

Democracy Is Not Enough

Citizens have to make a concerted effort to guarantee their own human rights.

In the name of democracy, freedom and human rights, almost anything can and has been done to abolish exactly those three values. Dr. Carlos Pereyra, a leading expert in human rights issues and professor at the College of Philosophy and Literature of Mexico's National Autonomous University, explains how government use these concepts to justify contrary policies. His views:

In the discussion of human rights, people often have the idea that they are a set of "natural rights", that is rights conferred on all individuals by the simple fact of birth. According to this view, a person's existence, in and of itself, should automatically confer certain rights on them. This kind of discourse is actually an application of jusnaturalism to human rights, often accompanied by ideas taken from the personalist metaphysical tradition.

This is not really the place to discuss the deeper assumptions of these philosophical positions. But it is important to note that despite their admirable intentions, people who use these doctrines to defend human rights are left with a rather weak defense. There is, in effect, an unavoidable tension contained within the very notion of "natural right." The concept of "right" always refers to a social pact that is eventually codified. There is no such thing as a "right" prior to and independent of a specific juridical order.

Defenders of jusnaturalism and personalism hold that if the above were true, then there would be no arguments for rejecting specific positive legislation not recognizing one or another of the human rights. If people do not have certain *natural* rights, or if a person's very existence is not sufficient to guarantee them certain prerogatives, then there is no basis for fighting against legislation or political practices that ignore those rights. Thus, either "natural right" is recognized or there is no

theoretical basis for demanding respect for human rights.

But this line of reasoning loses sight of the central problem. It's useless to invoke imaginary "natural rights" with governments and groups that violate or don't even recognize human rights. Changes in such situations don't depend on being able to show that the exercise of power goes against the dictates of



The endless struggle to free political prisoners

Photo by Francisco Mata

supposed natural right. Rather, improving the human rights conditions in places where they are denied can only be assured by reorganizing the social and judicial order. In other words, respect for human rights is not a product of more or less rigorous respect for the imaginary norms of natural right, but rather the creation of a political order in which such rights have some place. It is, then, the product of building a democratic order.

A society will function according to rules contemplating respect for human rights to the same degree that it manages to build a demo-



Photo by Jesus Carlos

In prison for attempting to demonstrate on Labor Day in Mexico City

cratic order. Natural right has no meaning since it doesn't help speed this process. And it is important to emphasize that it is just as irrelevant to use natural right as an argument in defense of human rights, as it is when it comes time to make the list of such rights. The contents of the list depend on historical conditions and not some arbitrary table given prior to specific social orders.

What do we mean when talk about democracy? It's become fashionable lately in Mexico to use a definition that, while good for public relations purposes, doesn't help clear up the misunderstandings attached to the word *democracy*; rather it actually increases the confusion. It's the position that is expressed by the slogan "democracy without adjectives." Nonetheless, what we really need are more adjectives and deeper analyses to help reveal the deliberately created misconceptions, often used to disguise polices violating the most basic rules of human co-existence.

It's enough just to take a look at U.S. policy, and not only during the Reagan administration, although he has carried things to insane extremes. One can conclude that just about anything can be done in the name of democracy, freedom and human rights even if it actually destroys democracy, freedom and human rights.

In effect, Washington's backing has been the main support for a number of dictatorships responsible for thousands of cases of murder, torture, imprisonment, etc. No one can ignore the fact, for example, that White House support for the Somozas was an elemental factor in the lack of democracy and the brutal assault on human rights that characterized Nicaragua for decades. No one can deny that Guatemala's infamous history during the past 30 years has its roots in the 1954 decision by the U.S. to crush the process of democratizations unfolding there. A similar situation exists in Chile since 1973, and it's not only the Chilean "Pinochets" who are responsible for the situation, but the Washingtonian "Pinochets" as well. The list of examples is almost endless and also, quite well known. Perhaps it's enough to point out the colossal incongruence between a policy that purports to defend human rights and the legally sanctioned decision to send millions of dollars to fight a "dirty war" against the relatively defenseless Nicaraguan population.

So, what do we mean when we talk about democracy? It may be inevitable that democracy takes a backseat among social concerns in those countries where inequality and social injustice take on alarming proportions. But that doesn't justify the confusion of democracy and equality or democracy and justice in theoretical discussions of the term. Unfortunately, some theoretical formulations introduce just such confusion. Tocqueville, for example, but also many conceptions developed from socialist revolutionary nationalist and populist perspectives, fall into this category. They have produced such erroneous notions as "social democracy" and "economic democracy" to deal with questions of equality and social justice even though they have nothing to do with the strict meaning of democracy, that is, with the problems of electing governments and leaders. Rigorously speaking, democracy is always *political* democracy.

It is important to avoid confusion in the use of concepts. Concerns about equality and social justice are unquestionably legitimate. There can be moves to eliminate private property (partially or totally), but it should be clear that an egalitarian society, without property owners, is not automatically a democratic society. Democracy, strictly speaking, is only an issue of how the led choose their leaders. It is question of the *form* of the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Thus, the conceptual pair, formal democracy-substantive democracy, has no real meaning. Democracy is *formal* democracy.

Both in society as a whole, as well as in society on a microlevel, that is, in each individual institution, there is always a division of labor in which some people lead the collective, administer decisions or represent the rest. Democracy is a kind of relationship between those leaders, administrators or representa-

mexican profiles

tives and those who are led, administered and represented. Rejecting representative democracy in the name of who knows what kind of direct democracy means rejecting democracy out of hand and opting for mechanisms that can only lead to bossism, corporativism, paternalism, intolerance, etc. Democracy is simply *representative* democracy.

While it is possible to imagine social life without class struggle, it is not possible to imagine it without conflicts of interests, without divergent projects. Absolute homogeneity is inconceivable. It is absolutely necessary to

and pluralist democracy is not conceivable in every economic, social and cultural situation. In this sense, then, it is reasonable to ask what kinds of economic, social and cultural conditions are needed for a democratic order to work.

It's not possible here to go into a detailed analysis of the matter. But it is important to point out, that if all members of a society do not have minimal access to the distribution of the social product, minimal possibilities of finding a job, minimal conditions of social welfare, you can't get very far in creating a democratic order. Without a certain social framework, without the autonomy of social organization, without a margin of pluralistic confrontation in those institutions meant for negotiating interests and harmonizing different projects, there can't be much progress toward building a democratic order. And a certain level of education and culture, as well as the free exchange of ideas and information, are also necessary. Democratic order presupposes a tolerant and permissive democratic culture, in which dissidents are not automatically considered as enemies. To synthesize, then, the exercise of political citizenship also requires the exercise of economic, social and cultural citizenship.

If all of the above is correct, then it is possible to explain the unjustifiable nature of Washington's propaganda and military campaign, that its arbitrary conception of democracy and human rights actually give support to anti-democratic policies that deny elemental rights. Or we can take the Mexican example of how power changes hands and all the hubbub that surrounds the process. The possibility of political power moving from one party to another is necessary for democratic order; that's what is alluded to with the term pluralism. Whether this possibility is made real or not, depends on the will of the voters.

But the fact that in some bipartisan political systems power switches rather frequently from one party to another doesn't say anything about the maturity of its democratic order. To the contrary, switching power back and forth between the Democrats and Republicans in the United States actually shows the enormous limits of U.S. democracy. There the number of ideological and political options presented to voters has been restricted by a particular set of factors, one of the most important being the manipulation of mass media. It's no exaggeration to say that for a long time now in the U.S. a single party, with two different organizational structures, has ruled. What kinds of human rights is the U.S. defending when it tries to impose that type of democratic poverty on others? In truth, respect for human rights is a function of the maturity of a democratic order allowing variety, complexity and plurality in contemporaneous societies.★

Carlos Pereyra



Photo by Jesús Carlos

Rally in protest over Brazilians who disappeared in Argentina during the military regime

acknowledge the presence of the other, that is, of that other with particular interests and specific projects. Democracy is always *pluralist*. Rousseau's theses, for example, against plurality, in the name of some direct democracy and supposed general will, only open the door to terror. There will always be someone who will act in the name of that single, general will with absolute power.

This is where the discussion gets quite bogged down. The four terms applied to democracy (political, formal, representative and pluralist) are taken by some to be necessary and sufficient conditions, while others, instead of discussing if they are sufficient, question whether they are necessary. The correct thesis, that they are necessary, but not sufficient conditions, has only been able to develop gradually. But this is not surprising since the question of democracy is really a recent issue in human history, raised decisively only in the past century.

They are, then, only sufficient conditions. And while related to the workings of the political system, their effective presence does not depend solely on the dynamics of that system, but rather on economic, social and cultural factors. Thus, political, formal, representative