

# CEPAL

## Review

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The phrase 'parallel lines of thought' is intended to highlight the widening gap between scientific monism and social criticism. The two ways of thinking manifest no empathy whatsoever: they keep their discourses strictly parallel. No search has been made for the procedures, mechanisms, instruments and institutions which could really reconcile, within a common social technology, the political demands for participation with the canons of economic and social theory. I have deliberately assumed that the science and the criticism to which I refer are optimum products in their respective branches of knowledge. I know

that this is not always the case; in that event, their mutual estrangement paves the way for all the obfuscations proper to those who lack a common term of reference.

To conclude, if the study were just one more testimony to the existence of an unaccomplished task, that merit alone would qualify it as a real contribution. But since the author bases these 'Notes', as he modestly calls them, on vigorous backward- and forward-looking cogitations upon the future outlook for democracy, they are an invitation to put into practice "the ways of consciously preventing the occurrence of many avoidable ills".

### *Comments by Gregorio Weinberg*

The power of suggestion is one of the many virtues of José Medina Echavarría's alert and sensitive thinking. His reflections enrich analyses and formulations, and go straight to the heart of any problem; hence their perusal is always stimulating. In this sense, his article "Notes on the future of the Western democracies" brings us face to face with what are some of the most vital issues of the contemporary world, since they relate to the destiny of the human race, yet does not on that account disregard the specific characteristics of the Latin American process at this critical juncture in the region's history.

Out of the compact sheaf of questions laid before us with so much acumen, we will take up two. The first relates to the author's timely reminder that "in the history of thought, liberal and democratic ideas precede and are independent of conceptions respecting

economic development": that is, they cannot be validated only by the success—nor, therefore, refuted by the failure—of their capacity to meet the requirements of increased well-being. The difficulties habitually encountered by all attempts to reconcile 'democracy and development' are not observable in the under-privileged regions alone (as might be presupposed at a very rapid glance, in view of the growing institutional instability of the developing countries, and the frequency with which they deviate or debouch into authoritarianism). Rather do they constitute, as Medina Echavarría stresses, a key concern of political thinkers everywhere and of all tendencies, for they underlie the whole spectrum that stretches from conservative interpretations to those of the so-called 'New Left'. What is more, "the criticism also extends to any other political system which has thrown in its lot

with the efficiency of development". In short, neither by their origins nor by their future are the concepts of 'democracy' and 'liberalism' necessarily linked to those of capitalism as an economic system, and much less still to the efficiency criterion, whatever the code of values selected as a point of reference.

To corroborate the conclusions of the foregoing paragraph recourse to history will suffice. We will dismiss straight away the facile arguments of those who attempt to impugn the concept of democracy from its very origins, and to that end recall only that it was confined to a small number of 'citizens' and excluded slaves and foreigners, even though these latter sometimes formed the numerically largest groups. They forget, however, that it has been undergoing elaboration and enrichment from the time of the Greek city-State to our own day. In any case, such reasoning is a very shaky foundation for criticism of what are still fruitful elements in the ideas of Plato and Aristoteles, since stating the question in those terms means shirking the real issue, which is not a matter of justifying a restricted democracy such as that undoubtedly was, but of creating the necessary and adequate conditions for progressive expansion of the range of participation (in addition to the guaranteeing of rights) until it is made really universal.

But let us look at another example closer to ourselves. Spinoza, for instance—to cite one of the greatest thinkers of the modern world, and perhaps one of the least remembered—, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, when he is analysing the various known political régimes, considers democracy to be the best of them, for its government is based on reason, since in it—in democracy—

sovereignty is vested in the person of the human individual. Still according to Spinoza, in the *republic* (that is, the political community), *authority* (for him a synonym of legitimate power) rests on the *jus naturale* (the law of nature, i.e., the law of self-preservation, and preservation of one's rights, not only as a reality but also as a potential), which does not, to be sure, fail to recognize the *jus judiciaire* (the law of society), but sees it as a means of safeguarding the idea of *tolerance*. Shortly afterwards a decisive contribution was to be made to the theoretical formulation of this last concept by John Locke, precisely one of the greatest architects of liberalism, in whose system the right to own property came to be given a privileged place. But at no point in his reflections, formulated—obviously—during the century of absolutism and of the consolidation of national states, does Spinoza resort to economic arguments to lead up to his conclusions, still less to justify them. Thus, in this seventeenth-century rationalist we find a forerunner already concerned with "secularizing on a lasting basis", as Medina Echavarría puts it in relation to the following century, "the images of legitimacy of power formulated by the Enlightenment". Consequently, the fundamentals of the democratic society are legitimized in ways perceptibly divergent from the paths followed by those who pursue the same end today via the 'instrumental rationale'.

This is not the place to explore the background of the ancient concept of 'democracy' or of the more modern idea of 'liberalism'; nor to stress their distinguishing marks or to linger over an attempt to discover the intentions of those who confuse them. What is of interest, in our opinion, is to underline the fact that they have a history, since this

criterion, on the one hand, facilitates their dissociation from specific régimes; and, on the other, makes it possible to relate them –especially the first– to a very old tradition of incessant search for the appropriate means of satisfying human aspirations, which, of course, transcend those concerned with “purely material satisfaction”. Nor does this approach shut out the potentialities of utopian thinking, which, although it does not hazard an interpretation of existing realities (a task, moreover, impossible for it, since strictly speaking it is not analytical), nevertheless can constitute a proposal for action. Provided that, as Ernst Bloch insisted, the utopia meets the twofold requirement of being satisfactory as a theory and efficacious as a praxis.

The second question, which we shall touch upon very lightly, is a reversion to the theme of what Medina Echavarría calls the “narrowness of national boundaries” and the political problems it involves, ranging from the constitution of regional units to the exploration of the possibilities for “establishing international authorities”. His remarks in this connexion suggest the innumerable difficulties raised in relation to the problems of democracy and its future –the focal point of the article under discussion– as well as the tests to which democracy is and will continue to be subjected. On our part we would venture to assert that the depth of the contemporary crisis could perhaps also be sounded from another point of view, not indeed completely divorced from that of Medina Echavarría, but expressed in other terms and approached on a different level.

Man in our day has witnessed a convulsion in his categories of space and time –not to mention others– whose dimensions and characteristics generate

much of his *malaise* (to refrain from speaking of a concept so mishandled and at times equivocal as that of ‘anxiety’). These assertions may be illustrated by recalling three significant moments in the course of history.

(a) The first consists in the transition from the Greek city-State to the Hellenistic empire, which generated a veritable civilization, distinguished by its brilliant lights and the uncompromising darkness of its shadows, in which strong individualism existed alongside a no less intense cosmopolitanism, engendering a *rootless* human being who looked on in perplexity at the rapid ousting of the culture of the cities by another with claims to universality (although its whole ‘world’ was a modest sixteenth of the planet).

(b) The second was the Renaissance, when within the short space of a few decades geographical discoveries gigantically enlarged the earth, and the theories of Copernicus deprived it of the privileged place it had held in the Ptolemaic system which had pervaded the western *Weltanschauung* through and through. (The known evidence seems to suggest that for sixteenth-century man the difficulty of grasping a fact so astounding as the existence of the Antipodes was apparently much greater than any that our twentieth-century contemporary finds in coexisting ‘naturally’ with manned spacecraft. Similarly, for the former –living in a markedly hierarchical society– it must have been easier to accept in a fatalistic and passive spirit the prevalence of poverty, famine or plagues, perhaps to some extent made tolerable then by their very inevitability, than for us –children of a more affluent society, vigorously mobile and fluid– at a time when historians as conservative and ethnocentric as A. Toynbee can say

that in view of our economic situation social injustice is becoming avoidable and therefore intolerable.)

(c) The third is our own time, when, again in an interval of only a few years, contemporary man has sallied forth into the universe (as witness his daring feats of space travel), and in the laboratories has explored the microcosm of the atom and succeeded in liberating energy by splitting it. The particular form of human tension deriving from confrontation with the macrocosm and the microcosm, combined with many others, such as those stemming from the speeding-up of the tempo of history, the disruption

of most of man's frames of reference, and the doubts consequently cast on many of his accepted values, constitute additional elements that no searching criticism of the culture of our age can afford to disregard. On the contrary, it must take them in conjunction with the motives of concern for the future of democracy—as enunciated by Medina Echavarría—in order to understand that if the contemporary world has new dimensions and new contents, it also needs new tools and new attitudes for their analysis and comprehension. All of which represents an unparalleled challenge to man's intelligence and imagination.

### *Comments by Marshall Wolfe*

As one has learned to expect from an essay by this author, the text is so tightly knit and deals so judiciously with the questions it sets itself that it leaves few loopholes for comments. On rereading one finds discreetly suggested and dismissed what one was at first tempted to point to as omissions. The main factors bearing on an uncertain future and the reasons for hoping that pluralist democracy will hold its own against 'authoritarian democracy' and 'people's democracy' (since the future of the word 'democracy' as a symbol of legitimation for all kinds of régimes seems assured) are here. The essay will start each reader on his own mental exploration, possibly leading to other essays rather than comments.

The author makes use of one prognosis borrowed from certain economists to make somewhat smoother the future of pluralist democracy: that the central

countries can expect more than twenty fat years of economic growth in which to reform their styles of development and prepare for a longer-term future in which such growth will no longer be feasible, in which 'development' will have to focus on quality rather than quantity. Are these twenty-odd fat years either probable or desirable? As to the *probability*, one can surmise a predisposition on the part of crusaders for a 'new international economic order' to suppose that the central countries are going to be in a position to meet the demands now being made on them without undue strain. In view of the multiplicity of problems with which the central countries are now contending, however, the odds in favour of such a future seem to be poor. As to the *desirability*, an additional twenty-odd uninterrupted fat years would almost inevitably mean a relapse into complacency; they