

**SÉRIE CEPPAC**  
ISSN Formato Eletrônico 19822693

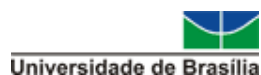
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Necessary democracy and possible democracy:  
a necessary debate

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Centro de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação sobre as Américas

Brasília  
2009



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ISSN formato eletrônico 19822693

Série Ceppac, n. 022, Brasília: CEPPAC/UnB, 2009.

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ISSN electronic format 19822693

Série Ceppac, n. 022, Brasília: CEPPAC/UnB, 2009.

# Necessary democracy and possible democracy: a necessary debate<sup>1</sup>

Henrique Carlos de Oliveira de Castro<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The book published by Robert Dahl *How democratic is the American Constitution?* of Robert Dahl (2001), retakes the debate about the own meaning of the concept of democracy. In this book, the author addresses the limits of American democracy. His conclusions are pessimistic about the possibility of improving the American constitution, due to the constraints of their political system, which, in Dahl's perspective is very refractory to accepting changes. More important than Dahl's conclusions is the fact that it places the discussion of something that until recently was considered a taboo in the academic world: the limits of American democracy. If other indicators were not available, that assertion would be enough to rethink the model of American democracy as something to be followed unquestionably. It must be taken into account, as part of the debate, that democracy in Latin America is a late phenomenon, constructed with the importation of concepts and values. Not only because Latin American realities are different than those found in the so-called advanced democracies, but also because the models themselves must be permanently questioned as Dahl has done. This paper retakes the discussions about democracy in Latin America from a political culture perspective seeking to contribute to the debate about what democracy is necessary and possible in Latin America.

## Introduction

The launching of *How democratic is the American Constitution?*, by Robert

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the 19th IPSA World Congress (Durban, South Africa, 2003), and it is part of the research project *Os limites da democracia na América Latina: os casos do Brasil e do Chile* (The limits of democracy in Latin America: the cases of Brazil and Chile) developed at the Graduate Program and Research Center for the Americas, The University of Brasília, Brazil.

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Dahl (2001), shed new light upon the debate on the concept of democracy in its own right. In this book, the author discusses the limits of the American democracy, starting from the review of the American Constitution, regarded as being an icon of political democracy. His conclusions are pessimistic in relation to the possibility of improving the constitutional text, due to constraints of the American political system that, in Dahl's view, would hardly accept changes. For the current project, more importantly than Dahl's conclusions is the triggering of a discussion which has so far been considered a taboo in many academic settings: the limits of American democracy. If we add to this the problems that took place in the last presidential elections in the USA when, at least, some doubts could be cast on the very transparency of the electoral process, we have reasons to rethink American democracy as an unquestionable model to be followed.

It ought to be considered as part of the debate that democracy in Latin America is a late phenomenon, built with the import of values and concepts. However, not only the realities from Latin American countries are different from those found in countries labeled as advanced democracies, but we should also consider that the models themselves must be constantly rethought, as Dahl did. Thus, rediscuss democracy based upon empirical knowledge of political culture in Latin America becomes relevant and necessary in order to know what democracy is necessary and feasible for us.

As it is known, an assumption of democracy building in countries where it was invented was the individualism, taken as one of the grounds of the making of capitalism in Britain as well as one of the strongest manifestations of advanced capitalist societies. However, this is not the tradition of Latin American countries. The formation basis of our societies followed another path, having in the State its source and strength. So, it is paramount to study the role of the State in the debate on democracy in Latin America.

Finally, it is never too much to remember that Latin American societies are, in their constitution and essence, excluding societies. More than that, most of people can hardly reach the minimum animal condition requires for survival (not to mention human condition). Thus, a study on political culture in Latin America has to consider inequality, which is prior to birth for most of Latin Americans and leaves everlasting woes.

The political culture from the Latin American has to be understood and contextualized in this reality. In an environment of deep and increasing inequality, the emerging political culture is fragmented, this means people do not understand their individual problems are mingled with the social problems and, at the same time, do not relate the macropolitical phenomena to their daily reality.

### **1. The difficulty of studying democracy from a Latin American view**

Few Political Science concepts bring about such controversy and dispute as democracy. David Collier and Steven Levistky, quoted by O'Donnell (1997, p.53), found more than 100 adjectives for the word democracy in 1995, and most of them had the purpose of showing that the cases studied somehow did not have all the requirements the authors ascribed to the concept of democracy. This conceptual intricacy is however positive as democracy cannot be studied as something definitive and finished, but as something still being built. So, its concept, far from being understood *a priori*, has to be seen in its evolution, that is to say, in permanent movement.

A first aspect to consider is that contemporary concepts of democracy have been constructed over centuries as certain processes became consolidated as a result from social struggles or the own theoretical evolution of the concept. Therefore, what French revolutionaries considered democracy in 1789 is somewhat different from what US civil rights defenders considered in the sixties (DAHL, 2001). So, the concept of democracy can be regarded context-sensitive to historical circumstances. The outcome of this accept that as the prevailing concept of democracy has not been built from the realities of Latin American countries, its import implied the acceptance of social, political and economical assumptions which were not among us.

The fact the concept of democracy is historically constituted does not mean it is devised from the analysis of reality. In other words, it is not necessarily a scientific concept, but normative. In fact, democratic invention, to use an expression coined by Claude Lefort (1990) resulted from a mixing of a normative intellectual proposition, even idealist to a certain extent, with organic links from its founders with the world they lived in. We

have to do the same in Latin America, that is, to know deeply our societies with the purpose of building alternatives.

As Becker (1999) claims in relation to Latin America, the research agenda should help to understand how to deepen the democratic achievements, no matter how frail they are. More than that, to think democracy in Latin America in today's world requires us to understand the world we live in and how we think of alternatives with the same intellectual freedom the "Father Founders" created something with no historical precedents. If they were able to suggest a president that was a negation from the king, in dialectical terms, it was because they felt free to do so, they did not stick to any enforcement preventing them from creating. With this extreme example, I intend to suggest that the study on democracy should be able to grasp existing concepts as a way to build an alternative based upon our historical experience.

## **2. The broadening of democracy concept and Latin America**

Dahl's contribution for the understanding of democracy may have had the same heuristic importance of Adam Smith for the understanding of economic science: it certainly did not solve or ended the theoretical controversy on democracy, but any contemporary debate must necessarily have a reference in it. Dahl himself argues in his *A preface to democratic theory* that his conception of polyarchy is ... *an inadequate, incomplete, primitive ordering of the common store of knowledge about democracy* and that... *somewhere between chaos and tautology we shall be able to sometime to construct a satisfactory theory about political equality* (DAHL, 1984, p.84).

In fact, in accordance with his view that the concept should evolve, the author, in later works, enhances his conception of polyarchy, incorporating dimensions that go beyond the electoral dispute. This is clear in his work *Democracy and its critics* where the author poses the seven attributes of polyarchy, widening its range: 1) Elected officials, 2) Free and fair elections, 3) Inclusive suffrage, 4) Right to run for office, 5) Freedom of expression, 6) Alternative information, and 7) Associational autonomy (DAHL, 1989, p. 221). As we can see, the first four attributes have to do with the original aspects of polyarchy, that is, the need of a fair and competitive electoral dispute

while the last three attributes expand the concept to aspects related to political freedom, not necessarily attached to elections<sup>3</sup>.

O'Donnell (1997, p. 41-2), based on case studies from Latin America, goes beyond that, suggesting that the concept of polyarchy be even more extended. The author suggests we should also consider:

- 1) the need elected members (and even some named) do not be arbitrarily removed from their posts before the end of their mandates;
- 2) that elected members cannot have their power or rights vetoed or constrained by non-elected political actors, particularly the armed forces;
- 3) the existence of an indisputable national territory with its electoral population clearly defined; and
- 4) the existence of a generalized expectation that both electoral process and its inherent freedom go on indefinitely.

O'Donnell's contributions undoubtedly improve the concept of polyarchy by Dahl. However, following the Argentinean author's steps, perhaps other attributes could be added to the characterization made by Dahl, especially in relation to the character of the existing (or potential) democracy (or polyarchy). In order to do so, maybe the best solution would be the analysis, here strictly understood, that is, the conceptual division of a complex whole in more simple parts to better approach the object. In other words, the limits of the concept of polyarchy should be verified in order to suggest its further extension.

Broadly speaking, the features of Dahl's polyarchy stick to the formal aspects or single traits of democracy, that is, to procedures and game rules. In this sense, it is essentially a minimalist view. If for analytical purposes this minimalist conception of democracy can be effective, and the consensus in the sense of Kuhn (1996) built around this conception testifies that there are other aspects of reality which deserve to be considered. I refer specifically to the aspects of social and economic equality, to the conception that a society will only be democratic if there be dignified life conditions for

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<sup>3</sup> - In a more recent work, Dahl defines democracy as a system which provides 1) *effective participation*, 2) *equality in voting*, 3) *gaining enlightened understanding*, 4) *exercising final control over the agenda*, 5) *inclusion of adults* (DAHL, 1998, p. 37-8). Although there is a small difference between both characterizations, they limit themselves to the political aspects.

most of the population.

Walzer (1983) summarized the debate about the need of extending the concept of democracy analyzing the different spheres of social justice. The author has equaled, for analytical purposes, the social and political spheres, with the following comparison:

‘One citizen/one vote’ is the functional equivalent, in the sphere of politics, of the rule against exclusion and degradation in the sphere of welfare, of the principle of equal consideration in the sphere of office, and of the guarantee of school place in the sphere of education. (p. 305-6)

Thus, even without being his goal, Walzer shows us a way to think the broadening of the concept of democracy: the incorporation of external variables to the political process (the more general social and economical process) to internal variables (the polyarchy)<sup>4</sup>. Debates between systemic theorists and neomarxists in the 60's and the 70's indicated two antagonistic streams: one that considered the political system autonomous in relation to other systems, especially in relation to the economic system; and other, conversely, that considered the economic as determining, in the sense of Marx, the political superstructure<sup>5</sup>.

Robert A. Dahl, in a text written in 1985, argues that democracy and economic welfare have a very strong correlation, although the author does not establish any causal link between the phenomena<sup>6</sup>. For the author, in reality, what matters for the existence (and maintenance) of democracy is not necessarily the existence of material standards and of consumption as the ones found in industrialized countries, but... *of a general perception of relative economic welfare, justice and opportunities, a situation not grounded in absolute patterns, but in the perception of relative advantages and constraints* (DAHL, 1990b, p. 43).

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<sup>4</sup> - During the sixties, a series of studies aim at linking political development with economic development. Even though with huge impact on the Political Science firm that time (and after) and even on the political action of the United States in Latin America and Asia, this approach stopped being the core one. On political and economic development, see Lipset (1959), Almond; Coleman (1960), Deutsch (1961), Dahl (1971), Huntington (1975), Inglehart (1990, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> - In the present work, the distinct views on the relationship between democracy and social and political equality will not be treated in depth. Even so, it appropriate to mention the summary done by Weyland (1996, p. 1-2). As of him, there would be the *classical liberals*, for whom democracy would have a redistributing effect, but the effects of a complete equality would be devastating; the *marxists*, for whom formal mechanisms of democracy do not assure social equality, due to the control of the production means; and the *social-democrats*, who would share with the liberals the belief in the redistributing power of democracies that, therefore, would be beneficial in attempting to eliminate the privileges and poverty.

<sup>6</sup> - Lipset was the first contemporary political science author to verify the existence of this relationship.

Karen Remmer, when studying the electoral disputes and the economy in Latin America, suggests the relationship between economy and democracy be thought in terms of *political capital*, that is, the economy would be used in an instrumental way to facilitate electoral disputes (REMMER, 1991, 1993). More relevant than results themselves, for this work, is the fact the author found a clear connection between economy and politics.

In an article analyzing the relationship between attitudes in relation to the democracy and market economy in Russia and Ukraine, James L. Gibson also finds a relationship between the variables, and democracy, according to the author, would have ideological components prior to the political transition (GIBSON, 1996). The importance of the author's conclusion is due to the fact both countries are in a transition process, not only political, but, what makes the study more singular, also economic.

Surjit S. Bhalla (1997) has arrived in a similar result, in a survey concerning 90 countries in the period from 1973 to 1990 using data from the *Freedom House*. By analyzing the relationship between freedom (political and economic) and economic growth, the author concludes there is virtuous circle in which free political and economic societies favor economic development; this, in its turn, would be an important factor for the existence of freedom.

There also studies which attempt to verify to what extent social and economic divisions of society influence the establishment of democracy. In a survey carried out in South Korea and Taiwan, Hsiao and Koo empirically verified the relationship between the size of middle classes, understood as... *those who occupy intermediate positions between capitalist and working class* (HSIAO; KOO, 1997, p. 313), and democracy, understood as polyarchy. The authors claim that the increase of middle classes is linked to economic growth. In this way, economic growth would influence democracy in an indirect way.

Hsiao and Koo's conclusion should be seen from a broader perspective. In a recent work that came out in 1998, Robert Dahl discusses the relationships between market economy and democracy. Their conclusion is, in a certain way, pessimistic:

market economy favors– and, in a certain way, is a necessary condition, for there is no historical experience of polyarchy out of market economy context– for the emergence and maintenance of democracy<sup>7</sup>. However, as market economy inevitably creates inequalities, it tends to limit the potential of democracy for it distributes the political resources in an unequal manner. Thus, despite being favorable to democracy, market economy prevents democracy from going beyond the limits of polyarchy (DAHL, 1998, p. 177-8). If Dahl's claim is correct, findings by Hsiao and Koo should be put forth in a relative way, that is, the relationship between middle class growth and the establishment of democracy would be limited, once market economy– being the case of those countries studied– would inevitably lead to social and economic inequalities.

Even more striking is the claim posed by Deepak Nayyar in a study about democracy and market economy. Denying the assumption of a natural relationship between democracy and economic liberalism, such as that claimed by authors like Plattner (1999), Nayyar argues that exclusion is inherent to markets, what would become a permanent threat to democracy. This threat would be curtailed by government actions. Governments should intervene to avoid market supremacy over social interests (NAYYAR, 1998).

José Álvaro Moisés, in his work on the political culture from the Brazilian, makes a long discussion about the existing relationship between governments arising from political transitions and their economic success and population's belief in democracy. Based upon several authors, he argues transition processes can have raised an overexpectation on the real possibility of solving social problems, what could yield frustration towards democracy itself (MOISÉS, 1995). Edgardo Catterberg (1991), in a classical study about political culture in Argentina, has reached similar results. As it is known, social problems in Latin America go beyond the institutional and political sphere, democratic transition in its own would not be able to solve them. So, there opens a path to disenchantment, to apathy or even to hostility towards a regime that cannot solve problems the population has to go through. Or, as Przeworski argues, this process can increase a potential non-adherence to democracy owing to results produced

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<sup>7</sup> - The author had reached this conclusion in former works such as Dahl (1990a). The thesis, however, is not consensual. Pinkney (1993, p. 2) argues that the hypothesis market theory is an indispensable complement to democracy is plausible, but has never been tested.

by democratic institutions (CASTRO, 1997; BAQUERO, CASTRO, 1996; CASTRO, 1996; PRZEWORSKI, 1994).

Susan Stokes (1996) reaches a distinct conclusion, in the Introduction of the special number from the *Comparative Political Studies* journal about public supports to market reforms in emerging democracies. Based on case studies from Poland (Adam Przeworski), Peru (Susan C. Stokes) and Mexico (Jorge Buendía), published in the same journal issue, the author concludes that contrary to what is taught by literature on the so-called economic vote, in some cases the economic deterioration increased the support to government members and their economic policies.

There are authors who argue the establishment of a democratic order may produce more lasting and deeper economic reforms. This is what Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner claim in the book edited by them, referring to the study of relationships between economic reform and democracy (DIAMOND, PLATTNER, 1995). A similar point is made by Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, José María Maravall and Adam Przeworski in a book from 1993: according to the authors, only a strategy combining economic growth and income guarantee and democratic institutions can produce successful economic reforms (BRESSER PEREIRA, MARAVALL, PRZERWORSKI, 1993).

In fact, there is a whole series of authors and points serving for the grounding of a thesis that there exists a relationship— in most cases, positive, or, using Bhalla's expression (1997), a virtuous circle – between democracy and market economy. This line of reasoning extends the debate beyond solely political aspects, including economic level variables, but does not include one aspect generally unnoticed in the analysis, the very content of democracy (or its quality). The claim the concept of democracy encompasses both form and content issues has connection with the conceptual division between economic democracy and political democracy, to differentiate the many ways to approach it. It is known this differentiation gives room to ideological interpretations, as it provides space either for ideological analysis assuming the end of history with the institutionalization of stable democratic regimes in core capitalist countries<sup>8</sup>, or for

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<sup>8</sup> - I refer to Francis Fukuyama, (1990) who just before becoming political analyst from the Department of State in the USA wrote an article where he defended the end of history in the hegelian-marxist

views establishing a purely tactical approach of democracy<sup>9</sup>. And this division is particularly important for the Latin American debate because, even in moments of relative democratic stability, social problems are not solved.

This split, as any other kind of split, is at the same time arbitrary and substantive. The substantive component owes to the fact former studies have already divided democracy. The arbitrary component sticks to the very nature of the scientific process that, as a human construction, is full of judgements and choices. There is no doubt that by using this split which dichotomizes and, to a certain extent, reduces the debate, much of its wealth will be lost. However, it is hoped this loss be compensated a rather objective approach.

### **3. And what does this debate have to do with social capital?**

We can draw a parallel with the main and most serious conceptual criticism I make towards the assumptions of *The Civic Culture*, the claim that one particular type of political culture is a necessary and absolute requirement for the constitution and consolidation of democracy. This particular type refers to the civic culture existing in the USA and in Britain.

This kind of reasoning made for the concept of democracy and social capital can also be made in relation to the social capital.

The traditional theory of political culture tells us that it is only possible the existence of a democracy whenever there is the combination of democratic institutions with an environment of civic culture. The civic culture, in its turn, would have passivity, moderation and participation (at certain levels) as its main traits. In conformity with this pattern, closer to the attitudes of a typical English citizen, Latin Americans would have a political behavior far from being democratic.

At most, the civic culture is highly packed with social capital, at least in the

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tradition. An excellent criticism to Fukuyama's apology can be found in Hobsbawm (1995).  
<sup>9</sup> - A criticism on the view of democracy as purely tactical can be found in Coutinho (1980) and in Weffort (1984).

terms of Putnam (1993, 2000). In other words, there is a relation between social capital and civic culture, they are close relatives.

One of the biggest mistakes of this claim of civic culture and – I shall add– of the social capital as a necessary factor for democracy is the disregarding of reality which yields these attitudes inherent to the very democracy.

- How to be favorable to institutions when they are not reliable?
- How to be moderate if governments act bluntly?
- How to be passive and tolerant if deteriorating life conditions in peripheral societies causes the man to be the man's wolf?
- How to believe others when we are taught to "trust by suspecting"?

The answers to these questions are self-evident: in relation to such social situation people react in a selective way. Thus, before searching the origin of problems, they react based upon the appearance of facts. To break off from this vicious circle, it is necessary the understanding of societies in Latin America and, based upon this understanding, to build alternatives. A way to do that is through the study of public policies, particularly, the way privatization has taken place in these countries.

In summary, I think the concept of social capital, given its close ties with civic culture (both concepts akin to the same source: individualism, rational choice etc.), should not be used as a reference for the understanding of democracy – what is worse – as a model to follow for the construction of our societies. Much more than following models, we have to build alternatives...

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021. BARROS, Flávia Lessa de. Redes sociais em campos políticos internacionais-globais para o desenvolvimento - perspectivas a partir da experiência brasileira. Série Ceppac, 2009, 21p.

## Instruções para os autores

Para tornar mais eficiente o preparo de cada número da série, toda e qualquer matéria destinada à publicação deve ser enviada ao Editor da Série Ceppac por meio eletrônico (arquivo .doc). As margens do texto deverão ser espaçadas (esquerda 3cm, direita 3cm, superior 2cm e inferior 2cm), espaço entre linhas “simples”, fonte “Times New Roman”, tamanho 12. O texto deverá ser entregue com alinhamento à “esquerda”.

As citações com mais de quatro linhas devem ser destacadas do texto normal em um novo parágrafo e manter o espaço entre linhas “simples”. As notas de rodapé deverão ser breves e excluir simples referências bibliográficas; estas deverão ser incluídas no texto principal entre parêntesis, limitando-se ao sobrenome do autor, ano e páginas, por exemplo: (CARDOSO DE OLIVEIRA, 1998: 09). A referência bibliográfica completa deverá ser indicada na BIBLIOGRAFIA, conforme o seguinte modelo:

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### Artigo científico

CRESPO, Carolina. Del ocaso del pasado a la reliquia del presente: Una trayectoria de vida alrededor del arte rupestre em Patagonia argentina. Campos – Revista de Antropologia Social, 06/1-2, 2005, pp. 125-137.

### Página da internet

KELLY, R. Electronic Publishing at APS: Its not just online journalism. APS News Online, Los Angeles, Nov. 1996. Disponível em: <http://www.aps.org/apsnews/196/11965.html>. Acessado em: 25 de novembro de 1998.

Deve-se evitar o uso de negritos, itálicos e sublinhados, assim como o uso de tabulações que afetem a diagramação do texto e dos parágrafos.

Os quadros, gráficos, figuras e fotos devem ser apresentados em folhas separadas, numerados e titulados corretamente, com indicação de seu lugar no texto e de forma pronta para impressão.

**Grato por sua colaboração com a Série Ceppac.**