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Discussing Democracy in the Area of Education

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Abstract

Democracy as a political value is highly prized in many spheres of social life, one of which is education. This critical essay, which hinges on historical, philosophical and discursive axes, addresses the relationship between democracy and education, problematizing and deconstructing the two concepts, particularly the former. The signifier of democracy is always present, even in differing ideological discourses, depending on by whom, where and with what purpose it is expressed. However, these meanings are all commonly structured as a beginning of salvation and a horizon of well-being for the community.

Introduction

Democracy as a political value is highly prized in many aspects of social life. In the educational sphere it takes shape as an unavoidable condition in the face of expectations annulled in the past and present by authoritarian regimes (Latin America, Africa, Asia and even Europe fifty years ago) as well as a desired future foreseen as being strongly connected internationally in various aspects (cultural, economic, political, aesthetic, communicative, etc.). Being that the unequal and oppressive conditions that prevail on the planet are not going to disappear by magic or erosion, the need to consider democracy from an educational standpoint becomes more and

more imminent.

The ties between democracy and education may be addressed from multiple angles, some of which I will mention here with the intention of contextualizing my own approach to this issue.

It can be addressed with a prescriptive aim, in an attempt to offer a combination of values conducive to democratic life and apply them to transversal school practices or certain subjects (such as civics). One could describe the democratic characteristics that are practiced (or not practiced) in the classroom. One could create a critical proposal on the absence of democratic values in school systems' curricula. I will not present either of these possibilities in this essay¹. My starting

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point is a problematizing and deconstruction of the concepts themselves. On this occasion I will refer only to democracy, since I have previously set forth an exercise of deconstructing the concept of education elsewhere (Buenfil, 1992 and 2011), and several others have addressed a decentralizing of the scholastic institution (Padierna, 2008, among others).

In this critical essay, which hinges on historical, philosophical and discursive axes in order to observe the relationships between democracy and education, I will argue the following:

- The signifier² for democracy is always present in discourses of different ideological orientations and expressed in various institutional bodies;
- The meanings of democracy are different and sometimes antagonistic depending on by whom, where and with what purpose they are expressed (international agencies, Mexican ruling authorities, oppositions such as political parties, union workers, populists, etc.);
- The signifier for democracy is an object of struggle, as various agents contend for and wish to define the establishment of its meaning;
- Despite the differences and possible antagonisms, what these meanings have in common is their structure as the beginning of salvation and a horizon of well-being for the community.

This article will be organized in three parts. First, some examples of the centrality of the word “democracy” in various contemporary discourses will be presented (to show its ambiguity and contextualism). I will then lay out some conceptual parameters in which I

place my discussion. Finally, I will interweave the problematizing of democracy offered by Mouffe with empirical information and the perspective of political analytical discourse, setting forth some theories for discussion.

Democracy and Educational Discourse: Dissemination

In this first section I will provide historical examples (i.e., relevant or specific) of the various ways of signifying democracy and then theoretically problematize (in conceptual and logistical terms) possible democracies, showing the pertinence of the denaturalization of democracy. I will address this matter by defining a discursive field that I have been continuously focusing on through the research that I have conducted in the last fifteen years (educational reforms, educational policies, legislation, and discourse on the subject of education among teachers, intellectuals, public officials and union workers).

I am working on the ontological assumption that democracy has no essence (neither in the history of thought nor in particular political or educational programs),³ but rather that it defines itself over time and space. Its meaning depends on each context and these meanings are built, reiterated, and debated, and they eventually settle, and either achieve a certain permanence or do not. The political analysis is interested precisely in delving into how this happens. I will demonstrate this historicity with some examples.

The signifier for democracy can be traced back to discourses on education occurring several centuries ago. In Mexico, democracy resolutely appears as a political value promoted by education since at least



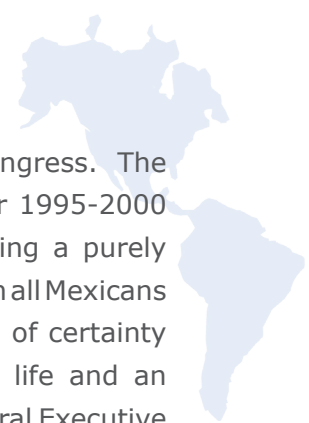
the mid-19th century, if not before. Since 1811, in the documents of the Cadiz Cortes - still within the framework of a monarchical system but already facing a professed impulse toward enlightened thought - the highest political values revolved around freedom and justice, rights and citizenship, equity and the greater good. Miguel Guridi y Alcocer, the Representative for Tlaxcala, pointed out that "suffrage cannot be denied to castes by virtue of their being members of a nation vested with sovereignty, and an election would cease to be popular if the people did not have suffrage" (qtd. in Guzmán, 1949, p. 30).

Furthermore, in the educational field a certain notion of democracy infiltrates such values as being public and cost-free, and having equal opportunity of the sexes (Guzmán, 1949, pp. 199-206), yet the signifier for democracy as such does not hold an important place. In the liberalism of 1857 the signifier for democracy is already clear and explicit, as certain principles are established in the Constitution as the higher principles of the Republic: being representative, democratic, liberal, popular and municipal.

In the beginning of the 20th century, in the discourse calling for revolution in Mexico, a wide variety of allusions to democracy can be observed in rally speeches, manifestos, and revolutionary plans. The democracy component appears to be defined as an equivalent to: suffrage, popular vote, freedom to elect one's government, exercising a right, respecting popular will, a political condition of citizenship, a condition of justice and a revolutionary ideal (and later, as the conquest of revolution). Democracy defines itself by opposition: to dictatorship, reelection, absence of legality, fraud, plutocracy, oppression, ignominy and despotism (Buenfil, 1996).

In post-revolutionary Mexican governments, the term democracy is tightly interwoven with a variety of republican, liberal and socialist values, as well as the social demands of farm workers and manual laborers. It is also interwoven with a very unequal national culture and a deeply rooted myth of the Enlightenment. Democracy is a nodal signifier of the Mexican Revolution's discourse, which articulates these differences through various emphases (liberal, rationalist, socialist and others) from each administration, modifying its meaning while maintaining the term of democracy and without losing its structuring position. One recurring example is the socialist democracy of *cardenismo*, which could be achieved through the organized participation of the proletariat, the peasantry and the popular sectors in the shaping of the Mexican Revolution Party. This would occur through a class struggle that would lead to the socialization of production means and a socialist education that would offset rural as opposed to urban decline and would shape the citizen for a new society. During Manuel Ávila Camacho's presidency (1940-1946) democracy was defined as respecting individual liberties, and it could be achieved through the fight against communism and fascism, the defense of the hemisphere and the subordination of the class struggle for "capital legitimate rights, and an education for national love and conciliation" (Buenfil, 1994 and 2000).

In the discourse on education during the last third of the 20th century in Mexico, the term democracy appears highly condensed, as it is the result of the circulation and meeting of international currents that are increasingly influential and visible. It is also the result of more divided national orientations with questionable leadership and credibility, as well as a particular political history and cultural



and economic conditions. In this sense, and with regard to Mexico, the democracy signifier can be traced to the political discourse of international agencies and certain spheres of interest.

Within a variety of discourses relative to various spheres within a community, democracy—a signifier that is absent in some international agency programs—is nevertheless a political value that these agencies associate with commendable forms of governments that these agencies are willing to offer aid through loans, consulting, programs, etc. A joint document of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank entitled *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – Operational Issues* (1999) argues the following:

Good governance is necessary to assure sound management of public resources, and achieve greater transparency, including active public scrutiny and government accountability in fiscal management. The active involvement of civil society in monitoring relevant aspects of a program is an important ingredient (IMF-WB 1999, p. 3).

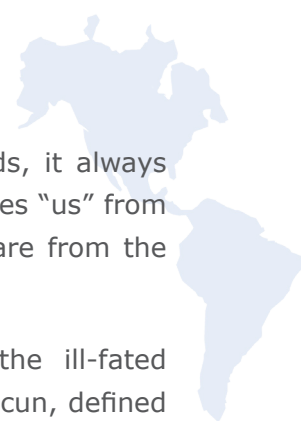
In this sense, democracy is defined as the participation of citizens in decision-making that affects their lives in the community, and the possibility of overseeing and demanding accountability from fiscal management authorities.

In Mexico's case, democracy is a value that is present in legislation, in the principles of parties and labor unions, on demonstrators' picket signs, in national programs and in other enunciatory areas. It creates other subsets, for instance compensatory programs to make national life more democratic; micro-financing systems to democratize access to funds; careful counting of percentages of the parties

to democratize the work of Congress. The National Plan for Development for 1995-2000 establishes the purpose of "building a purely democratic development with which all Mexicans can identify, which will be a basis of certainty and trust for a peaceful political life and an intense citizen participation" (Federal Executive Power, 1995, X). Democracy, participation and citizenship are joined throughout this and other such official documents, from this and other administrations, including that of the so-called transition (of 2000).⁴

Democracy and participation can also be traced to discourses on the sphere of education. Democracy is an educational political value that international agencies also promote in teaching the modern-day citizen, and through which they offer and condition aid through funding, consulting, programs, etc. In this sense democracy is defined as the possibility of shaping a responsible, committed, and participative citizen. Thus, the modernization of education was conceived as a transformation to respond to the new needs of a country and to guide education in meeting the demands of the population while contributing to its development process and well-being. This would lead to an improvement in the quality of education and its services, with the goal of strengthening national sovereignty, perfecting democracy and modernizing the country (cf. World Bank, 1996, pp. 102-103).

In the same way, in Mexican educational programs, where the imprint of values promoted by international agencies is easily seen, democracy is defined as a value, as an objective of the shaping of the citizen, as society's demand for knowledge, as a condition of the country's progress and its installation in the global sphere, in short as a point of arrival. The National Education Program for 2001-



2006 contains a section specifically clarifying the role of scholastic education in the political “transition” (which basically refers to the change in the winning political party in the 2000 elections). In this framework, the association between participation and democracy is also reiterated with regard to other issues such as the question of gender (p. 30 and 55ff), generational difficulties and unemployment (p. 30ff), and the cultural dimension of national identity (p. 46ff).

Various political meanings can be found upon analyzing documents such as those cited above. Democracy is of course a political and civic value. It is also a characteristic that, in accordance with whoever expresses it, is attributed to the strategies and measures taken. At the same time, it is the desired goal by which “necessary sacrifices” are justified, and it will eradicate intolerance, inequality, discrimination, lack of opportunities and corruption. It will lead to civic and political behavior that is responsible, transparent, participative, committed, and even efficient and productive. It is, in short, a guarantee for salvation and the community’s well-being. At this point it is interesting to point out the democracy signifier’s displacement or circulation from the civic/political to the administrative sphere.

The central value given to the democracy signifier can also be observed in other enunciative fields. Among the demands of the political parties, social movements and various union sectors of the educational profession (SNTE, CNTE, university unions) the democracy signifier is frequently present, whether as a substantive or as a qualifier of something (democratic elections for representatives, democratic participation in institutional decision-making, and others). In all cases it is something that declares itself

as not the enemy; in other words, it always appears as a trait that distinguishes “us” from “them.” The following examples are from the first decade of the 21st century:

- Noam Chomsky, during the ill-fated reunion of the WTO in Cancun, defined the enemy as: global elites that make up a *de facto world government* [...] forcing most countries to accept rules (which will increase the gap between wealth and poverty) (Jornada 8/Sep/03, p. 26). The expression “de facto government” is a clear demarcation of a democratic position to which Chomsky implicitly adheres.
- During the petition to strip immunity from PRI senator Aldana Prieto, fellow party member Enrique Jackson, President of the Senate, accused PAN representative Juan de Dios Castro Lozano of jeopardizing “the democratic normality and the rule of law” (Jornada 8/Sep/03, p. 4, with regard to the so-called Pemexgate⁵). Here the strength of the argument lies in the implied danger against a shared political value (which does not even need justification), which would threaten the country’s stability in not placing the representative’s activities under scrutiny.
- President Fox’s third State of the Union Address proclaims the “strengthening of democratic practices, freedom of expression, absence of repression and attention to crime in Ciudad Juarez” as accomplishments (Jornada 2/Sep/03).

Statements in which democracy plays some sort of role continue to appear frequently in communiqués on middle school education reform, as can be observed in newspaper sources.⁶



In June of 2004, the Undersecretary of Basic and Normal Education of Mexico's Ministry of Education (SEP), Lorenzo Gómez Morín, presented the proposal for the new middle school program, to be implemented starting in August of that year. This new program prioritizes the teaching of language, math, science and technology, and reduces the number of subjects in middle school from 34 to 24. Among others, it eliminates ethics and civics, and reduces geography to one year. Mexican Geography, which was usually studied during the second grade, disappears entirely as well as teaching on Pre-hispanic cultures and pre-15th century world history (China and Mesopotamia, among others).⁷

In various editorials, letters and journalistic notes published in the newspaper *La Jornada* between June and December of 2004, middle school reform is characterized as anti-democratic because teachers and parents were not consulted, and criticisms expressed by specialists were often ignored, as was the case with history or natural sciences (Colectivo Cultural de Nadie, 2004).

Three years later, in November of 2007, the following headline appeared on an official press release: "In Mexico, democracy is strengthened with and alongside civil society: Josefina Vázquez Mota" (the Secretary of Education at that time).

- The Secretary of Education invited all citizen organizations to present educational proposals, to be supported by a competitive grant of 100 million pesos.
- She also invited these organizations to write a book and participate in the creation of a radio program on the work that was being driven by organized civil

society in the country.

- At the opening of the 11th Annual Meeting of the Mexican Center for Philanthropy (CEMEFI), on behalf of President Felipe Calderón, the Secretary stated that democracy in Mexico was being consolidated and strengthened with and alongside civil society, and is blind to political party colors and emblems.
- She also pointed out that in Mexico civil organizations are not charity clubs, as they are committed to generosity, the future and being an invaluable contribution to the country by dedicating their efforts to building freedom, citizenship and above all democracy.
- Before the members of CEMEFI, Vázquez Mota announced the creation of a competitive grant fund of 100 million pesos for organized civil society, which would have very clear guidelines and whose request for proposals would be announced shortly, with the goal of supporting joint initiatives (http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb/sep1/sep1_bol2961107).

It is evident that the context here is a grant competition, and the use of the democracy signifier is associated with philanthropy and civil participation. Through the dissociative argument, the issuing source attempts to break ties with philanthropy and charity, with which the activity of some female figures of authority has been ridiculed. At the same time this argument seeks to associate democracy with an "inclusive" attitude on the part of the government ("which is blind to political party colors and emblems").



The democracy signifier continues to shift and re-shape itself in the configurations of meaning, through actors of the official sector as well as in the critical sector of government actions. Such is the case for intellectuals belonging to the Philosophical Observatory of Mexico (OFM), who proposed that the head of SEP, Alonso Lujambio, fulfill Agreement 488 (which amended the suppression of philosophical disciplines in high school), and meet with representatives of this community in order to actively address the problem.⁸ The group has pointed out that Lujambio has not taken the time to respond to their letter. Columnist Karina Avilés describes the situation thusly:

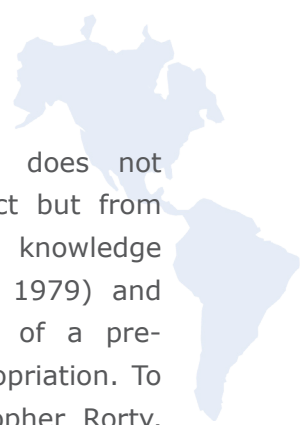
There is indignation and a feeling that the SEP is mocking the national philosophical community! says Gabriel Vargas, OFM coordinator and researcher at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM). The philosophers warn that the Comprehensive High School Reform Program [Reforma Integral de la Educación Media Superior (RIEMS)], which eliminated the humanities area and philosophical subjects (a decision that the SEP rectified in the face of community rejection) is part of an education that intends to destroy any sense of belonging. Hurtado emphasizes that this is a narrow-minded project, with a vision of teaching that strengthens employee training and shapes people who will obey market guidelines, instead of creating moral, critical and historical consciousness.

According to Gabriel Vargas, the government contradicts itself says. It claims to be humanist yet it eliminates the humanities; it claims to be democratic yet it makes an authoritarian reform; it claims to be against drug trafficking yet it makes no effort to offer moral strength to students through education. Mexican society is in crisis and, as

historian Miguel León-Portilla says, it is education that can provide solutions to the most significant problems facing the nation. There can be no social sensitivity without ethics, and no democracy without philosophy. As Vargas explains, without good ethics, it is impossible to tackle values issues such as corruption, drug trafficking or gender inequality (K. Avilés, *La Jornada*, February 28th, 2011, p. 43).

In this case the democracy signifier, framed by criticism of government action, structures itself as an argument of the role model that is betrayed on two counts: in the exercise of power, with the “authoritarian” implementation of a reform; and, fundamentally, as a civic and political value omitted from high school educational content. In this case it should be emphasized that, democracy is built as a value that requires no major precision or justification: it is a point of departure for the statement.

The political discourse analyst cannot avoid moving beyond the recognition and the unending description of agencies, places, orientations and ways in which the democracy signifier is reiterated. This is because in every iteration of democracy something prevails and something is altered (Derrida, 1982), and this prevalence with contextual alteration is in play in political relationships, not just semantics. Democracy simultaneously operates as the signifier that articulates a multitude of signifying systems —social, political, educational, communicational, and others— as well as a signifier susceptible to being “filled” by various meanings, even those linked to antagonistic political projects. The simplistic conclusion that some are “right” and others are “wrong,” or are demagogues, is no longer satisfactory at this point in the advancement of



knowledge. Before presenting some thoughts on this matter, I would first like to formulate certain conceptual coordinates from which I can address these issues.

Political Discourse Analysis

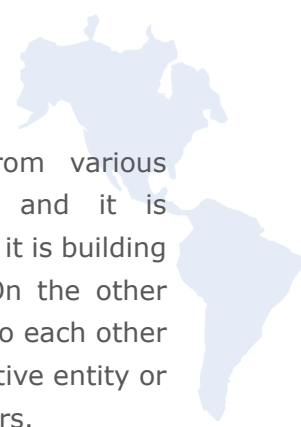
Political Discourse Analysis (or PDA) emphasizes the political dimension of any significant configuration (i.e., discourse). In other words, it focuses on decision-making regarding what should be covered and what should be left out (for example, inclusion and exclusion) in any signifier system (e.g., programs, projects, works of art, rituals, and any practice that holds some type of meaning).⁹ It is a perspective of research on social processes, which includes but is not centered on education. It also involves ontological, political, epistemological and ethical positions, among which I will highlight some examples.

The existence of things is discursive, historical and political; it is not an irradiation of mere existence, but rather the symbolic (*ergo* social) construction of this existence when agents or the community significantly appropriate it. This is similar to Heidegger's ontic/ontological distinction between existence and being (Heidegger, 1951, § 24-27), manifest in the situated being (or *Dasein*). Laclau assumes this distinction when he criticizes the elemental confusion between an object's being (*esse*), which is historic and changing, and that object's entity (*ens*). He states: "in our interchange with the world, objects are never given to us as mere existential entities; they are always given to us within discursive articulations" (Laclau, 1993, pp. 117-118; and Derrida, 1982, pp. 10 and 23-27).

This social appropriation does not stem from one contemplative act but from a significant construction, as all knowledge implies a perspective (Foucault, 1979) and not an isomorphic reproduction of a pre-existing objectuality to that appropriation. To paraphrase the American philosopher Rorty, there is no intrinsic nature of reality, but rather it will appear in different ways depending on the languages with which it is described, and there is no *a priori* universal principle to choose one description above the others (Rorty, 1991). For example, the materiality of a rock exists, but when this materiality is framed as an object of luxury and ostentation, as a projectile against an aggressor, or as an obstacle in the road, this is a significant/social construction that does not depend on, or much less stem from, the mere existence of the matter.

This social appropriation/construction involves a series of cultural and linguistic mediations found in history and in space. It is not a derivation of universal rationality but it is irreparably polluted by irrationality, passions and understanding that is not limited to the knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment, as valid as that may be (Laclau, 1996).

This construction implicates decisions over that which is defined — in other words, the distinctions that are outlined to demarcate the borders between the desirable and the excludable, the normative and the institutor, in a particular community (Laclau in Butler *et al.*, 2000). Because of this, a dimension emerges involving the existing/established normativity and the emerging/constituent values. Laclau emphasizes the ontic-ontological distinction in order to highlight the empty universal nature of ethics, vis-à-vis the specific content of normativity (ontic). Laclau also points out two conclusions surrounding the constituent



nature of the decision: first, only that part of the decision which is not predetermined by normativity is actually ethical; second, all normativity is the consequence of a previous ethical moment (i.e. decision) (Laclau, in Butler *et al.*, 2000, p. 81). To this extent, ethical and political dimensions are included, which brings us to a sphere of responsibility with regard to dividing lines (e.g., between what is moral and immoral, acceptable and unacceptable, etc.). These borders do not stem from a rational —much less unavoidable and empirical— necessity, but rather result from a tension between necessity and contingency, as well as from its established nature.

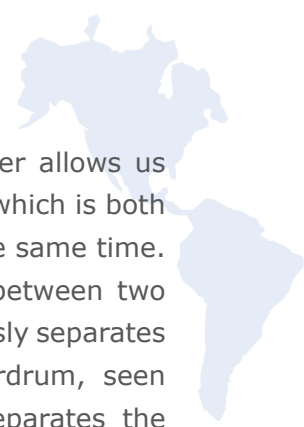
In addition to positions such as those described above, this perspective involves a conceptual or categorical body of an open, incomplete, relational, pragmatic, and overdetermined nature, to the extent that:

- Categories such as hegemony, identification, politics, tendentially empty signifiers, etc., are seen more as intellection tools than as obsolete concepts that describe the world “as it is” (essentialism).
- The theoretical body involves a systematizing that can never be completed, but rather which is susceptible to the incorporation of new tools depending on the inquirer’s questions, its empirical reference and the *corpus* to be analyzed.
- The meanings of the categories are defined by the use (Wittgenstein 1988) to which they are subjected in the analysis and interpretation of a *corpus* and do not possess an ultimate or essential definition.
- Its overdetermined nature alludes to at least two aspects. On one hand,

it recovers categories from various disciplines and theories and it is concentrated on the object it is building in order to understand. On the other hand, these notions refer to each other and none of them is a positive entity or independent from the others.

This research perspective also requires certain intellection logics found in the gaps between inherited causal relations, and attempts to situate itself within the mobile, penetrable and opaque margins of the interior and the exterior, inclusion and exclusion. For this reason, strategies of thought and reflection are required to capture in language what escapes definitive establishment and is characterized by the flow of signifiers, their mutual contamination and their transformations. In this attempt, we turn to the following logics:

- Irresolvable tension, which jeopardizes the conflict and its results as a possible institutor; unlike the Aristotelian figure of the happy medium (which resolves and eradicates tension, or the dialectic synthesis in which one founding and self-deployable logic absorbs and explains the movement). To illustrate the logic of the tension, I am referring, for example, to the link between necessity and contingency.
- Paradox, which tests signifiers and naturalized, apparently incontrovertible values by bringing them to unacceptable or contradictory conclusions, thus contributing to the development of thought (from the Greeks to Pascal and Kierkegaard to Bertrand Russell’s writings on logic).¹⁰
- Aporia, which makes the insoluble



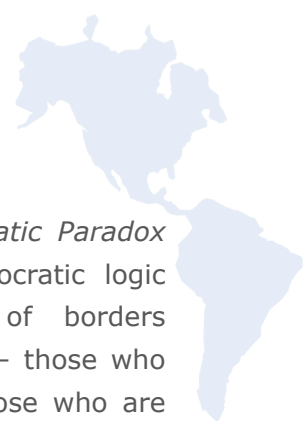
nature of a problem visible and in so doing profits, since it opens up numerous possible options; as a particular way of problematizing that, instead of forcing an unsustainable solution, assumes the complexity and possibility of the unsolvable. For example, when something is simultaneously necessary and impossible.¹¹

- Overdetermination,¹² which is incompatible with the entire idea of “last-instance determination” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987), and of hard and set causality. It functions, in turn, as a strategy to consider a certain mobile and impure “causality,” which is open to infinite interpretation (Buenfil, 2000). On one hand, the moment it partially captures pieces of the genesis of a process, it simultaneously recognizes that these pieces come from spheres other than the process in question. Therefore we are always in the presence of some identities in others (thus inevitably “polluted” identities). On the other hand, while it seeks out the forces that disrupt (Foucault, 1982) the gestation process of a regime, law, or signifying system, it simultaneously recognizes that in its emergence, in addition to seeking an essence, we are confronted with the unavoidable chain of contingencies.¹³
- Unspeakability (Derrida, 1982), which offers an alternative to the logic of inherited disjunction (e.g., either white *or* black, either internal *or* external, Pandora’s box *or* panacea), shares the logic of constitutive tension and allows us to play with a figure of aporetic conjunction: something that is not classic duality, nor the Aristotelian

“happy medium,” but rather allows us to regard the ambivalent, which is both internal and external at the same time. For example, the border between two countries that simultaneously separates and unites them; the eardrum, seen as the membrane that separates the middle ear from the internal ear yet also joins them together; certain medicinal plants such as digitalis, which can be a remedy in one dose and a poison in another [...]

It is worth remembering that although these types of intellection tools seem to be formed in a particular way in this research perspective, they are in fact recovered from thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Rorty, especially in the fields of political philosophy (from Arendtian phenomenology to Laclau), psychoanalysis (particularly Lacanian), historiography (from Nietzsche to Furet to the Annales School and Foucault), and political theory (from Marxism to post-Marxism, decisionism). This impure, hybrid or overdetermined theoretical identity of political discourse analysis makes its systematicity and consistency possible in the criticism of essentialism and the latest (or original) foundations. It also facilitates the assumption of responsibility in the face of the discursive, historical and political nature of the being.

Seen from this perspective, the democracy signifier does not have a definitive meaning, an atemporal universal *a priori* essence, or a meaning stemming from transcendental or communicative reason. Instead its meaning is defined by the use and position it holds in a discursive configuration (language-game, as Wittgenstein would say), and it is a product of social constructs in the history of communities, causing



its normativization to remain temporal, incomplete and distorted.¹⁴ This perspective also allows us to recognize that democracy as a concept is defined by how it appears to be enunciated in each case, and how it is used in each enunciative context, none of which can reclaim the definitive, true or correct meaning of the signifier.¹⁵ The logics of paradox, aporia, and overdetermination allow us to transcend the quest for the “true essence” of democracy or its ultimate and pure origin, instead assuming that there is no such thing, and that its meanings are always composed (hybrid or overdetermined, in the psychoanalytic sense mentioned above), and are partial and temporal fixations resulting from hegemonic practices that lack a transcendental basis. These logics suggest that recognizing the impossibility of definitive signification does not leave us in a state of political, gnoseological, moral or aesthetic pessimism, but rather presents the mobilization and generation of possibilities, without the arrogant and dangerous naivety of believing that a true, definitive, universal and undistorted meaning of democracy exists and can be reached.

Political discourse analysis aims to interpret how the meanings of things in history become what they are (or are being) today and how they are transformed. For this reason, historicization, problematization and recently created tools for intelligibility, as well as many others that cannot be mentioned in such a limited space, have become extremely pertinent.¹⁶

At this point it is appropriate for us to focus on the theoretic problematizing (ontological, conceptual, and logical) of the democracy signifier. To that end, I will address problematizing and the contributions of Chantal Mouffe, who has spent over ten years

developing these issues.

In his book, *The Democratic Paradox* (2002), Mouffe notes that democratic logic always implies the marking of borders between an “us” and a “them” — those who belong to the population and those who are outsiders. This is the condition for the actual exercise of democratic rights and inevitably creates a tension with the liberal emphasis on respect for “human rights,” since there is no guarantee that the decision made through democratic procedures will not jeopardize some existing rights. In a liberal democracy, limits are always placed on the exercise of the people’s sovereignty. Usually these limits are presented as what establishes the framework for respect of human rights and as a non-negotiable. In fact, since they depend on the way in which human rights are defined or interpreted at a given time, these limits are the expression of the existing hegemony and therefore debatable. What is not debatable within a liberal democracy is the idea that it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of freedom. Hence its paradoxical nature.

According to Mouffe (2002, p. 9), liberal democracy is the result of joining two incompatible logics, which cannot be reconciled but rather always remain in an irresolvable tension: the tension between equality and freedom can only take hegemonic (ergo partial and temporal) forms of stability. Although political philosophers such as Rawls and Habermas uphold a final reconciliation between liberalism and democracy through normative and deliberative procedures to match individual rights and liberties, and collective equality and participation, each one ends up favoring one dimension over the other. For Rawls (1995) this dimension is liberalism while for Habermas



(1995) it is democracy. Mouffe, on the other hand, recognizing the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy more than seeking an impossible definitive consensus (which may or may not turn out to be desirable), proposes to face politics as “an antagonistic confrontation between opposing interpretations of liberal democratic values.”

When constantly testing the relationships of inclusion and exclusion implied in the people’s constitution, which is required to exercise democracy, the liberal discourse of universal human rights plays an important part in keeping the debate, negotiation, fight, protest and resistance—which are all characteristic of democracy—alive. On the other hand, it is the democratic logic of equivalence that allows the creation of borders and the shaping of the “demos”, without which there would be no exercise of rights. It comes down to a constitutive tension, since without tension many of the conditions of a liberal democracy would dissolve. Furthermore, Mouffe emphasizes that it is not two external principles that establish negotiation relationships in the style of classic duality, but rather their relationships are contaminative (overdetermined), as the identities of both are implicated in certain aspects. The collective identity regimes resulting from this coordination have configurations that are always more than the sum of their internal elements.

Rationalist perspectives do not allow for this manner of considering liberal democracy, since instead of recognizing its ineradicable tension, they try to resolve and eliminate it, thus holding on to the illusion of “rational consensus.” Taking on the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy requires tools of intellection that are different than those of the rationalists, as well as the recognition that there is no

possible social objectivity that is not held in an original negotiation and exclusion.¹⁷

In more recent writings contextualized in other bases, Mouffe (2009a and 2009b) points out that the future of democracy at an international level has been conceived in two possibilities. First, the proposal for a democracy and a “cosmopolitan citizenship” resulting from universalizing the interpretation and implementation of the Western version of human values and rights. In some variations to this perspective, there is an underlying assumption that the modern Western way of life is the best and that moral progress requires the expansion of this way of life to the entire planet. Liberal universalism will argue that Western institutions are the only rational and legitimate institutions. The advent of a “World Republic” with a homogeneous body of cosmopolitan citizens endowed with the same rights and obligations, a citizenship that would coincide with “humanity,” as Mouffe points out, denies the political dimension constituent of human societies, which would embody the global domination of a power capable of erasing all differences and imposing its own concept of the world upon the entire planet, with very negative consequences.

Second, Mouffe (2009b) poses a different concept in response to “cosmopolitan citizenship.” His is a multipolar world order that recognizes the plurality of values in its strong Weberian and Nietzschean sense, in which there is a plurality of forms of democracy that are considered legitimate, and a set of institutions that regulates international relations, instead of assuming the existence of a sole structure of unified power.¹⁸

Universalist approaches—Mouffe proposes—contribute to the clash of civilizations, as by attempting to impose the



Western concept of democracy (considered as the only legitimate concept) upon societies that reject it, they inevitably end up portraying those who do not accept this concept as “enemies of civilization.” Thus they deny their rights to maintain their cultures, creating conditions for an antagonistic confrontation between different civilizations.

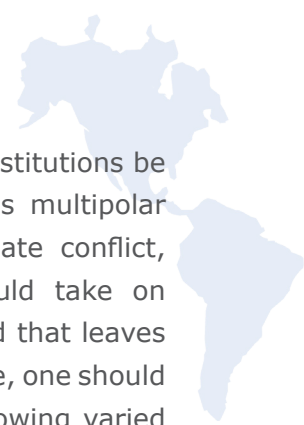
The universalism of human rights illustrates this argument, as it can mean many things, including: that human rights are universal because they are worth the same to everyone at all times and everywhere; that they are universal because they represent values shared equally by *all* humanity; that they are universal because they come from a universal notion of justice or reason. However, if we are less proud and a little more expert in otherness, we can realize that this so-called universality is less generalized than it seems, and that in any case it is more a result of political relations than of an essence that all humans share. This so-called universality of human rights has been put into question by various authors like Panikkar and Jullien.

The path that Panikkar proposes to understand the meaning of human rights is investigating the role and the position that this notion occupies in our culture. In his article entitled “Is the notion of human rights a Western concept?” Panikkar (1982) maintains that understanding this role, this social function, will allow us to consider whether this task is carried out in different ways in other cultures. For this reason he proposes to investigate whether equivalent functions of the notion of human rights exist in other cultures, what he would call “homeomorphic” equivalents. In Western culture, human rights are presented as basic criteria for the recognition of human dignity and the condition necessary for a social order and

just politics. Panikkar wonders if other cultures have different ways of visualizing respect for human dignity. Once it is recognized that what is at stake in human rights is a person’s dignity and justice, the possibility of visualizing these aspects in different terms becomes apparent.

Mouffe (2010) believes that the work of Panikkar shows how what Western culture calls “human rights” is in fact a culturally specific way of reinforcing a person’s dignity, and therefore it is presumptuous to declare that this is the only possible way. The formulation of dignity in terms of “rights” depends on a particular form of moral theorizing, which, despite being appropriate for Western modern liberal universalism, can be inappropriate for the task of specifying a person’s dignity in other cultures.¹⁹ On that same note, François Jullien proposes that the concept of “human rights” is not echoed in classic Indian thought, in which a person is not seen as separate from the rest of the natural world. “Freedom” can be a crucial political value in European culture, but in the Far East, from India to China, its homeomorphic equivalent is “harmony” (Jullien, 2008, p. 24). In many Mexican indigenous communities, the individual only makes sense within the community, thus liberal rights are less indicative of their idea of human dignity. López Pérez (2003) demonstrates in the case of the Trique people, that unity with nature, respect for the community, and preservation of the earth are values that make up the dignity of a person, and that individual liberties are secondary and in some cases even frowned upon by the community. Equivalent studies have been carried out surrounding the political values of communities in Chiapas (Padierna, 2008).

In this sense, Panikkar and Jullien show how the concept of human rights is a collection



of assumptions with a traceable historical origin, and its emergence is tied to sociopolitical conflicts, whether in the 17th century with the Bill of Rights of the English Revolution of 1689; or in the 18th century with the Bill of Rights in the 1776 American struggle against the British crown, or in the *Declaration des droites de l'homme et du citoyen* (Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen) in France, 1789. In addition to being understood as rights these are clearly Western.

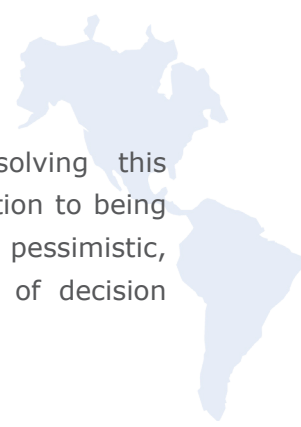
We are thus facing a discursive operation through which human universality is presented as a particular, contextual form positioned to understand fundamental political values in a community (metonymy of one part for the whole). As seen in the previous section, this is what is functioning in Eurocentrism, for which a collection of traits would characterize human rights: there would be a universal human nature that could be known through rational means, which would be essentially different than and superior to the rest of reality; the individual would have an absolute and irreducible dignity that should defend itself against society and the state; the autonomy of this individual would require society to organize itself in a non-hierarchical way, as a sum of free individuals. Mouffe as well as Panikkar, Jullien and others (e.g., De Sousa Santos, 1995; Parekh, 1994) call attention precisely to the fact that all of those assumptions are Western and liberal, and therefore distinguishable from other conceptions of human dignity in other cultures.

I agree with the aforementioned authors that only by recognizing the legitimacy of a plurality of just forms of society, and the fact that liberal democracy is only one form of democracy among others, can the conditions for an "agonistic" coexistence between different

regional poles and their specific institutions be created. Mouffe believes that this multipolar order would certainly not eliminate conflict, but it is less likely that it would take on antagonistic forms than in a world that leaves no room for pluralism. In this sense, one should not overlook numerous works showing varied and equivalent strategies for thinking about and organizing other "democratic" forms, "modernities" and "illustrations" (Chakrabarty, 2000; Einsenstat, 2001; Hunter 2001; Tully 2003, among the most well-known).

The previous paragraphs highlight a series of characteristics of political discourse analysis by addressing the subject of democracy: exercising problematizing more than prescription; ontological positions (objection to essentialism and aprioristic universalism) and epistemic positions (criticizing rationalism); and the use of certain logics (tension, paradox) and categories (equivalencies, antagonism, etc.).

It would be naive to think that problematizing liberal democracy, like the one described above, is insinuated in the naturalized discourses surrounding education. It is not even frequent to find these types of reflections in the academic sphere of the educational field. It is for this reason that these kinds of considerations become intellectually and politically pertinent. Intellectually, as far as it contributes to mobilizing and deconstructing naturalized figures and ways of seeing the binomial of democracy and education, which are a part of our common sense today (world of life and everyday life). Politically, as long as certainties on which we no longer reflect and which we consider inalterable and immediate are mobilized. For example, what would my reader think if I were to hint that globalization does not inevitably entail a loss of national



identity; or that democracy has been a corrupt form of government?²⁰ I would rather not imagine it.

Considerations for Discussion

In an attempt to weave together what I have been presenting throughout this text, allow me to establish the following thesis.

The democracy-liberalism paradox implies the recognition of the space of possibility, which opens up:

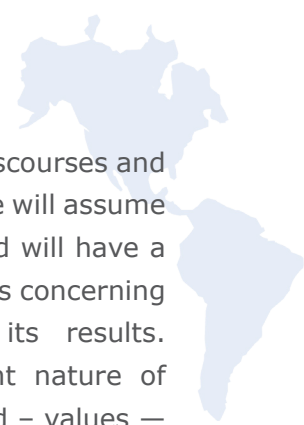
- The inexistence or emptiness of the bandied about “essence of democracy,” when numerous philosophical arguments have been created around the futility of continuing to seek to determine which reason essence stems from, when we are witnessing the extensive proliferation of meanings with which the signifier is used.
- The constituent ambiguity of the democracy signifier simultaneously alludes to what “we” are or what we want to be, and what “the enemy” is not, and the ambiguity of the relationship between democracy and freedom.
- The contingent nature of the various coordinations that can be made between democracy and freedom, with different emphases, meanings and effects in each context, in which the principles of each one jeopardizes the principles of the other. In the words of Mouffe, this places “tension with the liberal emphasis on respect for ‘human rights,’ as there is no guarantee that the decision made through democratic procedures will not challenge some of the existing rights” (Mouffe, 2010).

- The impossibility of resolving this tense relationship, in addition to being seen as stagnant and pessimistic, recognizes the dimension of decision and responsibility.

The political and ethical dimension (hegemony and responsibility) in the decision on partial and temporal establishment of some meaning of democracy is not visible in a logic that ignores the contingent nature of this articulation. In the perspectives that suggest that the meaning of democracy is fixed and is the result of a metaphysical or religious “human essence,” or in the enlightened version, that it stems from reason, economy or science, political action is seen as administrative instrumentality, as an operational means of putting a “true” supposed meaning of democracy into practice.

Instead, what I am describing here is the political nature of the very moment of deciding on the meaning that a community is prepared to affirm and support —what is at stake when deciding on a possible option— and what it is prepared to exclude from such a concept of democracy in a particular context (time and space). To recognize as political the decisive moment requires a willingness to realize how and why, and on this level, alludes to the dimension of responsibility.

The political and ethical dimension of the meaning of democracy in the educational sphere is a task taken on by some intellectual circles (a wide range of academics, activists, and specialists) and even by honest and well-meaning public officials. What I am interested in highlighting here is the parameters from which this political and ethical dimension of democracy has been discussed in the



educational field. As I presented in the first section of this text, it has generally been discussed from an administrative and instrumental logic, from a rationalist point of view and as a guarantee of well-being and salvation for the community that will thus be able to achieve final harmony. Mexican history offers many examples of this. For this reason, what I am supporting here is that attributing the foundation or essence of democracy to reason or science involves a concept in which the community and its agents do not assume a role (a conditioned role, certainly, but a role nonetheless) in negotiations on the meaning and the effects of the democracy signifier.

As Mouffe points out, rationalist perspectives prevent this way of understanding liberal democracy, as instead of recognizing its ineradicable tension, they attempt to solve and eliminate it, thus holding on to the illusion of the final “rational consensus.” Taking on the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy requires tools of intellection that are different than those of the rationalists, bringing to bear a non-essentialist perspective, and recognizing that there is no possible establishment of social meaning (i.e., objectivity) that is not borne of an original exclusion. What is excluded is, after all, also an object of negotiation.

Something analogous can be said of the prevailing intellectual tendencies in the field of education, which, with the best of intentions, recover from the Enlightenment and rationalism the set foundations of educational democracy, and then operationalize it so that students (of any age) may “learn it.”

If we think that God or Nature (or Science or Reason) have made the world such as it is, it is likely that we will consider our fate as something inevitable. But if we recognize that being of the world in which we

live is a result of the contingent discourses and appropriations that comprise it, we will assume another attitude toward “fate” and will have a greater chance of making decisions concerning it and being responsible for its results. The perception of the contingent nature of universal – or rather, universalized – values — allows us to visualize its precariousness and position ourselves before it (Laclau, 1996, pp. 212-213).

As expected, I do not agree with the possibility of the “new” or “true” concept of democracy and how to “apply” it to education, which is why I would prefer to conclude this essay with a reflection:

- If we have seen that there is not just one concept of democracy, but rather that democracy changes in each context and in history;
- If we have located some conceptual arguments that allow us to recognize the aporetic, paradoxical and overdetermined logics present in the links between democracy and liberalism, and democracy and education;
- If we are convinced that despite all of these conditions, liberal democracy is, in any case, a desirable option as a social regime and as an educational orientation;
- If we know that the meaning of democracy is not the result of an essential law, but rather of systems of inclusion and exclusion resulting from negotiations that involve social agents in specific contexts;

Is it possible that we are still waiting for something metahistorical, metaphysical, and knowledgeable of the absolute (reason, God,



the social contract, neoliberal economics, etc.) to establish the true and universal definition of democracy, therefore placing upon others what is our responsibility?

I believe that we are capable of putting our intellectual equipment, our ethical reflection and our political sensibility to work in order to build the possible meanings of democracy that we want and are prepared to defend in our microphysical, local, state, national, regional and international contexts, in an educational perspective. It is not enough to recognize

political and civic differences between cultures, continents and countries; problematizing and building contextualized perspectives is also required.

If in some way this problematizing and these reflections mobilize the thinking of colleagues, specialists and students interested in democracy in education and education for democracy, I will be satisfied even if their results differ from mine.

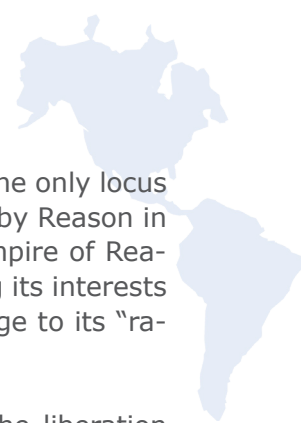
Endnotes

- 1 My reluctance in offering a prescription is due, as evident in this essay, to the fact that I support the contextual nature of meaning — ergo of any political, moral, epistemic or aesthetic value. In other words, the epistemic criticism of universalism revolves around and pervades my own political proposals in this essay.
- 2 By signifier I am alluding to a component of the symbol that is inseparable from the meaning but whose ties are contingent. It is the acoustic image, what Saussure would call the psychic imprint (1952). See Derrida's discussion of *différance* and iterability (1982, pp. 11 and 315).
- 3 I believe that we can find various notions of democracy, and when looking back at the history of Western thought, referencing the Greeks is a necessity. However, limiting our historical knowledge to the Greeks does not imply that another similar idea may not have existed previously or in other parts of the world. Neither does it mean that because they were "the first" to coin the term, they hold the truth of its meaning. What is suggested here is precisely that the meaning of democracy cannot be separated from its context of expression, and that there is no extra-contextual tribunal from which the "true meaning" of this signifier can be discerned.
- 4 In order to understand the meaning of democracy contextually, it is worth mentioning that in 2000 in Mexico, the political party that had been in power for almost 70 years lost the election, and an opposing conservative party, which was founded in 1939, won. Some analysts have referred to this as the "transition."
- 5 This refers to the use of funds from the PEMEX oil workers union for the PRI party presidential campaign in 2000.
- 6 In Mexico, the school system is composed of pre-school (three years), basic education (six years of elementary school and three years of middle school), high school (three years) and higher education (Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral degrees) in various formats: professional, general, in-person and distance education, public, private, etc.
- 7 The reform proposed by the SEP attempts, in the words of Gómez Morín, to put an end to encyclopedism, instead teaching competence and responding to the need to reform middle school, because adolescent scholastic performance and national and international test results were very



low. Morín claims that the reason for this is a curriculum that is too extensive. Currently, middle school offers many hours of class time (1,450 per year), while other countries offer from 850 to 900 hours focused on the command of language, math, science and technology.

- 8 The director of the Philosophical Research Institute at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (IIF-UNAM), Guillermo Hurtado, indicates that they will seek other channels for their voices to be heard: from legal actions to political and social ones.
- 9 The concept of discourse in this sense (Laclau, 1987) has analytical implications that shed light on the interpretation of various social processes (see: Laclau, Torfing, Buenfil (coord.) 1996).
- 10 Pascal (1623-1662) uses a paradox to explain the distance between reason and good actions as the irreducibility between "the logic of reason" and "the logic of the heart." Kierkegaard (1813-1855) also raises the paradox between the quest for certainty and faith as what allows such a quest. Russell (1872-1970) offers his paradox in the collections of 1901: some classes are members of themselves, for example the class of abstract objects is itself an abstract object. Other classes are not: the class of men is not itself a man. Let us consider the class of all classes who are not members of themselves. Is this class a member of itself? If it is, it isn't and if it isn't, then it is. In less abstract terms, the colloquial statement of the liar: "if someone tells you 'the truth is I'm a liar', he telling you that he is a liar or that he isn't."
- 11 Initially, Socratic aporia was exemplified by associating virtue with knowledge, reaching the conclusion that no one knowingly does harm, or no one knows the meaning of what they say when they use a term unless they can provide an explicit definition for it.
- 12 Overdetermination is a concept that Althusser recovers from psychoanalysis and incorporates for the first time into Marxism in order to problematize the idea of contradiction in Marx (Althusser, 1967). Laclau and Mouffe (1987) radicalize it, emphasizing the symbolic nature of all social relationships.
- 13 These dislocate a previous order, are a necessary although insufficient condition to shape a different order, and are unpredictable (Laclau 1993). In this way, although it is a strategy that depends on context, it can never be grasped as a whole (Derrida 1982).
- 14 Unlike what Habermas presents: an undistorted normativization.
- 15 Contextualism, an ontic form of relationalism that I hold, does not at all resemble the common sense idea of the "relativist abyss" that so overwhelms Habermas (1989) and others. If by relativism they mean that emancipation is exactly same as domination, nothing could be further from what I maintain. Contextualism implies that there is no tribunal outside or above history (context) that defines the essence of things. This lack of essence in no way leads to A meaning the same as B, but precisely the opposite: it means that A is either acceptable or not within one context, but in another context A can be exactly the opposite or simply something different than what it was in the first place.
- 16 For a brief account of other intellection tools in this perspective, see: Buenfil (coord.) (1996), and Buenfil and Granja (2003).
- 17 This is why non-essentialist perspectives, based on deconstruction, post-structuralism, and other post-foundational tendencies present in current debates are extremely useful.



- 18 Such a structure would necessarily lead to the presence of a center that would be the only locus of sovereignty. It is useless to imagine the possibility of a global system governed by Reason in which the relationships of power would have been neutralized. This so-called "Empire of Reason" could only be a screen hiding the empire of a dominant power that, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat every disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its "rational" leadership.
- 19 For example, according to Jullien's research (2008) the idea of "rights" favors the liberation of the subject from its vital context and devalues its integration into a multitude of spheres of ownership. It is a defensive approach that renounces the religious dimension and presents the individual as absolute.
- 20 Aristotle: pure forms and corrupt forms of government in Bobbio and Mateucci (1981, p. 494 and ss.)

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