

# Democracy versus Republic: Inclusion and Desire in Social Struggles

Renato Janine Ribeiro

We will argue in the following pages that the idea of inclusion is linked rather to the democratic tradition than to the republican one. In order to sustain this case, we will define democracy not only as its Greek supporters have done – as the power of the *demos*, the people – but also as its contemporary detractors did, understanding it as the power of *hoi polloi*, the rabble. Conversely, we will read Republic as its Roman creators did – as a regime defined rather by its *telos*, the common weal, the *res publica*, than by whoever holds the power inside this form of government. This means that we will give more importance to the final cause or *telos* of both regimes than to their *causa efficiens*, be it the people in Athens or the Senate in Rome – even though, of course, final and efficient causes may converge in the end. However, since the last years of the 20th century and the first ones of the 21st saw a strong revival of Republican thought, we will emphasize the limits of Republicanism – since it puts more stress on reason and discipline than in the desires of the *plebs* – and the potentialities of democratic thought, which can and must take into account not only the will of the *populus* but also the desires of the *plebs*, of the *polloi*. If we do not give democratic passions their due, if we do not try to create an important democratic *culture* in the anthropological sense of the world, we will confine ourselves to an idea of democracy which might not be able to cover the great diversity of cultures and societies we have across the world.

We are used to employing the terms ‘republic’ and ‘democracy’ as though they were practically interchangeable. The two words seem to express the finish line crossed by the modern West, in terms of the most desirable political organization. Of course, we know that there are republics that are not democratic – but they don’t deserve the name republic. There are also democracies that are constitutional monarchies (but, we would say, they can be even more republican than some republics). Thus, the opposition there might be between these two regimes comes undone in our time, because we implicitly assume that the true republics are distinguished from the false ones, and the genuine democracies from the faked ones. Here, however, we

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shall revalidate the distinction – not, to be sure, to make it absolute, but rather to show how it can be heuristic, helping us to think and, who knows, to improve politics.

Generally speaking, in the tradition that began in Greece, democracy became the regime of the *polloi*, the many. Even if we employ the word *demos* as the holder of the power, many detractors of this regime have said that, to tell the truth, power would be in the hands of the *polloi*. That is why *demokratia*, for Aristotle, was not classified among the pure forms of policy, but rather considered as one of its degenerated forms. The multitude of the poor are mobilized, above all, by the desire to have; and the great danger of the regime in which it prevails is that it may oppress, with their weight, the rich. For this very reason, tyranny is not limited to the case in which one person dominates, or in which a minority takes over the government; it may apply to every situation in which one forsakes the plane of right and law to occupy that of greed. There is a tyranny of the masses that is as detestable as that of the individual or the group. The tyrannical government of one, the oligarchy and what we would call in our present age the *deformation* of democracy (but which Aristotle calls ‘*demokratia*,’ to the surprise of the modern reader and the discomfort of his translators) have in common the primacy of greed and desire over the respect for the law. This is the specter that haunts democracy; that is why a whole school of Greek thought mistrusts it so. Poorly educated, as they say, the mass of *hoi polloi* may easily get excited about expropriating the rich, thinking that politics is just a way to confiscate the excess wealth the latter possess. We can remark that a large part of left-wing thinking follows that route, inasmuch as it is characterized by giving a social basis to political matters: the political question cannot be thought of as referring merely to the power of the State; such power must be considered to have been generated by society, with all inequalities and conflicts it houses. However, such politics of the left are misguided for in discarding the republican *topica* – because the latter is generally seen as conservative – it loses sight of the question of power, limiting itself to an ideology of distribution which, in the last analysis, does not go much beyond the old Latin American populism.

We need to go more deeply into *desire*. This expression seems rather vague, especially in the context of democracy. However, this vagueness is not fortuitous, but rather the necessary outcome of the questions discussed above. In the first place, desire is referred to pejoratively, in the third person:<sup>1</sup> those who refer to democracy as a regime of desire, or to the *polloi* (the poor) as essentially ‘desirers’, are basically the conservatives or the *aristoi*, the ‘best’ or the rich, who antagonize them. In this sense, desire is first of all greed; second, a desire for *goods*; third, it is the epitome of irrationality; and fourth, it is the root or limit of indecency. The more one desires, the less reason one has. One desires goods and, for that reason, wants to steal them. In the eyes of a certain conservatism, there is no difference between the desires to steal and to expropriate, between common crime and a socialist political platform.

Since ancient times a *social* character has been present in the characterization of democracy. We often hear historians of political thought say that democracy was a purely formal, juridical, constitutional and bourgeois matter, until the late 19th century; and that some sort of social ‘flesh’ had to be added to that insufficient skeleton, i.e., class conflict, economic relations, etc. It is true that historically, things worked

out that way in modernity, with a 'formal' democracy in the 18th and 19th centuries, complemented, after many struggles, by a social characteristic, mainly in the course of the 20th century. But if the Greeks had already seen the beginnings of social struggle in democracy, the novelty is not to be found in the relatively recent moment (the 20th century) at which the latter stopped being a merely political regime and acquired a social dimension. What is new, and needs to be explained, is why modernity constructed representative democracy as a regime from which was excluded, at least at the beginning, the strong social content with which the Greeks had imbued their democracy. By this, I do not mean that social demands bring about a re-hellenization of democracy, or that they better correspond to an imaginary essence of what that political regime should be supposed to be. Our task, rather, is to deny that the democratic regime would have had an initially political definition, and only later a social one. If this is true for the modern, it does not apply to the Greeks. Furthermore, it is appropriate to suggest that democracy, the regime of the *polloi*, brings together the themes of political and social relations. Separating the two topics has been a complex and difficult modern construct that often keeps us from understanding the nature of power in a democratic society. To go a step further, the nature of power specific to democracy cannot be adequately understood if we maintain this two- or three-centuries old split between political and social aspects of democracy.

Our first remark is, therefore, that what is social is not a recent addition to an original conception that would be merely juridical or political, in a strict sense. Quite the contrary, what needs to be explained is how, at the beginning of the modern era, in revisiting ancient democracy in order to make it representative and to add the crucial idea of human rights to it, a political form was severed from its social implications and came to operate independently of the latter. Far from deriving from the nature of the thing – of the *res democratica* –, this separation is itself problematical.

Our second proposition is that it is impossible to separate the themes of social struggle and desire. Or rather, the separation of the two is also a modern *conquest*, if you allow me to be ironical. Since the beginning of the modern era the ancient theme of virtue has given way to that of interests. Human relations have become economic: in the last analysis, interests direct our attention to an economic reading of our lives. Even that which is qualitative, such as life, or the good life, tends to be quantified in terms of means and ends, investments and results. And this domination of the future via the present is rationally constructed. That is, a precise analysis of profit and loss, of risks and results, structures time itself. The growing role of social struggle in our world is no exception to this pattern. When the workers organize themselves as a class in order to struggle for their share, or even to extinguish bourgeois domination, the key word is interest; and this is measured by the standards of the economy and of reason. Actually, this is the axis, and the limitation, of Marxism.

Without a doubt, there is much here to take into account. Without a grounding in interests, it is hard for any policy to function today. What we need to emphasize is that virtues, in Antiquity, and interests, in modern times, *repress*. Interest makes a clean break with virtue, because the latter involves denial of self through abnegation, while the former is the clearest sign of the affirmation at least of a certain self, the rationally measured economic self. But with this in mind, virtue and interest share the function of repressing something seen as bad or unacceptable, namely desire.

Let us return to the dangers of democracy, i.e. the risk, anticipated by the Greek conservatives, that the masses of *hoi polloi* might decide to expropriate the few rich and institute a tyranny over them. Now this danger is also denounced in modern times; in the 19th century, denying universal suffrage was a strategy of the conservative rulers, afraid that the rabble might decide to confiscate the property of the well off. Among the Greeks, the greedy multitudes were seen as vice-ridden; that was why it was necessary to activate the virtues against them. As for the crazed mob, among the moderns, it does not perceive its own medium- or long-term interests; that is why it needs to be tutored by the interest groups. Desire is seen as concupiscence, or even madness. It implies enslavement to one's own passions. The man who only desires, without the control of reason, needs to be protected, tutored. There are, of course, differences between the ancient and modern disturbances caused by desire. But in both cases the emphasis is on the expropriation of the property of the rich. Desire is essentially for goods; no distinction is made between the claims of the masses and theft or robbery by a criminal; the masses clamoring for equality of access to property are no different from the mugger. They may even be worse, forming a gang. Even today, in the eyes of many conservatives, left-wing parties, labor unions and gangs may be seen as similar; one need only observe how the Movement of the Landless (*Movimento dos Sem-Terra*, or MST) is portrayed by the more conservative among Brazilian ranchers or by a part of the Brazilian press.

In fact, it is impossible to reduce the desirous character of the class struggle to the rational and economic focus on interests. No doubt, the measurement and rationalization of the latter is of great value. Thanks to such interests, we can negotiate, and thus insert the dimension of time into the accomplishment of that which is desired. Desire negotiates little and virtue despises negotiation, while the kernel of interests is to negotiate. Therefore, there is no great harm in going on from desire to interest. Such a linkage is, at least potentially, more fruitful than the more radical and non-negotiable opposition between desire and virtue. But the serious risk of the dominant perspective, which accords primacy to interest, is that desire – which is the base, the driving force, or whatever you want to call it, of a whole social process of discontent and search for new contentment – may simply be forgotten.

It is time to talk about the republic.

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At its definitional core, the republican thematic differs from that of democracy. If there is one topic that constantly reappears, whether in the republican thinkers of Rome or in the works where Montesquieu re-examines their State, it is that of a renunciation of private advantage in favor of the common welfare or the *res publica* – a renunciation that Montesquieu calls 'vertu' and which, it seems to me, could better be translated as *abnegation* or self-denial. For the author of the *Spirit of the Laws*, it is an *anti-natural* quality – considering that our nature would make us follow the inclinations of our desire to have more and more – and is constructed through intensive education.

In sum, we might say that while the essence of *democracy* is the desire of the masses to have more, in order to be equal to those who possess more goods than

they, and, therefore, that it is a *regime of desire*, the *republic* has at its core a disposition to *sacrifice*, proclaiming the supremacy of the common weal over any private desire. Of course, one may criticize the republic, saying that the so-called common good is, in reality, what is good for one class, or a few classes; and that the sacrifices made in the name of the fatherland are unequally divided and, above all, they never question the domination of the majority by a small group. But what I would like to emphasize in republican doctrine is the idea of *duty* which it highlights.

Perhaps the major difficulty in democratic thinking has long been how to link the theme of desire (in this case, the desire of the masses to have more) with the requirement that they do not limit themselves to taking goods of which they feel (even unjustly) deprived, but also pursue the intention to take power. The struggle for goods fails when it does not lead to a dispute for power, when it does not translate itself in a dispute for *potestas*, for *kratos*. We see this clearly in the epic fight of the Gracchi brothers for agrarian reform, in a republican and socially unjust Rome – but who wound up, the younger eleven years after his elder brother, defeated and killed by the senatorial class to which both belonged, and who viewed them as traitors.

The question is a bit complicated, because whether in 19th century Europe or throughout the world today, it is actually in desire that the essence of class struggle arises. The masses do not complain because they are deprived of participation in the legislative, executive or judicial branch. What mobilizes them is deprivation of what is essential to life nowadays. They need food, health, housing, transport. But, as I have argued elsewhere, more and more it is the need they feel for superfluous items that has become essential. Among these, the most typical are quality sneakers or athletic shoes, the theft of which functions, in the great metropolises of the world of poverty, as a precise marker of how politics are played out in the everyday life of desire.<sup>2</sup> Thus, tennis shoe envy may be the motor of class struggle in the slums. But if it is in desire that the sociological nature of political struggle manifests itself, that is insufficient for the latter to find expression and resolution. For it is only in appearance that the struggle for surplus, for that which constitutes inequality, is a fight for left-overs, for excess; in reality, it is a battle for the center, for command, for power. This is one of the major lessons we owe to Marx: what defines a mode of production is the way it organizes the production so that the surplus (the *excédent*) goes to one class or to another one; and often the surplus is much more than a left-over, it can be very big.

But let us ask how democracy becomes viable and consolidated. Speaking of power, the following consideration arises: there are few if any problems, if those who give the orders are distinct from those who obey. In this case, the rules that apply to all do not apply to one who governs. This is so true that even in democratic regimes, an exception is made for the head of State<sup>3</sup> or, more broadly, in favor of Congressmen or Members of Parliament, who are immune to procedures valid for others – which is a significant holdover from the old idea of *majesty*, which manifested itself in the king. *If, however, those who give the orders coincide with those who obey, power gives rise to a series of problems.*

The only regime in which, at least in theory, there is full identification between those who give the orders and those who obey is that of popular sovereignty, i.e., democracy. As the other regimes have progressively lost their legitimacy in the

course of the 20th century – and they may continue losing it in the near future – democracy has, especially since the Second World War, become the only form of government considered legitimate nowadays. Nevertheless, this reserve of respect it has accumulated contrasts with an effectiveness deficit in practice. Maybe in practice one reason for its difficulty in functioning is that it is so much easier to act when one almost surgically separates those who legislate, execute or judge, on the one hand, from those who obey, on the other. Here we have a division tested over thousands of years, a highly developed technology of command and submission, and against it, merely a still youthful legitimacy which has not yet, in the two hundred years since it arose in two countries (the United States and France, with their revolutions), had time to disseminate its practices, its emotions, on a scale comparable to that of authoritarianisms of quite proven effectiveness. To sum up, the political experience of several millennia points to a rupture between command and obedience; that is, as Hobbes correctly perceived, between law and prerogative, or, as we would say in the context of this present discussion, between the order of power and that of desire.

It is to these problems, born out of the very definition of democracy, that the republic offers at least an outline of a response. The republic is a Roman construction seeking precisely to answer the question regarding the difficulties that arise when those who give the orders must obey. We note that it is this problem of rights and duties that is constitutive of democracy, i.e. of the fact that in this regime, more than any other, it makes no sense to radically pit rights against duty, as Hobbes does with such vehemence in chapter 14 of *Leviathan*. If we take democracy to mean merely satisfaction of desires, or even compliance with human rights, we forget its constitutive kernel, which is the power of the people, i.e. the fact that democracy exists, essentially, not because hunger is satiated or rights are respected, but because the people hold power. It is not that hunger or violence are minor problems, but that they may, in principle, be overcome in non-democratic political systems, for example enlightened despotism, an aristocratic fair government, or even a populist and authoritarian regime; while democracy only exists when the people are basically accountable for decision-making.

Now the whole republican question resides precisely in self-government, in the autonomy and expanded responsibility of the one who simultaneously decrees the law and must obey it. It is understood, therefore, that Hobbes, in sundering *jus* from *lex*, right from obligation, in the quotation from *Leviathan* referred to above, created enormous difficulties for republican thought and practice. The entire construction of his State tends toward monarchy – although he does consider legitimate those regimes in which several or all command, i.e. aristocracy and democracy itself – precisely because for him the essential distinction is between those who command and those who obey. In his doctrine, it is true that those who obey *constitute* the one who commands as their representative and, so to speak, obey themselves, but the everyday mechanics of the system continually denies this quasi-identification between the governor and his subjects, because since the law is the simple expression of the non-justified will of the sovereign, he cannot be subjected to it.<sup>4</sup> (It is interesting that Hobbes admits democracy but does not even mention republic. It is true that he discusses ‘popular States’ of ancient times without distinguishing Greek democracy and Roman republic. But in the chapter 19 of *Leviathan* the noun he gives to the forms

of government he accepts are monarchy, aristocracy, and *democracy*. In his theory, a popular regime seems to be more acceptable than one in which those who command must always restrain themselves. This is because his power, being sovereign, liberates the ruler *hybris*,<sup>5</sup> against which the republic is set.)

This scheme separates command from obedience, and is much more anchored in our customs than we might think. Now what I want to point out is that an encounter between republican and democratic thinking must *necessarily* happen if we want democracy to become a reality. A democracy without a republic is not *kratos*; it is merely a populism which distributes goods, like so many we have seen in the decades in which, first in Europe and later in Latin America, the masses rose to the visibility of a social platform, manifesting themselves initially by their desire. In practice, it is the despotism of a demotic prince. That is why social demands simultaneously make it possible to replace a democracy restricted to an elite with a mass democracy, and tend to re-institute, at its center, the power of a prince or tyrant, a heteronomy of the multitudes – where the prince or tyrant may be a dictator, a charismatic leader or, simply and equally effectively, a religious preacher, a television or radio announcer.

In order to perform, democracy requires a republic. For everyone to have access to goods, to satisfy the desire to have, it is necessary to take power. In a nutshell, the problem of democracy, when it is effective, is that it can only take effect if it is republican; and that while it is born of a desire clamoring to become reality, it can only preserve itself and expand if it contains and educates the desires. This is the terrible contradiction of democracy, which, so far, has extraordinarily limited its 'desiring' nature and resulted, even where it has best consolidated itself, in its not going far beyond the political sphere. The problem with the democratization of affect and socialization, i.e. of affective life and labor relations, rests precisely in this requirement of republican autonomy, which is not always perceived as essential, since people want to get consumer goods from democracy, not power itself.

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Let us try to arrive at some conclusions. Perhaps there remain two points to clarify. The first is that desire is said to apply mainly to the have-nots, while abnegation applies to those who have. The republic is the virtue of the proprietors, or patricians. It represents excellence, high moral quality, dignity, in sum an *arete* – which certainly does reflect its aristocratic nature. It is no coincidence that the model republic, that which for all time plays the paradigmatic role which, in the case of democracy, is played by Athens, is Rome. There, the republican regime was born out of the triumph of the aristocracy over the monarchy, and lived and died in the resistance of that class against the people. But is desire exhausted in the yearning to acquire things, goods? Certainly not. Through matter and merchandise, one aims at something else: recognition as a human being, or even something less nameable, the density of which we can only imagine. In insisting on the desirous nature of democracy, I am rejecting all attempts to rationalize it hastily. In pointing out the virtue of the republic as a regime of self-restraint, I am affirming the need for the desires, in order to accomplish an expanded democracy, to learn to educate themselves through habits that are initially aristocratic.

But at this crossroad of the two traditions we find attractive, the republican and the democratic, it may well be that the republican has already more or less constituted its technology, its *modus faciendi*; what we need to do is to develop democracy. We still do not know much about this regime. I have insisted that it needs the republic – without it, it will fail. But the republic must be a means for it to broaden its possibilities, reforming not only the State but also social, and even micro-social, relationships. Even if democracy as a regime, that is, as a way of being and acting, must be republican, the novelties we have to construct theoretically and to build in the practical word are on the side of the democratic experience.

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What does this imply for inclusion and exclusion? If we are right, then democracy will have to be recreated in order to re-incorporate in its own core the social elements that modernity has considered as something added to it; and we will have to assume that what we call 'social' belongs to the vague order of desire. This rather large change in the way we view democracy will then imply that neither the Patrician republic of the American Founding Fathers, nor the quasi-Patrician IIIe République that has consolidated the republican form in France, will be sufficient to address the needs and desires of a truly worldwide democracy. Democracy as we have known it for the last centuries is not a convenient export item for the countries outside of the North Atlantic area and the former Dominions of the British crown. So, either we consider that democracy is something that can only grow in the places where it is already ripe – a view not very remote from Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations – or we accept that democracy must undergo serious changes in order to lose its Eurocentric flavor and become a really global regime; and to conclude, we stress the point that a regime is much more than a form of government: it is a way of being and acting.

Renato Janine Ribeiro  
*University of São Paulo, Brazil*

## Notes

1. In *Ao leitor sem medo*, ch. 7, p. 221 of the third edition (Belo Horizonte, Editora UFMG, 2003), I have suggested that the third person of discourse is not only the person of whom one speaks, but rather the one of whom one speaks badly. This with reference to the passage in *De cive* (ch. I, para. 2) where Hobbes mentions people who are reluctant to leave the room in which they are conversing, afraid as they are of becoming the butt of slander the moment they depart! One might argue that I extend to the second person the courtesy of accepting him or treating him as an interlocutor, while the third person is not only absent but excluded from the conversation.
2. This paper has been previously discussed with several Brazilian colleagues. One participant suggested that the theft of tennis shoes would have the aim of selling them to get money for food or dope. I received the following e-mail from my then student Luis Felipe da Gama Pinto: 'For five years I have been involved with an NGO which deals with boys and girls who have been removed from the streets; and one doesn't need much experience with them to appreciate the incredible symbolic importance of such sneakers, their potency as an object of desire. Contrarily to what one might expect, tennis shoes



even justify the sacrifice of food; the ostentation of having them on one's feet is a goal with a power of seduction many times greater than that of food. Commonly, the bulk of one's money is derived from traffic or other robbery. The important thing about athletic shoes is to wear them.'

3. One need only cite Article 86, paragraph 4 of the Brazilian constitution of 1988, which prohibits lawsuits against the President, during his term of office, for common crimes not related to the exercise of office – although it does authorize them once he has left office; or the court action in the United States in which President Clinton sought to interrupt a suit brought against him for an alleged crime against a person's honor, sustaining that as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces he should not be judged by a court other than the Senate while in office.
4. We should stress this point: Hobbesian theory is very clear in the identification between populus and sovereign – which means, the people are (or is) the sovereign, and it is this (republican or even democratic) principle that makes him accept democratic and aristocratic regimes when he comes to theorize politics; we should bear in mind that before his discovery of philosophy, when he was no more than a traditional humanist scholar, he translated Thucydides' *History of the Grecian War* meaning to show how democracies are inadequate and monarchies are superior to them when a war is at stake. This point, a major one in his preface to the Grecian War, disappears from – or rather, never appears in – his political philosophy. So, theoretically a Hobbesian democracy can be conceived of; it would not be very different, maybe, from Rousseau's regime in the *Contrat social*. But it is the mechanics of his system that makes a Hobbesian democracy or aristocracy almost unworkable, for the reasons exposed in this text.
5. And yet . . . To come back to the mechanics of Hobbes' system, the rulers' hybris is rendered unnecessary and counter-productive to their own interests, since they have everything to gain when they do not oppress their subjects. They are not forbidden to do that; it is again the mechanics that keeps the sovereign from being a despot. See esp. ch. 24 of *Leviathan*, when Hobbes discusses what we would call the economy of his State.
6. This expression is from Brazilian historian José Murilo de Carvalho.