

**Democratic Failures and Political Inequality. Beyond the
Gordian knot***

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WORKING PAPER

(ALL COMMENTARIES AND SUGGESTION WILL BE WELCOMED)

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Preface

This is a discussion paper and its objective is underline some methodological and theoretical problems in the actual debate on Democracy. Democratic Theory has a lag in its development, caused by the overoptimistic and conformist situation prevalent in the last two decades. In this paper I work only in the more mentioned but less studies quality of democracy: Political Equality. However, I work only in some particular aspects of the problem. I have only playing with a set of general ideas in order to formulate a reasonable framework. In fact, the questions that I call, The Democratic Question. That I am approaching very old but important questions. To my knowledge Aristotle approach the question on democratic sustainability. In our modern times, to my opinion was Tocqueville whom frames the actual view on the relations between Democracy and equality. In our times, a lot of political sociologists and political scientists are doing a pretty good work on the democratic Question. But that continues to be obstinate to easy answers. Professor Robert Dahl stated recently than we do have resolute answers to the way in how democracies become equalitarian societies (1996). Moreover, in the last three decades we are testifies, against our illusions, expectations and wishful thinking, that democratization can be coincident and, even produce bigger inequalities (APSA, 2008). The Third Wave of democratization was spectacular. More than 50 nations become democracies. But we discover that we need put a lot of qualifications to these new democracies. Hybrid regimes, *delegative* democracies, stagnated democracies, semi democracies, managed democracies, inverted totalitarianism, etc. The list could follow...

This so called third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991) was the scenario of one of the most impressive negative income distributions into nations and

among nations. Intra and inter nationally, income concentration has been one of the symbols of the so called *reflexive* modernity.

I will give more details ahead in this paper, but now I want to ask the following question. Does democracy engender social Justice? Let me call the Democratic PDahl, problem to one aspect of modern democracies. If they are founded in the legal and ethical ground of political equality, political equality must be sustained in certain measure of social and economical equality. In the more refined statement, they would be the roofs of poliarchic societies. But nobody knows exactly how reach a poliarchic situation capable to sustain stable democracies (Dahl, 1996)

In short, There are three different pathways. The first is from modernization to democracy; the second, from poliarchy to Democracy and the last, from Democracy I to Democracy II. DI and DII are simple symbols to differentiate inner process toward inequality or equality. The first pathway is the so called Lipset Hypothesis, or endogenous thesis. The second is associated to the name of professor Robert Dahl and is apparently similar, but differs in fundamental questions on the working of democracy; the third pathway can be called the Tilly thesis, in honour of late Charles Tilly and his insights on the dialectics among democratization and de-democratization. The case is to find satisfactory causal explanations to each one.

We can begin with a simple presentation. There are two types of political equality distortions. The first arise from the way on that modernization goes on. This is an corollary of the so called *Lipset thesis*. The second type of mechanisms can be called second grade traps and are inherent to the same democratic institutions. The first types of mechanisms are related to the conditions of de emergence of democratic institutions. These mechanisms are often common to the so called third wave democracies. The

second mechanisms are typical to the consolidated democracies. Of course, both types of mechanisms can be found acting together.

The first class mechanism are now, discussed in new formats. But their analytical roots were presented by the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. The original model was framed to fix the characteristics of the context of the democratic stability. The relevance of the theses on the socio economic conditions of democratic regimes are well appreciated until now and are reevaluated to be an inspiring departure to a intense debate on the so called endogenous thesis of democratization.

The endogenous thesis is associated to Tocqueville, and after him, in the middle of the last century, to the American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. The thesis can be stated in this form. Modernization causes democracy. Democracy is a endogenous corollary of modernization. In this form, the thesis offers many variants and possible causal paths. The first is the lineal path where Democracy is a viable possibility when income distribution reaches certain point where the lower classes lost their impulse to rebel against elites and elites lost their fear to lower classes. Democracy lost their worst danger to be disrupted by the losers. A second variant is that Democracy is a real possibility when the lower classes have the potential power to throw the oligarchic elites by force. The alternatives are open. There are three possible outcomes: Revolution, populist dictatorship or repression. These outcomes depend on the political potential power of basically two actors: elites and lower classes. An intermediate actor is the middle class. If this middle class is stronger and is politically conformist, the chances to overthrow of the regime or the chances of repression lessen. That could be the confirmation of the Lipset arguments (1959) on the social conditions of democratic

stability, translated to the new scenario of the actual democratic transition and consolidation.

Both general theses have long antecedents in the history of political ideas. They are stated in the works of the founders of modern social sciences. The actual novelty is that these arguments can be discussed in more formal ways. My own experience and common sense says to me that the exogenous theses are very convincing. However, the endogenous thesis has detailed mechanisms to explain each possible political outcome. My proposal consists in to reach a reasonable answer to the debate. In my first approximation I believe that it would necessary to look for help in a more interdisciplinary approach to the Democratic Problem.

There are many strategies to justify the apparent anomalies in to have most democracy, more inequality and less democratic quality. I will do the following. First, I will make a brief review of the state of the art on modernization theory and democratization, secondly, I will introduce an exploration of the most common and studied democratic failures, and third, I will do an examination of specific democratic traps in the actual democratic process. My answer will be, after had take the role of devil advocate, to try to take more directly approach to the original question on the real –no the fictional- democratic potential to improve social justice.

Democracy and Political Equality.

It is convenient to begin with the common observation –normative in its foundations- of the importance of political equality into the foundation of Democracy. I can do an in deep analysis of this point because is certainly a contended issue and it is territory of philosophers. But I can mention the bothersome case that nobody knows

how political equality can be reached into a real fact of life. The most close answer is that the professor Robert Dahl has provided. His argument is that political equality suppose some kind of social justice, incarnated in minimal standards of social and economic equality. Democracy is linked to equality since the beginning of political theory. But, as I mentioned before, actual democracies are very good machines to produce inequalities of all kind, including the so called structural inequalities (Tilly, 2008). What is happening?. The ingenuous answer is very similar to the modernization ideology. We are living in a state of transition and beyond the hill is the Promised Land. But panacea is not a qualified scientific assertion. The second answer is that democracy itself has inner failures. But in our enthusiasm with the Third Wave we forgot some lessons. It would be healthy for political scientist to look to reality. Democracy is very imperfect form of political regime (the worst except the all the others).

I would to simplify the words *poliarchy* and social economic equality only in economical distribution. This reduction is arbitrary, but very useful to a first approach to the big problem. Basically there are two thesis about the causal relationship between democratic regime and distribution. The exogenous theses is associated to Adam Przeworski and his colleagues and state that democratic regimes are no best income distributors that dictatorships. The thesis establishes that the internal political game into democratic regimes do not promote income distribution in a best way that other possible competing forms of political regimes. If Democracy does the work in a best way is not because its inherent political traits (political equity, electoral competitions, party systems, individual human rights). If Democracy works a distributive policies is because elites have no other option when confront external dangers and internal demands for inclusion into the political democratic game. That means that democracy is

a conflict induced mechanism of equalitization. The question that arises is on what kind of conflict process induce equalitization.

The apparently uncontroversial facts suggest that Equality of conditions and yet, of opportunities would be present before the democracy could be the hegemonic alternative to the political organization of a society. The modernization theory said the same thing during decades but now the same proposition is a heresy. Imply that Democracy has no very well founded credentials as equality, alt least in some basic forms. Wealth distribution is the one most significant black point in the curricula of democracy. In fact, modernization implies the creation of the conditions that sustain democracy (Lipset). But there are nothings inherent to modernization that prefigures democracy. Modernization, as Barrington Moore, and now, Acemoglu and Richardson have noted can culminate in some political forms very far of democracy and in theory, legitimate. Ugly legitimate. Michael Mann suggested many years ago that are no one but three types of citizenship in the XX Century: fascist, socialists and democratic. The first two lost the war,. Democracy won. But the possibility of other causal relations amongst modernization and political regime was well stabilised. Democracy is a very contingent and very improbable output except when the stringent Lipset conditions were present. And this is not the case in most of the third wave so called democracies. Because that, many observers are inventing new types of political *chimeras*.

Democratization as a source of Inequality

In that way, it is a real probability the emergence of non-consolidated but self preserving democracies. The third wave type of theses new forms of democracies are a kind of chimera. There are new specie of democracy and a challenge to classical and postclassical or Schumpeterian democracies. In fact, this democracies are oligarchic

electoral systems. There are some variants into them. But all have similar characteristics: a oligarchic ruling class capable to maintain its privileges and contain the possible challenges of the factual status quo on public resources access. They are negative distributive regimes.

The explanation of these characteristics was found in the first place by historians. Barrington Moore contribution was about one trait of modern democracies. The emergence of stable democracies is associated to two characteristics. The one is a dismissing strength of landed assets of power based elites. A emergence of farmers and the weakness of the landlords. The second is the emergence and strength of urban middle classes and a modern bourgeoisie. The actual new editions of this thesis can be founded in the work of Dan Amoceglu and Richardson. But modernization scarcely flow into this mode. Generally must be forced to become a consistent social basis to sustain a stable democratic regime. For example, the “second wave” democracies were forced to rebuild some of their basics on land tenure. The thesis of Moore-Acemoglu & Richardson implies a exogenous factor. We must return to this factor.

But there are a deterministic variant. This was compounded by two elements. The first is about the necessity of modernization; the second is on what that modernization is a previous condition, necessary and sufficient, to democracy. This thesis was framed by Charles Boix and Susan Stokes. The rationale is that democracy is the cherry on the top of modernization, when the general wealth grots at certain level, it is possible to elites to begin a distributive policies. In both, the market and the public policies, distribution affects the social structure and engenders a relative big middle classes and a lower income classes. Their demands do not put in danger the status quo, as are lower that the cost to confront them. As the elites are not in a dangerous situation

they are open to reforms in the political and economical courts. Spain is a good example. After *Franquismo*, Spain enter in a fast track transition. The success of this example supports the idea of endogenous modernization.

Challenges. Political Equality and Socio Economic Distribution.

Political Equality is a *de jure* condition of modern democracy. But that condition supposes certain similarity with factuality. This concordance is a central piece of the legitimating mechanisms of democracies. Political equality has been studied by many ingenious thinkers. The principal is Robert Dahl. Professor Dahl sustain that Political equality must be sustained in some special clans of social condition that he calls *poliarchy*. Poliarchy is a measure of resources distribution as of a index of social complexity. The causal arrow from social equality to political equality is, however, very unclear. But is a matter of fact that the reality of political equality requires some cognitive abilities and capabilities, all related to the access to a pool of cultural resources. These resources are very similar to the resources contained in the Lipset conditions. Empirical findings are nearly conclusive in relate the aptitudes to exercise the *de jure* potential to the factual access to some resources associated to the constitution of a cognitive apt citizenship. Not good or bad citizenship, but potential effective citizenship.(Booth, Seligson, 2006)

But all these qualities of democratic regimes and apt citizenship are a normative view of the problem. We need to understand the factual side of the story. Are democracies self sustained political mechanisms? Political Equality is far to be a reality. Moreover, political equality seems to be far from its ideals, but its precedents. We are living in a de democratization world, as the late Charles Tilly wrote, or in a special hang out after the collective effervescent wishful thinking third wave (Huntington).

The neoliberal democracy.

There are many explanations on a simple question. Why, if deprived people are the most of the voters, they do not vote to expropriate the richest'. This question was a real nightmare during the XIX century, until liberals discover interpersonal comparatives. People don't feel inclined to take the ballots against their rulers because a) they feel comfortable with status quo, because the present situation provides a sense of fairness and opportunity; b) they do not feel that they are exploited or exploited by the ruling class. Certain sense of fairness is basic to explain the apparent paradoxes of the failure of the median voter theorem. The fact is that democracy must be sustained in two elements: sense of fairness and sense of equal opportunities at certain point in the future. But why people don't vote against policies that are striking their pockets? In the three decades before, income distribution as been negative and persistent. Are common people stupid? I do not believe that, but that elites are wiser and knows that the results of game are prearranged. In most cases, voting is the best way to resolve distributive questions. When voting is about distributive questions the word used is populism.

Beyond the median voter rationale. Conflict as a source of democratization-

This is a very interesting problem. The median voter hypothesis has a long history. The rationale is that we can represent a democratic –direct- competency amongst two parties, each one fighting to obtain the half more one vote. This vote is situated in the median distribution of the preferences of the electorate. Has this measure is hard to obtain, normally is used a material measure –Gini index on income. The key point is locate the exact point where the median voter is, and that is a function of income distribution weightetd by net income per capita. The discussion on what measure of inequality is best fitted to do the work seem a soluble problem (Milocevic,

1999). The median voter is situated in the median of the normal distribution. As most people is to the right of the distribution, they can act to improve distribution. As society is unequal more people wants distribution. This is an idealization because ignore a lot of problem on real elites power. A few powerful people can manage themselves to maintain control over large populations. Suffrage is not necessarily free and clean. The impoverished can be politically unable to understand the working of electoral competition,. Etc. But, the median voter permits make some imaginary projections. All depend the point of the real distribution where is the median voter. A equal society find him/her in the middle; an unequal distribution, find him/her left to the mean. In short is overtly a mayoritarian point. Them, democratic politics must move to equalitization.

This implications can be good or very bad, accordingly your ideological biases. For conservatives must be the seed of populism and tyrannical majorities. For rightists or *whiggist* is the rationale to legitimate democratic games.

The real trick of the median voter theorem is not about the realism of its assumptions but his flexibility to “predict” certain outcomes when we have diverse income distributions and different levels of net income. Imagine three different cases.

a) High fixed asset concentration and different degrees of income, b) high income inequality but non concentration in fixed –land- assts, c) high concentration in fixed assets and income distribution. In the first case we have the patter of modernization described by Barrington Moore conductive to authoritarianism and dictatorship. The second is the classic case of England in the XVIII century, and the third, the case of Third world middle modernization level countries. The outputs are predictable in one important sense. They can be corroborated in the historical court. The first two cases are the classic games described by Acemoglu and Richardosn (2006) that

had replicated the narrative of Barrington Moore (1966), and other historians (see Mann, 1992). Especially the second case is relevant to democratic theory because the social problem was broached by British elites very successfully. The USA after the golden Age is another case. But the third is anomalous to democratic theory. Simply, the “conditions² are very bizarre to sustain a real electoral competence. The *prima facie* condition of political equality seems very implausible. Let us try to imagine the outputs.

The first is an exclusionary oligarchic pact and de facto *getthisation* of vast amounts of marginal population. The second is of course rebellion under the leadership of populist leaders, and the third, developmentalist. But this one possibly was not an electoral decision, because the middle cases and the oligarchic pact can join forces against. This is the Gordian knot situation of most Third Wave countries. But the median voter theorem is only an artefact that helps to think, in the real world it does not function. The causes are very interesting because they illuminate the democratic failures or traps. The fact that deserves more in-depth analysis is the relationship among income and democracy. As Acemoglu and Robinson recognize (2006) there is no conclusive way to understand this relationship until now.

Democracy and Distribution.

In his masterful brief text on the state of democratic theory, Ian Shapiro (2003: 104ss) has made some valuable suggestions to open new avenues to research. Inequality has grown everywhere –excepting China, a non-democratic country– in the last three decades –the neoliberal age (APSA, 2008). Equalitarianism is out of fashion not only on the right and centre but on the left parties. Przeworski gave some insights to reach an logical answer. The capital puts limits to politicians in many ways. These ways revert the

initial prediction of the median voter that says that as the median –and decisive- voter is majoritarian, in an idealized election _especially direct democracy election- the system must flow into a equalitarian equilibrium. This prediction contrast with reality. As I noted before, political scientists do not have an satisfactory answer. Dahl, for example, an *ad alid* on equalitarianism declare his ignorance on how Political equality is sustained in equalitarian society. That is Political Equality and social equalitarianism don't have an intrinsic relation, but, contrary, very fragile. However, democracies require minimal conditions of social justice. But produce normally social injustice. This paradox imply that equality is produced by exogenous factors. Or in other words, that the endogenous thesis –the Lipset thesis- is untrue. The normal working of democratic regimes increase inequalities. Why this happen?: first, because actual democracies are very vulnerable to economic and political corporate capitalist power; secondly, because democratic regimes have growing institutional impairments to distributive policies; and, third, because the rich are too rich to be expropriated. This is the thesis of Breyer and Ursprung (1998).. These authors offer an explanation to the median voter anomaly. This thesis is called “bribing the voter” between the median and the mean. The argument presuppose that the middle class is in the loser side of the median distribution. That is only a possibility. But if this is the case, the elites can “capture” the decisive voters, including if they are into the loser halve of a dichotomous¹ distribution. Anywhere, the median voter theorem can be useful for its anomalies more than for its successful predictions.

The second question is that political democratic –electoral politics- could be a very innocuous method to decide the social preferred choice toward the distribution of social goods and values.

¹ All this paragraph must be taken carefully and its conclusiveness is very precarious. The goal of this research is reach an more solid answer to the question framed into it. The importance of locate the median of the particular distribution. Despite this is a reasonable demand, there are not enough measurements to make sign fictive comparative analysis.

On Democratic Quality and Political Equality

Truism: Lesser political equality means lesser democratic quality. If Democratic quality means accountability, responsiveness and efficiency in the government works, the less political equity means more probability of abuse and arbitrarily. But there are grades of quality. The gradient shows a more consolidated –o qualified democracies- in Western Europe and the USA, and less quality, less consolidated in the third Wave class. But the fact is that the common feature is the lowering of quality across the gradient. Accordingly APSA report, in terms of income... Of course this is not the key variable due that democracy is not about money 8pork barrel politics9, but on political equality. But others measures indicate that democracy is losing is brightness. What are that variables?. The question needs, from the beginning be cleaned of ideological (well-paid) trash. Terms as democratic quality and governability are ones of the most favourites to justify status quo situations (Schmitter, 2004). But Democratic Quality is associated to Political equality (and that to general social justice) and both them, tto the performance of accountability across the board. For example, Schmitter says that this criteria is decisive (Schimmitter, 2004) and with others like Robert Dahl claim that democratic accountability must include not only governmental offices but corporate books. But this is the beginning of a new debate on the Quality of democracy. Actually more tender observers include only indicators on turnover and electoral process. Worst, they often make comparative intra-cases, ignoring the behaviour of the full sample. If we look the full sample of democracies, we can conclude in a decline in quality across the sample. The reason lies in the supply and in the demand sides. Liberalization of

capital, weakness of workers organization, pluralization of demands and lack of relevance of the equality question.

END OF THE SECTION

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