

ACHIEVEMENTS OF DEMOCRACY

To reflect on “Democracy” one has to go back to basic principles.

Democracy is not a form of government nor a type of constitution, but rather the expression of values connected to the will of the peoples.

Therefore we can have diverse degrees, a little, or more, or full expression of democratic values or even no level of democracy in any political and constitutional form.

Democracy is based on popular will, whose legitimacy depends on the regular confirmation of that will. Thus, democracy presupposes the rule of law, coupled with a verification process.

Democracy has emerged only twice in history. In both cases social communication has developed and assumed a central role in the political process.

The first epoch of democracy preceded the political preeminence of Athens in classical Greece. Practically all fifth century B.C. Athenian citizens knew how to read and write. It was a period of **direct democracy** where all citizens were called to exercise their rights and duties.

The essence of Athenian democracy was vested in three principles: equal participation in the exercise of power; equality before the law; equal right to free speech.

However, the declining hegemony of Athens after the golden Age of Pericles is the possible explanation for the fact that no Athenian author has celebrated democracy and its practices.

The second time democracy encounters human populations is in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and of the «Great Transformation» that ensued. The values heralded by the French revolution: **liberté, égalité, fraternité**, were propelled as universals.

The introduction of education, the eradication of illiteracy, the creation of systems of public instruction were essential to the success of the new way of life in industrializing societies. And “progress” stimulated, reinforced and promoted the preeminence of economic perspective.

The emerging world-system was being structured along communication and financial networks. In Western nations modern science was becoming the paradigm of true knowledge and new forms of government based on the **representation** of citizens (and of property) were being developed, supported by the development of political parties and the press.

In the turbulent climate of the nineteenth century **liberty** did overcome **equality (fraternity)** had vanished much earlier, after 1793, as its universalization was supposed to be “outrageous”) much helped by the climate of economic growth, new wealth and political dominance enjoyed by the European nations in the concert of the world. But all went on.

Mass movements, demonstrations and social unrest brought the concept of “class struggles” to the fore and the proliferation of revolutionary attempts. The impact of the World War and the subsequent Russian revolution provoked the re-emergence of the word “democracy” to designate republican or monarchic liberal regimes as a counterpoint to the “socialisms” that were rampant in the 1920’s.

This designation was later reinforced, during the Cold War, as the nations of the “free” world were seen as opposing “communism”, a promised goal in the Eastern part of the world.

Representative democracy became thus the characteristic of the political regimes of the Western nations since then, in varied declinations according to time and territory. In these democracies the central question is the free expression of citizenship.

The citizen is one who participates, who objects, who demands why. He or she must possess and safe keep critical spirit, i.e. the capacity of interrogating, of demanding explanations to the governing institutions.

The achievements of democracy in the past century have been undeniably the creation of a general climate of peace, prosperity and social justice in the nations of the Western world.

But, as time goes by, the network society is becoming under siege. Competitiveness has been erected as the ultimate vector of wealth creation, and commodification of all life forms its counterpart. Public space is becoming littered with fake or uninteresting information, and education is suffering from chronic underinvestment. This overall crisis shows that the capitalist world-system is undergoing a bifurcation. But where to?

The future of the world will be played in the field of **equality**, because liberty is ingenuous and, if let alone, easily captured by sellers of illusions or dealers in chimeras. This is the harsh lesson to be learned from the joys and abuses of the twentieth century.

QUESTIONS TO BE EXAMINED

1. In the present multipolar world can peace be maintained by the democratic nations?
2. In the present state of informational capitalism can prosperity (or fair redistribution of wealth) be assured in the democratic nations?
3. In the present state of disaggregation of state machineries through privatization and financierization can social justice be implemented or even enforced?

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