

CEPAL

Review

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CONTENTS

ECLAC: Forty years of continuity with change. <i>Gert Rosenthal.</i>	7
Agriculture as viewed by ECLAC. <i>Emiliano Ortega.</i>	13
Regions as the product of social construction. <i>Sergio Boisier.</i>	41
Some notes on the definition of the informal sector. <i>Martine Guerguil.</i>	57
Changes in development styles in the future of Latin America (Seminar in homage to José Medina Echavarría, Santiago, Chile).	67
Medina Echavarría and the future of Latin America. <i>Adolfo Gurrieri.</i>	73
Political culture and democratic conscience. <i>Enzo Faletto.</i>	79
A hopeful view of democracy. <i>Jorge Graciarena.</i>	85
The change of orthodoxy and the ideas of Medina Echavarría. <i>Aníbal Pinto.</i>	97
New light on the concepts of "private" and "public". <i>Aníbal Quijano.</i>	105
Significance and role of the universities: Medina Echavarría's view. <i>Aldo Solari.</i>	121
Dilemmas of political legitimacy. <i>Francisco C. Weffort.</i>	127
The social actors and development options. <i>Marshall Wolfe.</i>	143
Some recent ECLAC publications.	149

A hopeful view of democracy

Jorge Graciarena*

I

Medina Echavarría's concept of democracy

More than a decade ago, in the year of his death, what was to be José Medina Echavarría's final essay was published in the *CEPAL Review*. With his customary modesty, he referred to this article as "notes" on the future of democracy, even though the way in which he approached his subject and the scope of his analysis make this one of his best-conceived and most powerful works. Certainly, it was a subject that was very near to his heart for a number of reasons: his status as an exile from Francoism, his deeply liberal intellectual calling and his personal character, which was proof against any lapse into authoritarianism.

As Adolfo Gurrieri has reminded us, the subject of democracy made its first appearance in Medina's work in connection with his studies on economic development at least as early as 1960. Subsequently, he touched upon the topic a number of times in various essays on the universities, planning and policy, and other subjects. The topic thus never ceased to figure among his chief interests, but he nonetheless did not deal with it on a comprehensive and systematic basis until his 1977 essay,¹ which, by virtue of its nature and scope, may be regarded as his intellectual last will and testament.

Medina wrote this article during what were difficult years for democracy, years marked by an overwhelming presumptuousness that subordinated the future attainment of democracy to the operation of market laws in line with neoclassi-

cal doctrines, which blurred the distinction between citizens, on the one hand, and, on the other, consumers who acted upon their preferences and exercised their sovereignty by choosing among economic options. Democracy was also, however, subject to the tutelage of a military power which felt it necessary to protect democracy from its congenital weaknesses. Without endeavouring to directly refute the arguments then in vogue in the Latin American countries governed by authoritarian régimes, Medina chose to address the subject in a way which stressed the sociological, political and historical foundations that have upheld the idea of democracy and its practice, not only as a political system but also as a form of harmonious social coexistence.

According to Medina, democracy involves three basic elements: a recognition of the individual's inalienable human rights, the primacy of political freedom exercised by an organized citizenry and, finally, social equity as a form of distributive justice. These elements encompass the civil and political liberties, as well as the social and human rights, which economic liberalism excluded by omission. For Medina, the distinction between the two approaches was a clear one and became even more so when considered, as he did in the article we will discuss here, within the context of their politico-philosophical foundations and historical backgrounds. When it came to choosing between the two, Medina unhesitatingly opted for political freedom, even at the risk of slighting the economic freedom of the market, and he did so because he firmly believed that the supreme value of political democracy in terms of human coexistence lies in the fact that only it can guarantee the complete ascendancy of natural human rights, civil liberties and social rights.

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¹J. Medina Echavarría, "Notes on the future of the western democracies", *CEPAL Review*, No. 4, second half of 1977. This essay was included in a selection of his works entitled *La obra de José Medina Echavarría* (selection and introductory analysis by Adolfo Gurrieri), Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, Madrid, 1980.

The page numbers cited in parentheses after the quotations appearing in this article refer to the former publication.

Medina's references to John Stuart Mill in various parts of the essay and especially in the final quotation illustrate how much he agreed with Mill as to the fact that democracy resides in human beings; if an authoritarian State diminishes man, it "will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished". Medina went on to observe that this "conviction of the classic champion of liberalism, shared by other thinkers of similar stature, exalts the supreme meaning of politics and the decisive value of the human element in shaping a lasting social order" (p. 136).

Thus, perhaps without even intending it as such, he left us a priceless and enduring legacy, as may be appreciated each time one turns back to this brief text, which addresses all the major issues that have always fueled the debate concerning democracy.

Before going into some of Medina's central ideas on this question, however, we should first examine his concept of democracy. His views were neither normative nor idealistic, inasmuch as he regarded democracy as an open and ongoing process that would never be fully crystallized or take on a single and final shape. "The organization of democracy as participation by the people depends on higher requirements relating to the meaning of life ... itself." There is nothing either of metaphysics or transcendentalism in this statement. Medina saw democracy as part of the secular order and therefore as a societal condition which could be continually refined by means of politically-generated and judiciously-implemented reforms, i.e., reforms based on "the creation of new techniques of social organization which do not, however, claim to offer definitive solutions" (p. 132). Democracy could thus, in a strict sense, never be turned into a dogma because the mere attempt to do so would distort its very nature.

This philosophical stance gives his analysis a highly flexible dimension and saves it from pessimism when the moment arrives to consider the obstacles which divert the democratization process from its essential objectives. More than a political régime, democracy was, for Medina, a social way of life based on principles which form an inseparable part of it: natural human rights, civil and political liberties and social equity. He saw it as being a question of the "supreme values

of a form of human society which has a real significance for man and his community" (p. 134).

Certainly, however, Medina understood that democracy as a social and political order is not free from tensions and conflicts among the various sectors and social classes of which it is composed. "Consequently, every liberal-democratic conception of the political system tends to accept as its point of departure the existence of opposing interests and ideological positions which cannot be fully reconciled at the dictates of an absolute truth possessed as such, but can only come to temporary arrangements, successively amplified to meet the needs of the moment, and worked out through agreement, compromise and mutual moderation of incompatible extremes" (p. 127). He therefore saw the inevitability of conflict as a positive factor, since having suitable institutional means of mediating and ultimately resolving conflicts was one of the functions of democracy.

As part of this concept of democracy as a progressive process by which expression is given to certain values, a process incorporating dissent, pluralism and conflict as central elements in its makeup and internal dynamics, Medina also ascribed a specific meaning to the idea of crisis as such. In the midst of the various interpretations suggested in the course of the debate as to the meaning of a concept that plays such a pivotal role in the examination of concrete situations and historical processes, Medina asserted that the term crisis refers to a "particular stage in the evolution of a system which is marked by sufficient symptoms of vacillation and disturbance to indicate a state of transition, ruling out neither the recovery and reinvigoration of the system or its final disintegration and collapse" (p. 119). All crises have a temporal dimension involving a history ridden with "difficulties already observed in the immediate past and therefore in the present day" which also includes their "prolongation into the future". In other words, any crisis must necessarily resolve itself in one of the possible ways alluded to above, one of which is, certainly, the continuance of a stationary state that, while not involving either any progress or any retrogression, does entail some degree of internal recomposition of the system in question. This is why crises are never a static

phenomenon but instead signify, above all, movement, a process of transition, a shift in some direction towards a different state. Although Medina's choice of terms might be misleading in this respect, his concept is not evolutionist in the sense of entailing an *a priori* assumption that progress will be made towards a

desirable end. His idea of crisis as an open-ended transition is particularly relevant and thought-provoking when applied to the analysis of the actual situations created in the course of the redemocratization processes pursued by the Latin American countries which have entered into a new political stage in recent years.

II

Economic development and democracy

From the very outset, Medina addressed the issue raised by the widespread presence of "authoritarianism" in Latin America² and undertook a concise exploration of its nature and of the explanation put forward to justify it. He observed that there were two schools of thought that merged into a broader question, and it is this latter issue which constitutes a common thread running throughout his essay. The first interpretation is the economic one, which attributes authoritarianism to underdevelopment and contends that the drive to overcome underdevelopment will inevitably entail a period of authoritarianism since, without it, the first steps along the economic road to development cannot be taken. According to this line of thought, once these steps have been taken and a certain level of modernization has been achieved, it will then be possible, given the existence of other conditions, for a democratic political system to be gradually established. The other interpretation emphasizes political considerations, arguing that the problem is to be found in the State and in its inability to reconcile opposing interests, mediate conflicts and take appropriate decisions for setting up a well-defined policy to promote development. While Medina regarded the latter explanation as being more plausible than the former, he did not embrace either of these one-sided (the economic or the political) views. Instead, he asserted that "both interpretations, if they are to be valid, must be completed by a

detailed analysis of the historical and social processes that have taken place in each case" (p. 114). Consequently, developmentalist authoritarianism is not necessarily something which can be defined, on an *a priori* basis, as being engendered by underdevelopment.

The central element shared by these two main interpretations could thus be said to be that they both postulate the existence of a close type of "kinship" between economic development and democracy on a deterministic basis. In this and earlier essays, Medina energetically rejected the necessity of such an association, especially when it was seen in terms of a cause-and-effect succession whereby democracy would be contingent upon economic development. In his opinion, past experience indicated that these two processes could follow parallel and even converging courses but need not necessarily do so, since either could exist without the other. One piece of supporting evidence in this respect is the fact that authoritarian developmentalism has often shouldered democracy aside, thereby denying it a role in the various "economic miracles" of recent decades. On the other side of the coin, there are also cases of stationary economies existing in combination with stable democracies, as occurred in Uruguay during the almost 20 years between the mid-1950s and 1973.

Having clearly delimited the relative independence of these two processes, Medina elaborated upon his line of reasoning, since for him it was evident that development and democracy are in no way mutually exclusive either. On the contrary, a complex network of interrelationships binds the two together, as is illustrated

²All the South American countries except for Colombia and Venezuela were governed by authoritarian military régimes in 1977.

particularly clearly by a thorough analysis of specific situations. Indeed, he noted how much economically-rooted social tensions and conflicts are eased in highly developed societies in which personal incomes are relatively large and not too inequitably distributed. This does not, however, necessarily mean that one process depends upon the other, but rather only that democracy tends to become consolidated in capitalist societies in which an abundance of consumption gives rise to an apathetic type of conformism and a passive adherence to an electorally-annointed political leadership. Nevertheless, to begin with, the most important thing was to disprove the argument that the road to democracy excluded the possibility of development. This authoritarian concept was primarily based on a negative assessment of the populist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, which had been presented as democratic paradigms that were synonymous with chaos and a threatened social order. It was therefore imperative, first of all, to put things in their proper place.

Nonetheless, Medina's analysis of the correlation between economic development and democracy was quite pliant in that he allowed for transitory contingencies. "Let us provisionally admit that the correlation does show a temporary validity in relation to the historical juncture at which it has been observed" (p. 124), i.e., for the time being and to a limited extent. This analytical context also encompassed "the demoralizing effects of both inflation and recession on political consciousness —[with] the strength of the impact varying in the different social sec-

tors", which gave rise to conflicts that, as they worsened, placed serious difficulties in the path of attempts to find a political solution within the framework of a pluralistic democracy. Even so, Medina felt that the impact and continuity of political habits and traditions accounted for the capacity exhibited by the central democracies to deal with the difficulties they had faced, noting that some of these democracies "have kept going with exemplary vigour during the recent years of economic recession". In exploring this issue (which is only very briefly reviewed here) and other related questions, Medina made a point of outlining the independence of political institutions and their autonomy in respect of deterministic economic constraints. While it is true that democracy functions within the framework of a given social and economic structure and historical background, it is also true that the extent of its autonomy is such that its makeup and functioning cannot be fully explained in reference only to the pertinent historical/structural factors. Medina regarded the political rationale of democracy, based on participation and a widespread consensus concerning policy design and implementation, as being sufficient and appropriate for the solution of the problems arising within the historical context. If a democracy were to collapse, it would therefore not be a direct consequence of economic stagnation or of any intrinsic weakness on its part, but rather of social upheaval and of the internal and external conflicts sparked by such unrest which the rule of law and its institutional mechanisms had been unable to resolve.

III

Capitalism and democracy

Underlying observable events and processes, however, there is a deeper issue which subsumes that relating to economic development. This issue concerns the long-standing connection between capitalism and democracy by which the economic and political sides of the question are interwoven a single system. Ever since its beginnings, it has been difficult to make democracy

fully compatible with capitalism, the latter being understood as a certain way of organizing economic production and society. A never completely harmonious form of coexistence has been the rule in the history of capitalist development and of the spread and establishment of democracy, which only belatedly attained what might be characterized as a mature state in the central

capitalist countries. However, this accommodation has invariably been achieved by forcing democracies into a kind of "Procrustean bed" so as to make them conform to the needs of capitalism in each of its successive historical phases. This does not, however, mean that a coalescence has taken place whereby democracy has been reduced to nothing more than a mere appendage of capitalism or, in other words, that it has been converted into a capitalist democracy. For Medina, this position was unacceptable: democracy has its own *raison d'être*, its own legitimacy which is not subsumed into that of capitalism; nor is it to be supposed that capitalist society is the only type of society which can uphold democracy as a political system and way of life.

If these two historical forms cannot be made to converge naturally, however, then this will be achieved forcibly, through the predominance of that form which has proved to be the most vigorous in Western civilization and, hence, to be most able to impose its own terms. The following quotation illustrates the nature of such an accommodation: "According to the theorists of the democratic political patterns proper to late or more mature capitalism, the entire system, concerned solely for its own stability, uses an institutional complex whose one and only objective is the loyalty of the masses, i.e., simply to be able to secure a state of apathetic obedience which is functionally satisfactory" (p. 129). And this passive conformism is achieved at the expense of full democracy, by means of disinformation, political propaganda, ideological pressures, consumerism, religious fundamentalism and other cultural methods of countering political motivation and mobilization. The outcome is a functional sort of legitimacy, whether or not consciously conferred, which perverts the true meaning of active citizenship, the ultimate foundation for democracy as a form of popular participation.

In the 1970s, when Medina wrote this essay, a great deal of interest was being aroused by the discussion going on at that time concerning the gradual and irreversible decline of the expansion of the central economies and, by extension, of the underdeveloped periphery as well. This was the period following the major oil crises, when attention was reluctantly and fearfully riveted on the population explosion and on what was seen

as the probable and imminent depletion of the world's main natural resources, as the experts speculated about "the possibility of remaining becalmed ... in a stationary economic situation" (p. 133). Much was being written about zero growth and its possible medium- and long-term implications for the structure and functioning of society and politics.

Some authors set their ideas and conclusions within the framework of civilization itself. R.L. Heilbroner, whom Medina quoted frequently, had written a number of highly influential works in which he postulated the forthcoming "decline of industrial civilization". This thesis, with some slight variations, was shared by the neo-Marxists, who felt that it was not industrial but rather capitalist civilization which was on the verge of collapse. Both of these schools of thought predicted that these events would occur well into the next century, when the elements and factors at work would, they thought, have achieved their full impact and have helped to produce the situations they foresaw.

This exceeded the time frame considered by Medina in his essay, which, strictly speaking, was not a prospective study. Nevertheless, this futurological debate suggested some ideas which he felt were pertinent to his analysis of the democratic process and its immediate future. As indicated earlier, he would not accept any interpretation which would subordinate democracy to any given economic form, whether it be industrial or capitalist. Political democracy was capable of accommodating a varied range of economic and social forms based on relatively different principles of production, appropriation and of the distribution of economic goods, although, of course, its scope was not unlimited.

This is why he felt it necessary at this point to clarify a matter which would make it possible to draw a distinction between democracy and its economic foundations. Although he had mentioned this question earlier, it bore repeating at this juncture in order to lay such predictions of catastrophe to rest. "*Vis-à-vis* the doctrine ... that the legitimacy of the democratic régime is identical with the success and efficiency of the economic system, a vigorous reminder is needed that the type of domination which characterizes the modern State and which in one way or

another upholds both its liberal elements (political rights) and its democratic features ('representation' as a legal faculty) has its origin in the evolution of ideas on natural law before and after the dawn of the modern epoch ... Accordingly, no essential relation links the development and historical consolidation of the modern constitutional State and its subsequent democratic structure with the specific conceptions of the capitalist system, and consequently neither the rule of law nor the institutional crystallization of the egalitarian aspirations of democracy has been formulated or defined as a function of what we now call economic development." In order to reinforce this argument, a few lines later Medina

added: "The history of Europe is a clear case in point, since poverty was no bar either to the ardent desire for democracy or to the gradual improvement of the footing on which it was established. The history of the various parties, of their doctrines, and of the steady formation of political habits and traditions, has its fount of inspiration in some of the European countries" (pp. 124-125). In sum, democracy is an independent political phenomenon whose historical fate will not necessarily be determined by the economic form it takes, and this has been so since its very beginnings. Its fate is therefore not necessarily tied to that of present-day civilization, be it industrial or capitalist.

IV

Democracy and technocracy

In discussing the medium-term prospects for development in the Western countries, Medina agreed with the optimistic view expressed in the report presented by W. Leontief to the United Nations, which foresaw continued growth in these economies for "two or three decades", i.e., until the end of this century. With this growth scenario as a backdrop, Medina asked himself what the presumable outlook might be for the great industrial democracies in the near future (p. 115). This question goes hand in hand with another which may be regarded as crucial for the future of democracy: "Will it be possible for liberal democracy to survive in economic and technical conditions very different from those hitherto prevailing?"

These questions usher in an attempt by Medina to address an issue of deep concern to him: the possibility that technical considerations could ultimately dominate all the major spheres of social and political life. The steadily increasing prominence of instrumental criteria, to the detriment of considerations based on a substantive rationale, could result in the adulteration of the underlying and essential meaning of the idea of democracy, which is chiefly practised within the realm of politics and through political means. In this connection, Medina noted that a civilization

would be irremediably threatened if an instrumental focus were to become the only prevailing rationale. In another section of his essay, he made a categorical statement which is worth quoting in full because it sums up the meaning which he attributed to democracy: "Philosophical criticism ... [has] emphasized and perhaps demonstrated the aberration implied for civilization by the predominance of the instrumental rationale. The practical or perhaps historical rationale upon which depend the values people look to in everyday life —ethical and aesthetic values, values relating to community support and fraternity— has been increasingly dimmed by the instrumentality of the relation between ends and means in science and technique, in economic development and in the technocratic expertise brought to bear on political decisions, leaving the ordinary human being painfully frustrated in his most intimate and most vitally essential aspirations. All the personal —i.e., psychological— '*malaise*' of our time stems from the combination of the alienation imposed by institutions subject to the instrumental rationale with the anomie bred of the frustration of personal values" (p. 130).

This is the chief threat to democracy posed by the present civilizing process. In "a civiliza-

tion increasingly dominated by scientific knowledge ... science and technique would constitute the dynamic force of such a future ... Would it be meaningful to speak of the survival of democratic organization in such a society [which is—it must be recalled—an essentially political form of organization]?" After reviewing the neo-conservative arguments concerning the "end of ideologies" and the "death of utopias", Medina observed: "Some people are beginning to see politics as a mere illusion" (pp. 130-131).

It would surely be a futile exercise to try to imagine a democracy in a world bereft of an explicit and pluralistic form of politics, in which even the most sweeping and important decisions were seen as a technical question and thus as the exclusive preserve of technocrats and their expertise, with the representatives of the political citizenry being entirely bypassed. Medina was very clear on this point: "Neither the rule of law nor the concept of democracy can be reduced to the status of mere instruments ... the future of Western democracy depends on whether it can find itself again."

It is very important to understand that Medina did not, in respect of this or any other topic, argue against science or modern technology. On the contrary, he took a highly positive view of today's scientific and technologically-based industrial civilization. What he feared were technocratic excesses and the arguments advanced by ideologues for the supplantation of politics by technical considerations and, hence, the replacement of government as conducted by political representatives of the citizenry with

government by specialists and experts. This technocratic approach, which was energetically espoused in the mid-1970s, was gaining ground in academic and international institutions and in powerful and influential civilian and military circles. Indeed, it became the predominant ideology of the authoritarian phase of capitalism of that time and its influence was felt not only in the countries then ruled by military régimes but also in nations which managed to maintain their civilian governments. This is what moved Medina to refute this argument, which he did by attacking it at its very roots.

Despite these "ill winds", Medina's faith in the future of democracy was unshaken. He firmly believed that the human values embodied in democracy could not easily be swept off the stage of history. "... great importance is of course attached to [trends] of a strictly technological character [as regards the present and future of democracy]; but undoubtedly the keenest concern is for the future lot of humanity, ... for the extent to which the values that are still considered essential to civilization are destined to flourish or to founder" or, in other words, the supreme value of the freedom of the individual; the values upholding society which are based on solidarity, fraternity, equity, justice, participation, identity; and the forms of development placed at the service of human liberty and dignity (pp. 115, 117 and 120). These were the values which, in his view, constituted the foundations of democracy and which he saw as being threatened by the "technification" of the world, of society and of people's lives.

V

Corporative powers

Political representation is an essential element of both the classic and modern forms of democracy because it ensures the participation of the citizenry in the taking of decisions and in controlling their implementation. After reviewing some of the difficulties encountered by parliaments and other bodies representing the people as regards the effective exercise of the demo-

cratic powers of initiative, the reconciliation of interests and conflict resolution, Medina admits that there have been obvious shortcomings in the way these powers have been constituted and used. Presumably, in a representative democratic system, the gap separating actual individuals from the abstract State should be bridged by the parties and the deliberative bodies established in

accordance with political constitutions. In various aspects, however, this representational coverage has fallen short of what is called for both by democratic doctrine and by political practice in order to ensure that the democratic system will operate as it should.

The resulting representational void is manifested in at least two forms. The first of these is the questioning of the legitimacy of the democratic political régime, which is seen as an ineffective means of representation. According to democratic doctrine, one of the functions of such a régime is to give effect to the "alchemy" by which social interests are transmuted into political demands. When this is not done, the system suffers from what are sometimes serious failings, failings that alter the way in which the political régime functions and, what is worse, produce a representational deficit which prompts people to resort to their own means in order to cover. Secondly, it is manifested in the multiplication of "*corps intermédiaires*" representing specific social interests; this phenomenon undoubtedly stems from the increasing complexity of the relationships between society and politics. This is not in itself harmful to the democratic system, but it can be if these intermediate bodies tend to fill the representational void that has not been satisfactorily covered by the political régime and, in doing so, act on behalf of social interests without, however, politicizing them, i.e., without submitting them to the screening process carried out by the bodies, parliaments and parties which perform a representational function in a democratic political system. Even if they are presented directly to the government and the State, however, when such social interests have powerful backing, they tend to set up non-democratic alternative channels of representation.

Major social interests are corporatively represented when they are championed by large bureaucratic organizations which then bring these interests to the attention of public authorities without going through any intermediary and, hence, without integrating them into politically representative bodies. This gives rise to a dual representational system made up, on the one hand, of political channels and, on the other, of corporative agencies. It could be asserted that this duality has always existed alongside the

party system and has served to complement the latter to varying extents. Furthermore, it is obvious that, in the past, it has never been the case that all social interests have been politically represented. The issue thus begins to take shape, firstly, as a question of degree, of the relative significance of the social interests taken outside the realm of the political régime and, secondly, as a question of the autonomy of social representation, inasmuch as when such representation tends to become relatively independent of the political system, the difference then becomes a substantial one. Power thus becomes heavily concentrated in groups outside the domain of the State, giving rise to complex societal configurations such as those described as "polyarchical" by Dahl or as "polycentric" by García Pelayo. These major enclaves of power are formed by economic and financial groups, employer federations, labour unions and ecclesiastical and military institutions which provide their own representation and which are generally reluctant to submit to the dictates of the political authorities of the citizenry and of the State as the representative of the law.

When corporative powers gain an increasing amount of operational autonomy, the relationships between social actors and citizens of the polity reflect a dissociation that works to the detriment of the party system and political representation and to the benefit of large economic and social corporations, which act on behalf of the most powerful interest groups in the society. This tension, in its most condensed and significant form, reflects the present structural and systemic incongruencies between liberal democracy and capitalism, which, historically, have never been resolved to the full satisfaction of the former. Now as before, the coexistence of the two has been achieved by adapting democracy to the structural matrix and to the logic imposed upon it by capitalism at each given stage in history.

This new type of social power structure, whose influence extends into politics (in recent years referred to as "neo-corporativism"), was discussed early on by Medina in his analyses of the newly-emerging characteristics of the bureaucratization and technocratization processes, a subject which he explored in depth in his essays on planning. In his article on demo-

cracy, he introduced yet another important topic in this connection when he discussed the formation of pyramidally-structured meritocracies based on a type of élitism tending to result in the oligarchization of the corporative leadership.

This subject, which was dealt with by R. Michels in a now classic work on the European countries, has attracted a great deal of interest in the region because these processes have begun to have an extraordinary impact on the political processes involved in the transition to democracy. Indeed, the corporatization of the social representation of major sectoral interest groups is manifested in the growing power of the corporative structure *vis-à-vis* a weak State presiding over a democratic political system which has not finished rebuilding itself and which, as a result, is accorded a limited degree of legitimacy. A plurality of corporative forces, which frequently form alliances despite the divergent interests they represent, is thus progressively encroaching upon the political sphere and exerting a sometimes decisive influence on governmental policy measures.

The civilian and democratic States formed in the wake of authoritarian régimes are still precarious in their makeup, suffer from a lack of authority, are generally inefficient and project an image, both of themselves and of the political parties and political activity, which contains the undeniable elements of confusion characteristic of a transitional phase. The differences between the relative amounts of power wielded

by the two are, however, not only the product of the limitations of the democratic political authorities, but are also due to the fact that, during the preceding authoritarian régimes, corporative forces gained new ground which they have thereafter been unwilling to relinquish. Furthermore, the receptiveness of these new social power structures to democratic practices is either very slight or entirely non-existent, depending upon the type of interest groups they incorporate.

Medina brought up these points in discussing the "breakup of democracy" in connection with the "crisis of governability" (S. Huntington) and the idea of a "blocked society" (D. Bell). The possibility of an "overload" of chaotically-presented social demands, in the former case, or of a paralysis of the political system, in the latter, seriously hampers decision-making. In a society marked by these characteristics, the political system is eventually immobilized by the action of powerful antagonistic forces. Although Medina did not espouse these hypotheses in the form in which they were expressed, he did not conceal his concern as to their possible implications for "the whole essence of democracy as political participation". He went on to stress that "in the democracy of today the traditional sense of 'citizenship' is the most important thing to save, even from the perils of what are often generous attempts to perfect it". In other words, Medina placed the utmost emphasis on the primacy of politics as a decision-making forum without which democracy would be inconceivable.

VI

Crisis and the transition to democracy

Insofar as possible, Medina's attitude was optimistic whenever there were grounds for being so, invariably constructive and highly realistic. This positive outlook is clearly evidenced in his analysis of the future of democracy in the region, considering, of course, the assumptions on which it was based. "If it is true that the foreseeable picture for the next two or three decades [the Lontief report] suggests the probable continuance of general economic growth [the Latin

American countries] may reasonably be expected to enjoy a period of further enrichment, keeping the gap between them and the central countries the same as hitherto, or perhaps even narrowing it. If the likewise favourable prospect for the continuity of democracy in the capitalist countries is also confirmed, the model thus emerging could perhaps help to rub off the burrs of the authoritarian systems prevailing in the region." The latter should, how-

ever, be the result of a process that is free of "interference or pressures —most of which have a negative effect— or of straightforward copying of foreign models ... rather it is a matter of the existence of a generalized political atmosphere which the Latin American nations could hardly fail to breathe too, given their birthright of membership in a common culture and their long-standing spontaneous links ... with the great democracies whose future still holds out a promise" (p. 135).

Note the great care with which Medina formulated his projection, aware as he was of the fact that these favourable overall trends might change either totally or in part, and that his predictions might therefore be fulfilled in one sense and yet be belied by the facts in another. And this is indeed what has happened. It seems worthwhile at this point to take a brief look at what has occurred during the decade that has passed since Medina's essay on democracy was written and published. The "international economic order" has changed so much that it has become, generally speaking, a factor which diminishes the periphery's opportunities for development: the central capitalist economies have fallen back behind the defensive wall of an unprecedented degree of protectionism; commodity prices and the demand for these products have dropped to previously unheard-of levels, and the exporting countries' earnings have plummeted along with them; the terms of trade have deteriorated substantially; and the foreign debt crisis, which came out into the open in 1982, constitutes an ongoing resource drain that is depleting the region's investment and growth opportunities. The projected "two or three decades of growth" have evaporated, and the retrogression of the Latin American countries' economies to the levels they had reached in the late 1970s, has seriously exacerbated social conflicts. The drop in employment and the growth of underemployment, the decrease in wages and living standards observed even in middle-income sectors, increasing marginalization and recourse to extreme survival strategies, the decline of the rural peripheries and the poverty of the peasantry—all of which is in glaring contrast to the consumerism of the well-to-do strata, whose incomes have increased in many cases— have pushed the social barometer up into the storm range.

Nobody could reasonably deny that the social situation is steadily deteriorating in the countries that are in the process of making a transition to democracy and that their economies have stagnated or, in the most extreme cases, are even shrinking. Perhaps the most politically delicate aspect of the situation is that of both the dependent and independent middle-income sectors; historically one of the most effective mainstays of democracy, these sectors have gone into a rapid decline.

¡E pur, si muove! Democracy has been reinstated in most of the countries whose authoritarian military régimes were incapable of overcoming the crisis or of managing it satisfactorily. The specific nature of the corresponding events has varied from one country to another, but the differences among them cannot conceal the existence of one main feature which they have in common and which has become evident wherever the "debt crisis", with all its economic and social implications, has been followed by a sudden interruption of dynamic growth trends in the Latin American economies. The restoration of democracy has filled the void left by the withdrawal of authoritarian régimes, but has not necessarily resolved the structural crisis which envelopes the region's peripheral version of capitalism as an historical system. In line with the logic that prevailed some years ago, it might have been thought that the imperative of preserving the capitalist social order in the face of an outright crisis would have given rise to demands for an expanded role for the State and its Praetorian Guards. This has not, however, been the case, perhaps because it was neither necessary nor possible. Firstly, the crisis has not entailed any serious threats to the *status quo* which would have cast doubt upon the capitalist order. Quite the contrary, although there have been signs of discontent and social protest, they have not been such as to call the system into question. Secondly, no one can deny that the response capacity of both civilian and military authoritarian apparatuses had been exhausted and that the changeover was thus inevitable and undeferrable.

Political demands have been for democracy rather than for more authoritarianism, and it is democracy that has been assigned the heavy responsibility of enduring and then overcoming the crisis. This is not an appropriate place to

assess its possibilities of success, but it is a fitting time to take another look at Medina's ideas on the relative independence of politics from economic development. The countries currently making a transition to democracy have embarked upon this process under the worst economic conditions of the last 50 years. Nevertheless, the trends being observed today bear out Medina's optimism, since much of the available political and social evidence supports the conclu-

sion, at least on a provisional basis, that democracy is here to stay. And the reason for this, above all, is that nobody with a sufficient degree of power and ability is offering a viable or significant alternative which could garner the necessary consensus and material support. We thus continue in a state of transition, following a course which we hope will lead us to the consolidation of the infant democracy that we now enjoy.