

The Human Principle in Participatory Democracy

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Abstract

Facing the different challenges of the modern world – economical, social, political, environmental – it could seem that the world stands in need of a new story, narrative or anything, that could, with the words of the late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, bridge the gap between reality and understanding. Without such a story, we would be vulnerable to those who wish to take advantage of the chaos for their own purpose. With a new perspective on the issues, the world starts to make sense again. This is also true with regard to the problems that are faced by democracy today, and especially when it comes to the question: What is true democracy?

Such a narrative has to begin with the question of how we understand the human being; or rather with the different ways that *being human* can be understood. The full meaning of the words crises and challenges becomes clear only on these premises. Conversely it is also true that if we propose a solution that involves a narrowing of the understanding of the human being, the solution would probably create new or even bigger problems than the difficulties they in the first place were intended to solve.

This paper narrows the bridge between reality and understanding by presenting some reflections on participatory democracy understood in a general and theoretical way. And it does so by setting forward a conception of the human mind – which I call the human principle – that in some way hints at the meaning of the notion of participatory democracy and suggests a solution of the problems that this concept today implies and a possible opening for a new way forward in order to try to solve them.

The paper is divided in four parts. The first and second part lay down the fundament for the human principle in participatory democracy by confronting representative and participative democracy on the issue of freedom. This principle is explained in the third part. From this principle the paper finally deduces some practical consequences as to how to realize participatory democracy.

1. Introduction

Etymological roots of the word democracy (greek: demos [“people”] and kratos: [“rule”]) imply a system where the people itself is directly in power. Thus all democracies would be participatory. In point of fact very few nations have been democratic in this sense.

Traditionally we think of participatory democracy as a feature of human society since at least classical times, and especially in Greece. But we tend to forget that even with the reforms made by the Athenian leader Solon at around 600 BC, which initiated some reforms to limit the power of oligarchs and re-establish a partial form of participatory democracy with some decisions taken by a popular assembly composed of all free male citizens, this democracy was very limited and did not concern the greatest part of the Athenian population. It should not be overlooked that the Athenians could practice democracy because they had slaves to take care of their daily affairs. It is also noteworthy that few philosophers if any in antiquity praise direct or participatory democracy as an ideal constitution. On the contrary, Plato holds democracy to be the worst of all the polities acting according to law, but the best of all such as act contrary to law (1901, 302e–303b). Aristotle does not count it among the good constitutions at all, but defines it as a perversion of constitutional government, being simply the power of the many and the poor having in view the interests only of the needy and not of the common good (1916, 1279b).

In this paper I will ask if direct or participatory democracy necessarily favors the interests of the few by being contrary to the common good. In order to get to the root of the problem, I will first state it in terms of the dichotomy

between the idea of participatory democracy and that of representative democracy, two ideas that contradict each other. Secondly I will try to show that these two systems presuppose two different conceptions of the notion of freedom, which in one case becomes an impossible idea, but in the other is the very fundament for a meaningful notion of an active, acting democratic government. In the third part I will analyze what is called the human principle in participatory democracy. Finally I will discuss the objection most commonly raised against participatory democracy, which is about how to develop civil consensus between different political opinions, as well as the need for educating the citizen and for a new understanding of the relationship between the legislative and the executive power.

2. Representative versus participatory democracy

Let me start with the idea of representative democracy, an idea with which we are much more accustomed to than that of participatory democracy. Representative democracy is a form of political system founded on the principle of elected people representing groups of people, and where these elected representatives form an independent ruling body, charged with the responsibility of acting in the people's interest. Traditionally, representative democracy is said to be practically superior to direct democracy because it provides a solution for the problems of mob rule, demagoguery, political decay and inefficiency. However, there are numerous criticisms of representative democracy. These are often divided into two broad categories: harms to an objective and neutral governance (as for instance short-term thinking, corruption, favoring friends, promoting the interests of particular groups in society or lobbying) and harms to individuals (citizens having no direct say or there being no representative of a voter's own views, which makes voting a meaningless and trivial act sometimes being at best the barest expression of a general sentiment summarized by exit polls and disenfranchisement).

The Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein focuses in her writings particularly upon the first group of problems or the harms to the governance

that we witness today in western societies. By way of corruption and promoting the interests of particular groups the political democratic power gradually becomes transformed into a kind of a corporatism, where the executive power or government gets outsourced to corporate contractors or privatized: "A more accurate term for a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business is not liberal, conservative or capitalist but corporatist," she pinpoints (2007, p. 15). The consequences to civil society are dramatic:

Its main characteristics are huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor, and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security. For those inside the bubble of extreme wealth created by such an arrangement, there can be no more profitable way to organize a society. But because of the obvious drawbacks for the vast majority of the population left outside the bubble, other features of the corporatist state tend to include aggressive surveillance (once again, with government and large corporations trading favors and contracts), mass incarceration, shrinking civil liberties and often, though not always, torture. (2007, p. 15)

In the last part of this quotation she draws attention to the second group of problems arising from representative democracy, i.e. harms to individuals, which under a corporatist system takes an extreme form of inhumanity: It implies a refusal of freedom and the fundamental civil liberties and by the same principle fundamental civil rights, including, as Klein writes, even in modern democracies arbitrary incarceration, mistreatment and torture.

Of, course Klein is hinting at an excessive version of representative democracy, where democracy has become mixed up with modern global, neoliberal capitalism or economics. Nevertheless, I think that even the more traditional idea of representative democracy principally implies the same: the refusal of civil liberties and fundamental freedom to the citizens and consequently a shrinking of their fundamental rights, with a strong tendency towards paternalism, thus taking away people's own personal responsibility. And I find it a cynical paradox that those democracies, which are considered

the strongest advocates for freedom and human rights, are the very same societies where representative democracy is most highly praised as a political system.

At the bottom of this problem lies a paradox, which the Genevan and French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau has pointed out. In his book *The Social Contract* he observes: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (1923, p. 5). And a little later he states: "To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties" (1923, p. 10). To Rousseau freedom constitutes the essence of the human being; it is the indispensable quality, which makes the human being human. Freedom is not something you have, but are. Hence, it follows that one cannot alienate one's liberty: It is not an object that one disposes of as any other merchandise, and which can be traded, sold or changed in return for something else. Liberty is absolute, i.e. unconditional: One is not free to give up one's liberty.

Rousseau's political system is built upon this principle. Though, he restricts the word democracy to signify a special kind of executive power, i.e. a government where the greater part or all of the people is in charge of the governmental power, his understanding of the word legislative power implies democracy in a wider sense of the word, and a democracy that is participatory, including all of the citizens. At the heart of his doctrine we find the two following principles: 1) "That sovereignty is inalienable" (1923, p. 22), and 2) "That sovereignty is indivisible" (1923, p. 23), meaning by sovereignty "nothing less than the exercise of the general will" (1923, p. 22) of the whole people.

From this it follows that the sovereign, or the assembled people, who in this sense is no less than a collective being, cannot be represented except by itself: "The power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will" (1923, p. 22). This is the reason why Rousseau so vehemently opposes representative democracy. The idea of representative democracy means the end of the democracy:

I do not mean by all this that it is necessary to have slaves, or that the right of slavery is legitimate: I am merely giving the reasons why modern peoples, believing themselves to be free, have representatives, while ancient peoples had none. In any case, the moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free: it no longer exists. (1923, p. 85)

In consequence he sees the creation of political parties or groups of political interests as a threat to the sovereignty of the people:

But when the social bond begins to be relaxed and the State to grow weak, when particular interests begin to make themselves felt and the smaller societies to exercise an influence over the larger, the common interest changes and finds opponents: opinion is no longer unanimous; the general will ceases to be the will of all; contradictory views and debates arise; and the best advice is not taken without question. (1923, p. 91)

This analysis shows that if democracy favors the interests of the few without aiming at the common good, this criticism denounces much more representative democracy than participatory democracy. The first one implies by its very principle a violation of fundamental human rights, tending in its extreme forms towards a system of corruption and inequality. Let me pursue this analysis further by discussing more in detail participatory democracy and the kind of freedom that it implies.

3. Two conceptions of freedom?

Apparently there are two ways in which we can understand freedom. However, before digging deeper into the matter, let me specify that freedom here means free will, i.e. the ability of agents to make choices free from external constraints. What is meant by the term *free from external constraints* is better understood through an analysis of human consciousness.

Here I understand consciousness as a general term to designate any mental state or whatever it is about a state that makes it mental. Consequently

(...) consciousness includes not only awareness of our own states, but also these states themselves, whether we have cognisance of them or not. If a man is angry, that is a state of consciousness, even though he does not know that he is angry. To be aware of the fact that he is angry, is another modification of consciousness, and not the same. (Kolstad, 2010)

Given this definition of consciousness, what do we mean by a free and independent consciousness?

Human consciousness can be said to be constituted of different levels of layers. In order to understand it, I want you to imagine an onion or an apple, and then that you peel off the outer layers in order to get into the heart of the fruit or vegetable, which are more softy and juicy than the outer parts. Let us then start with the inner kernel of consciousness and try to reconstruct by way of analysis the outer layers.

What we find in the heart of consciousness is, according to the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1910), a flowing, irreversible succession of states that melt into each other to form an indivisible stream of consciousness. The experience of this inner stream of consciousness is not an abstract concept. It is a concrete experience. It is an experience of real or *pure* time, also called inner time, something immediately experienced as active and ongoing.

The fact that consciousness is pure succession or movement does not entail a Heraclitean flux, whereby everything that appears in consciousness, disappears and is inevitably lost, without ever repeating itself. On the contrary, it belongs to the properties of inner life that consciousness receives every new impression within itself and keeps it there. In this way, consciousness constitutes an organic whole, where the past is preserved and continues to live. The paradox is that change and continuation are both characteristics of consciousness. This dual process is the condition for the growth of all of our feelings and even for the development of the personality: The personality is in each moment an organic result of every experience it has had.

This theory states that the elements of inner life are not indifferent to each other; they do not exist outside each other like mechanical parts. On the contrary, they overlap into each other, forming a mutual penetration. They melt together, but not in the way of forming an indistinctive mass. Through this mutual penetration each moment keeps its individuality, but is nevertheless formed and coloured by all the others.

From this conception of consciousness it follows that at each moment the individual is richer than it was the moment before. It is subject to a continuous, organic evolution and growth. This change is true creation: It is unpredictable since each new moment means something qualitatively new and hence gives the totality of the states of consciousness another colour which they did not have the moment before.

Such a living organic unity is characteristic of the deeper part of consciousness, which by its very nature is life, movement and creation. And because it also is unpredictable, it is true freedom. Consciousness thus understood consists in an active, lived experience of freedom in the sense that in every moment consciousness changes due to the qualitative and creative process which at each moment goes on in it, and which only can be understood in terms of consciousness' dependence on itself and not on any external cause or principle.

Let us then, in contrast to this living unity, look at the part of consciousness that is turned towards the outer world. We will find that it consists of layers of stiffened forms, conventions and habits. Such rigid, static and mechanical forms play a decisive role in the human being's practical functions. But at the same time they act as a cover-up of real life, i.e. life's own creative force. It would, in other words, be totally wrong to consider the rigid forms that consciousness presents in day-to-day life to be the only life of consciousness. On the contrary, they are a product of the human mind, created for practical reasons (Bergson, 1910).

What is peculiar to these outer layers of consciousness is their spatialization. With this latter term is understood the spatial forms that mental phenomena

or processes take in the human mind when they are perceived as objects of thought. Each impression or idea exists as a separate entity, different and recognizable from the others and is only attached to other ideas in an external way. Thus, we have to do with a mere mechanistic assemblage of different levels of simple ideas and their combinations. While remaining unchanged with regard to the different combinations, which they enter into, these spatial entities do not interfere with each other in any deeper sense of the word. They constitute only an exterior combination. It would on these principles be hard to see how they can result in a true, living and free activity. They are mere symbols or a spatial reconstruction of the free and ongoing activity that characterizes the deeper layers of consciousness at every moment of their life.

Thus we have two different ways of conceiving human consciousness. Either we can conceive of it as a result of the outer part of consciousness, which implies a spatial and static conception of consciousness. On these premises mental activity can only be understood as a consequence of a mechanical arrangement of rigid or stiffened forms of the consciousness. However, it is easy to see that this is not really freedom, but a mere combination of exterior elements that do not interact in an internal way with each other, and which is determined by their relation to outer elements that are something outside and different from them. Consequently, they depend on something else than their own free and spontaneous activity and must be explained by constraint of determinism.

Or we can conceive of human consciousness in an inner organic way, which let us grasp consciousness in form of pure time, what we call living time or also duration, where every idea penetrates or overlaps into another idea and thus is linked internally to each other. This process is true freedom: It does something to the incoming impressions, i.e. it creates new impressions, and hence constitutes a free and acting activity instead of being simply a passive receptacle of impressions or static states of consciousness (Bergson, 1910).

4. The human principle in social theory

From what has been said, it follows that a system, which legitimates the selling or alienation of one's freedom, is supposing a conception of the human mind that only applies to the surface of consciousness. It deals with a symbolic reconstruction of the human mind, not with pure consciousness itself.

On the other hand, even the smallest and seemingly indifferent selling of one's right in political matters, affects human consciousness and implies a restriction of its free activity and is therefore a limitation to this human being's personal growth and expansion. The risk is that the outer mechanical parts of consciousness in an increasingly higher degree will suppress the inner, creative force of consciousness, thus turning man into some kind of a political or social machine. Instead of being a free and independent citizen the individual will be transformed into some kind of zombie existence, bereft of consciousness and self-awareness, yet ambulant and able to respond in a mechanical way to surrounding stimuli.

How is this precisely to be understood? The answer of this question implies what I call the human principle in social theory.

From the theory of the inner organic growth of consciousness it follows that we cannot speak of a subject, which is independent of – or exterior to – the society. The subject is inherent to the impressions it receives from the outer society and consequently changes with them. In this way each impression received from the society becomes a living part of the individual's consciousness and as such a presupposition for this individual's personal expansion. Without these impressions the individual will in many ways get poorer, at least on the personal and inner consciousness plan.

It is doubtless that every human being lives in a society, which is developed within a group of humans characterized by patterns of relationships between individuals that share a distinctive culture and/or institutions. Nevertheless it would be difficult to understand the impact of these common, natural and

outer patterns upon human consciousness if the society did not in some way also exist within the consciousness, doubling so to say mentally or in an inner way the outer, cultural, social and political society. In this way the existence of the human being participates in an inner way in the existence of other human beings: Each personal consciousness is reflected in the consciousness of the others. They mutually receive impressions from each other. This reception of constantly new mental impressions results in changes of quality in each individual personal consciousness, creating a time that is supra individual, which constitutes a social time, and hence which constitutes the very bond between the individual and the other.

This aspect of time is what I call the human principle in social theory. It is to be regarded as an expansion of inner time, being of the same inner or spiritual nature as this. Though it presupposes the latter, it implies nevertheless specific qualities, which make man a social being. Or should I rather say: It constitutes the very condition for man to be a political or social being. With this last expression I am not referring to Aristotle to whom man is a political being by way of certain external psychological, physical or sociological features. In accordance with the above advanced theory, and that is my point here, man is a social or political being by the way how consciousness functions in itself, i.e. regardless of any outer relations to family, friends, tribes, classes or outer authority: Without the presence of this social dimension of inner time, man would not at all exist.

This explains, I think, why alienating one's freedom, even in political matters, how trivial they could seem to be, is, as Rousseau said, the same as to alienate the very essence of the human being. But contrary to Rousseau, in my opinion freedom is not a result of an original primitive living of the human being in a hypothetical state of nature, but an essential and intrinsic quality of an ongoing process at each moment within the individual, and which is more: one of the premises for the individual's consciousness considered as a living existence in time or duration.

5. How to realize participatory democracy

Even if it is easy to see why only participatory democracy respects the social expansion of time within each person, it remains to see how the idea of participatory democracy can be cultivated in a way that a political system can be realized.

The most important thing in order to establish a true participatory democracy is to organize a kind of civil education teaching how to behave with regard to disagreements in the political debate and how to find a consensus. As a matter of fact, it is not sufficient that people get together and discuss matters of common interest. When they come to a decision, it should depend upon some kind of a unifying principle. As an example of such a principle I will mention what Rousseau called the general will.

The idea of the general will is a main theme in Rousseau's philosophy. The general will is not the will of the majority. Rather, it is the will of the political organism that he sees as an entity with a life of its own. The general will is an additional will, somehow distinct from and other than any individual will or group of individual wills. The general will means the common will of the people with regards to matters which concern everybody, and which is expressed after hearing each individual. It is characterized by three principles of universality: Firstly, the general will emanate from the totality of the citizens. This means that all the votes of the people should count, and that they have to be given directly: No votes by representation are acceptable. Secondly, the general will concern everybody in an equal way. This means that no law could harm anybody in particular or anybody more than any other person. Thirdly, the general will should aim at the common good of the state. In this way society becomes coordinated and unified by the general will. In *The Social Contract* Rousseau underlines the importance of the general will as follows: "The first and most important deduction from the principles we have so far laid down is that the general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e. the common good" (1923, p. 22).

Further he states that

(...) the general will, to be really such, must be general in its object as well as its essence; that it must both come from all and apply to all; and that it loses its natural rectitude when it is directed to some particular and determinate object, because in such a case we are judging of something foreign to us, and have no true principle of equity to guide us. (1923, p. 27–28)

From Rousseau's statement it follows that the general will always is right and tends to the public advantage. Nevertheless, the deliberations of the people are not always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is, and what we take for the general will, may in many cases actually not be the general will. Hence, the virtue of learning to submit to the will of the others when we find ourselves in minority: What voting is about, is not at all to follow our own interests, but to ask what in each case would be the general will:

When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what the people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on that point; and the general will is found by counting votes. When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so. (1923, p. 93–94)

This system imposes certain limits to political power, which hinder that this power could be abused. For instance political power – or sovereign power – could not “impose upon its subjects any fetters that are useless to the community” (1923, p. 27), nor could it favor somebody more than anybody else.

In short, if participatory democracy should be realizable, it ought to be founded upon a central principle which coordinates and unifies the state, as well as defining the limits to political power and hence the correct use and abuse thereof. This principle must be deduced from some conception of

human nature since participatory democracy must be judged to the extent that it realizes or hinders the fulfillment of the human being. By setting forth a theory of the general will as the codifying principle of participatory democracy, the general will becomes intimately linked with the idea of freedom as the essence of human nature, not of course freedom to do exactly what one wants, but freedom to develop one's own personality through responsibility towards a society which each person is an intimate part of, and which finally is crucial to our understanding of our own situation as human beings.

Essential to this theory is the fact that the principle of participatory democracy only concerns the legislative power of the state or the power to give laws. It ought not to be applied to the executive. For the same reason that the people cannot be represented in the legislature, it should according to Rousseau be represented in the executive if this should have any efficiency:

Law being purely the declaration of the general will, it is clear that, in the exercise of the legislative power, the people cannot be represented; but in that of the executive power, which is only the force that is applied to give the law effect, it both can and should be represented. (1923, s. 84)

Thus, we can divide the government of a state in two parts: the legislature and the executive branch. The first encompasses the general people, who have the power to make and pass laws. The latter executes or enforces the law and ensures that they are carried out as intended. Thus the executive has only authority and responsibility for the daily administration of the country, and it remains responsible to the whole people and not only to a small group of individuals as in representative democracy.

Since the law is general for the whole nation, the decisions or the decrees of the executive should be adapted to the different circumstances, being nothing else than the applications and the enforcement of the declarations of the general will.

6. Conclusion

This essay states the intimate relation of democracy to the freedom of man regarded as an inner state of consciousness. Furthermore, it emphasizes the necessity of a civil education of each person in order for him or her to be a political and social being. Normally man is not oriented towards the true interests of inner life, but towards short-term interests in the outer world. These interests however represent only the surface of the inner consciousness. If we want to realize participatory democracy, we should look into man himself and understand his true nature as a free social and political being. Participatory democracy is the expression thereof. Finally the essay shows that democracy is much more than a mere practical or pragmatic solution to social problems. It concerns the essence of man. Hence, democratic power cannot be the question of somebody representing the people, but of the people itself.

On these premises the essay explains why democracy does not consist in the fulfillment of certain interests on behalf of the interests of the other. In being the realization of every person's inner life, democracy tends by its nature towards the common good instead of sapping it. The paper also shows that democracy is not the same as mob rule or demagoguery, but presupposes a profound moral and social vocation within each citizen.

When philosophers have doubted the virtues of democracy as a political principle, this can be explained by their misunderstanding of human nature. Because of this true democracy cannot be realized before we have a deeper understanding of man. It took more than 2000 years to acquire this knowledge. Hopefully it would not take the same amount of time to accept it and to learn how to put it to effective use in political and social life.

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