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The author has succeeded in expressing, in a style as precise as it is elegant, a deep and sincere concern for the democratic and humanistic values. From the methodological standpoint, he begins "by seeking the support of studies written in a conservative spirit" on the subject of the present and future of "the great capitalist democracies". The article may largely be regarded as an able synthesis of conservative interpretations, since basically they are not at variance with the brief remarks on the ideas of the 'New Left' or with the general conclusions. In point of fact, the statement of the problem in terms of a 'crisis of Western democracy' and of the urgent need for democracy to recover its real efficiency is conservative in the strict sense of the word, since it assumes the existence of a situation, prior to the current disturbances and threats, which should be preserved or restored.

The author bases his summary of the conservative diagnosis primarily on the works of two North American thinkers, D. Bell and R. Heilbroner, who voice their uneasiness about the political trends followed in their country during the past few decades and their anxiety as to the long-term implications. Here I want to discuss, in the empirical context of the recent history of the United States, only one aspect of the conservative approach summed up in the article under review – but an aspect which is in my opinion of great importance for the argument. I refer to the 'overload' of demands made upon the contemporary State.

To condense this argument even further, the suggestion is that a principal cause of the "faulty operation of present-day democracy" lies in a recent overload of new demands and the consequent State transfers and contributions. These claims would seem to constitute a deep-seated menace to the survival of democracy, not only inasmuch as they imply an increasing degree of State interventionism, which would do away with individualism and personal rights, but also because the fiscal impossibility of meeting all these demands for 'entitlements' would inexorably lead to the collapse of the Public Household, or to a curtailment of democratic participation as the only possible safety measure whereby to conserve that very democracy itself.

But who are the 'individuals or groups' that are urging these excessive claims, and why are they doing so? Sometimes the 'civic consciousness' in general would seem to be the source of this view of things, according to which the new consumer aspirations have acquired the character of entitlements. But the article makes it quite clear that it is not the general public that is responsible for this overload; it is the groups which have not been able to satisfy their demands through the market that 'peremptorily' and "transcending the principle of equality of opportunities predicated at the start, in reality call for actual equality of benefits". It would hardly be an exaggeration to formulate the conclusions of the argument as follows: certain groups and individuals that have been
incapable (from limited intelligence or from laziness?) of availing themselves of the equality of opportunities to satisfy their consumer wants, are now claiming as a right the satisfaction of their needs and wants by the State. These excessive demands are a threat to the stability of the democratic system itself; it would be partly imputable to the irresponsibility of these groups if the outcome to be faced were a fiscal crisis and the danger of an authoritarian and interventionist régime.

The article offers no indication whatever of the identity of these groups. It is common knowledge, however, that in the United States this controversy was precipitated by the new demands and the new ways of putting them forward that emerged in the chronically poverty-stricken sectors: the black and the Spanish-speaking populations; the indigenous groups; and the whites of Appalachia (miners, smallholders, migrant agricultural workers), which, although minorities, make up in the aggregate about one-third of the national population. But in the context of the operation of the socio-economic system in the United States, it is perfectly possible to interpret these demands in a different way, which would lead us to conclusions very different from the concept of an 'overload of demands'.

In the study by Medina Echavarría it is categorically declared that no attempt will be made to examine in detail the relation between political and economic institutions. Strictly speaking, it is a matter of divorcing 'political science' from 'political economy'. Such a decision seems particularly regrettable in the present case, for several reasons. The relegation of economic factors (with the exception of the growth of the gross product) to the ceteris paribus of the analysis eliminates several economic premises as implicit bases of the political analysis; what is more, although the new demands of the groups in question certainly included their basic civil rights and some measure of proportional participation in the public decision-making process in general, they were (and still are) mainly economic demands, as the article itself makes plain. By evading discussion of the relation between politics and economics, the analysis discounts the possible economic causes of the crisis, besides ruling out solutions which would imply structural changes in the economic sector.

But before considering the causes underlying the underprivileged sectors' new demands and possible ways of dealing with them, let us briefly revert to the economic assumptions implicit in the conservative argument. The most obvious is the idea that real equality of opportunities exists in the United States. It is sufficiently proved and admitted that this aspect of the American Dream is largely a myth; although a certain very limited social mobility does exist, from which one-third of the population has been in fact excluded. More subtle are the implications latent in the assertion that the demands of these groups constitute a danger for democracy because they are new, peremptory and likely to overstrain the capacity of the Public Household. In reality, the history of economic development in the United States is in part the history of the demands and pressures brought to bear on the State by the economically powerful sectors, from the railroad owners and the great financiers of the past century, to industrialists in the steel, motor-vehicle, petroleum and other sectors, and the giant defence industry of today. They attained most of their objectives in the shape of special policies and concessions, not be-
cause these demands were fairer than those made by the deprived groups now, but because they were put forward by powerful sectors. Acceptable, too, are the nowadays traditional demands of certain professional organizations, such as the powerful American Medical Association, and, after an initial period of struggle for their rights, the great industrial trade unions which constitute a sort of labour elite with exclusivist mechanisms of its own. If these groups' demands on the State have not exceeded the latter's capacity, it is because the present 'pluralist' political system represents precisely the product of the various demands and influences of the interest groups and the private sector. Obviously, the black and the Spanish-speaking populations, etc., have been traditionally excluded from the system as far as full economic and political participation goes. The mechanisms and causes of this discrimination are many and complex, and are mainly of economic origin, although among them racism cannot be overlooked.

The recent demands of these underprivileged sectors are 'new' in several senses. In the first place, they are demands for State guarantees of a new type, respecting equality in employment, several non-traditional services, etc. The history of these movements certainly began with demands for equality of opportunities, but it gradually moved on to demand for "actual equality of benefits", and this for two main reasons. Even if future generations were to have opportunities equal to those of the other sectors of society, one-third of the present population would continue to be poor because it had not enjoyed that equality "at the start"; and, furthermore, it soon became clear that the measures applied (access to education, non-discrimination in employment, etc.) did nothing to undermine the real mechanisms of economic discrimination. In this context, the quota policy (in higher education, in employment, etc.) is essentially a "liberal solution", since it is not based on a full appreciation of the relation between the social classes and does not seek to bring about fundamental changes in the relevant economic institutions.

Secondly, the tactics employed by the underprivileged groups were also distinctly novel, especially during the 1955-1965 decade, when the black civil rights movement was in its heyday: marches, boycotts, sit-ins, etc. Pressures on the State within the pluralist system are exerted through the local 'machinery' of the two great traditional political parties, and through lobbyists or professional agents of the pressure groups and enterprises in Congress itself.

In contrast, the 'passive resistance' tactics of the deprived groups produced their impact partly in the form of direct economic pressure, but much more through the moral confrontation of the general public with the realities of oppression. In this sense they constituted a tremendous stimulus to civic responsibility, a 'conscientization' with respect to the true principles of democracy—that is, the very opposite of a threat to such values.

Lastly, since the new demands represent pressures on the part of groups which have always been outsiders in the pluralist democracy, they logically exceed the possibilities of the existing structure of the politico-economic system.

From this standpoint, therefore, in what sense could it be said that a public medical insurance scheme (to take the only concrete example of 'demands' given in the text) constitutes an overload
on the system, or a threat to democratic principles? Innovations of this type, based on concepts of social justice, would manifestly imply substantial changes in the distribution of income, economic power and political participation, but it would be absurd to argue that they exceed the capacity of the United States economy. As regards the jeopardy in which increasing State intervention might place creative individualism and personal rights, it must be remembered that there are several forms of interventionism. The intervention of powerful economic interests in public affairs is obviously not very democratic, nor, by definition, are the restrictions imposed by an authoritarian State. But popular participation in decision-making is in itself a kind of interventionism in the economic field through the State: it would make a difference to the operation of an economic system at present based on the decisions of the great enterprises, yet it does not necessarily imply any diminution of personal rights, much less a 'crisis' of democracy. It seems more than ironical that some authors of functionalist analyses, while rejecting at the outset solutions that imply structural economic changes to resolve the problems and demands stemming from socio-economic inequalities, find it perfectly acceptable to contemplate the possibility of a curtailment of democracy as the only remedy for this 'crisis'.

I very much appreciated Medina Echavarría’s article because of the decision and clarity with which he approached a problem of major significance and profound relevance for us.

However, there are two points of differing importance about which I think it would be useful to raise some doubts. The first, and the less important, concerns the statement that the type of political system prevailing in the Western countries influences the trends towards change in the political systems of less developed countries. It is not clear whether, by this, he means that the democratic régimes might use their economic power to impose political projects which they favour, or whether he is merely thinking of the spread of cultural patterns. In the first case I believe that the statement would be mistaken, at least in its general sense, while in the second case the connexion, if there is one, in my view is only very slight.

However, the main point that I wish to discuss is his assertion, firstly that the Western democracies are passing through a period of crisis, and secondly, that this crisis also affects the democratic ideal—Democracy with a capital D, understood as a system of protection of personal rights and of channels for popular participation in the running of the republic. It seems to me that the author shares this conception of democracy, since he expresses concern lest the basic values of Western civilization may be threatened by the difficulties which these political systems are experiencing. I do not entirely go along with the first assertion mentioned, however, and I particularly disagree with the second, so let us analyse each in turn.