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Democracy

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Democracy

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Democracy is one of those essentially contested concepts that, in W. B. Gallie's famous dictum, "inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (1956, 169). Combining the Greek words for "people" (demos) and "to rule" (kratein), democracy literally means to rule by the people. Here the conceptual disputes start: Which entity constitutes "the people"? (In Ancient Greece it was, of course, a tiny minority of free, native and male citizens.) What does "to rule" mean? (In today's liberal democracies it does not include collective control over the means of production.) How are the people to rule itself? (Directly or indirectly, or by consensus or majority decisions?) Are there any constitutional preconditions of democracy (that enable a people to rule itself) that are outside the reach of the very exercise of democracy (that is, not subject to the rule of the people)?

Gallie's crucial insight that turns his argument about democracy being essentially contestable into an important academic and political intervention is the following: The internal complexity of the very concept of democracy makes it impossible to identify, by way of systematic reasoning, one "correct" or superior conception of democracy. There is simply no single, somehow logically deducible answer to any of the above questions. Still, empirically speaking, democracy is not always actually contested and, at any given point in time, one particular understanding of the concept may be hegemonic. Thus, any specific conception of democracy is always contestable in principle, but it may well become decontested – that is, taken for granted and assumed common sense status – in a given socio-historical context.

In this sense, the long 1980s (between the late 1970s and the early 1990s) were not simply the years during which most Latin American countries moved from authoritarian to democratic regimes (→ Authoritarianism, II/25). They were also characterized by important ideological shifts that included the decontestation of democracy in terms of a limited, liberal, representative, and market-oriented conception (→ Capitalism, II/2). This conceptual development enabled, and was further consolidated by, the almost region-wide establishment of democracy (see Smith 2011). Furthermore, the convergence of a narrow, Dahlian notion of democracy as polyarchy was actively supported by the U.S. government (Robinson 1996) and also characterizes the scholarship on the transitions to democracy in Latin America (Guilhot 2005, chapters 3-4; Munck 2012, 5) (→ State Transformation, II/21). Recent years, however, have seen a significant revival of contestation of democracy across the region associated with the so-called leftist turn in Latin America. Like the previous period of decontestation, these ongoing disputes over the parameters of democracy encompass internal struggles over the transformation of democracy within Latin American countries (Cheresky 2006; Dargatz and Zuazo 2012; Escobar 2010), conceptual disputes over the meaning of democracy at the level of inter-American relations (Heine and Weiffen 2015; Legler et al. 2007; Whitehead 2008), as well as a renewed academic interest in enrichments of, and outright alternatives to, liberal democracy (Arditi 2005; Avritzer 2002; Cameron et al. 2012; Lissidini et al. 2014; Wolff 2013). To large extent, political developments and related academic debates in the Americas can be read as processes of contestation and decontestation of democracy. In the meantime, a new dynamic of contesting democracy has emerged from the recent turn to the political right in various American countries, e.g. in Argentina with the election of Macri in 2015, Trump in the USA in 2016 and Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018.

Democracy in Latin America

With the processes of (re)democratization that started in the late 1970s, democracy became a key topic of major comparative studies and academic debates on Latin America and has remained high on the agenda ever since (see Borón 2003; Domínguez and Shifter 2008; Mainwaring and Scully 2010; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Of course, the history of democracy in the region is much older. One prominent way to summarize this history is to recount Latin America's experiences with different kinds of democratic rule since the early 20th century, which mostly failed until the most recent wave of democratization during the long 1980s that inaugurated this remarkable period in which democracy became the almost uncontested norm across the region (Munck 2012, 3; Smith 2011, 17-71).

Scholarly interest in democracy, by and large, evolved in response to these political developments. In the 1960s and 1970s, when scholars addressed the issue of democracy rather indirectly through the lenses of modernization theory or the dependency paradigm (→ Modernization, I/35), studies particularly aimed to explain the failure of democracy in Latin America (→ Clientelism, II/29). From the 1980s onwards, academic interest shifted from explaining democratic transitions to understanding the consolidation of democracy, investigating the limitations, deficits, or, more generally, the quality of Latin America's democratic regimes (see the overview in Munck 2012). It is in this latter context that the previously mentioned decontestation of democracy can be observed. Politically, the experience with brutal repression and economic failure of the military dictatorships (→ Military, II/37) and/or with intense political violence led a broad range of political actors and social forces to converge on an essentially liberal understanding of democracy. These particularly included elites and middle classes that were traditionally fearful of the "populist," if not anti-capitalist, results of mass democracy (→ Populism, II/43), as well as leftist organizations and popular sectors that had traditionally downplayed "bourgeois" political and civil rights as merely formal illusions. Global developments – most notably the decreasing attraction and collapse of real existing socialism (→ I/42) – significantly added to this.

The academic debate generally followed this trend. As Gerardo Munck has noted, scholars that studied the transition to, the consolidation of, or the quality of democracy "largely converged on a conceptualization of political regimes in terms of the procedures regulating access to the highest political offices in a country and of democracy as, at the very least, a type of regime characterized by mass suffrage and electoral contestation" (2012, 5). The "intellectual journey of Guillermo O'Donnell" (Guilhot 2005, 123) is a good example of this. When it comes to research on democracy in Latin America, the late Argentine political scientist is probably the most influential scholar (and a genuine inter-American scholar in his experience with both U.S. and Latin American academia). In addition to his leading role in the landmark study on Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, O'Donnell has made important contributions to most democracy related debates on Latin America since the mid-1970s and has coined key concepts such as "delegative democracy," "horizontal accountability," "low intensity citizenship," and the "brown areas" of the rule of law. What is interesting about O'Donnell in the context of the present entry is that his evolving work reflects the shifting perspectives on democracy in the region.

O'Donnell's early studies on bureaucratic authoritarianism in the 1970s were characterized by a critical engagement with modernization theory, which was significantly influenced by dependency theory, structuralist approaches (→ Development, II/6), and class analysis (→ Social Inequality, II/20). From the late 1970s onwards, however, he theoretically adopted an increasingly actor and elite centered perspective and began to normatively reassess the value of "bourgeois" democracy (see Guilhot 2005, 123-133). Analyzing democratic transitions, he explicitly adopted a procedural definition of liberal democracy and argued that mobilization for democracy should deliberately stop short of demands that would threaten the bourgeoisie (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 8, 27).

At the same time, O'Donnell's work also shows how the convergence of a fairly specific conception of democracy, paradoxically, led to an explosion of competing conceptual innovations intended to grasp the complexities of political regimes and developments in the region. On the one hand, the limited fit between the ideal type concept of liberal democracy and the actual shape of Latin American democracies led scholars to invent diminished subtypes of democracy, such as O'Donnell's "delegative democracy," in which weak horizontal accountability makes for virtually omnipotent presidents (see Collier and Levitsky 1997). On the other hand, the limited scope of a procedurally defined concept of liberal democracy proved problematic, given that pervasive social inequalities, the confluence of economic and political power, and the socio-geographically selective enforcement of the rule of law effectively limited even the exercise of core liberal rights. Hence, O'Donnell's argument that in most Latin American countries, even if the political regimes are democratic in procedural terms, significant "brown areas" exist that are characterized by "low intensity citizenship" (see O'Donnell 1999) (→ Citizenship, II/27).

Based on his distinction between a democratic regime defined in procedural terms and democracy or a democratic state in a broader sense, in his latest work O'Donnell increasingly moved away from narrow, institutionalist perspectives. In doing so, he could relate to many of the issues that had long troubled the diverse critics of the liberal mainstream perspective (see, for instance, Avritzer 2002, 27-35; Borón 2003, 227-262). For example, O'Donnell's contribution to the UNDP project Democracy in Latin America brought forward the notion of a "citizens' democracy" based on effective, civil, and social citizenship (see PNUD 2004). Thereby, O'Donnell became a part of the revival of conceptual debates on democracy that have taken place throughout the Americas since the turn of the century. Still, this renewed debate has moved beyond O'Donnell's critique of the limits of liberal democracy and democratic statehood in Latin America (for instance, the contributions by Fernando Calderón, Catherine Conaghan, and José Nun in PNUD 2004).

Just as the narrowed conceptual debate on democracy in the 1980s and early 1990s reflected the actual path of the democratic transitions, the revival of conceptual contestation since the late 1990s has been directly related to actual processes of political struggle and policy experimentation that challenges the limits of liberal, representative democracy in Latin America. Starting with the introduction of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (since 1989), through political experiments and academic debates, participatory forms of democracy have thrived throughout the region (see Avritzer 2002; Cameron et al. 2012; Lissidini et al. 2014) (→ Participation, II/31). In a broader sense, waves of citizen protests and social movements (→ I/41) have led to debates about “immediate” forms of democracy (see Cheresky 2006) and new types of “societal accountability” (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000). Indigenous movements (→ Indigeneity, I/31) and their call for collective rights and indigenous autonomy have meant a further “postliberal challenge” to democratic regimes in the region (Yashar 2005). Finally, the rise of anti-neoliberal movements (→ Alter-Globalization, I/21) and the so-called leftist turn produced by them has led to a renewed debate about the relationship between democracy and capitalist development (Escobar 2010) (→ Capitalism, II/2). In a few countries, most notably in Bolivia and Ecuador, these trends have culminated in Constituent Assemblies assigned to profoundly transform the democratic regimes at hand (see Dargatz and Zuazo 2012).

In short, these contested attempts to deepen, or democratize, democracy in Latin America have implied significant “postliberal” moves that do not aim to replace, but rather move past mainstream conceptions of liberal, representative democracy (see Arditi 2005; Wolff 2013). In this sense, highly diverse contemporary contestations of democratic theory and democratic practice still share a series of overall features. First, they criticize elitist and institutionalist democracy and stress the role of ordinary citizens and the public space, particularly the contentious collective action by marginalized groups. Second, they do not reject representative institutions, but rather respond to the frequently discussed crisis and limits of representation by emphasizing direct/plebiscitarian and participatory/non-electoral mechanisms. Third, they expand the notion of citizenship (→ II/27), most notably in terms of indigenous collective rights as well as social and economic rights. Finally, the limited reach of neoliberally transformed democracy is challenged through an emphasis on the role and responsibility of the state (→ Nation State, II/38) vis-à-vis the economy and socioeconomic development (→ II/6).

These elements can be observed, perhaps most clearly, in the case of Bolivia. Since the late 1990s, a wave of protests led by indigenous and social movements had challenged the so-called “pacted democracy” (democracia pactada) and the neoliberal consensus that united the political elites sustaining it (→ Neoliberalism, II/16). These protests prepared the ground for the election of the country’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales, in late 2005. The Morales government not only turned away from neoliberal economic policies and significantly expanded the role of the public sector in the economy, but actually initiated a profound transformation of democracy (Wolff 2013; Zegada et al. 2011). This transformation, as enshrined in the country’s new constitution adopted in 2009, broadens and hybridizes Bolivian democracy by officially recognizing three types of democratic rule: “direct and participatory,” “representative,” and “communitarian.” The former is particularly expressed in a series of direct democratic mechanisms, as well as in the far-reaching right to social control that is to be exercised by "organized civil society" (→ Civil Society, II/28) The latter specifically refers to the collective right of indigenous peoples to make use of their own norms and procedures when exercising or delegating political authority (→ Indigeneity, I/31). Certainly this transformation of democracy is far from settled and the actual implementation of the new constitution is still another matter (Mayorga and Zuazo 2015). Nonetheless, the Bolivian example vividly shows the extent to which social movements in Latin America have succeeded in opening up the conceptual debate on what democracy might mean in contexts in which a narrow, liberal conception appears overly formal and elitist.

Democracy in Inter-American Relations

Democracy has long been a key issue in inter-American relations, at least since Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine established "chronic wrongdoing" in the Western Hemisphere as a legitimate cause for U.S. intervention (→ Interventionism, II/36), followed nine years later by Woodrow Wilson's infamous announcement "to teach the South American republics to elect good men." In 1936, the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires recognized the "common likeness" of the American republics "in their democratic form of government" and declared "unqualified respect for their respective sovereignties and the existence of a common democracy throughout America," before condemning any intervention "in the internal or external affairs" of other states (United States Government Printing Office 1943) (→ Pan-Americanism, II/40). These quotes effectively illustrate the dual role of democracy as a common but contested reference in inter-American relations. On one hand, in terms of official declarations, for most of the 20th century, most governments self-identified their countries as democratic, which enabled an agreement on representative democracy as a common, region-wide standard (as in the 1948 Charter of the Organization of American States). On the other hand, U.S. governments have generally considered their country as holding a special position to judge and, if need be, help correct the (un)democratic state of affairs in its "backyard." The worldview that has traditionally informed U.S. policymakers implies that the United States – as the shining city upon a hill and the cradle of democracy – is both capable of and entitled to promote the spread of democracy in Latin America and elsewhere (even if, historically speaking, U.S. policy in the region has rarely amounted to anything one could plausibly call democracy promotion). While somehow self-evident from Washington's perspective, this U.S. attitude has understandably led most Latin

American governments to emphasize the principle of nonintervention whenever talking about democracy throughout the 20th century.

With the almost region-wide establishment of representative democracy during the long 1980s and the end of the Cold War, this tension temporarily seemed to have finally dissolved (→ Geopolitics, II/34). By and large, Latin America's elected governments now shared an interest in creating mechanisms for the joint defense of democracy against domestic threats. In 1991, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted Resolution 1080 on "Representative Democracy," which was followed by further democracy related agreements (including the 1991 Santiago Commitment and the 1992 Washington Protocol) and enabled a series of collective responses to (attempted) coups in the region (see Legler et al. 2007). Ironically, when this process of strengthening hemispheric democracy norms culminated in 2001 with the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the decay of the temporary regional consensus had already set in (Heine and Weiffen 2015, chapter 3).

However, this collective dimension of democracy promotion and protection in the Americas is only part of the story. At the same time that the OAS moved towards strengthening its democracy related norms and practices, the U.S. likewise expanded and professionalized its unilateral policies of democracy promotion. While the OAS was largely focusing on the relatively uncontested protection of representative democracy against outright domestic threats, U.S. democracy promotion has been more actively engaged in shaping the very kind of democracy that was becoming established in the region. As William Robinson (1996) has forcefully argued, U.S. democracy promotion since Ronald Reagan has deliberately aimed at promoting "low-intensity democracies" across Latin America that would be compatible with the persistence of highly unequal internal and international socioeconomic relations in the new era of neoliberal globalization (→ Social Inequality, II/20; Neoliberalism, II/16). In terms of the conception of democracy, scholars have observed that U.S. democracy promotion was generally guided by an elitist, formal and market-oriented model that emphasizes institutional checks and balances, civil liberties, and private property rights. Given the previously mentioned region-wide convergence on liberal democracy (cum neoliberal restructuring), this practice was relatively uncontested for some time, at least among the region's elites. This dramatically changed when the domestic tides in many Latin American countries increasingly turned against "neoliberalism" and actually existing democratic regimes.

The new struggle over democracy that has characterized inter-American relations since the turn of the century is multi-dimensional. With the election of a series of more or less leftist presidents since the first electoral victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, domestic challenges to liberal democracy within Latin American countries scaled up to become an issue of inter-American relations. More specifically, the emergence of governments that claim to represent a participatory alternative to liberal democracy has led to a revival of the contestation of U.S. interference in the name of democracy (Wolff 2016) and a decreasing conceptual consensus at the level of inter-American relations (Whitehead 2008). The aggressive turn of U.S. foreign policy under the George W. Bush administration – which included contested support for the ultimately failed coup against Chávez in 2002 – has certainly contributed to this. As a consequence, U.S. democracy promotion policies in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have faced outright resistance, while debates in the OAS have become increasingly polarized between the U.S. and its allies, and the anti-imperialist critics of liberal, representative democracy. These conceptual disagreements – which are intimately connected with conflicts of power and interest – have characterized important debates within the OAS. Most notably, they have contributed to the failure to find common inter-American responses to coups (as in Venezuela 2002 and Honduras 2008) or to political developments that some governments, but not others, consider a coup (as in Paraguay 2012 or in Brazil 2016), or see as a gradual backsliding of democracy (as in Venezuela under the Chavista governments) (see Heine and Weiffen 2015). As Neil Burron has noted, the political backdrop of these developments is the reemergence of “a struggle over the meaning of democracy – and who possesses the legitimacy to promote it” (2012, 12).

Most different views have emerged in regard to Cuba, which was suspended from the OAS in 1962. While member states such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela demanded the immediate readmission of Cuba to the organization, the U.S. and Canada considered the democratic principles of the OAS to inhibit such a move. In the end, the 2009 General Assembly of the OAS struck a compromise that lifted the suspension of Cuba’s membership, while making its future participation in the organization dependent on a process of dialogue “in accordance with the practices, purposes, and principles of the OAS” (Organization of American States 2009). In this way, the conceptual struggle about how these principles, including those relating to democracy and human rights (→ II/35), are to be interpreted and applied to Cuba, could be postponed until Havana would formally request to start such a dialogue – a request “that was unlikely to be forthcoming” (Heine and Weiffen 2015, 139).

In the context of inter-American relations, Canada has traditionally occupied a special place. In terms of its democratic regime, the country is the only one with a parliamentary system, in contrast to the presidentialism that characterizes political regimes in the U.S. and across Latin America. Furthermore, Canada has traditionally remained at the margins of regional affairs and, in fact, joined the OAS as recently as 1990. Since then, Canada has followed the U.S. in increasing its involvement in democracy promotion in Latin America. In contrast to the U.S., Canadian democracy promotion has been characterized by a cooperative and multilateral approach, a rather social democratic conception of democracy with a stronger grassroots tradition of working through NGOs. In recent years, however, Canadian development cooperation, including its support of NGOs, has been increasingly "aligned with the foreign policy of the state and the interests of Canadian multinationals" (Burron 2012, 5) (→ Development, II/6; Transnational Corporations, II/23)

Conclusion

A rich debate about the proper meaning of democracy is in itself a good indicator of a democratic state of affairs. In this sense, the revival of the contestation of democracy that can be observed throughout the Americas since the turn of the century can be seen as a signal of democratic progress regarding both the internal affairs of Latin American countries and inter-American relations. However, this positive conclusion must be qualified in two important regards.

First, democracy – whatever its specific shape – depends on a balance between conflict and consensus. This, in particular, concerns the case of conceptual contestation of democracy. Given the essential contestability of democracy, the absence of any serious conflict over the meaning and implementation of democracy means that relevant voices are silenced and important alternatives concealed (→ Silencing, III/19). Yet, such contestation also needs to be limited by some general agreement on basic (democratic) rules of the game, if conflict is not to turn violent and threaten the very opportunity structure that enables an open debate over democracy. Disagreement over democratic principles is probably not the most important, and certainly not the only, controversy that is driving political conflict in the region. Still, whether in the context of the coups against Chávez in Venezuela (2002) and Zelaya in Honduras (2008), during the heavily contested constitutional reform process in Bolivia (2008), in the contemporary political crises in Brazil and Venezuela (2016), or in the campaign that led to the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. (2016), the lack of a basic consensus over the legitimate constitution and exercise of political power has clearly contributed to societal polarization. Relatedly, the clash of competing conceptions of democracy and human rights (→ II/35) at the level of inter-American relations has yet to produce a meaningful political dialogue on this issue, but has already weakened those multilateral institutions that are key fora in which such conceptual conflicts can be carried out in cooperative ways.

Second, it is one thing to say that the strengthening of voices that call for direct, participatory, or communitarian types of democracy is a good sign for democracy. But this does not imply that the actual transformations of democracy that are, at least partially, driven by such calls are necessarily successful by any democratic standard. In fact, there is rather widespread disillusionment with the different attempts to move beyond liberal, representative democracy in the region. If for different reasons, few observers would see contemporary Brazil or Venezuela (to name but two) as hopeful examples of democratic experimentation. Especially the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018 stands for the advance of a new type of political discourse from the Right throughout the Americas, which openly devalues liberal norms and democratic institutions and justifies the past and possibly future political violence. Yet, what is important for the purpose of this entry is that none of the different problems that these countries currently face is plausibly caused by the actual introduction of participatory and/or plebiscitary institutions or to the strengthening of socioeconomic and/or collective rights. One might rather argue the problem is, in fact, that the promise of transforming democracy by democratic means has not been taken seriously enough by the respective governments. Yet, of course, this argument is as contested as is the normative premises on which it is based.

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