An enlarged conception of the periphery

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T oday, the notion of "periphery" seems to be used to serve essentially these zones of

rural or urban habitat (precarious neighbourhoods, favelas, slums, and abandoned villages) placed in the margin of economic development and "modernisation" that we can observe in countries of the South. Behind this notion, we can often find the idea of a radical inequality of status between citizens, that are nonetheless part of a same political entity: on one hand, the powerful that monopolise the structure of the State and benefit from the rules of the global economy game - in terms of power and revenue - to what is known as the "centre." On the other hand, a group of citizens held in condition of precariousness, unhealth, illiteracy and total subjugation - to what is known as "the periphery." In this middle ground, a so-called urban and modernised "middle class" would have developed which, admitting the legitimacy of the principles set out by the centre, claims, with more or less vigour, the exercise of its rights in the public space that it helps to build.

This view of the "periphery" as an assignment of certain groups of people to a position of eternal subordination unique to the countries of the South and based on their "racialisation" seems too restrictive - even if it reflects the reality of the order of social relations which has generally prevailed in the former countries under colonial or imperialist domination. Yet, the institutionalisation of a hierarchy that justifies the power of those who hold the wealth, the legitimisation of social domination, limited access to resources and rights, loss of economic chances, discrimination of gender and ethnic origin, and the deliberate neglect of

the voices of the most vulnerable, are not phenomena exclusive to the global South. In fact, the installation and the reproduction of an asymmetrical power between "centre" and "periphery" is a principle of domination that we discover in any unequal and hierarchal society, whether it be a democratic regime, authoritarian regime or within a colonial or postcolonial regime. From this perspective, the distinction between centre/periphery can be applied when we identify a certain asymmetry in/of power, as is the case when we juxtapose: metropoles and colonies, bourgeoisie and proletariat, imperial powers and "Third World," rural and urban, included and excluded, winners and losers of globalisation, or the elite and the people.

It is from this idea that I would like to propose an enlarged concept of the "periphery", which will allow us to classify under this term a*ll the social groups that, regardless of economic or political development of the country in which they live, are subject to mechanisms that lower their capacity to contribute to questions of general interest and how to collectively seek solutions.* These mechanisms of disposition may reside in submission (absolutists regimes), repression and murders (authoritarian regimes) or in delegation and representation (democratic regimes). However, these mechanisms always aim to 1) forbid that the voice of each be fully heard in determining the present and future of the collectivity they are part of; 2) deny to citizens a certain control over the action and behaviour of those who govern them; and 3) to discredit the judgment that the governed formulate against their rulers by resorting to their own criteria of justice, equality, freedom, dignity and honesty.

In a sentence, it would be about understanding the periphery not as a condition (that would determine the destiny of a social group forever placed in a situation of marginality) but as a situation [1] In the sense that social anthropology gives to this notion (defined by contextual factors that can be reconfigured).

One of the aims of this broader concept of the periphery is to be able to see the fight of stigmatised or "racialised" populations as a challenge for democracy - a challenge that is at the heart of protest movements that, since January 2011, has echoed through protests, meetings, and occupations, in the North as well as the South.

At the base of every claim of democracy there lies a triple exigency: challenge the mechanisms of dispossession of individual and collective rights; allow the ordinary citizen to express their political capacity fully and with autonomy; legitimise their intervention in the control of the authorities that govern them. This triple exigency can be resumed in one proposition: all challenges for democracy strive to abolish the effects of inequality and injustice that the separation between centre/periphery maintains. In order to understand this proposition, one must first define the practical concept of democracy.

The two faces of democracy

As Sara Laugier and I have shown,[2] A. Ogien and S, Laugier, Le Principe democratie, Paris, La Découverte 2014 democracy is an ambivalent concept. On one hand, it refers back to a political regime, founded on an election, a separation of powers and a greater understanding of the rights and freedoms of the individual guaranteed by a Constitution. On the other hand, the concept of democracy refers to a way of life, this means that social relations should ideally be free of all traces of domination, whether they be class, capacity, origins, or gender, and that it be funded on one principle: the unconditional respect for and equality of all. This is a principle that we struggle to take seriously, but is paramount because it needs to be applied to all spheres of social activities: in politics, in business, at school, within the family and all public affairs. And putting this practise into principle is an infinite task simply because no one knows where equality stops. It's in this way that we can say that democracy- as a regime allowing the functioning of the State and assuring individual and collective rights for all - is and never will be concluded.

An important distinction between democracy as a regime and democracy as a way of life is that it is driven to believe that it is the latter (meaning the unconditional respect for equality of the citizen) that creates the rules and orientations by which its transformations will affect the former -- meaning the legal order that rules in a society.

To admit the duality of democracy -- as a regime and as a way of life -- ruptures the current idea that reduces democracy to an institutional system that balances between two seemingly incompatible concepts: freedom and equality. Against this purely institutional

vision, we must note that it is in the constant "coming and going" between democracy as a way of life and democracy as regime that the law of a State adjusts itself to the *status quo* as it develops in its own movement within society.

From this practical and dynamic concept of democracy, we can admit that it is from the idea of democracy as a way of life adopted by the ordinary citizen, conceived and claimed by increasing rights and liberties, that we develop political practices that promote individual autonomy and respect for pluralism.

In one word, all that feeds the struggles of the "peripheries" against this domination exerted by the "centre," movements that rest, in the most marginalised zones, on issues as basic as the right to housing, to water, to electricity, to basic public services, to decent revenues, to work, and to dignity. It raises the question as to what characterises these movements as fights for democracy and not fights against exploitation, segregation, discrimination or "racialisation"?

External critique and internal critique of democracy

While Western society has experienced democracy as a regime, a way of conceiving the dynamic of government/governed has stabilised under the form of Nation-State to which the capacity to exercise sovereignty is recognised. And this form has slowly spread to most countries in the world following the Second Word War, with the creation of international institutions, of decolonisation and of independence movements. We know that this political organisation was questioned in the 1970s when the role the State played in the realisation of public needs (health, education, housing, work, social benefits, etc) was deemed too costly. The question of debt then colonised public debate.

With the politics of liberalisation and the disengagement of the State, the management principles imposed by the rules of financial capitalism have taken precedence over the minds of political professionals. This change of direction produced -- all around the world -- identical consequences: the concentration of decision-making power fell in the hands of supranational political entities, banking institutions, multinationals and investment funds.

And this reconfiguration of rapport between political, economic and financial powers mirrors the weakening of the State, the domination of the regulation by markets, the increase in levels of corruption and the booming strength of money. The consequence of this new distribution of powers has been the disaffection of electoral democracy (what is the use of voting if decisions are made elsewhere than where the vote is held or if the ballot count is rigged?), and the disgust felt towards governments indifferent to the needs of the population. This serves an oligarchy that reigns supreme (what happens to legitimacy if the verdict of the ballot box is not respected and if the decisions taken are the same regardless of the elected candidate?).

Henceforth the experience of democracy is one of deception doubled with betrayal. Within these conditions, what covers the term democracy has become confusing. On one hand, democracy's principle is questioned even by voices that denounce the illegitimacy of this type of regime. This is what we can call external critique. But on the other hand, it's the way the democratic regimes function today that is being criticised, arguing that they betrayed the very maxim that defines them: the government of the people, by the people, for the people. This is called internal criticism. We must always keep in mind the radically different aims of each of these two criticisms - even if they are based on the same phenomena: indifference to politics, disgust for the representative system, abstention in elections, refusal of any commitment, desertion of parties and unions, and rejection of all that is considered "political."

If the external critique of democracy seeks to undermine faith in these two pillars of democracy, namely equality and human rights, in order to wipe out in the spirit of the citizens the chimera of the end of the hierarchy and the domination of the powerful; internal criticism proposes a completely different way of putting an end to the resentment provoked by the spectacle of a parliamentary system that no longer represents its citizens. It consists in working towards the radicalisation of democracy, that is to say, to fight for a power respectful of the aspirations of the population, truly representative and which encourages citizens to directly take charge of government activity. In a word, to return to the argument defended in this text, to abolish the distinction of centre / periphery. But the task does not seem easy to achieve. It is because it comes up against a force that works to maintain this distinction: anti-democratic thinking. What is this thought?

Varieties of Anti-Democracy

The current political situation is marked, more or less everywhere in the world, by the emergence of groups of "insurgent citizens" [3]J. Holston, Insurgent Citizenship, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008. that have chosen to act in politics apart from official institutions of representation in order to defy the powerful, the governors, and their advice on the terrain of rationality and legality of public action. No day goes by without hearing about the initiatives of "organised civil society" (collectives, platforms, associations) or those of movements that are born outside the framework of traditional parties or unions. It is in this political effervescence that citizens are building an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of how to use the tools that can be mobilised to act and to be heard (social networks, autonomous media, petitions, demonstrations, occupations, recourse to justice, direct nonviolent action, elections, etc).

The development of these "autonomous political practices" of the governed irritates and frightens those who have made politics their profession - whether they have been elected or have seized power in a violent manner. And there is no shortage of arguments to reject the demand of citizens to contribute to the definition and implementation of government decisions. It suffices for them to argue that the stakes of the "great" politics (war, power, sovereignty) go beyond ordinary people's understanding, that the questions of government (health, education, economy, ecology, etc.) are too technical to be dealt with by novices or that matter of "national cohesion" and security are not a matter for a majority vote.

The thought of anti-democracy unfolds in this context. It expresses itself when one considers the expertise of the administrators and managers of public affairs as superior to that of ordinary people; that one seeks to impose and reproduce an asymmetry of reason and competence in favour of the powerful; that one hesitates to grant a new freedom to those who claim it; that providential leaders pose as guides of a population held as incapable of having a legitimate political point of view. In short, it is when we justify the power exercised by those who feel invested to decide for the good of the masses, imposing it on those who are destined to be subjected.

One of the modes of expression of anti-democratic thinking is the mockery and sarcasm with which citizens who pride themselves on politics are drily dismissed as novices or neophytes. These rebuffs spread a condescending conception of the "people" which justifies denying them any political competence. The analysis that Sandra Laugier and I proposed in Anti-Democracy[4] A. Ogien et S. Laugier, Antidémocratie, Paris, La Découverte, 2017 reviews the reasons for limiting the intervention of ordinary citizens in political decision-making and the way power elites saturate the public debate with all sorts of arguments in order to convince citizens of their powerlessness, to dissuade them from giving themselves the means to act autonomously, or to comfort them in their disgust for politics.

Anti-democracy is also manifested in the contemporary proliferation of the use "populism." If the political features of speeches classified under this term have little in common - that includes nationalist programs, xenophobic, fascist, ultra-liberal, democratic, revolutionary or anarchist - two elements characterise them. The first is that these are leaders who claim to speak "in the name of the people," knowing what is best for their destiny; the second is that they propose to question the elements of the consensus on which the exercise of power rests. To say that a speech is "populist" without explaining how it is gives *de facto* validity to five ideas: 1) political activity is the monopoly of "leaders" and experts; 2) the sensitivity of the "people" can be easily manipulated by appealing to their lowest affects and impulses; (3) the masses are bound to follow the prescriptions given to them by those who direct them; 4) citizens views on the way they are governed and how public affairs should be conducted can be disdained; 5) the ordinary conception of politics and democracy expressed by citizens can be excluded from public debate.

It seems to me that the "autonomous political practices" that are developing today around the world demonstrate the futility of these ideas, even if they continue to dominate the minds of a majority of people.

Conclusion

The thought of anti-democracy is the principle of the distinction between centre and periphery (in the extensive conception proposed in this text). The question that lies at the

heart of the struggles going on in the South, as in the North, is how to abolish this distinction in order to achieve the emancipation of the dominated groups in a society. This comes, in part, by disarming the thought of anti-democracy, as expressed in these analysis which, denouncing the extra-institutional protest movements that attack incompetence, corruption or the sufficiency of the "elites," panic at the danger represented by this inconsistent rejection of representative government and the wisdom of its leaders. Against this panic, it must be maintained that nothing prohibits the unconditional trust in the people - of the periphery - who regularly demonstrate that they know how to deploy democratic collective intelligence when they address the affairs that concern them.

One of the questions that arises today is whether capitalism (in the financial form it has taken in recent decades) is compatible with this mode of expression of democracy. The question is: should we maintain capitalism as a system that serves the interests of a large majority of the population committed to increasing their standard of living; or is it necessary to call into question a stability that, far from improving the situation of the population, aggravates inequalities and separates citizens from political decision-making processes. Or, to use the terms of the argument defended in this article, destroy the separation between centre and periphery. This is undoubtedly one of the major questions of the present... and it is only through the fights to come that we will draw an answer.