

Democratic Theories after the Third Wave A Historical Retrospection

Guillermo O'Donnell

Part I

Every time I am in this part of the world I cannot avoid a reminiscence that I have told before and that I allow myself to repeat today. During 1968-1971, I was a graduate student of political science at Yale University. Soon, I discovered in the library a series of books that purported to explain why Iberian countries (Latin America, Spain, and Portugal) were not and could not possibly become democracies, nor achieve reasonable levels of economic development. The argument was that we Iberians shared a religion and a culture marked by hierarchical views of authority and organic/corporatist views of society. The main reason that underpinned this argument was the lack of individualism, deemed to be an indispensable foundation for democracy. The implication of these books was not politically innocent: the various kinds of authoritarian regimes that in those times ruled Iberia were argued to be the political form that “fit” our culture, so they should be looked at positively by policymakers in Washington and other Western capitals. Consequently, trying to promote democracy in those countries was seen as not only hopeless but also damaging, not only for the interests of Western countries but also for peoples who were supposed to be living quite happily under authoritarianism.

During my wanderings in the library, I made another discovery. There were also books making a remarkably similar argument about countries seen as being under the aegis of Buddhism and Confucianism, all of them, as Iberia, supposed to be quite happily living under authoritarian regimes deemed to be more consistent than democracy with their religions and culture. Again, that these countries did not support an individualist culture was the main reason that supposedly made democracy and, indeed, even sustainable economic development, “unnatural” to them. Today, even more books make similar arguments about Islamic countries—about these matters there is nothing new under the sun, except that, in addition, nowadays civilizations are supposed,

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and sometimes induced, to clash.

Allow me now another, more recent, reminiscence. I refer to the joys and hopes with which many of us lived the demise of authoritarian regimes and the democratic transitions. In addition to many good reasons for rejecting repressive, authoritarian rule, were feelings fuelled by a mistake that during the transition was very helpful but turned out to have quite negative consequences in the medium run: it was the hope that jointly with democracy all sorts of good things would come in many spheres of social life.

Yet, quite soon, almost everywhere it became clear that we had achieved very imperfect democracies, that authoritarian legacies continued to weigh quite heavily, and that we were facing, at best, a rather long learning process by political and social leaders, and by citizens at large. This perception triggered widespread feelings of disenchantment, if not cynicism, toward the newly achieved regimes. Practically all democratized countries went through this. This period was labeled as one of *desencanto* (disenchantment) in what has been considered, after all, one of the most successful, if not the most successful, transition, Spain.

Part II

Many of the emerging challenges and problems of new democracies are well summarized in the agenda of this conference, so I will not go into details, as they will be dealt with by eminent colleagues who specialize in the various aspects. I want to note instead that, soon after the transitions, an abundant literature emerged dealing with what, on one hand, was supposed to hopefully follow the transition and, on the other, what probably was a way to exorcise rather widespread concerns about authoritarian regression. I refer to the topic of democratic consolidation. I was one of the authors who expressed skepticism about this topic. The idea of “consolidation” seemed to me teleological and quite ethnocentric, as it postulated a direction of change and a point of arrival that looked too much like an (idealized) image of the democracies existing in the countries of the Northwestern quadrant of the world. Another reason for my criticism was that the idea of “consolidation” tends to evoke a stabilized point of arrival; this, in my opinion, hinders the proper theoretical approach to democracy, which should focus not on democracy *per se*, but on an always ongoing process of democratization. Such a theory should take into account the crucial fact that democracy is, and will always be, inscribed in an open normative horizon that projects both new hopes and dissatisfactions. Furthermore, and more to the point of my topic today, the linearity of change implied by those ideas about “consolidation” hinders recognizing that, as I will argue, we are living in a world that exhibits a variety of democracies, not a single or “best model” that all of us are expected to somehow aim at and reach.

So, what it seems to me to have happened is not some kind of achievement

or even the perspective of “consolidation,” but the plain fact that, in some countries, but certainly not all, democratic regimes have proved resilient, enduring despite significant flaws and serious crises.

Actually, some countries have come a long way toward fair elections, even though everywhere the power of money and its deeply corrupting influence cast doubts over the fullness of such achievement. The countries that have moved toward greater electoral fairness and a more complete assignment of the rights of political citizenship often are ones where other dimensions of citizenship—civil, social, and cultural—are more broadly and effectively, if not fully, enacted. In turn, some of the new and not-so-new democracies (including much of Latin America) fall into a second type. In them, elections are generally less fair and political freedoms, less secure. Furthermore, the dimensions of citizenship that extend beyond the political are less developed and widely diffused. These are democracies hindered by the malign effects of pervasive poverty, deep inequality, state deficiencies, and quite widespread corruption. In addition, more of them today than was the case just a decade ago face the threat of slow or even sudden death. Not surprisingly, many of their inhabitants report low levels of trust in core institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and judiciaries.

On its part, this set of countries can be distinguished, albeit in some cases somewhat hazily, from a third group where elections, even if held, are not reasonably fair, and political freedoms are seriously curtailed. These are democracies *pour la galérie*, especially the international *galérie*—authoritarian regimes that pay oblique, if not cynical, tribute to democracy by holding that kind of elections; they are the “electoral authoritarianisms” that have recently been drawing much attention in the scholarly literature. Below the electoral-authoritarian regimes, lurks a fourth set whose numbers have been shrinking as authoritarian rulers learn the advantages of fake elections; I refer to those few countries that still dispense with even minimally credible electoral legitimation.

Within this mixed situation, an encouraging fact is that quite a few countries, including Taiwan and mine, Argentina, have rather recently achieved democratic regimes, or political democracies. Since this is not an entirely peaceful concept, let me clarify what I mean by it. It consists of the existence of reasonably fair and competitive, as well as institutionalized elections for most of the highest governmental positions. This regime also includes some political freedoms, or rights, such as those of association, expression, movement, availability of a nonmonopolized media, and similar ones.

In the face of this, and quite naturally, there have been many studies of the main institutions of the regime, such as parties, party and electoral systems, and parliaments and executives. These are important works that are producing very valuable knowledge. Yet, sometimes I worry that the abundance and often high quality of these contributions may obscure that, in my view, the *problématique* of democratization does not center only on the regime but also

on issues of citizenship that are broader than the political citizenship entailed by that regime. As I have argued in some works, beyond the regime but encompassing it, democracy also entails crucial dimensions of civil, social, and cultural citizenship.

At any event, once the consolidation approach began to fade away, the obvious imperfections of democracies (including of those long established), even if rather narrowly understood as regimes, have given way to studies that try to assess differences and changes in the quality of democracies, especially those that emerged during the “third wave.” I believe that this kind of study is important and should be pursued and perfected. Practically, normatively, and theoretically, we want to know, and to make knowable to audiences as wide as possible, in what senses each of our democracies is just different and/or is defective in what dimensions and, based on such assessments, explore how they may be improved. I will return to this topic; for the time being, I note that the task of assessing the quality of each democracy entails some hard challenges with which scholars must deal as self-consciously and carefully as possible.

Part III

At this point, it is necessary to take a broad comparative look. I begin by mentioning what I believe are some important lessons to be derived from transitions and early stages of democratization. One such lesson is that, indeed, there are many paths to political democracy. Some have emerged from authoritarian regimes that were quite successful in terms of economic growth, while others were abysmal failures in this and other respects. Some have emerged from authoritarian regimes in which the armed forces had a preeminent role, while others were mainly civilian-ruled. In some cases, the legacy of the authoritarian regime included a state that, despite many unpleasant features, was rather strong, while in other cases, the legacy—which in some countries, as in Latin America, has old historical roots—included a state that was very weak and scarcely operational. Finally, those legacies have included societies deeply marked by poverty and inequality, and others in which significant, if not fully satisfactory, advances in socioeconomic equity had been achieved. Despite some valuable attempts, to my knowledge, we still lack systematic comparative studies about the consequences of these and other transitional paths concerning the characteristics and functioning of the new democracies. My hunch is that the legacies, in terms of stateness, of relative economic success of the preceding authoritarian regime, and of preexisting degrees of poverty and inequality, merit particularly close examination as factors central to the relative success or failure of new democracies in weathering domestic crises and international shocks, and even regarding their medium- and long-term prospects of survival.

From the preceding, derives another fundamental lesson. It is that the several

dimensions of citizenship point directly to issues not only of the effectiveness, but also of the democraticness of the state, the indispensable anchor of the rights and obligations of citizenship. No less than the regime, the state is a crucial theme for a properly understood theory of democratization, at least once we recognize that this is an open-ended process that embraces the attainment and expansion of various dimensions of citizenship and—importantly—of its respective obligations. I believe that a big challenge for political theory and comparative politics is to deal systematically with the up-to-now scarcely explored mutual relationships between the state and democracy.

A third fundamental lesson is that there is not a single type of democracy, which should be evident even by glancing at the important differences observable in the democracies existing in the Northwest. Now, especially after the “third wave,” the world exhibits a significant variety of democracies, shaped by different historical and cultural traditions, as well as by the impacts of different locations in the networks of economic and geopolitical world relations. Surely, all these countries have a shared overarching institutional setting of executives, legislatures, and judiciaries (with Taiwan, of course, a partial exception); but behind and beyond this setting there exist important variations in the kinds and weights of meso- and micro-institutional arrangements, as well as, very importantly, in informal institutions and practices. Furthermore, some of those democracies are based on individualistic conceptions and others on more collective or communal ones, and are infused by different cultural and religious traditions. Posed in these terms, nothing authorizes *a priori* judgments that some kind of democracy is better than others, although there is no lack of writings, especially in the “consolidation” literature, making more or less explicitly this kind of assessment; what is needed, instead, are more elaborate and properly comparative typologies of the existing democracies.

A fourth fundamental lesson is that only exceptionally are rights granted; they must be conquered by means of often arduous and long struggles. And rights are never guaranteed: they are subject to cancellation, erosion, or simply neglected implementation—the holding of citizenship is a permanent challenge to practice them. In this sense, the political citizenship that is assigned to us by a democratic regime is a space of empowerment for the conquest of other rights of citizenship, especially in societies where there are few of these. Political rights, sometimes dismissed as “purely formal,” are indeed formal in their enactment and their universalistic assignment, but are very real as at least potential springboards for the conquest of other rights—this is the main reason for the sometimes dormant, but always potentially dynamic, character of which democracy has given so many proofs in history.

Part IV

Now, I return to the democratic regime. In it, each citizen may not only vote but also has the right to try to get elected. That she may or may not want to

exercise this right is irrelevant in relation to the fact that, by having the right to be elected, each adult carries with her the potential authority and the enormous responsibility of participating in governmental decisions. Voters not only vote, but also they may share in the responsibility of making collectively binding decisions, and, eventually, in the application of state coercion. An important point with respect to the participatory rights of voting and gaining access to governmental or state roles is that they define an *agent*. This definition is a legal one; these rights are assigned by the legal system of a political democracy to most adults in the territory of a state, with exceptions that are themselves legally defined. This assignment is universalistic: it is attached to most adults irrespective of their social condition and of adscriptive characteristics other than age and nationality. Agency entails the capacity to make choices that are deemed sufficiently reasonable as to have significant consequences, in terms of the aggregation of votes and of the incumbency of governing roles.

An agent is construed as somebody who is endowed with practical reason (i.e., she uses her cognitive and motivational capabilities to make choices that are presumed to be reasonable in terms of her situation and goals, of which, barring conclusive proof to the contrary, she is deemed to be the best judge). The presumption of agency constitutes every individual as a legal person, a carrier of subjective rights, including the rights of political citizenship.

An aspect I want to stress is that, when we reach adulthood, we enter into the agency of political citizenship as already constituted social beings—we carry rights and obligations that have textured our lives since birth. We also carry into our political citizenship identities that have been shaped by manifold factors, including country, history, culture, family, and, eventually, religion. Such identities may be individualistic, while others may privilege various kinds of communal and/or solidaristic affiliations. In all cases, political citizens are social beings, not monads that enter into politics naked of history, culture, or identities.

Some versions of liberalism, spanning from Hobbes to Rawls, are individualistic, in the sense that they construe individuals as initially located in the throes of the terrors and loneliness of the state of nature, or under a veil of ignorance. Other versions of this current, starting with Locke and the rights he asserted were already held in the state of nature, as well as, very explicitly, with J.S. Mill, share the view of a socially constituted being I sketched in the preceding statements. Thus, against rather common misunderstandings, liberalism is not necessarily individualistic, even if many contemporary currents see it this way. Of course, socialism, including its democratic varieties, as well as the many existing versions of solidaristic, communal conceptions are not individualistic—and yet not few of them are perfectly compatible with the view of agency that I have sketched.

This view of agency is not just one that has been enacted in some countries; it was also inscribed in the moral and legal conscience of humanity by the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, by the Prologue

and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, by the 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and, since then, by many international treaties and covenants, ratified by a large number of countries. Nowadays, this view of agency belongs to the legal culture of humanity, and has been mobilized, again and again and in the most varied circumstances, as a powerful moral argument.

Part V

I hope it is clear that my discussion of citizenship and agency leads to the view that democracy is hospitable to different conceptions of the human being. The socially preconstituted beings who become political citizens load the respective version of democracy with a rich repertoire of history, tradition, and culture. In each country, this human variety percolates into specific characteristics of the state and the regime; this is another reason that makes unwarranted—and undesirable—to believe that we will or should wind up at some kind of “end of history,” or at some kind of final “consolidation,” with a single kind of democracy.

I note now that democracy is the only political arrangement that construes all of us as agents; this is the crucial difference with, and advantage from, all sorts of authoritarian rule. This construction entails, and demands, the effectuation of a system of respectful mutual recognitions as such citizens/agents in our unavoidable and legitimate diversity. It is disputed if this recognition is a moral obligation. I believe that it is, but anyhow, the relevant fact at this moment is that the obligation of mutual recognition is effected in many aspects of a democratic regime and of the legal system of a state that contains this kind of regime; among many other aspects, this is shown by the prohibitions of private violence and discrimination, as well as by the legal backing of the existence of political parties, of many diverse associations of society, and of the innumerable cultural manifestations that embody, and dynamically reproduce, the burgeoning social diversity accepted and fostered by political democracy—none of these and many other legally protected rights would make sense without the mutual recognitions that every citizen/agent owes to each other, whether they are located in the private sphere or in the incumbency of state or governmental roles. At the core of democracy—the agency entailed by citizenship—is asserted the dignity of everyone, not as abstract beings but in our socially and culturally shaped identities and interests.

From the preceding flows the great restriction and at the same time the great freedom-enhancing characteristic of political democracy. The restriction is that we are free in our choices and identities insofar as we do not arbitrarily or illegally violate the agency of others who are no less agents than we are. The freedom-enhancing side of democracy is that, within the broad parameters demarcated by the restriction, we may shape and reshape our identities, live

our cultures, and express and attempt to peacefully implement our preferences. Of course, this broad space of freedom leads to disagreements and sometimes conflicts among diverging views and interests, but these are to be arbitrated by the nonviolent and agent-respecting institutional channels that a democratic regime and its legal system enact.

In turn, this restriction/enhancement aspect of democracy is the door opened for bringing into the political arena various personal and collective identities. Simply, democracy does not admit a privileged identity and/or conception of the human being. Rather, democracy houses various identities and cultures, although of course their characteristics and relative weight varies across countries and time. Theories of democracy that ignore this fact are inconsistent with their own topic, and/or are an ethnocentric expression of the presumed conditions of the societies where they are written.

Being a Latin American and visiting East Asia, I insist that the citizens of political democracy are socially preconstituted beings. They enter into the public arenas of a democratic regime carrying a dense network of social relations—many of them legally defined and backed—as well as identities, collective affiliations, and cultures that usually are strong and meaningful for them. This fact and the beneficial diversity it entails is not a hindrance but the reason that underlies the positive value that we should attach to the contemporary existence of various kinds of democracy and, with them, of various paths for further democratization. In contrast, the isolated monad of individualistic theories is an emasculated being that can only ground restricted, linear, and unidimensional views of democracy. It is surely no accident that the authors I mentioned at the start of this lecture shared, based on their individualistic conceptions, an inability to conceive democracy other than grounded in those same conceptions. That recent history has proved those authors wrong lends strong support to my plea not just to accept but also to celebrate the grounding of democracy in various cultures and traditions.

Part VI

Four main arguments have guided my presentation. One is that the weight of tradition, history, culture, international location, and other factors reverberates at the micro-level of the citizen and jointly generate, returning to the macro-arenas of politics, a variety of really existing democracies. The second is that the consequent diversity is a valuable achievement of countries and regions that impress on each of their democracies their own specific traits. The third is that, because of this very fact, no particular version of democracy has an *a priori* claim of superiority from others. The fourth is that, irrespective of such variations, even at the relatively narrow level of the regime, every democracy entails, and legally backs, agents and their consequent dignity as moral beings—only this kind of being can be, logically and morally, the carrier of the rights and obligations of citizenship.

Jointly, these arguments lead to the rejection of a unique model of a “best” democracy; on the other hand, they should not slide into relativism. This is an issue that is being disputed from several angles. Although it does not solve matters that go beyond the ones I am discussing here, I believe that the grounding of democracy—of every democracy that at least meets the definition of political democracy that I have proposed—gives an answer. It is that every kind of democracy should meet some basic requirements springing from the condition as agents of its citizens. This is a transcultural requirement of human decency, which includes some basic aspects: first, making possible for everyone to have access to the means minimally necessary for being active members of their societies; second, shielding everyone from all kinds of violence; third, treating all individuals—in their interactions with the state, with the institutions of the regime, and with other individuals—with the respect and consideration due to agents freely living their own lives under the constraints established by democratic law; fourth, government officers’ actually recognizing that the citizenry is the origin and the justification of the authority they hold, and that, consequently, they perform their roles with dedication, integrity, and authentic dedication to the public good; and fifth, that in so doing, government officers subject themselves to the constitutional and legal rules that determine their authority and consequent responsibilities.

However ambitious they may be considering the present situation of some countries, the above aspects are a minimum that I believe can be shared by all traditions and cultures, however diverse they are and should continue being. These aspects also are the proximate normative horizon of democratization everywhere and, I would argue, a common yardstick with which to lay a baseline for assessing the quality of democracies on a comparative basis. It is beyond this yardstick that we may—and should—ask ourselves what traits of each democracy are a challenge for improving its quality, or are expression of legitimate or acceptable differences springing from the embeddedness of each case in its particular societal context. Becoming able to distinguish between both kinds of traits I see as the major challenge ahead for assessing the quality of the variety of democracies nowadays existing—and, indeed, for developing adequate analytical and comparative theories about those democracies and their possible paths to further democratization.

I finish by insisting that democracy always projects a horizon of both hope and dissatisfaction. Democracy is more than a valuable kind of political arrangement; it is also the notorious sign of a lack, of an always pending agenda that calls for the redress of social ills and further advances in the manifold matters which, at a certain time and for a certain people, most concern human welfare and dignity. This projection toward an unending, undefined, risky, and promising future is why, as this conference does, we should nurture democracy not only remembering its advantages but also by critically looking at its challenges and shortcomings.

