and the dogmas of religion. Propaganda should be limited to simple themes and these should be constantly repeated. Here, as in*

*countless other cases, perseverance is the first and most important condition of success. No amount of genius spent in the creation of propaganda will bring success if this fundamental principle is not kept always in mind. Propaganda should be limited to a few points that must be repeatedly ad infinitum. Here, as with many other things in the world, persistence is the first and most important condition. The greatness of every powerful organization that incarnates an idea in this world lies in the religious fanaticism and the intolerance with which, fanatically convinced of itself, it imposes its will intolerantly against all others. And, in this way, I believe that my conduct is in accordance with the All Powerful Creator.*

These quotes, which seem to be drawn from a textbook for the production of fake news or of a discourse of the authoritarian right wing leaders, are from Adolf Hitler's book *My Struggle*. A phrase from Olavo de Carvalho, the ideologist of Brazilian president Bolsonaro, is part of this same tradition – “We do not discuss to prove that the adversary is wrong. We discuss to destroy him socially, psychologically and economically”.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the differences, there is something in common between the present day and the 1930s: xenophobic nationalism, patriarchal machismo (we should not forget that Hitler identified the feminine with the Jews, and persecuted homosexuals), immigrants seen as hordes out to disfigure the essence of the nation, and vanguard art bringing about its decline. Once again, today, the resilience of our democratic institutions that incarnate the enlightenment tradition are being called into question.

Not unsurprisingly, the same methodology is employed both in the on-line recruitment of the Islamic State and in the elaboration of the fake news of the extreme right. They promote existing feelings of unease, confusion, resentments and personal frustrations to then put forward a new way of looking at the world, which orders the internal conflicts and provides a feeling of superiority through being part of a group which takes on the enemies (“the immigrants”, “the ideologues of gender”, journalist, NGOs, the “socialists”, “George Soros”, the “infidels”), who are presented as responsible for the problems they are experiencing.

Democratic politics does not exclude the use of metaphors and images capable of mobilizing feelings, desires, prejudices and lived experiences. No political narrative is reduced to detailed rational arguments filled with facts (the politician who discourses like an academic is unlikely to be elected), but when discourse is eliminated

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21 Available in <https://epoca.globo.com/o-curso-de-olavo-de-carvalho-artista-da-ofensa-23521208>  
Accessed in 07/05/2020



and substituted by messages which systematically distort the facts, when smoke-screens are continually being resorted to and new enemies invented with the aim of diverting attention from the real problems which people are experiencing, then democracy is approaching the abyss.

The extreme right redefines the terms “left” and “right”. It constructs a narrative in which all those who oppose them including the “liberals” are lumped together into a single bloc (“communists”, “globalizers”, “anti-patriots”), and are made responsible for all the evils of the nation. This amalgam of very different ideologies, displaces the political conflict, leading the opposing parties either to adopt the option of producing alliances which give priority to the struggle against authoritarianism or to maintain their old oppositions while trying to appropriate some of the banners being promoted by the authoritarian right.

The discourse of the authoritarian right has fed on the paralysis of the traditional parties and on the exaggerations and authoritarian attitudes of the “politically correct” associated with identity politics, which have lost sight of the common good. Those attitudes increase the malaise among men who resent the collapse of their masculine power and which is echoed in religious sectors concerned with the abandoning of the traditional model of the family and sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

## THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE AUTHORITARIAN RIGHT

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Many books have been written explaining the movements towards “illiberal democracies”, political regimes in which the ritual of periodic elections is maintained while at the same time democratic institutions are slowly destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

The political strategy of the authoritarian right is that of a gradual attack on the institutions of democracy rather than that of a State coup or a revolution. Without confronting democracy head on, “antidemocratic reformism” advances through making incivility acceptable in the public arena. Veiled or explicit threats are resorted to against the “enemies”, and when their extremist declarations are not well received

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22 It is curious that the religious argument against the “ideology of gender”, used since the 90s by the Cardinal who would later become Pope, Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, argues that sexuality should be restricted to what is natural, whereas the religious monotheisms constructed their norms and visions of human beings in separation from and contrast to “natural instincts”, (Ratzinger, J. A. *La Sal de la Tierra*, Madrid. Libros Palabra. 1997).

23 Of the extremely ample bibliography on this theme I would single out the recent book by Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*, (Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

by public opinion, they are treated as jokes, as misunderstandings, or as statements taken out of context.

This ability to create a new “normality” in which latent sentiments or feelings only expressed in small circles (such as statements in support of authoritarian governments, machismo, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia) become acceptable in the public arena and in political debate, transforms governments of the extreme right into the antechambers of repressive regimes.

Political propaganda is substituted by psychological warfare whose objective is to mobilize fear (of the danger that the “enemy” is coming to destroy “our” way of life), which becomes the principal argument for closing ranks around a leader, presented as strong and protective. The strategy of the authoritarian right works through messages aimed at undermining confidence in democratic institutions, the balance between the different powers and the autonomy of the Judiciary, with constant attacks on professional journalism and civil society organizations. None of these movements has, yet, managed to destroy the overall structure of the democratic institutions and substitute them with a new political regime. The permanent tactical objective is to weaken the mechanisms of control over the executive, such as the judiciary, the press and civil society, and reach a situation in which the executive no longer has to confront criticism and monitoring on the part of the public powers and civil society.

The new communication technologies (with their bubbles, eco-chambers, low entry costs, and the culture of short messages which do not invite reflection), have shown themselves to be extremely useful tools for these new actors. The authoritarian right are not the only ones to make use of fake news, but, in their hands, this has become the principal tool of political propaganda.

From the political perspective, the systematic use of fake news is a strategy to destroy the democratic public space, through disinformation and permanent intoxication produced by extreme polarization, so that the content of the message no longer is the most relevant factor.

The transformation of every opposition into an enemy, the constant denunciation of conspiracies and the destruction of democratic conviviality has the objective of creating a climate of war. The psychological atmosphere of war in which fear and insecurity prevail facilitates the promotion of the figure of the leader/protector who needs unlimited authority to defend the nation and who should not, therefore, be subjected to the control of democratic institutions.

Totalitarian governments employed censorship, repression and the systematic propaganda of their ideas in the information media, which they monopolized. Fake news is part of a new form of political communication, which is quite different from that of totalitarian ideologies and governments. Totalitarian ideologies had an interpretative framework which explained who was the enemy from the point of view of an ideal alternative society. Fake news, which operates within the context of democratic liberties, does not sustain a coherently argued ideological discourse, nor does it make explicit any alternative model of society. It acts to undermine professional journalism and the traditional elites, attacking and demonizing people who disagree with the authoritarian right.

Non-rational factors are always present in political life and politicians lie and speak half-truths. This becomes a problem when they are used systematically, eliminating rational debate and informed, opening the way to the abuse of political power, threatening dissidence and destroying the democratic institutions and values that they defend.

## THE SOCIAL BASE OF THE AUTHORITARIAN RIGHT

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All societies include long standing xenophobic and antidemocratic currents that in normal times stay out of the official political game but reappear in periods of political crisis. This substratum, which was previously submerged, includes a wide range of people with contradictory values in relation to democracy – which they support up to a certain point while condemning “excesses” in relation to different themes and issues – but which the authoritarian right manages to attract.

The reactionary right feeds on and is fed by the most diverse resentments, fears, and forms of social unease – loss of income and social status, lack of security in the face of crime, religious intolerance, and cultural transformations which stimulate nostalgia, together with the disempowerment experienced by adult males in relation to their wives and children –. It produces a crisis of identity and a feeling of social disorder that express itself in rejection and hate in relation to the new social realities and a yearning for an idealized lost world.

The frustrations and resentments produced by modern life can be channeled equally against capitalism as against democracy. At present, it is the extreme right that has been most successful in elaborating a discourse that channels the feelings of malaise in a narrative which “makes sense” and creates a sensation of belonging.

It provides symbolic and affective compensations, which can relegate the economic interests of the electors into second place.

The new right brings around it the most diverse sectors motivated by a sense of “disorder” and a wish for a “return to authority”. A variety of issues are included: the increase in criminality – perceived or real -, loss of job security; the end of a hierarchical system in which women, children, and racial minorities were not recognized as equals and were considered to be the legitimate target of macho, racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic comments. The valorization of authority and national symbols also attracts sectors of the repressive apparatus (the armed forces and the police), which have a culture based on discipline, obedience, subordination, and “virility”, and which idealizes a country operating as if it were a huge army headquarters.

Most of the leaders on the extreme right support neo-liberal agendas, at least in relation to the national economy, but at the same time, they question economic globalization. This convergence does not imply that the authoritarian right is a direct subproduct of neoliberalism, although in many instances business sees authoritarianism as an opportunity to advance its own interests, and is willing to be subject to an alien cultural agenda in exchange for the perspective of greater profits.

After the Second World War, efforts were made to comprehend how fascism and Nazism had been possible. This gave rise to the theory of the “authoritarian personality”, proposed by Theodor W. Adorno, to characterize individuals with mental rigidity, prejudices, and who idealize leaders and authority. The social psychologist, Stanley Milgram, questioned this theory based on experiments showing that most people tend to follow orders given by someone hierarchically superior, without taking into account the suffering this might cause, and that an authoritarian disposition would depend, therefore, more on the social context.

Both of these contributions help us understand facets of the “authoritarian attraction”, but they are insufficient when it comes to making sense of concrete historical contexts affecting individual choices. Without doubt, they are individuals who have a greater affinity with discourses promoting hate and dogmatism, and are incapable of living with difference, but we are not dealing here with a fixed segment of the population. Most, if not all, people, in specific circumstances, can lose the ability for critical reflection and come to accept any message that reinforces their prejudices and supports authoritarian ideologies and leaders. The “authoritarian tendency” is related less to a type of personality and more to a state of mind which penetrates

society in certain historical contexts and favors social action and actors which mobilize antidemocratic sentiments.

## THE OLD AND THE NEW RIGHT

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The reactionary conservatism of the new right does not represent a continuation of the tradition of rightwing democratic parties, but rather a break with them. Conservative right wing parties do not propose a return to the past. Their strategies are aimed at slowing down the rhythm of transformations brought about by new social policies and cultural changes. In this way, for instance, for decades in many democracies the traditional catholic parties struggled against the legalization of divorce, but once this was introduced, they adjusted to the new reality.

The democratic conservative opposes what he sees as the sin (changes with which he does not agree), whereas the authoritarian right pursues the sinner (all who are defined as opponents of their project for power). Conservatism tries to slow down the rhythm of changes, the reactionary proposes a return to past - a past to which it is no longer possible to return and to which they in fact do not wish to return. The democratic conservative believes in and is committed to the values he professes. The extreme right mobilizes symbols and religious values as instruments of power. Trump and Putin, for example are far from being examples of Bible-reading Christian virtue, and Netanyahu is anything but an orthodox Jew, but they make use of religious motives to win support. The political discourse transforms citizens into believers and "real" patriots, and only such believers and patriots have the right to be full citizens. Those who oppose politicians who speak in the name of God and the country are presented as opposing God and the country.

The democratic right tempers its moral conservatism with the recognition of the inalienable rights of the individual to liberty and tames its economic liberalism with a recognition that the socially unacceptable effects of the market should be the object of social policies. The democratic right has always criticized the discourse of the revolutionary left - particularly that of the communist regimes - which subsumes individuals within homogeneous and undifferentiated groups, such as class or the people, giving cover to the dictatorship of a minority in the name of the whole.

The new right, as in the case of fascism, does the same as the revolutionary left, using the notion of "the nation" as a fantasy to annul the plurality of individuals, fusing them into a single mass with identical values and interests. Rather than recognize

the social problems created by the market, they cover these up, expelling the theme of social inequality from the political narrative, and blaming “external” enemies for the eventual difficulties faced by the poorest sectors of the population.

The authoritarian right aims to revert the advances in the field of human rights, gender and minorities, and breaks, in practice even if this is not recognized explicitly, with the principles of liberal democracy. They question the separation of powers, attack the freedom of the press, the organizations of civil society and use lies in a systematic manner to demonize opponents, and placing the “defense of the country” above all other values.

## THE NEW RIGHT AS A GLOBAL STRATEGY

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In a variety of countries, the new right shows many similarities, but it is not a homogeneous bloc and there are important national specificities. The most common themes are nationalism – with various tones of racism –, diverse critiques of globalization, in particular of its cultural consequences, and the associated movement away from human rights discourse. This is complemented with a defense of the market economy – which does not exclude rhetorical critiques of international finance capital –; the use of religious symbols to defend “moral” values –; an anti-feminism which mobilizes a nostalgia for an idealized past in which patriarchal authority was accompanied by physical and psychological violence against wives and children; and the persecution of homosexuals.

Variations include the liberation of firearms in the case of Trump in the U.S., the Vox party in Spain and Bolsonaro in Brazil. In the case of Bolsonaro, given the absence of immigration as a theme, the enemy is once again the anachronic phantom of communism.

The new right does not question the presuppositions of economic liberalism and social inequality is not an issue. The principal proposal for the protection of workers is the exclusion of immigrants and the privilege of feeling superior by belonging to a community that struggles against the enemies of the nation.

The new right attacks both the left and – in some cases even more – the traditional right, whose electorate it contests. The new right also appropriates themes put forward by the alternative left, as in the critique of globalization or the power of international finance capital, which allows it to attract social groups who feel economically

and culturally harmed and dislocated by the enormous transformations of society in recent decades.

In all countries the political strategy is that of demonizing the means of communication, the opposition parties, the judiciary and civil society, which are considered enemies of the nation (in general “at the service of foreign interests”). They do not directly attack the electoral system, but make it known before every election that if they do not win it is because the election was fraudulent.

Its discursive logic is close to old fascism, and to communism, in the transformation of politics into war and the opponent into the enemy. They do not employ violence in the same way as the fascist groups (or, in a different fashion, the communists), but they come close to this in the machismo cult of violence and in the inclusion of violent groups in their ranks. Trump, Putin and Erdogan all criticize and, when it is possible within the limits of their power, persecute feminist militants and LGBTs. In fact, the persecution of homosexuals was a characteristic common to fascists and communists.

Globalization is questioned for its cultural impacts and not in terms of its origin in the dynamic of capitalism, with its power to revolutionize production, communications systems and consumer products. As a result, the new right, even in its neo-mercantilist versions a la Trump, must negotiate enterprises demands for openness to international trade with a nationalist discourse of closure in relation to the outside world.

Their nationalist rhetoric hides the fact that the new right has developed a capacity for international coordination and support which recalls the Communist International. United in their opposition to international institutions and agreements which promote human rights and the protection of the environment, they are a globalized group, exchanging experiences, organize periodic meetings and share the same political operator – Steve Bannon – who is one of the main articulators and mentor of these groups.

## LATIN AMERICA

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During a large part of the XX Century, while a small number of countries were politically organized around a biparty stable system, as in Uruguay, or a one party system as in Mexico, the region as a whole was characterized by a high level of political instability. The political history of the region was plagued with military coups, charismatic

leaders on whose basis political parties were often created, together with parties and group on the left without any commitment to democratic institutions.

The right mobilized the military and the left proposed armed revolution in these extremely unequal societies, and the ideological profile of the political actors became thoroughly mixed up when nationalism. Nationalism took hold of a large part of the left, sectors of the Armed Forces and of business - who looked to the support of protectionist policies. Until recently, the dominant groups still depended on the strategic support of the United States and the left identified itself with the Soviet Union, with China and with Cuba, both refusing to respect national sovereignty with one side accepting U.S. interventionism and the other the active support of communist countries in the region.

This led to a weakening of democratic values, both on the right and the left, a situation that still persists until today. In the majority of Latin American countries sectors of the left does not adopt a clear and unequivocal position in support of liberal democracy, and sectors of the right are limit social demands willing if necessary to establish political alliances which threaten the democratic institutions.

The most fundamental division in Latin America is that between a democratic and an undemocratic left and right. With some minor deviations, the governments of the Broad Front (Frente Ampla), in Uruguay, the Concertation (Concertación) in Chile, and the Workers Party, (PT) in Brazil on the left, and the governments of the right in Argentina and Chile respected the separation of powers, the autonomy of civil society, the freedom of the press and their constitutions. This has not been the case with Maduro in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua, and to a lesser degree Evo Morales in Bolivia, countries where we have seen the gradual but continual destruction of democratic institutions.

Sectors both of the left in Latin America find it difficult to fully accept democratic institutions, the positive aspects of markets and there remains an association of statism with social justice, a propensity to demonize opponents and a pervasive anti-imperialist discourse tied to an anachronic vision of the international system.

Even though Latin America, today, reveals political tendencies which are somewhat similar to those of developed countries, its characteristics of social stratification and conflicts are quite different, not to mention the increasing importance of public (in)security due to widespread criminality, which mobilizes sectors of public opinion in the direction of anti-democratic solutions. This issue of insecurity particularly favors political discourses that transform the legitimate fears of the population



into a generalized hate against those who are identified as responsible for criminality, generally those who live in the poorest communities, which then justifies the indiscriminate use of police violence against.

The fragility of the political system in Latin America is increased by the tendency of the armed forces to go beyond their constitutional role. Affinities exist between a military culture based on hierarchical discipline, the ritualistic cult of symbols that represent the nation as an abstract unity, the friend versus enemy logic, and an authoritarian vision of social coexistence. However, in democratic societies this culture does not spread over into the political system, although this may happen in moments of extreme tension even in countries with a strong democratic tradition. We have only to remember the generals' conspiracy and revolt against President De Gaulle's policy for Algeria.

In the Latin American region, civil control is not only more fragile, but the Armed Forces have very particular characteristics. In countries where, for historical and geopolitical reasons, the hypothesis of war is real, the Armed Forces have an external enemy on which to focus their resources and preoccupations. In South America, such a hypothesis is virtually zero, because most countries have not had any general mobilization or war for more than a century and this favors a tendency for the military corporation to look within the society for an enemy to be confronted. Such a tendency has been even more pronounced given that for most of the twentieth century the struggle against the "internal enemy", communism was a recurrent preoccupation in the Armed Forces.

There is an extensive bibliography which attempts to understand the interventionist role of the Armed Forces in the region as a product of a broader social dynamic in which they are called on to intervene by external social forces. No doubt, the social and political context is ever present, but the "military solution" presents itself because the military are available to fulfil this role. When the military are unwilling to take sides as has happened on various occasions in Latin America, society is forced to reach a negotiated solution.

In Latin America the current situation presents new challenges as much for the democratic left as for right. The right needs to re-elaborate its agenda for the promotion of economic liberalism to include policies that confront social inequality and poverty. The left needs to stop pretending that the market does not exist and believing that, by definition, all public enterprises are fulfilling a social function, and that civil

servants and their corporations are untouchable. They must also deal seriously with public security as an issue that is not reducible to broader socio-economic questions.

Crime's control over populations and territories implies that the State has lost its monopoly of the use violence and abandoned its fundamental duty of defending the lives of its citizens. Criminal violence has a deep effect on people's lives. It penetrates and corrupts the police forces (including the Armed Forces when called on), distorts the political system and affects the foundations of democracy.

The population's feelings of insecurity in the face of high rates of criminality (in some countries these are not so high but are increasing which is a key factor in promoting a feeling of insecurity), lead some sectors to become attracted by punitive discourses, the unrestricted use of police violence and the arming of the population.

With the ending of military dictatorships, the explosion of expectations led to the demand for rights, often inscribed in new constitutions, which are unrealizable if not adopted in stages in accordance with priorities and a long-term perspective. Otherwise, long lists of demands and reforms will continue to confront the persistence of privileges by those groups with greater political clout and closer to the decisions of government, and the most in need will continue to be excluded. The region is being left behind in terms of global economic and technological competitiveness, being transformed once again mainly into a producer of raw materials, and its democratic institutions have become fragile, all of which favor the rise of authoritarian discourses.

## THE SEARCH FOR NEW PATHS

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Why is it that today feelings of community are associated with a slide into authoritarianism? It is clear that every concrete case is rooted in national particularities, but what is of note in all democratic countries is the bypassing of the political elites and the traditional intellectuals. These elites (scientists, lawyers, journalists), still occupy an important place in the public arena and in specialized institutions but they have lost influence among wide sectors of the population. The resurgence of xenophobic nationalism as a political force, in addition to its obvious manipulation by political leaders, can nevertheless not be dissociated from feelings of exclusion on the part of sectors of the population which do not feel themselves a part or represented by the cosmopolitan tribes, whether those of human rights, ecology or identity groups.

In democracies the effective power of citizens is limited, and they are quite distant from the minority which occupies positions of influence in the economy, in politics and in the media. For the vast majority of citizens, the organizations of collective action such as trade unions, political parties and civil society organizations are what “create power”, empowering the disempowered. When isolated from the structures of citizen participation, individuals feel that they have no control over their destinies, which predisposes them to conspiracy theories in which minorities acting backstage decide the direction of society.

Social struggles continue despite the strengthening of the authoritarian right which expels the issue of inequality from their political narrative. In the United States, demands are centered on universal health services and higher education, areas in which people spend a considerable part of their income or simply remain without access. In Europe, an increase in individual income is the principal motivation behind social struggles, as in the case of the *Gilets Jaunes* in France.

On the left, the critique of neo-liberalism concentrates on the socio-economic effects of globalization and the cuts in social policies. In the United States this led to a radicalization of sectors of the Democratic Party, and politicians such as Bernie Sanders, who defines himself as a socialist – in practice a moderate social democrat according to European standards – came to occupy a position of prominence in the Democratic Party.

In France, a new party was created France Unsubdued, (*France Insoumise*), which incorporated nationalist elements into its discourse without achieving broad electoral support but enough to become a factor in imploding the hegemonic party of the left, the Socialist Party. In Spain, the We Can Party (*Partido Podemos*), created after the street demonstrations of the “outraged” (*indignados*) in 2013, and which united a diversity of left-wing ideological currents, has grown rapidly challenging the centrality of the PSOE (*Spanish Socialist Workers Party*).

When multitudes take to the streets they do so usually at the call of political parties, unions, or organizations with clearly defined leaderships and orientations. Strikes organized by trade unions and public demonstrations organized by political parties always had clearly identified objectives and leaderships. Without doubt, these could generate political instability, but always within predictable and negotiable frameworks. In the new context, instead of prepared demonstrations we witness “explosions” generally mobilized through virtual social networks, whose objectives are not clearly defined (often the slogans change as the days pass and new publics

join in), and which are absent of representative leaders who can speak in the name of all. "Indignation" is a central component of political life but when it is associated with a discrediting of the political system it provides an opportunity for manipulation. The impact of these social explosions is influenced by the actions of diverse political groups, whether newly created or pre-existing, who try to channel the malaise of the streets to their respective benefits.

Some attribute these explosions to the role of new communication technologies that allow for instant communication via social networks. The internet with its low costs and the possibilities it offers for decentralized vertical communication, for transmitting messages and mobilizing slogans for groups with few resources. This, however, does not explain why sectors of the population are led to demonstrate. Contemporary social explosions express a lack of confidence in those who govern and the inability of the representative institutions to provide an outlet for social unrest.

The survival of democracies depends on the ability of politicians, and the elites who provide them with support, to offer answers for the needs of the population as a whole, not only economic but also symbolic and affective needs, relating these to the themes which have been adopted in the populist discourse. If it is true that the new authoritarianism feeds off fake news and empty symbols, it is, nevertheless, responding to a real malaise with the existing state of affairs and the need that people feel to belong to a political community of shared values, to feel that their living conditions can improve and that their children can count on a promising future. For broad sections of the population, this feeling of community and hope was associated with the world of work, which now seems to be out of reach. The challenge now for democratic political parties and leaders is to recover the ability to produce creative social policies and economic growth as much as narratives that are able to create a sense of community based on shared values and common destiny.<sup>24</sup>

So far, we have seen tactical movements rather than great strategies and designs. With greater or less intensity, nationalist winds have built up around the world and the traditional political parties are attempting to adapt to the new times. Preoccupation with an electorate inclined to oppose the arrival of immigrants has led some Social Democratic Parties in Europe to support restrictive immigration policies. The Greens in Austria, for their part, have been pushed to participate in a

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24 On this subject it is worth reading Richard Rorty's book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*, (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1999).

Government led by a party of the right in order to prevent an alliance with the authoritarian right.

On the right, the rise of authoritarian tendencies has had dramatic consequences and some of the traditional parties have tended to incorporate elements of the xenophobic discourse of the far right as a way of reducing the loss of their voters. But in this case, the new right has to confront the criticisms of the ideologues of neo-liberalism, the Economist and the Financial Times, which are committed to globalization and economic liberalism.

Moderate political parties cannot be purist, nor do they want a part of their base voting for ideologies of the extreme right or left. Both the right and the left have had, therefore, to rethink the issue of nationalism. The strategy of some parties of the right to appropriate aspects of the xenophobic nationalist agenda involves the enormous risk of becoming ever closer to, and then to be finally conquered by, the forces which they sought to neutralize. In the United States, it led to the Republican Party being captured by a leader far removed from the historical tenets of the party.

The rational nucleus of the “national question”, in the current context, expresses the malaise of sectors that see themselves as being negatively affected by the socio-economic and cultural transformations associated with globalization and technological change. Nationalism can be used for exclusionary, anti-pluralist and, in the end, anti-democratic visions, but it is too important to be relegated and handed over to retrograde sectors. The challenge is to develop a discourse and a political agenda, which confronts the xenophobic nationalism of the new right and the archaic anti-imperialism of the left with a national project of integration into globalization without marginalizing large sectors of the population.

## 7. SOCIETY OF (DIS)INFORMATION AND THE CRISIS OF TRUTH

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Danilo Martucelli <sup>25</sup> is quite right to assert that contemporary society is not made up of isolated and self-centered individuals. On the contrary, in the “society of information” people are emotionally involved in a constant sea of news that range from events affecting persons and places near their immediate world to the denunciation of tragedies in the most diverse corners of the world. In this way, an individual’s experience today is that of an acute consciousness of our ties to society, while at the same time the challenges placed before us on a daily basis are lived as singular subjective dramas for which we alone are responsible.

Although this continuous immersion in the world’s waves of information makes for very well-informed citizens, at the same time it leaves them confused and anxious about their collective destinies. The informational overload is paralyzing and leads to feelings of malaise, insecurity and the sensation – which is not completely false – that no-one is in control.

At the same time, the enormous quantity of information that circulates in the social networks creates the sensation that we are living in an ever more transparent society. While this is partially true, it hides the darker reality that new information reaches us after being digested and returned to us by algorithms which store and organize information according to commercial criteria, all this without taking into account the professional production and dissemination of fake news.

Virtual communication fuses oral and written culture while at the same time losing in the process the quality and richness of each. The gap between the time that we need to elaborate our emotions and thoughts and the speed with which messages demanding an immediate response are transmitted limits our ability to act in a reflexive and responsible manner. An elaborated argument is difficult to fit into a tweet or a zap. Instantaneous reaction prevails in electronic communication, lacking a sensitivity to the feelings produced by the message, because the suffering that might eventually be caused to the other is not taken into account, a very different situation from that of face-to-face encounters.

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<sup>25</sup> See *La Condition Sociale Moderne: L’avenir d’une inquietude*, (Paris. Gallimard, 2017)

The invasive world of the internet transforms life into a permanent present, in which we are forever rushing to keep up with our work, respond to messages, or look through Instagram or Facebook to check if the message or the photo has been acknowledged - very often idealized images which do not reflect the personal realities and which produce an unreal view of the world.

The speeding up of time is a characteristic of modern societies and is at the heart of capitalist production but with the internet, this has acquired new features symbolized in the "one click shop". A new illness, cyber addiction, has become a symbol of the times (almost all the apps are designed with the aim of producing rushes of dopamine in the user). We are in a world of hyperactive children who are treated medically although they are only reflecting the actual rhythms of today's world, of adults who cannot stop looking at their cell phones and who consume anxiety pills and resort to self-help guides to continue participating in a system that demands a constant flight from oneself.

## THE END OF PRIVACY

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Modern technology has created a system where people voluntarily place their most intimate details into huge data banks (to a certain extent this is not exactly true because many cell phones come with programs which collect the users data without their knowledge). For what looks to be a free service the user is willing to give up his privacy, providing information on his movements. This information eliminates privacy and intimacy and allows for a continual bombardment of personalized publicity, in addition to being a mechanism of citizen control.

We live in a paradoxical world. On the hand, the quantity of available information allows us a vision of the most diverse aspects of the world that were previously out of reach, and makes possible horizontal and decentralized communication. The counterpart to this libertarian aspect is that these same networks make systems of vigilance possible both of personal and anonymous relations (firms, the State), and they are able to store and process personal data with enormous efficiency, an ability which tends to increase exponentially. These networks, like the god Janus, have two faces, libertarian and totalitarian, a network society and a society entangled in the networks.

## POLITICAL USES OF THE INTERNET AND FAKE NEWS

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The democratic potentials of these new technologies, such as the possibility of greater transparency in government activity and access to public information, together with new forms of participation - whether for the purposes of consultation or the advancing legislative proposals - open new possibilities for democratizing political party life, are all real but to date have not demonstrated notable results.

One of the biggest difficulties is to find an adequate balance between the representative system and consultations of public opinion via plebiscites or on-line referenda. Even though some issues can be the object of public consultations, they do not substitute for the mediating role of the public authority, political parties or representative structures, which must deal with questions that require specialized knowledge, negotiate with different interest groups, and deliberate on complex issues that cannot be dealt with in a one-off manner. Public responsibility might demand the taking of unpopular decisions, and the protection of minorities against the impositions of the majority.

While only timid steps have been taken to use the new technologies for the development of democratic practices, the phenomenon of fake news advances rapidly and places the existence of the public democratic space at risk. Social networks have transformed the public space, allowing political groups and individuals to act without legal responsibility, leaving aside the filters and checks of professional journalism, which, because it is their main competitor, has become a central target for their attacks.

The internet has shattered any and every limit on incivility in this virtual public space. Communication on the internet has enabled a culture where the more virulent and unilateral the message, and the more that prejudices and emotions supplant reason, the greater the impact.

To confront this new reality, various platforms have been created to check the information that circulates in the virtual world. While these initiatives are necessary and deserve credit, they confront a range of obstacles. In the first place, the very quantity of these messages is out of all proportion and generally their origins undetectable, with the result that only a tiny portion are checked and very few people make an effort to ascertain their veracity. Secondly, even when this information is hardly credible, it still has an unconscious impact on the receiver. And thirdly, the central question is not that of the factual veracity of the information but the content of the message itself. A large part of the political messages which circulate on the



networks does not contain real information and is not news in the traditional sense. In their majority, these messages are caricatures or have varied content aimed at demonizing opponents and institutions, provoking hatred against those who think differently, spreading chaos and feelings of dread with the aim of creating a political climate for the demoralization of democratic institutions.

Twentieth century totalitarian ideologies brought with them a quite different narrative, making explicit the values which they defended and presenting a clear vision of what they intended to achieve. Rather than propose alternatives to liberal democracies, the principal objective of current populist leaders is their demoralization, and in this sense fake news corresponds to an undeclared authoritarian agenda. Such a strategy avoids any direct confrontation with democratic values, which, in spite of their discontent, are shared by a large portion of the population.

As a political project, fake news is part of a systematic effort to defame public figures, institutions, and the means of communication associated with the defense of democracy, and more generally any source of news or criticism which is considered to be inconvenient. The aim is to produce mistrust in all information. If nothing is true, the acceptance or otherwise of information depends only on the subjective disposition of the user. If a message confirms one's prejudices, it is believed in, if not, it is rejected out of hand. In this way, the public arena is dominated by prejudices and visceral reactions based only on emotions.

In the new environment produced by fake news, believing in the information contained in a message depends on the source. If it is associated with "the other side", whatever its content it must be false. To challenge fake news, although necessary, is of limited use. Its role is not to transmit information, but to create in the mind of the receiver a state of spirit and a political narrative which is constructed on the basis of a myriad of short messages, often reduced to images, symbols and metaphors, in themselves apparently isolated, but which correspond to their creators' vision of the world and aims to cumulatively penetrate into the unconscious of the user.

The result of this policy of fake news is the destructive polarization of the public space. Bubbles are created which generate new bubbles by those who oppose them, producing a cognitive closure, in which it becomes impossible to live with difference and the civilized debate of conflicting ideas.

Fakes news mobilizes pre-existing feelings, (fear, resentments, uncertainties, dissatisfactions), and prejudices (machismo, racism and homophobia). In the first instance, they channel feelings into a political narrative, which then

normalizes and legitimizes the expression of public positions which, before, people were too embarrassed to assume. The struggle against fake news is a permanent confrontation of minds and hearts, because democratic values can never be assumed to be consolidated.

As some analysts have argued, the internet has allowed for greater participation and communication among citizens and a level of access to information that was unimaginable only a few years ago. At the same time, however, it has nourished tendencies, already present in society, to value subjectivity, narcissism, simple and peremptory messages. In networks, people, desensitized by the lack of physical and emotional presence of the other who can be “turned off” with a simple click, escape from confronting contradictions, information and arguments that do not confirm their prejudices. They transform the cell-phone screen into a mirror and an echo chamber, through which they listen to variations on their own voices. This provides a context favorable to polarized discourses and conspiratorial visions.

The new possibilities for participating in networks and in street mobilizations are no substitute for the systems of representative institutions and the powers of the State. On the contrary, as Nathan Gardels, writes: “ All this presents a paradox for governance in the digital age: the more participation there is, the greater the need for the counterbalance of impartial practices and institutions that can process the cacophony of voices, sort out the deluge of contested information, negotiate fair trade-offs among the welter of conflicting interests and dispense with the magical thinking or xenophobia that comes along with networked popular sentiment.”<sup>26</sup>

## FAKE NEWS AND THE CRISIS OF TRUTH

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What constitutes fake news? In his book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that the phenomenon of fake news is a constant in human history. He claims that the most diverse myths and religions are fictions are based on beliefs which are not sustained by any evidence.: “When a billion people believe it for a thousand years – that’s a religion, and we are admonished not to call it fake news in order not to hurt the feelings of the faithful, (or incur their wrath).”<sup>27</sup>

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26 Gardels, N. Weekend Roundup: Mobilization Politics Is Here to Stay. Berggruen Institute, Los Angeles, 23 ago. 2019. Disponível em: <[www.berggruen.org/the-worldpost/articles/weekend-roundup-mobilization-politics-is-here-to-stay](http://www.berggruen.org/the-worldpost/articles/weekend-roundup-mobilization-politics-is-here-to-stay)>. Acesso em: 7 maio 2020.

27 Harari, Y. N. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018.

Harari's way of integrating varied historical facts to elaborate creative interpretations allowing him to generalize long periods of history, sometimes leads him to ignore or smooth over discontinuities, the diversity of cultures and the meaning of concepts in different periods. In particular, his reflections on fake news are contradictory.

Why is this the case? Because the author defends science and responsible journalism as the most appropriate sources for reaching the truth – despite their limitations – and thereby protecting us from fake news. However, either truth has different criterion, or it is reduced to shared beliefs no matter who affirms them.

The vision of truth as sustained by science or by responsible journalism did not exist for a great period of history. Calling religious myths fake news or truths is an anachronism, since for the greater part of human history truth was not understood in the same way as the moderns understand it. As Foucault points out:

*“Each society has its regime of truth, its “general policy” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and puts to work as true; the mechanisms and instances which allow statements to be distinguished as true or false; the way in which some are sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorized for obtaining truth; the status of those who have the responsibility for declaring what functions as truth.”*<sup>28</sup>

The “truth” upheld by scientific methods values doubt and curiosity is sustained by the belief that every claim should be based on logical reasoning and refutable empirical proofs. Scientific truths, therefore, imply the possibility, if not the necessity, that other people develop alternative arguments that question established knowledge.

As a result, the scientific environment requires a way of organizing social relations that ensure and promote the values of freedom of thought, pluralism, and the free debating of ideas. Clearly, as an ample bibliography attests, the scientific world is not free from tendencies to freeze up its paradigms or from internal power games. Such questioning, however, does not aim to discredit science but, on the contrary, draws attention to the way that certain forms of sociability and ways of organizing the field can prejudice and limit its advance.

The Enlightenment extended the basic values of scientific thought to the whole of social life and brought them into the public arena, and with the support of the power of the State and the legal system ensured freedom of thought, pluralism and the free debate of ideas. Although, the development of a genealogy of liberal values

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28 Foucault, M, *Microfísica do poder*. Rio de Janeiro. Graal, 1972. p.12

might identify moments in the past with greater freedom of thought, as in ancient Greece and the Greco-Roman world, respect for the individual's subjective freedom, the valuing of doubt and curiosity, is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is only a few hundred years old, has been, and continues to be challenged.

The questioning of science has been a constant of contemporary history. "If science cannot survive without the Jews, we can do without science for some years", was Hitler's reply to Max Planck's plea that the impact of the expulsion of Jews from public administration and academic life be taken into consideration.

Authoritarian regimes of both right and left have not supported and have repressed academic freedom, particularly in the human sciences. Communist regimes have argued that theories which do not share their analysis of the historical process were at the service of the bourgeoisie and should, therefore, be rejected. Paradoxically, it was claimed that Marxism was a scientific view of history. At the same time, it was considered the only view possible, which, by definition, meant the exclusion of different perspectives, thereby denying the basic rules of the scientific community, which do not exclude different views *ex ante*, nor discard an argument because it does not agree with the political orientation of the author. The result was the negation and the repression of pluralism and the free debate of ideas.

A new theoretical orientation, associated with the decline in the influence of Marxism in academia and political life, has focused on various applications of the social construction of reality theory, particularly as appropriated by various currents in cultural studies. The social construction of reality postulates that we "naturalize", that is, we assume as eternal truths or as "normal", beliefs, values, ways of feeling and thinking that are in fact the product of specific historical and social circumstances. Although it is possible to question whether all knowledge is reducible to a social construction, this perspective sharpens critical capacities in the face of phenomena such as domination, patriarchy, racism, sexual orientation or euro-centrism.

The basis assumption of this approach is that the various forms of thought, including the scientific, are the product of determinate cultural contexts. Such a conclusion, which is philosophically reasonable, becomes culturally suicidal when transferred to the normative arena. Society's reproduction depends on the transmission of values and on the belief that these values have intrinsic worth, and are preferable to other cultural systems,<sup>29</sup> which clearly does not imply that we should not be respect and try to understand and learn from other ways of life. Furthermore,

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29 As is well remembered by Lévi-Strauss in his text, *Race and History*. UNESCO, 1952

we cannot forget that the theory of the social construction of reality and possibility of defending it in public arenas are only possible thanks to the existence of an autonomous scientific field within democratic societies.

All scientific research involves some form of normative orientation, but what differentiates science from other forms of knowledge pursuit is that it is based on rational arguments that can be empirically refuted. If this were not the case, we would be in the realm of personal moral philosophy, the arts and theology. Instead of science, we will have a valorization of subjectivity, of emotions, and finally, irrationalism.<sup>30</sup>

Some authors in the field of cultural studies, such as race, feminism, or post-colonialism, who base their argument on the social construction of reality approach, on occasion adopt positions that undermine scientific thought, refusing to consider ideas branded as being at the service of “forms of domination”. For some, at the limit, only those who have suffered in the skin forms of oppression would be qualified to speak about it. Once argument depends on the personal experience from which one speaks scientific debate is disqualified, because substantive arguments are replaced by feelings, and personal experience becomes the criterion of validation. Such a position destroys the basic rules on which scientific dialogue and democratic life are founded, which privilege the intrinsic value of arguments rather than the personal values or experience of the person who puts them forward. Without democratic values there would be no concept of domination, which only makes sense in a society formed of individuals and communities which share and believe in human dignity, individual liberty, self-realization, personal autonomy and the right to confront socially oppressive relations.

This approach would have only limited impact if it were restricted to academia and did not penetrate diverse groups of civil society activists that strengthen this cognitive closure around identity claims, with each group emphasizing the forms of domination to which they are subject, leading to a decline in the capacity for dialogue and a common vision of society.

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30 The recent questioning of the existence of climate or the argument that it is the result of human action, the rejection of compulsory vaccination, and the impact of fake news, have led many authors, including one of the most notorious challengers of scientific objectivity, Bruno Latour, to review their opinions. See Kofman, A, “ Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher Mounts a Defence of Science”, *The New York Times Magazine*, New York, 25/10/2018. Available: [www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html) Accessed: 07/06/2020

## THE RISE AND CRISIS OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

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The press made possible the mass reproduction of information that previously circulated only in the form of rumors and wall posters. Initially it was used for the eventual publication of pamphlets that little by little became periodical publications. As from the 19th century, with improved printing technology, the increasing democratization of the public sphere, the expansion of urban life and the educational system, newspapers with a large print run became routine. In the last century the journalistic profession, identified with a body of specific values, was established. Journalism as a sub-system specialized in the production of news, with a work ethic that required information to be based on original and trustworthy sources, and which was independent of other spheres of power is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon. Even so, the tension between the owners of the media (or outside influences of economic and political powers), and the independence of the journalist's *métier* is a constant in the history of the press. The best newspapers try to protect the independence of their journalists and reporters, making a clear separation of the editorial line, expressed in the opinion's section and in editorials.

In democratic regimes, by contrast, the sensationalist yellow press has always been present, together with a press associated with political parties or personalities. The owners of the communication media try, with greater or less intensity, to influence the news agenda, but must also take into account the relation between the press and its readers. If, on the one hand, they shape public opinion, they also respond to the expectations of the public to maintain their audience, which is the deciding factor in defining the prices to be paid for publicity.

The emergence of radio and then television created new challenges for the democratization of the means of communication. While, theoretically, any individual or group could begin a publication in print, with the public authority's responsibility limited to ensuring freedom of expression, radio transmission, and even more so television, depended until very recently, on a limited wave spectrum for transmission, which therefore became subject to public regulation.

The ways in which different democratic governments regulated transmission and tried to limit the concentration of these means of communication diverged considerably between countries.<sup>31</sup> More recently, with the rise of the internet and cable TV, the

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31 See Sorj, B. *Meios de Comunicação e Democracia: Além do Estado e do Mercado*. São Paulo, Plataforma Democrática, 2011. Available: [www.plataformademocratica.org/Arquivos/Meios\\_de\\_comunicação\\_e\\_democracia.pdf](http://www.plataformademocratica.org/Arquivos/Meios_de_comunicação_e_democracia.pdf) Accessed: 07/05/2020

spectrum for radio and televisions widened, increasing the number of participants, although this did not eliminate the role of public regulation. In democracies, journalism, as the primary source of information and the production of news, has always been the target of criticism from politicians and those in power, who are uneasy with investigative journalism, which is the main source of denunciations of the abuse of power by government.

Its influence on public opinion, which has led to it being called the “fourth power”, has been enormous – and remains so even if this has declined –, although this influence is overestimated by its critics. If the press were all-powerful, as is argued, its political line in times of elections would be decisive, which in fact is not the case. In many Latin American countries, where the press is denounced for being right wing, parties of the left – as for example in Chile, Uruguay and Brazil – have been victorious. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez had electoral victories in his first governments when the press was opposed to him and he lost part of his electoral support after he had closed or brought under State control the opposition media.

With the expansion of Internet search platforms and social networks, traditional journalism, in particular newspapers and journals, but also the open television channels, came to face problems from the alternative forms of communication. There was a decline in demand for printed publications, which led the news vehicles to develop on-line versions, even to the point of discontinuing the printed, with some papers now existing only in digital form. This substitution also affected the way newspapers are read, since digital readers concentrate on a small range of news of their personal interest, whereas previously they had looked through all the pages of the paper.

This dynamic had consequences on the business model of traditional journalism, where the sales of publicity space played a central role. The revenue from subscribers or users of electronic versions generally does not match the levels of the physical versions, and even more importantly, publicity funding has shifted to the large search sites, to the social networks and to the electronic platforms specialized in commercial announcements. Less revenue has meant a decline in the teams of investigative journalists.

By reducing almost to zero the cost of transmitting or accessing news, the internet has imploded the monopoly of the press as the principal information vehicle in the public space. On the one hand, this has expanded the possibilities of access to news that is not filtered and mediated by the traditional press, but it has also allowed for the growth of information sites which only aim to be a front to give an appearance of credibility to fake news.

Despite the legitimate criticisms that can be levelled against the traditional press, they have a legal responsibility for the information they transmit and public reputations to preserve. With varying levels of quality, the free press is a precondition for democratic life in a mass society. Yet, with all its limitations, professional journalism remains the only available instrument for citizens to access validated information, even with the errors and biases that might occur.

The current tendency is towards a fragmentation of information, increasingly disfigured by fake news, making the survival of responsible journalism, whether in the old or in new formats, one of the challenges for which democratic societies must find creative responses.



## 8. THE DILUTION OF THE FRONTIERS OF SOCIAL SUB-SYSTEMS

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Today, democratic societies are experiencing a systematic transformation of their institutions, both formal and informal. Unwritten norms which govern daily relations and even the barriers which have maintained a separation between different spheres of power are collapsing. The effect of these transformations produces a feeling of fragility and chaos.

No one cause is behind all these changes. Some result from the advances in democracy and transformations in capitalism, while others arise from the way the technological revolution is being appropriated. The list is long, and we will only focus on the most important of these here, given that some have already been discussed throughout the different sections of this book.

*National spaces/Global expectations.* As mentioned in the previous chapter, national societies have, from their origins, always had the international system as their reference. The history of national States is the product of the constant interaction between internal and external dynamics. With greater or less autonomy and success, nations have tried to accompany and, in one form or another, imitate or overtake the economic, scientific, technological and military achievements of the other countries.

Nevertheless, national frontiers constitute barriers or at least relatively effective filters to the cultural and commercial exchanges between countries. National cultures have without doubt always been influenced by the international system, but people interact, inform themselves and create expectations above all within the framework of national frontiers. This situation has changed with the advent of the channels of cable TV, with on-line commerce that provides direct access to global products, and the possibility of communicating instantaneously and freely with people anywhere in the world. External interference in the elections of another country, or the dissemination of propaganda to promote international terrorist groups, point to the growing limitations of the national State as the main filter and controller of national political life.

In less developed countries, the elites and the upper middle class always tried to reproduce the consumer patterns of the most advanced countries. This process has accelerated with the massification of globalized consumption and with the new systems of communication, which lead a large part of the population to look for references in the international system. This produces a permanent dissatisfaction with one's own country, and continually induces a measure of idealization of those "who are better than us".

*Spheres of power and the influence of money.* Democracy sustains itself on the separation of the different spheres of power: inequality in certain fields, (economic, professional) should not be translated into other spheres, particularly in the political and juridical fields, which presuppose the equality of rights. This is a situation which has never entirely prevailed in practice, but which serves as a normative horizon. The influence of money in politics – in large part due to the ever greater costs of electoral campaigns – has increased in recent decades, in addition to becoming more visible thanks to the increasing transparency imposed by public regulatory mechanisms. This has been accompanied by a hyper-valuation of personal enrichment – weakening of social recognition on the basis of works accomplished or personal qualities (for instance, teaching, liberal professions, intellectuals).

*The judicialization of politics and the politicization of the judiciary.* Party political fragmentation and the inability of parliaments to produce consensus – which together the "revolt of the minorities" (identitarian, religious, ethnic, regional) – transfers decisions to the judiciary which before would have been resolved by the parliament and government, damaging the autonomy, the specific attributes and the legitimacy of the representative system and, as consequence, of democracy itself.

*The public and the private.* The separation between the public and the private, which is fundamental to the modern concept of liberty is being undermined. At first, this was the result of the feminist and LGBT movement which carried into the public sphere issues which the old legislation reserved to the private sphere, covering up the violence against women and children or repressing sexual practices. However, the radical change came with the social networks. With the active participation of their users, almost all private communication has become publicly available. At the same time as political marketing has assumed the form of (apparently) private communication, giving rise to the industry of fake news. Information on the most intimate personal aspects has come to be controlled by data banks that allow firms and political operators to target people on the basis of their individual profiles.

*Income and employment.* Technological changes and the new models of business organization have called in question the notion that an academic title ensures employment or a trajectory of social advance. Today we have a society that demands individual initiative, flexibility, constant adaptation to the requirements of the labor market and aspirations to ever increasing consumption. At, but at the same time produces an individual who experiences the anxiety of losing their employment and having to pay the monthly bills, which produces a feeling of abandonment and failure for not managing to obtain “success”, leading often to depression which has assumed epidemic proportions.

Responsibility for these sentiments of malaise is frequently transferred to the politicians and even to democracy itself. A result which expresses itself in a global tendency of declining participation in elections, of less support for and participation in the party political system, and to a growing support for paternalist figures who present themselves as being “anti-system”.<sup>32</sup>

*Personal responsibility/system responsibility.* The internet is changing the way people relate, increasing people’s possibilities of communicating and controlling their activities, allowing access to an almost infinite supply of information which can be used for the most diverse purposes – productive, military, professional, scientific, criminal and State vigilance – creating new forms of employment and destroying existing activities.

The internet has transformed the patterns of coordinating communication of the most diverse social activities, which now come to be mediated by computational systems, whose algorithms are developed by commercial firms or by the State for the control of the population and which store up all the information transmitted by their users. In addition to the potential danger that the systematic dependence on centralized systems represents, there is an increasing tendency to place the responsibility for decisions and errors onto these systems. Today we are becoming used to hear from firms: “We are sorry but it was a system error”, a response that will soon be employed in relation to any situation, from the mistakes of governments to the most diverse professional services.

*Plugged/unplugged.* Solitude as the experience of being with oneself, reflecting, reading or “with nothing to do”, has come to be substituted by multitasking, a constant connection with social networks and messages – whether during work

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32. Solijonov, A. *Voter turnout trends around the world*. Stockholm: Idea. 2016. Available: [www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf](http://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf) Accessed: 05/06/2020

time or leisure, or mixing both, connecting up with the “outside world” when at work and with work in one’s free time. The end of solitude, not as a feeling of emptiness, but as one of long spaces of time for concentrated reflection which the reading of a book, for instance, requires, are tending to disappear through the “need” to be always accessible to respond to short messages and look at images on the social networks.

*Monetary and non-monetary relations.* Capitalism is permanently producing new products, many of which involve monthly expenditures (such as the cell phone for every member of the family, access to cable TV, a car etc.), which feeds an orientation to consumption which is revived up through publicity. In a consumption society money becomes central in almost all social contexts. This is not to say that income is not fundamental, and it is not a question, therefore, of idealizing a world without money, but in earlier times a large part of social interaction was conducted in less monetarized spaces. Only a few decades ago, children, even from the middle classes, had few toys which lasted for much longer.

Cultures of “class consumption” defined expectations, ways of dressing and eating. These subcultures of class consumption have been substituted by the “universal” spaces of publicity, supermarkets and famous brands. If some consumer goods can be considered superfluous, the expression of fashion or social distinction, others are essential to the quality of life and necessary for the enjoyment of civilizing advances. Nevertheless, a part of the population spends above its income, making use of credit cards and bank loans, in a dynamic that leads to private indebtedness and the creation of speculative bubbles that periodically explode. A recent study has concluded that six out of every ten people in the United States have not enough savings to pay for emergency expenditures of between five hundred dollars and a thousand dollars.<sup>33</sup>

It can be argued that the consumer society is more egalitarian, although it at the same time created unrealizable expectations for most of the population who cannot pay their monthly bills. It is a society where the point of arrival is continually moving because “needs” never stop increasing, and insecurity with regard to future employment, income and decent conditions of retirement is permanent.

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33 Vasel, K. “Six in every ten Americans don’t have US\$500 in savings”, CNN. New York. 12/02/2017. Available: <https://money.cnn.com/2017/01/12pf/americans-lack-of-savings/index.html> Accessed: 07/07/2020

*Authority/hierarchy.* With the end of norms dictated by tradition, modern societies stimulate a questioning of all the established types of social hierarchies and principles of authority. Egalitarian individualism has led to the disintegration of feelings of deference – and on occasions fear – in relation to parents, the old, and, more generally, hierarchical structures. The values of individuality and equality, the more egalitarian relations within the family, the loss of the aura surrounding politicians – whose private lives are now constantly under scrutiny –, and the questioning of specialists – as more people search for information and alternative diagnostics on the internet -, have diluted hierarchies and the acceptance of authority in the most diverse fields of social life.

Increasing individualization leads to a personalization of all relations, whether in the family, where parents have to be alert to the particularities of their children or in the production system and services that are continually diversifying their offerings in the effort to establish a personal relation with the client. In today's firms, at least those that depend on the autonomy and the creativity of their employees, it is considered that, in addition to the salary, personal motivation and a good working environment are fundamental. A similar tendency can be found in the public services, where teachers, for instance, are required to take into account the individual characteristics of each child and adolescent, and doctors the same with regard to their patients.

The demand for respect – for children, women, ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals and service workers – represents an important advance in the democratization of social relations. On the other hand, in certain cases, the libertarian impulse rather than universalizing respect produces an anti-social narcissism, which ignores the norms of civility, collective needs and is incapable of recognizing and learning from the experience and knowledge of others.

*Individualism and egalitarianism.* Capitalism produces inequality and democracy promotes equality, but each, in different ways strengthens the values of personal autonomy and individualism. In this way, one of the paradoxes of our times is the penetration of the liberal capitalist economic culture – which has promoted the calculation of gains and losses in personal relations, together with egoism and competition which is enhanced by virtual networks where egocentrism and narcissism predominate – and a culture of consumption which promotes universal desires and informal relations, all of which simultaneously strengthen a libertarian and to a certain extent an egalitarian culture.

A society in which people base themselves on the principle of “me first”, does not accept hierarchies or submission to any norm or authority which is seen to be against its interests or its personal sensibilities. People who send “selves” of themselves on holiday, of the meals they are enjoying in restaurants, and the new products they have acquired, animates a world where everybody wants what the other has. In this way it promotes a radical egalitarianism which is guided by the principle: “if others have it why shouldn’t I?”

*Heteronomy and autonomy.* The individual in contemporary society is someone who navigates between heteronomy – where conduct and desires are shaped by the wishes and expectations of others –, and autonomy -the capacity to decide freely based on reflection and one’s own value judgments. Opposition between these only surfaces when the external imposition is unambiguous, but in modern society heteronomy works by induction, which is generally unconscious, whether through publicity, the jealousies which makes one want to live the “moments of happiness” posted by “friends” in social networks, and which leads to wanting to purchase more objects and have more “experiences” which in its turn requires a credit card. In the public sphere it can produce an abdication of critical reflection, closing oneself in the bubbles produced by fake news. The great challenge of the educational system, therefore, is to strengthen a person’s capacity to act autonomously.

*Feminine/masculine.* The transformations in the relations between the sexes and the new formats of the family (recombinants, serial monogamy – various marriages – homosexual couples) and sexual orientations have broken down the system of norms and expectations formed in a patriarchal culture which is still widely entrenched. The erosion of patriarchal power and the loss of control over female sexuality produces a machismo reaction by men who feel they are losing the references for identifying their place in the world.

*Nature/society.* The radical separation between society and nature – on the basis of which the scientific-technological paradigm and the modern economy has been built, where nature represents an external neutral object to be controlled and exploited – is being substituted, under the influence of the environmentalist movement, by a viewpoint in which humans are integral to and dependent on a greater system which must be preserved. Instead of nature being a variable whose price is defined by the market, our relation to nature must, in the words of Hans Jonas, be based on the “principle of responsibility”. For Jonas, our actions, including those in the economic sphere, must take into account not only the immediate consequences but also the interests of the generations yet to come.

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Confronted with the disintegration of institutional frontiers and the transformation of the most varied areas of activity, the social sciences (economics, psychology, political science, education, juridical sciences and communication) have seen their explanatory capacity greatly diminished. The social science disciplines developed their theoretical frameworks on the supposition of the existence of relatively autonomous subsystems of social life. As these frontiers are broken down, they produce a systemic instability, requiring a vision of society as a whole, which is foreign to the specialization that characterizes the different disciplines. The call to interdisciplinary and to complexity, although valid is difficult to accomplish since it must confront both the inertia of established paradigms and the lack of causal models capable of responding to the interdependent causalities contemporary societies.

## 9. DEMOCRATIC CONVIVIALITY AS “POLYTHEISM” OF VALUES

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“Value” is a polysemic concept, which is to say that it has a variety of meanings and uses in different contexts. All of these, however, refer to criteria which allow one to discriminate, to compare qualities and make judgments on what is right and what is wrong. Values express feelings, reasoning, and the ability to establish emotional relationships with others, with the practical objective of indicating the way forward in social action. Moral values orient personal conduct in everyday personal life, while ethical values refer to our social interaction in the public sphere.

Moral and ethical values are related but not juxtaposed. In democratic societies, ethical values, many of which are incorporated into legal norms (which does not mean that all legal norms are based on ethics) guide our conduct as citizens or as professional groups. They are universal, that is, they should be applied in a similar way to everyone. For example, public functionaries need to be able to relate to citizens independently of any subjective sentiment they may hold, and all our fellow citizens should be treated with the same civility. Impersonality in the application of ethical values, which requires that personal interests and feelings be held in abeyance, is quite difficult to achieve because it demands a civic culture that disciplines our emotions, prejudices and personal sympathies or interests.

Moral values include dimensions relating to our intimacy, such as love, responsibility and generosity for those close to us. The way in which we carry out these values are not separable from particular and subjective ties, such as those of the family and friends or relations which we are interested in promoting. Solidarity, for example, cannot be completely separated from the individual subjective dimension, since although we may have fraternal feelings for other people, our feelings for the needs of others are formed by concentric circles, which increase in intensity to the degree in which we come close to those who make up part of our immediate group.

Life, liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, individualism, security, free initiative, solidarity, private property, the nation and human rights are values that are present in the repertoires of the constitutions of all contemporary democratic capitalist societies. When applied to concrete situations these values may come into conflict with each other. As a result, personal life as much as societal



organization requires that values be placed in some sort of hierarchy or balanced accordingly with specific circumstances.

Social life in a democracy is founded on the recognition that individuals have to deal with a range of values that could have conflicting implications in concrete situations, and it is up to each one to negotiate a “synthesis” both individually and collectively, which will always be precarious and contextual. To give only a few examples: “you must not kill” allows for exceptions in cases of self-defense; compulsory vaccination can be seen as an imposition and an attack on individuals freedom of choice; services which are necessary for the public good must be financed by taxes which constitute a limitation on the rights of private property. In addition, consumer protection, public regulation of urban land, the financial system, the use of medicines, or pollution controls among so many different forms of intervention by the public authorities, impose limits on individual liberty and free initiative.

The democratic optimum means living with the sub-optimum at the level of individual values, but this is the price for making all values feasible and able to complement each other. A society whose objective is to optimize a single value tends to self-destruct. It is only necessary to undertake a mental experiment of what the life of an individual or a nation would be if it were organized around a single value: it would simply become unworkable. As systems theory teaches us, the greater the number of criteria we are able to take into account in the organization of our lives, the better will be the solutions achieved. This is equally true in the case when values are put into practice: no society can be exclusively organized on the basis of market mechanisms, or the hierarchical command system of the Armed Forces, or via anonymous bureaucratic or central rules, or the endless exchange of opinions among scientists, or the asymmetric relations between parents and children, or on the basis of friendships.

Neither individuals nor societies can be oriented by a single set of values, with the possible exception of saints who are able to neutralize their egos, pathological behavior, or societies submitted to totalitarian dictatorships. Even orthodox religions must choose, in practice, how to apply the range of values and orientations provided by the sacred texts. When political regimes attempt to impose a single value system – whether State collectivism, xenophobic nationalism, unbridled individualism, or religious fundamentalism – they must resort to the systematic use of repressive mechanisms to “eliminate” other values that remain alive despite their censorship.

The plurality of values and reflection go together. We reflect because no situation is unequivocal, and requires decisions that take into account gains and losses, not

only economic but also moral and emotional. It is evident that in extreme situations, such as wartime, defeating the enemy can occupy the collective imagination as the principal value. In times of peace, however, only totalitarian ideologies and political demagogues proclaim and promote a single value. It is not by accident that authoritarian discourses aim to create a “state of war” political environment.

Life in society requires that we educate ourselves to take into account many different values that include the diverse facets of our everyday personal identity and interests (of the individual him/herself, family, friends, professions, beliefs or ideologies). The capacity to negotiate values is as much the object of democratic political life as it is the basis of personal autonomy. To judge is the ability in each situation to weight different values, and take decisions that always include some arbitrary aspects, because they imply sacrificing to some degree principles which are dear to us. To mediate and negotiate the conflicts and complementarities of differing values, finding solutions that are able to gain the support of the society, constitutes the objective of democratic political life.

Since they are very generic, polysemic and interconnected, values become a minefield when we try to define them in a rigorous fashion. In practice, our judgments are formed largely on the basis, of what we do not accept or want, values suggest to us more what we do not wish for rather than what we positively desire.

Values are always history embedded. If, for instance, we take the case of liberty, we are confronted with a monumental bibliography, which steadily increases, of authors who battle over the most adequate definitions. In the classical liberal definition, it is the right to autonomy, to act without suffering coercion or external constraints, and in a context in which the role of the State is reduced to that of ensuring that the liberty of one person does not interfere with the liberty of another. We are dealing here with a minimalist definition, which nevertheless demands that citizens decide the rules by which “the liberty of one person does not interfere with the liberty of another”. This leads us on to the republican definition of liberty in which the citizen must participate in public life and assume responsibility for the common good if his/her rights and obligations are to be ensured.

The common good, however, is not reducible to the abstract liberty of the individual, independently of the social conditions in which he/she lives. Liberty, as the Nobel prize winner for economics Amartya Sen argues, is only meaningful if the basic conditions for achieving autonomy are ensured, involving the possibility of the development of personal capacities. What meaning can autonomy have for someone

who has no access to school education or to someone who does not earn enough to buy food and medicines for his/her children? This leads us back once more to the role of the State, initially limited in its attributions in order not to become an oppressor of liberty, but now transformed into the provider of public services which guarantee the basic conditions for the population as a whole, so that all can act with autonomy.

## VALUES AND INTERESTS

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In daily communication people tend to oppose values to interests. To do something based on interests means that we orient our conduct in accordance with a rational calculation for the obtention of personal benefit, generally of a material nature, whereas those who are oriented by values are considered to have the common good as their concern.

This view is associated with an interpretation of human conduct in which interest is seen as something “natural” arising from the human condition, whereas values demand a specific effort and extraordinary qualities. In practice, for the greater part of human history, and until only recently, people were guided by passions, beliefs and norms that did not imply any rational calculation of personal benefits. Most people were motivated by – and even gave up their lives for – religious values, honor, country, glory, a leader, individual passions and for many other reasons which have emerged since the origins of humanity.

In the capitalist world, the dominant idea of interest is related to financial loans, whose daily expression is the banking system. The idea of interest with meanings other than financial gain, however, has remained present. The public interest, the national interest, interest as a vocation or as curiosity, are not simply extensions of the notion of material gain. When we think of people dear to us, we are concerned for their interests and not our own (for example when we desire that our children be happy and follow their interests not those of their parents). In fact, only in the modern era has it been possible to reflect and distinguish between our own interests (in their most varied attributions) and those of others, since we have now defined ourselves as free beings who should follow their own choices, and in this way we understand both ourselves and others as singular beings.

If we understand “acting on the basis of interest” as characterizing the fact that each does what is in accordance with one’s beliefs and that in some way this brings “satisfaction”, even if it implies suffering, pain, or death, then clearly everyone,

including altruistic saints act on the basis of interest. In this case, the concept of “interest” comes to have a meaning quite different from that applied in daily use. We would be referring to a simple affirmation that we do what we do based on our mental universe of that which “interests” us without that implying that we maximize gains or personal utility.

What we call personal monetary interest is, in reality, a value that has only established itself in the last few centuries in connection with the development of capitalist relations. It is only in the context of these relations that a vision of the individual emerges which is only oriented to the rational calculation of economic gains in their social transactions. Clearly, this value is part of people’s mental universe in contemporary society, but other values continue to orientate our choices even in commercial settings – from those of trust within the firm or in the provider of services, or decisions under the impact of publicity or those resulting from habit. Each choice that we make is the result of an ample repertoire of criteria, which are constantly modified in accordance with personal and social contexts.

Considerations of affection permeate our family and friendship relations in which solidarity and empathy are fundamental values and which comprise an integral part of our personal well-being. The transposition of the model which emerges within the economic sphere, that of individuals who maximize their gains, to the social environment or the public arena is even more problematic. The single-minded valorization of personal gain and immediate hedonistic satisfaction would lead to the decomposition of social relations and would place at risk the functioning of the capitalist system itself, which depends above all on cooperation. Almost all of our acts and our very survival depend on the actions of a wide range of people who make our daily life possible, and we would be paralyzed or paranoid if we suspected that other people only care for their personal gain, with no orientation to values such as responsibility, ties of sociability and concern with the collective good.

In our participation and political choices, considerations of personal gain certainly occupy a central place. However, these are not the only criteria. Some authors argue, for instance, that from the point of view of rational calculation voting is a waste of time since the weight of any individual vote is insignificant. It is very difficult to imagine, however, that anyone participates in elections calculating the relative weight of their vote. Those who vote do so because they feel responsible for the future of their community, because they feel empowered in expressing their preferences, because they wish to participate in an event which will affect their lives and of which they are a part, and/or because they wish to share in a civic event. None of these

reasons operates on the level of an individual calculating personal costs and benefits, rather they are part of values associated with participating in a community. And those who do not vote, are also not motivated by a rational calculation, but by a loss of confidence and a sense of apathy in relation to the alternatives offered by the political system.

In the public space differentiating between values and interests can be useful tool to distinguish ends from means. In this sense, interest refers to the use of rational calculation in a way which allows qualitative and indivisible values to be separated out in practical and quantifiable forms, so that they can then be negotiated in confrontation with the interests generated by other values. On this understanding, interests are ways of translating values in terms of their practical consequences, which allows them to be negotiated in the public arena in a rational way and validated in terms of the consequences they bring. The challenge of transforming values into interests does not imply a dilution of one's values but the ability to transform these into practical proposals, which can be the object of negotiation in confrontation with the interests promoted by other values.

For different values to coexists peacefully they cannot be presented as absolutes which would lead to denying the legitimacy of those who hold different views to participate in the public sphere. Conflicts of values, therefore, are susceptible or not to resolution depending on the way they are elaborated as political narratives. The conflict between capital and labor, for example, was, for a long time, presented by ideologies of the right and the left as an antagonistic confrontation which demanded on the one side the prohibition of trade unions and political parties which represented the demands of the word of work, and, on the other, the elimination of private property and the market. Democratic capitalism has not eliminated class conflict, but it has transformed the terms in which it was perceived, leading to negotiated solutions that profoundly transformed both sides and society as a whole.

The role of democratic political ideologies is that of formatting our values into a vision of the desirable society, defining priorities, and, above all, defining the direction that should be taken. They are practical responses in which values are combined in different ways in each political ideology – whether that of individuals or parties.

Many of these combinations can seem bizarre such as the social policies pioneered by the conservative chancellor, Otto von Bismarck at the service of the Prussian Emperor at the end of the nineteenth century, or the social reforms of the U.S. President, Franklin de Roosevelt in the twentieth century that were considered

“communist” by the opposition. Even Hitler, who saw capitalism as having a greater affinity with his ideal of the “survival of the fittest”, although he eliminated the trade unions, maintained many of the rights that the German working class had achieved. More recently, we now have a form of capitalism, “under the leadership of the Communist Party”, both in China and in Vietnam. In practice, all political regimes and all governments reveal “bizarre” ways of organizing the relations between the State and society, because they are obliged to find practical solutions – which are often not acknowledged in a clear manner in ideological discourses - to the conflicts of value inherent to social life.

Recognizing the legitimacy of conflicts over values and interests and the institutional mechanisms that allow for social harmony and the search for peaceful solutions produces uncertainties given the enormous variety of voices in society. If the solutions encountered are precarious and changing, the diversity of viewpoints drives society on to produce new responses and creative solutions.

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## “POLYTHEISM” OF VALUES

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“Polytheism” is a concept used by various authors, such as Pope Bento XVI,<sup>34</sup> Max Weber<sup>35</sup> and Richard Rorty<sup>36</sup> to describe a world in which individuals are guided by a multiplicity of values that gives meaning to their lives. For Pope Bento XVI, polytheism is a negative phenomenon, because it implies the loss of the unity of life’s meaning given by Catholic monotheism. For Weber, on the other hand, the notion of the polytheism of values was elaborated in opposition – generally more implicit than explicit – to socialist thinkers view that a society can be built only on the values of solidarity. Thinkers such as Norberto Bobbio and Leszek Kolakowski placed the antinomy of values at the center of their political philosophies, while Rorty argued that the “polytheism” of values is a more adequate vision of the world from a democratic perspective, since it involves a respect for pluralism and the autonomy of the individual.

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34 Sandro Magister, “The New Polytheism and its Tempter Idols”. Available: <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1345887?eng=y>. Accessed: 12/02/2019

35 See: Weber, M. “Science as a Vocation”. In Gerth, H. H.; Wright Mills, C. (orgs.). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1948; Weber, M. “The Meaning of “Ethical Nautrality” in Sociology and Economics”. In Shils, E. A.; Finch, H. A. (orgs), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Illinois: The Free Press, Glencoe, 1949. See also Freund, J. “Le Polythéisme chez Max Weber”, *Persée*, Lyon, v 61 pp51-61, 1986. Available: [www.persee.fr/doc/assr\\_0335-5985\\_1986\\_num\\_61\\_1\\_2384](http://www.persee.fr/doc/assr_0335-5985_1986_num_61_1_2384). Accessed: 07/05/2020

36 Rorty, R. “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism”, *The New York Times*, New York. Available: [www.nytimes.com/books/first/d/dickstein-ptagmatism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/d/dickstein-ptagmatism.html)>. Accessed: 06/02/2019

As with Weber and Rorty, we use the term “polytheism” in a metaphorical sense. The notion polytheism, therefore, as used in this text, has nothing to say about the existence of a single god, nor does it imply that religious monotheisms<sup>37</sup> have no place in a world guided by the polytheism of values, or that contemporary polytheism is similar to that of antiquity. On the contrary, in a world oriented by the polytheism of values, religious monotheism is not excluded, but it is accepted that this religious universe can coexist with other beliefs, with other value systems, and other meanings of life. In this way, the polytheism of values is simply the recognition that co-existence in democratic societies requires accepting that there is no universal value which can provide the basis and the measure of all decisions.

Modern polytheism transfers to the individual the responsibility and the right to define the way in which choices will be made, with legal interdictions providing the only restriction. Valuing polytheism, therefore, does not imply a return to the past since modern polytheism is based on quite a different political and sociocultural context.

In earlier times, magical and mythological dimensions permeated all aspects of society whereas today institutional differentiation, the role of scientific legitimation, and free debate based on reason, limit the space for transcendent beliefs in the private sphere. The polytheism of antiquity was the product of a system of beliefs that accepted multiple gods as part of tradition and was not defended in the name of individual liberty and pluralism that sustains western culture. Whereas in theist polytheism, the diversity of values and motivations are attributed to different gods, each one representing a specific quality, which influences the destiny of individuals and the collective, in the modern context it is the individual who assumes values and passions as his personal choices, and is therefore responsible for his own actions.

As Rorty argues, the challenge facing modern democratic societies is that of completing the process of secularisation overcoming the remains of secular political “monotheism” in contemporary societies. Secular monotheism substituted human for divine omnipotence and is present in authoritarian political ideologies. Nothing indicates that Rorty’s ideal will be realized, at least within any foreseeable future. On the contrary, as we have seen in previous chapters, we are living through the strengthening of new forms of political secular monotheist ideologies and religious fundamentalism.

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37 That is, doctrines revealed by God to special individuals defining his expectations of what is right and wrong, and indicating the way to salvation.

## THE DIFFICULTY OF SURMOUNTING VALUE MONOTHEISM

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In traditional polytheistic societies, the cult of various gods presupposes that all beliefs are true, and the visitor who enters the city gives presents to the local gods as a demonstration of respect. We should remember that in the Greco-Roman world, the Jews first and then the Christians were considered atheists, because they denied the existence of other gods.<sup>38</sup>

Monotheistic religions denounced all other religious beliefs as paganism, the enemy of the one and only truth, the source of the salvation of souls. Monotheism created an absolute and Manichean separation between believers and non-believers – defining those who diverged from the official interpretation as heretics, as is still the case of the Catholic Church today in relation to Protestantism, despite the recent efforts towards an ecumenical approximation – which gave the right to forced conversions or to the elimination of dissidents.

The monotheisms, institutionalized by Judaism, Christianity, and Islamism at least until the nineteenth century when revisionist currents arose within them, were founded on a particular version of human liberty, far removed from that of modernity. It was reduced to a single choice: the way of God or that of sin.

What defines the will of God or otherwise is not the interpretation carried out by each person of the sacred scriptures and the divine figure but the official version – even within Protestantism – of those who possess the monopoly over the interpretation (priests, pastors, rabbis, and imams). Doing “good” or “bad” in monotheistic religions is associated with divine rewards and punishments, in the majority of cases to be handed out in the afterlife. In modernity, on the other hand, values are justified in the name of subjective choices and are the responsibility of each individual.

The formation of the modern world and the advance of secularization were convergent processes, leading to the production of truths, of norms, and meanings to life that were no longer the monopoly of clerics, able to punish anyone considered a heretic. As a reminder of these times, in Paris, close to the Montmartre church, can be found the statue of Jean-François Lefebvre de La Barre, a gentleman of twenty

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38 In its first phase, Israelite monotheism did not deny the existence of other gods. The Bible uses the plural, (Elohim – gods), to refer to God, and mentions other divinities, with the God of Israel being the most powerful, as can be seen in the image of Moses confronting the Pharaoh’s priests and the reference to other deities. For a long period, Judaism was a monolatry, which recognised the existence of other gods but prohibited cults to them. With time, this became transformed into monotheism, with the existence of other gods no longer being recognised.



one years who in the eighteenth century was condemned to have his bones broken because he did not take off his hat and kneel before a religious procession. He had his tongue and his right hand cut off, was decapitated and his ashes thrown to the winds.

Secularization involves a long process, still underway, of the formation of a political culture and institutions in which power is no longer legitimated by divine delegation, but as the expression of the popular will, in which individuals have the right to think and express their ideas freely, with religion becoming a private concern.<sup>39</sup> Democratic modernity does not exclude religious monotheism; in practice rather than eliminating religion the modern world has freed it from the bonds and the deformations resulting from its associated with political power, allowing each individual to negotiate on the basis of his/her own subjectivity the space which religion should occupy in their universe of beliefs.

This passage implied a profound shift in values, in which priority is given to doubt rather than to certitude, curiosity rather than dogma, free choice rather than external impositions, individual rather than divine will, and mundane rather than transcendental reality. Modernity substitutes resignation in the face of “destiny” – which is in the “hands of God” – for individual and collective activism, the assumption of responsibility and self-realization, while rewards which would be obtained in the “after-life” give way to the search for happiness (or the lessening of suffering) in this world. Modern law draws up norms which can be altered by popular will and which are no longer considered immutable principles defined by the sacred texts. Modernity, as much at the scientific, the artistic, and the business level, gives value to creativity, innovation, and the questioning of established truths.

This shift to the individual of the responsibility for defining the “meaning” of life places a new value at the center of social life, that of the freedom to search for the truth according to each person’s conscience and to express this publicly without fear of external punishment. In Europe, the formation of secular societies was impregnated with struggles against the power of the Church to decide what thoughts could be censored. This was a long process, with the Dominican Giordano Bruno being burnt at the stake in 1600, while Galileo only saved himself from the same fate by denying that the earth was round, and that important philosophers such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and even writers like Émile Zola and Nikos Kazantzákis

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39 The extensive work of Marcel Gouchet presents a broad historical panorama of this process. For a different perspective see also Taylor, C. *The Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

had their books placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, the long list of books prohibited by the Catholic Church.

The case of the United States was different in that it is a country formed since its beginnings by “heretical” religious Christians, persecuted by the official Church, which has left a legacy associating the right to liberty as the product of divine will.<sup>40</sup> If, on the one hand, this was profoundly libertarian and led to the proposal to separate the Church and the State, the name of God is mentioned in the country’s Constitution and is printed on every dollar (in God we Trust, translation of the Hebrew acronym: AMEN). The political culture of the founding fathers of the United States has produced a curious synthesis: God’s will is the will of the people, and the search for happiness in this life has substituted for the kingdom of God.

Secular political ideologies have not broken entirely with the expectations associated with the religious tradition. Paradise has been substituted by the realization of utopias in this world and divine omnipotence has given way to the belief in progress and the power of reason and science to resolve all the problems that trouble us. Modernity has produced its myths and cults: in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the great ideologies and political philosophies maintained their discursive structures and expectations, which to a certain extent attempted to present themselves as alternatives to the religious universe. In their extreme, totalitarian, versions the similarities are even more pronounced. In communist regimes, Marx and Lenin’s texts were sacralized and their authors sanctified, and the party and its political leader came to exercise a monopoly over the interpretation of truth. Even so, to the extent that they were imbued with the values of modernity, secular monotheisms must validate their promises in this world and not after death, and could be exposed by the facts, leading to a shortening of their longevity.

The transfer of religious categories to the political field by leaders or authoritarian political ideologies finds its expression in the implicit or explicit use of the opposition between the pure and the impure. Purity is the prerogative of the political party, the leaders and the values which they express as representatives of the nation, the class or the people. Everything that is done to defend them is justified in the name of this greater good. The impure are the rest, and any contact with them leads to contamination, and for this they must be demonized, isolated and, if possible, expelled from the social life.

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<sup>40</sup> The majority of the “founding fathers” who drew up the U.S constitution were deists (they acknowledged the existence of God, as creator of the universe), but they did not associate this with any specific revelation.

Some authors see in this continuity between religious practices and secular political ideologies the inability of modernity to legitimate itself outside the Judeo-Christian tradition and break with religious traditions.<sup>41</sup> This is clearly an exaggeration, because no modern political ideology – and even less so democratic regimes – can be reduced to their elements of continuity with monotheistic religion. At best, it is possible to argue that magical and mythical elements present in all societies persist in modern politics.

A critique of these elements of continuity between monotheistic religions and secular monotheisms remains relevant to the extent that it reminds us of the dangers and the challenges which contemporary democratic societies face, and the need to deepen the break with the monotheism of values which are still in evidence both in secular political ideologies and in religious fundamentalism.

## THE VALUES OF MODERNITY

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Although the values of contemporary liberal democracy seem to form a coherent whole, they have emerged at different moments of history and have been mutually influencing. The historical period which they span, the last six hundred years, was also that of the rise of capitalism, but these diverse values cannot be reduced to, nor deduced from, the requirements of the new model of production, which was effectively established with the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Among the various factors which gave rise to the diversity of the modern world's values we can enumerate the most important:

1. Humanist thought and art which expanded as from the Italian Renaissance in the fourteenth century and which recovered the classical Hellenist tradition valuing curiosity and rationality, placing the human being, its body and nature at the center of its preoccupations.
2. The scientific revolution, which looks for explanations of natural and social phenomena without reference to transcendental forces, through the free confrontation of hypotheses and empirical research, and which has led to the creation of autonomous academic institutions previously dominated by the clergy.

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41 Carl Schmitt is possibly the most representative of this current of thought.

3. The mass production of books, thanks to the printing press, which stimulated literacy, and which for the first time since the development of writing allowed the population access to reading books, created a market for writers, and made the way for the rise of journalism.
4. Protestantism, which broke with the cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church and whose theology gave rise to a new form of individualism. The expansion of Protestantism resulted in the religious wars of the seventeenth century which led to States tolerating a plurality of creeds.
5. The creation of a system of sovereign national States as the basic unit of the international system, which was launched with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and which led to the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, founded on the principle of the self-determination of peoples.
6. The ideal of individual autonomy and the ability to be guided by reason and feelings, promoted by rationalist and enlightenment philosophical thought from the seventeenth century by Rene Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant.
7. The republican principle of popular sovereignty which eliminated the privileges of the aristocracy and declared the sovereignty of the people, made up of citizens, as the only legitimate source of political power. A principle which was first applied in the United States in 1776, then in the French Revolution of 1789, and in the Latin-American Republics at the beginning of the nineteenth century.
8. Capitalism as a system of values which includes the inviolability of private property, production and exchange organized through market based contractual relations and the earning of profit as the objective of business activity.

The different values associated with specialized fields of activity created social sub-systems, with their own rules, which protected them from outside influence. In this way, journalism, liberal professions, the academy, the judicial system and public service, for example, became institutionalized as areas with differentiated norms and ethical principles.

While each field of activity has its own specific genealogy, the different fields continuously exert influences on each other. The scientific revolution, for instance, which emerged as from the Renaissance in the XIV century, was promoted by absolutist

monarchs who in the XVII century created Royal Science Academies. At the same time, scientific thinking and the advance of secularism reinforced each other.

Many of the institutions which today we associate with capitalist democracy, such as the division of powers and popular sovereignty, were the product of political theories and social struggles, which preceded the Industrial Revolution and stretched from the English Magna Carta of 1215 - to the confrontations with absolutist monarchies.

A long historical process of social, political and cultural struggles, with advances and retreats, including extremely violent wars, created the socio-economic, political and cultural transformations that have shaped the modern world. A part of these processes had their epicenter in Europe, but they were influenced by political factors in other parts of the world, such as the independence of the United States, the Russian Revolution, the anti-colonial struggles and the world wars.

The fact that modernity erupted in a particular geographical space within a common time frame (the last five centuries) has produced an extensive bibliography examining the reasons for the emergence of what is known as western civilization, and questioning whether this could have occurred in other contexts. The debate is certainly interesting, but hypotheses can only be confronted with imagined counterfactuals and can never be proven. The reality is that the innovations that arose in Europe have altered the cultures of the globe in a radical fashion and continue to be a decisive element of contemporary history.

## THE FRAGILITY OF VALUES

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Human creativity, imagination, desires and emotions remain to a large extent beyond the explanatory power of scientific thought. Various disciplines and currents of thought identify relevant aspects of the functioning of the human mind, but these constitute an archipelago of areas of knowledge that are little engaged in communication among them.

Different currents of psychology have developed hypotheses relevant for characterizing the mental states which are present in the development of individuals and in their social interactions, as in: the analyses of the role of external conditioning explored by the behaviorists; the importance of unconscious mechanisms and the first stages of childhood identified by psychoanalysis; the development of intellectual faculties and learning processes by the cognitivist school; the structures of language

studied by linguistics; the components inherited from our animal past in evolutionary psychology; the different cognitive biases studied by social psychologists.

Behavioral economics has equally questioned the presuppositions of the central ideas of this discipline: the concept of homo economicus as someone capable of processing an infinite amount of information and thereby able to make rational decisions. Economic Sociology has demonstrated that individual liberty and decisions are always embedded in society reality and that markets depend on inter-personal trust and access to social networks that filter and circulate information within their own internal circuits.

More recently, neuroscience had developed an analysis of the association between different activities and mental states and the mobilization of neuronal and biochemical processes. The study of artificial intelligence has come to occupy a central place in research on the human mind, and a number of authors believe that it will be capable of substituting human intelligence, although, at present this is still an unconfirmed prophecy. Logical operations can be reproduced by computers and can even be more efficient than humans can, but we still far from understand how humans “think”, how emotions are formed and take shape, and how we imagine and create. If we feed a computer with algorithms, which reflect our mental processes and our intentions, we do not create humans but only a mirror of the practical dilemmas of humans.

The human world is constituted through the interaction between the mind, culture and biology. A computer may be able to process algorithms more efficiently and more rapidly than humans, but the ability and the need to make judgments, to choose at each moment according to diverse desires and beliefs, differentiate humans from the most advanced of computers. The danger, at least for today, is not that machines will be transformed into a post-human species, but that we humans accommodate ourselves to following orientations given by computers.

Above all, what distinguishes humans is our ability to make judgments for which we feel responsible. Judgments articulate the cultural and the biological dimension, individual finitude and participation in communities which will outlive us, feelings and reason, thoughts and acts, self-interest and empathy and identification with the interests of others.

The fear and the neurological mechanisms which inform us of pain or pleasure are innate and alert us to the most diverse dangers which we face and are, therefore, necessary for our survival as humans. Social contexts transform and direct this fear

and pain towards targets which are culturally produced, and which can be mobilized against social groups with the most varied political and religious objectives.

The relation between the individual and culture expresses a constitutive tension because the answers which culture provides do not exclude the impulses, desires, and fears of each concrete person. In the best of cases, individuality is disciplined, domesticated and socially channeled but never eliminated. In the same way, creativity is present in all human action, but it is socially oriented by the incorporation of individuals into organizations with norms and power structures which limit the options for action and direct them towards particular fields of activity, both in private life and in the public sphere (markets, scientific, religious and artistic institutions, and public life).

Culture is always prior to each individual and its mechanisms have a longevity greater than that of a single life because it is cumulative and transgenerational. If the individual is a product of culture, (s)he will always be a particular expression of that culture, because it is internalized and absorbed on the basis of personal psychological mechanisms and impulses. Culture responds to individual and collective needs (whether in the search for and distribution of material goods, or providing answers to fears produced by illness and the consciousness of death).

Value systems do not exist if they are separated from biological and mental structures, which, to a large extent, are determined by mechanisms which act beyond the control of the individual conscience. Values are, therefore, permeated by reasons which reason is ignorant of. They express and are affected and modified by the most diverse emotions and by social and psychic mechanisms that we are unaware of, and even when we are, we are not always able to control them. Aggression, for example, which is built up through frustrations, resentments and feelings of insecurity can be expressed in an individual manner or can be channeled through collective action. Individually, it expresses itself in forms of self-aggression – depression and alcoholism for example – or in physical and symbolic violence against other persons. Collectively, it is externalized in the humiliation of the weakest, in racism, war and authoritarian ideologies which channel violence and repress anger, through political "enemies", in fact scapegoats. The fact that racism and xenophobia are still deeply rooted is proof both of the capacity of people to be politically manipulated and the degree to which varied forms of ethnocentrism are deeply entrenched and present in societies all through their history.

Is freedom a historical construct, a pragmatic concept, which allows society to attribute responsibility to people for their acts – even if they are determined by factors out of their control – or is it inherent in the human condition? What is the basis of the ideal of freedom? Is its value dated, the product of a specific historical period, or is it associated with the very nature of the human condition?

We will probably never have definitive answers to these questions. What we do know is that societies do not produce homogeneous beings who automatically reproduce transmitted norms and knowledge. The human condition includes a predisposition or a potentiality, which is rooted in the desires and creativity of each individual – more or less reinforced by personal characteristics, social and cultural contexts – for some form of individuality. Disobedience to the will of God (or to the gods or spirits), as the first step towards freedom of choice, is present in a great diversity of myths in a range of different cultures, the most well-known of which among us is that of Eve eating the fruit of knowledge. Paradoxically, all monotheistic religions with rigorous principles of obedience to norms have as their origin a rupture with tradition by individuals who promote a break with the truths inherited from the past, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

If values are fragile, then the transmission and maintenance of democratic values cannot be reduced to a trust in the force of reason. No one is free from racist, misogynist and authoritarian postures, or from supporting policies that promote them. What guarantees the continuity of democratic life is the strength of the institutions, decent living conditions and the permanent effort of education and learning oriented to conviviality in the home, in school and in the public arena - in particular the development of empathy (the ability to accept difference and to put oneself in the place of others).

## VALUES AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

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There is a long tradition in the social sciences dedicated to explaining values in relation to the social structures. For example, in modern times the value of individual liberty is associated with the disintegration of the social controls present in small communities, substituted by the anonymity of urban life, the dissemination of scientific thinking through education, the generalization of contractual relations, the promotion of free initiative, secularization and the monetarization of social relations.



If, on the one hand, values are intimately related to society's organizational forms, there is no univocal relation between them. Values have a plasticity which allows them to traverse different historical epochs and coexist with distinct political regimes. Similar social structures are associated with an enormous variation in the organizational forms of political power. In Antiquity, in modes of production based on slavery, we find Athenian democracy, autocratic despotism and the aristocratic Roman republic. Various religions span millennia and values related to capitalism have been present in liberal democracies, in Nazism, and in authoritarian regimes. In their turn, similar social contexts can lead to a myriad of responses oriented by very different values. The great economic crisis of 1929 led both to Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States and to Nazism in Germany.

The values of truth, justice and liberty, have emerged since Antiquity and remain until today as the expression of the struggles to make vocal the people's discontent with the established powers. Power has always attempted to impose its own will, its own version of the truth, which is not to be questioned. To question power implies the production of truths (versions of reality), which place in doubt the version of truth of the dominant powers. For the first time in history, democracies have allowed protests against those in government without fear of punishment, which defines the principal difference between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

The values of solidarity, as also the struggles for "freedom" – especially when confronting a foreign oppressor – are millenary. Clearly these were not the same as the struggles for freedom and solidarity of modern times, but they have continued to influence and have become integrated into the narratives which inspire the social and ideological movements of the last centuries (for instance, the importance of the biblical history of the flight from Egypt in the imaginary of the struggles of the black movement for civil rights in the United States).

One tradition in the social sciences considers that values, including religion, represent "false consciousness", mystifications which cover over or justify social realities based on domination and exploitation. It is not possible, within the limits of this work, to develop the various arguments, but we understand that this is only a partial vision, which is not able to explain how religions whether western or oriental, deist or animist, manage to survive the most diverse social transformations. Their survival cannot simply be explained, either, by the fact that they deal with transcendental issues, like the meaning of life and death, since Confucianism focuses on the rules of good governance and the good life, and Judaism, and its

subsequent dissemination in the form of Christianity and Islamism, deals with wider social norms and ideals of the good and evil.

Furthermore, religions are not narratives that praise the powerful. The Bible shows great empires being transformed into puppets by a God at the service of a small and defeated people that envisaged a messianic time of peace and justice. The law of Moses defined Saturday as a day of rest which should include serfs, and instituted laws on the harvest, by which the leftovers should be for the poor, foreigners, orphans and widows. The prophets confronted the kings who stole and mistreated the people, and they rebelled against formal ritualism. "The kind of abstinence that I am aiming for is that you cease oppressing those who work for you and that you treat them with justice, providing them with the wages to which they have a right. I want you to share your food with those who are hungry, poor and without support" (Isaia, 58, 6-7). The Gospels place at the center Jesus message of love and concern for the poor, the ill, and the outcasts. Buddhist principles are oriented to compassion. This long tradition can be summarized in the principles expressed by the rabbi Hillel two thousand years ago: "If I am not for myself who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?"

The diversity of the messages and the contradictions of the holy texts allow for the most diverse interpretations and uses. In the Bible, for example, the figure of the king is initially criticized (God opposed its creation because it would lead to despotism), but the popes were responsible for anointing the monarchs once the Church had allied itself to the imperial Roman power. Once transformed into a political force, a religion that placed love as its central value justified and led the crusades, implemented the Inquisition, took part in wars of conquest and the forced conversion of other peoples, just as the Muslims did in the name of Allah, the merciful, or the Maccabees in the name of Jehovah.

There is an enormous distance, as we know, between the sacred texts, their varied interpretations, and the effective practice of religious institutions. This is without mentioning the relations between political power and religious institutions, which have generally played the role of legitimizing the social order, sharing also in the privileges of the dominant groups.

While it is correct to assert that values should be ensured by institutions with effective power to implement them so that religions are not reduced to mystifications or to compensatory alleviations in the face of the cruelty of the social world, they have also inspired social insurgencies against social oppression. In the Middle

Ages, for example, the Cathars in the south of France formed egalitarian communities and survived centuries of persecution by the Church. The theologian, Thomas Müntzer supported the peasant revolts in Germany during the XVI century, and radical groups in England during the XVII century defended the abolition of private property and the equality of women, inspired by the prophetic and anti-monarchist sources of the Bible. Karl Marx, a fierce critic of religion, remembered for his phrase that defines religion as the opium of the people, wrote in the same paragraph. "Religious suffering is at the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the vision of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless situation".

## THE POLITICAL FRAGILITY OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

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The values of modern society that are presented as an act of individual choice are more fragile and volatile than religious values shrouded in holy mantles. The solidity and longevity of divine figures survive in direct proportion to their non-presence (or, if one prefers, their infinite presence, which allows opposing groups to invoke their protection). In the religious world, those who speak in the name of God may be questioned by others who also share the same divine figure.

In modern times, the empowerment of individuals with freedom to question and decide in an autonomous fashion extracted a high price in terms of subjective disempowerment. After all, is there any greater sensation of power than that of being related to God, the all-powerful and all knowing? Is there any greater comfort than to feel that everything that happens in life, including death, is part of a greater plan, even though this be mysterious? Is there any greater form of security than to believe that our acts – or divine grace – can ensure a place in paradise? Can there be more peace of mind than to believe that our actions correspond to divine will and that makes us feel part of a community of believers?

The separation between individual subjectivity and the transcendental world founded on norms of conduct based on shared beliefs created an abyss between the individual and society, and between the community and the political power, since the monarchs embodied the union between the secular and the transcendental world.

Modern values have not the force of a transcendental meaning, which provides the individual with the feeling of security afforded by an external and sacred power and allows him/her to feel part of a "greater whole".

All this does not imply that the free individual of modernity can be confused with the stylized ideal of the liberal political tradition, in which each person depends only on his/her rationality and discernment to serve as guides in the world. Quite to the contrary, individual freedom is always impregnated with personal circumstances (beginning with birth, a decision taken by others, and which determines the place, the historical moment, and one's family -with its economic situation, religious beliefs, and ethnic and racial characteristics, a whole range of affiliations-), and then continuing in the constant need for social supports to feel recognized and to be part of a community: money, family, employment, profession, friends, ideological group, Church etc.

The individual who does not find justification for his/her situation in tradition and fate is an individual responsible for all his/her problems: if a child of ours is experiencing difficulties, we ask ourselves "what have we done wrong?"; in cases of illness, "why did I not take greater care?"; or if there are problems at work "what did I do or say wrong?"; and if a couple is experiencing difficulties in their relationship we ask "why did I not match up to expectations?".

Each situation leads people to a constant search for answers, in books of self-help or with specialists of various kinds, and will find new answers and questionings in Google searches on the type of advice received, which leads on to new therapies and medication. Paradoxically the advancement of scientific knowledge, creating expectations that illnesses can be prevented and cured, increases our feelings of fragility and of "dangers" associated with what we do or desist from doing.

Democracy, as a series of rules and procedures for dealing with social conflict, having as a value the exercise of individual freedom and the acceptance of pluralism, provides a framework for social behavior, but no substantive answers to the challenges and choices which social life demands. Individuals in democratic, in contrast to traditional, societies navigate between the promise of security that progress should provide, and an uncertainty produced by the absence of a point of arrival and a journey which involves constant changes in our lives. These uncertainties include marriage, whose duration is unpredictable, choices that children may make without considering the position of their parents, an unpredictability with regard to the future of one's professions or work, and the volatility of accumulated assets. This insecurity leads to a search for protection in the political system, whether that of the political tradition of the conservative right, which looks to slow down the rhythm of changes in customary practices, or in the traditions of the left, which offer greater socio-economic security through the State's social policies.

In the modern world, the search for scientific and technological answers has occupied a large part of the space (social, biological or psychological) previously dominated by animist or magical practices. However, this is now a “disenchanted” world, where the individual must decide each step without the “certainties” provided by the sacred and the expectation of rewards in the after-life, and where finitude can find no refuge in sentiments of resignation or the identification with transcendental powers. The future is ever a wager, because reason has no control over the unknown or the arbitrary, despite efforts to shield oneself in statistical calculations or in scenarios produced by “risk analysis” firms. The contemporary world is a universe devoted to controlling the future, and both the problems and the solutions are unpredictable.

Until modern times, various civilizations presented themselves as eternal (for some, including the Apocalypse, the arrival of the Messiah and other eschatologies), and exceptional events and transformations were interpreted as divine rewards or punishments, which allowed for the new, the fortuitous, or the unknown to be reinterpreted and given new eternal meaning.

The modern world has transformed the acceptance of the new into something normal, although changes still provoke insecurity and the desire to return to the known, to the past. Many authors and political and ideological movements criticize modern life for being a retreat and impoverishment in relation to the past, when, although the majority of the population experienced need and were at the mercy of nature’s inclemencies and illnesses, they nevertheless had a life full of meaning and subjective stability.

There can be no “objective” argument about which of these worlds is to be preferred but it must be recognized that a disenchanted world created a new sense of fragility. If modernity has liberated individual creativity and has allowed for a revolution in the ability to control illnesses, to increase life expectancy, to diminish pain, increase production and the availability of food, create new systems of communication and transport and multiply social wealth, the cost has been increasing the loss of a sense of belonging to a world of transcendental meaning.

The secularized “polytheistic” world weakens collective action. The atomization of society into individuals whose priorities are his/her own particular values, makes it difficult to create a consensus which can guide the construction of projects for the future. The production of meaning in the contemporary world brings with it formidable challenges, both within national societies, and even more so in the construction of a global governance oriented by common values.

## CONCLUSIONS

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Both life in society and that of individuals are awash with value conflicts. Everyone carries with them various “others”, and all our systems of values and beliefs are full of contradictions, and the conflicts they give rise to are efforts to respond to the drama of the human condition and life in society. To believe that there is a “superior value” to which all should submit, or be eliminated, opens the way to totalitarianism, whether religious or secular.

Humanity, made up of singular individuals with their own quite different wills, is by its nature plural. Such plurality is resolved by the violent imposition of the will of some over others, by reference to external norms sanctioned by a system of power, or by the creation of mechanisms for the construction of consensus, which demand communication between those involved and the negotiation of solutions. The starting point for political democracy is the recognition of diversity and plurality, which is also its point of arrival, since the solutions agreed on do not require that the different parties renounce their values.

The stakes in the conflict between “polytheism” and “monotheism” are not personal beliefs, whether religious or otherwise, but the institutionally organized system of power to which they are submitted. In the case of religious or secular monotheism, the individual is subjected to the community – in reality to those who control political power and possess the keys which provide access to the correct interpretation of the sacred texts, the line of the party, or the “essence of the nation” – ; whereas for modern polytheism, each individual must pursue, express and confront his/her truth through dialogue.

# FINAL REMARKS

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Democracies are characterized by situations of constant crises and transformations. In most cases these are positive transformations which allow for great advances in civil, political, social and cultural rights. However, when the representative system is unable to process tensions to resolve conflicts and social unrest, the ensuing crises may lead to a questioning of democracy.

More or less diffuse feelings of marginalization or unrest in sectors of the population, which do not see themselves represented, or even feel that they are jeopardized by the "system", are always present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all democratic societies. These can be catalyzed by leaders supported by social forces with authoritarian tendencies, who present themselves as attentive to these expressions of social discontent. This poses the question of how to limit the rise of these destructive tendencies in a democracy.

The relations between democracy and capitalism are passing through a period of inflection that requires profound institutional innovations to confront the challenges posed at both the national level and that of the international system. The citizenry expects answers from governments, which in the best of hypotheses will be palliative. Within the framework in which contemporary society is currently organized, confidence in the political system will remain low, at least in most democratic countries, and in authoritarian countries it will depend on systems of surveillance, repressions and the control of information.

It is possible that the current impetus of the extreme right is a passing phenomenon. However, even though its influence may retreat, the destructive impacts on national and international institutions will last for a long time, and the problems they give rise to will persist. The long-term survival of democratic capitalist societies will depend on the ability to process the problems that did favor the growth of extremist positions.

The current challenges, therefore, are not limited to those posed by authoritarian politicians. Rethinking democracy requires that we also face the problems of the environment and the technological revolution. New technologies are eliminating jobs and allowing for an enormous concentration of power in the hands of the few companies which control (and transmit) information and centralize an increasing

percentage of commercial transactions. These new technologies, with their capacity for surveillance, the destruction of privacy, and for establishing control over the most diverse areas of social life, represent an enormous challenge.

One of the major political debates on the future of democracy is concerned with who controls the algorithms and the use of the information that they produce. What are the risks that we can assume in a responsible way if we transfer and centralize almost all the aspects of our lives to fallible systems that are subject to all kinds of attacks and manipulations?

We are more and more tied up with our personal perspectives, and our interaction with others – both close and distant – is increasingly intense and overwhelming. However, those relationships are mediated by software that we do not control and whose functioning is unknown to us. Increasingly, all aspects of social life come to depend on technologies, and if democracies do not create mechanisms for the effective control of their impact on employment and the consequences this will bring for personal liberties, privacy and the public space, we will slide towards a dystopic future, in which notions of freedom and privacy will be transformed into phenomena of the past.

To define democracy as a set of institutions and formal procedures which allow for political competition, with no substantive values, is clearly insufficient. Rather than adopting unbridled progressive or conservative postures, the questions that must be asked are: what should be modified and what should be maintained? How is it possible to preserve while at the same time incorporating change, and promote changes without destroying what should be maintained? It is not the case, therefore, of celebrating novelties in an uncritical manner or of supporting change without due analysis and evaluation. On the contrary, changes should be confronted in the open spaces of broad-ranging public debate. Moreover, it is necessary to find original solutions. In the words of the French poet René Clair: “Nôtre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament”. Each generation must decide what it should do with the world it has received.

Until new forms of political organization that guarantee the same fundamental rights emerge, liberal capitalist democracy, despite its limitations remains the only responsible bet for those who value liberty. Such an affirmation does not imply that the future of capitalist democracy is guaranteed. If it shows itself unable to process the new forms of inequality, the concentration of economic power and the impact of technological changes on daily sociability, on



the structure of employment, on systems of surveillance, on data banks which allow people to be controlled and manipulated, or on the potential of extremely expensive gene therapies which could lead to a definitive fracture in the human species – , the divorce between capitalism and democracy will be inevitable, and the consequences catastrophic.