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Some historic considerations on democracy

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Democracy was born in the city-states of classical Greece, in the fifth century BC. It reached its most complete form in the city of Athens, in the time of Pericles. The characteristics of Greek democracy are those that come closest to the ideal of direct democracy, in which the group of citizens participates directly and continuously in making decisions about the affairs of the community. However, from an institutional perspective, it is a very simple and primitive construction.

In Athens the citizens met several times a year, it is estimated that at least 40, on the hill of Pnyx to discuss the affairs of the community. The agenda of discussions was established by the "Committee of 50", constituted by members of a "Committee of the 500", representatives, in turn, of the hundred demes that made up the city. The period of public office was very short (less than two months in the "Committee of 50", one year in the "Committee of 500") and the designation was made by lottery methods in the first case and rotation in a second. The discussion and deliberation among citizens formed the basis of this system of democratic participation. Decisions were made, normally, by way of consensus, and at the time of the apogee of the system in Athens a quorum of 6,000 participants was required for the decisions of the assembly to be valid. All this gave rise to a kind of "democracy without a State".

Direct democracy, as practiced in Athens, requires very special conditions of development, which have not occurred again in history. The citizen was a total figure, whose identity did not admit distinction between the public and private spheres: political life appeared as a natural extension of being itself. The interests of citizens were harmonious, a phenomenon typical of a homogeneous society that, moreover, had a small size, which favored direct relations between all. In classical Greece the existence of a wide stratum of slaves was a fundamental condition for the functioning of direct democracy. Thus, citizens were able to meet frequently to decide directly on laws and policy measures.

As Giovanni Sartori points out, after the decline of Greek democracy, the word democracy practically disappeared for a period of 2,000 years. They spoke rather of public res. In Rome, for example, the idea of mixed government was introduced, which represented diverse interests or groups that constituted the community. The system quickly adopted oligarchical features (government of a few), in which the formal commitment of popular participation resulted in a very limited capacity for control.

The expansion and consolidation of Christianity in the Western world displaced political reflection towards the universe of theology: the issue of political participation ceased to be a concern for more than a millennium. In the Middle Ages it reappeared in a different form that, at the time, had little to do with democracy. In several European countries, monarchs, urged by economic needs, called assemblies to deal with matters of State, fundamentally associated with the lifting of taxes and

warmongering companies. The members of these assemblies very loosely represented the estates that made up the kingdom: the nobility, the clergy and the bourgeoisie.

From there arose the idea of responsibility of the monarch before some of his subjects; This was the beginning of what is now known as Parliament. In England, in the fourteenth century, Parliament forced the king to sacrifice ministers to grant subsidies and then to present account statements; in France, Spain and Scandinavia similar phenomena happened. However, with the consolidation of the absolutist monarchies, the parliaments stopped being convened from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; England was the exception. Even so, the idea of political representation (effective or not) was beginning to penetrate Western political thought. Its origin was far from democratic, but it provided a solution to the problem of participation in complex political communities of large size.

At the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance great transformations began to take shape, which little by little would return to make political participation an important topic of reflection and a popular demand that centuries later would become more universal. In the social, economic and political spheres there were changes that would have repercussions in the world of values.

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