



Democracy and Knowledge*

*Democracia y Conocimiento**

*BOOK REVIEW

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Resumen: Uno de los momentos más importantes en la educación de la ciudadanía es la alfabetización en asuntos políticos. Respecto a esa idea es que presentamos esta reseña crítica sobre el libro "Democracia y Conocimiento". Los datos generales del libro son presentados en la primera sección de esta revisión. Luego, el autor continúa comentando y evaluando las contribuciones por capítulos, así como sus aportes científicos. Finalmente, se emiten las conclusiones que destacan la variedad del texto y su importancia para los esfuerzos futuros en el campo de la filosofía y las ciencias política, y en un sentido más amplio en la educación de la ciudadanía toda.

Palabras clave: democracia; conocimiento; epistemología; filosofía política.

Abstract: One of the most critical moments in the education of citizenship is literacy in political matters. Regarding that idea is that we present this critical review of the book "Democracy and knowledge." The author presents in the first section the general information of the book. Then, he continues commenting and evaluating the contributions by chapters, as well as their scientific implications. Finally, in the conclusions, it is highlighted the variety of the text and its importance for future efforts in the field of philosophy and political science.

Keywords: democracy; knowledge; epistemology; political philosophy.



INTRODUCTION

It is almost an indisputable truth that the success of a symphony is not in the absolute genius of its isolated instruments, but in the opus that combines diverse voices in a single purpose.

The book that I have in my hands, *Democracy and Knowledge* (*Democracia y Conocimiento* in the original), is proof of the above. Moreover, I would dare to say that I have it in my hands, even if it is not in them now, because it is the sort of reading that accompanies us, even after having finished. This happens because of three features that I would like to highlight in this review: its didacticism, its importance, and finally, its theoretical rigor.

We must start by saying that the work in question has been the result of the project "Epistemological innovation: the case of biomedical sciences," funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain. It is part of the consolidated research group, funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya, "Group of Humanistic Studies of Science and Technology." Additionally, it has also been included in the research projects "Applied Epistemology" and "Democracy and knowledge," funded by the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes.

I want to start by saying, after a careful and detailed reading, that Marc Jiménez Rolland has carefully edited the book. Consequently, a rigorous correction is evidenced, in the appropriate and heterogeneous selection of themes and authors and, finally, a sober design that adjusts to the simplicity of the proposed objective and allows the careful and thoughtful reading of such a complex subject.

From the organization by chapters, the book consists of twelve collaborations between essays and scientific articles. To these are added a prologue written by Luis Xavier López Farjeat, the epilogue written by Emilio Lledó and an introduction entitled, *The legitimacy of democracy*¹, of the coordinators, Anna Estany and Mario Gensollen.

As its title indicates, throughout its almost 300 pages, the fundamental reason for this research has been the inscription of democracy in the vast and complex matrix of knowledge. Already from the prologue, López Farjeat alerts us about the necessary commitment of philosophy in a world that increasingly needs its practical intervention. Furthermore, in the opinion of the author, this work is located as an indisputable example "of how it is possible to think and philosophically defend the possible political legitimacy of democracy" (p.11).

For its part, the introduction begins with an invitation to think of democracy beyond the famous definition of Abraham Lincoln, the government "of the people, by the people and for the people." The problem, we think together with the authors, is that this definition brings back another series of questions that have to do with its definition, justification, values, forms of governments, or merely non-expressed paradoxes in its most apparent and public form.

In parallel, and rightly, Estany and Gensollen, define the conceptual blocks necessary for the future understanding of the forthcoming chapters. Thus, in the first section of the introduction, *Senses of Democracy*, for example, we are offered different approaches to the concept studied. This is one of the most motivating moments of the book. Though of its simplicity, it shows the path that the future reading will take, in other words, it gives a short but necessary account of the most important ideas that the reader will find along with this democratic puzzle.

That section is followed by *The Values of Democracy*, where the authors discuss the instrumental and intrinsic values of that concept. *The Reasons of Democracy* shows to us that to some extent there is a lack of clarity in the reasons we have to choose it as the most optimal form of government, therefore, "understanding the limits, advantages, and problems generated by the democratic method is an unavoidable matter of utmost importance" (p.20). Then, there is *Dissemination and democratization of Knowledge*, and finally *Perspectives in the Relationship Democracy and Knowledge*, where it is detailed what the book is about and how it contributes to political knowledge.

¹ The translation from Spanish of titles and quotes has been made by the Author.



Although not transparent, the reader may find that we can group the articles into two sections, at least virtually. In the first place, chapters dedicated to the debate on democracy itself, or essential aspects for its definition. And in the second, a group of collaborations on more specific aspects from the cognitive and epistemological point of view.

FROM THE CONSTITUTION OF THE *DEMOS* TO THE CHINESE INSTANCE

Paul Luque opens the first group of articles with a question that, in the author's opinion, has been overlooked for a long time: "How should the *demoi* be configured?" (p.43). Despite this omission, the problem of the constitution of the *demos* (PCD) has gained recently particular importance among democracy theorists. There are here two large groups of experts.

On the one hand, those who think about the convenience of global and open *demos*. On the other, those like Sarah Song (2012), who argue the instrumental impossibility of that idea, and that, consequently, there should be a coincidence between the *demos* and the current states. From this crossroads it is that the author, first, reconstructs the debate above; and second, he tries to respond to the author's arguments, offering reasons to show that her arguments are not strong enough to understand the problem.

Taking as a reference to the definition of democracy advanced by Christiano (2015), Alejandro Mosquera, in *Democracy and negative freedom*, begins his article analyzing the weight of freedom within the justification of democracy. This concept, following Bobbio, finds its legitimacy in the freedom understood as autonomy, since this allows to eliminate the differences between rulers and governed. However, the problem, according to our author, begins with the increase of the territory and the number of inhabitants associated with other problems that make direct democracy an impracticable method.

Given the complexity of contemporary social and political life, "the democracy that is currently possible is representative democracy (p. 68)," however, thinks Mosquera, it implies a contradiction with the principle of freedom as autonomy, understood as a critical principle in democratic environments. In this way, we have another problem: how to justify representative democracy from the

concept of freedom? Isn't there a contradiction? The response of Mosquera brings us back Rousseau and his idea that the individual reaches his true freedom when he subordinates his particular interests to the interests of the general will.

Nevertheless, in this new moment, there is a risk that the concepts of the general will and freedom in Rousseau may drag us towards a paternalistic and monistic democratic conception. Then, Mosquera will face this new obstacle putting on the table Berlin's argument about negative freedom. The author culminates his collaboration with the example of the debate about the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico.

Along with freedom and equality, the other vital value to justify democracy is fraternity. In this regard, the reader will find the article by Àngel Puyol, *Fraternity, and democracy in contemporary liberalism (with special reference to the work of Ronald Dworkin and Véronique Munoz-Dardé)*. Here the author examines the crucial role of fraternity in the political legitimization of democracy. He will perform this task taking the ideas of Ronald Dworkin, which, in his opinion, are "generally little discussed or commented" (p. 84). The fundamental idea is that democracy is a political system superior to others because it is the one that best realizes the political ideal of fraternity.

By political fraternity, we must understand the political ideal in which citizens are related to each other in a way that they see each other as equal, in rights and duties, including the right and duty of mutual help if necessary. Political systems that are not based on equal rights and individual freedoms (those that are not democratic) cannot realize the political ideal of the fraternity thus understood. The politically fraternal link is essential for democracy to obtain actual political legitimacy. "Not all democracies are fraternal, but the fraternity is only possible in a democracy, and only fraternal democracy can achieve true legitimacy" (p. 83).

Dworkin's work allows us to distinguish between *bare community* and *true community*. The fraternity corresponds to the true community where we can find a conception of group responsibilities. These responsibilities, to be considered as "genuine fraternal obligation," must meet several conditions. On the other hand, the methodological approach to Munoz-Dardé shows the three alternatives of



fraternal politics according to their legitimacy: *fraternal anarchism*, *fraternal communitarianism*, and *fraternal contractualism*.

In the next collaboration, Claudia Galindo will begin by making a diagnosis of life in the contemporary world, the lack of meaning and various crises that not only affect the dimension of the individual but also the social sphere. From a more essayistic perspective, but without demeriting the discursive force of her arguments and the imperative need to create some awareness in the readers, this article seeks to detail some partial results that she had already reflected in her previous work.

The diagnosis of our present must go through a necessary assessment of the state-civil society relation as a whole. Given the new problems of meaning, the new media wars, the turn to the radical right in Europe and other parts of the world, among many other problems, it is necessary to reconceptualize the homogeneous character with which we understood politics in the past.

In this way,

Traditional conceptualizations, in many cases, are insufficient in the face of unprecedented realities. The presence of new actors and projects makes necessary and unavoidable a new design of the logic of power, which far exceeds the dimension of cohesive, unitary, and homogeneous identity (p. 101).

Taking this as a reference, Galindo intends to explore what she thinks is vital in the task of democratic restoration, the notion of an ideal citizen and “the return it represents to a concept often forgotten in politics: the fraternity” (p. 103). Using Hannah Arendt, the author rethinks modern democracies, contrasting the views of the Arendtian political ontology with what she calls a “revitalization of the public sphere and citizenship” in the case of American politics.

The author carefully examines the North American case and offers us a much more optimistic idea of the debate that is currently taking place within that society. “Fortunately, she says, what seems to happen in the democracy of the north country is a healthy version of a mature, organized civil society, which had long retreated to individual life and the predominance of consumerism” (p. 110). Beyond optimism, we must follow this hypothesis carefully. It is well known that not only in politics but in all life, extremes touch each other.

As a counter-argument, it could be justified that, in the first place, it is too early to be able to classify as positive the heated debate that takes place within American society; and secondly, one would have to enter into a more specific analysis of the simplifying, and sometimes even superficial ways that such debates take. The latter is especially important because this sort of simplicity or lack of complex thinking often opposes the fraternity ideal and the well-being of the public sphere.

In any case, the political revitalization project to which we have referred still has many challenges ahead, and its guide, although problematic, could be made concrete by retaking the concept of fraternity. This “gives us the possibility to glimpse mechanisms of political innovation beyond a probable electoral simplification of democracy” (p. 115).

Something familiar in several of the texts is the idea that, although there is a coincidence in the literature that democracy is the best form of government, “it is full of imperfections derived from the same definition” (119). In this way, given the lack of trust and the problems associated with the lack of representation, Victoria Camps in *For an enlightened democracy* proposes the examination of the relationship between knowledge, on the one hand, and participation of the *demos*, on the other.

Given the abrupt incidence of populisms in contemporary political life, the cancellation of intelligent *demos* by partisan interests, the increasing demagogic proposals, it should be possible, in the author's opinion, to establish a government of all citizens who will find: “forms of participation that will give governments the essential intelligence to discuss and obtain the best decisions” (p.122).

From here, it is not strange to consider that contemporary democracies degenerate not only because of external conflicts. Those can also die from an internal process of degradation of the institutions and mechanisms that enable it. Mario Gensollen and Víctor Hugo Salazar in *Democracy and sovereignty* devote their article to this contradiction.

The “paradox of democracy” is nothing more than the real possibility that any legitimate and correctly constituted democracy can, through the force of custom, lack of control and surveillance mechanism, corruption, or other means, deny itself and elect an undemocratic government. This, more than a hypothesis, is a reality that we must recognize is



becoming more and more common. The formulation of the problem has been attributed to Karl Popper² (2012).

In this sense, the authors' proposal is aimed at promoting any means and mechanisms that allow us to defend the democratic commitment. As a result, some mechanisms to deal with the aforementioned paradox are listed and defended, following the suggestions of Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018). However, before that, we need to know the elements that can alert us when we are in the presence of a potential authoritarian scenario. According to the authors, the "determining" role in fighting the "democratic weakness" expressed in the Popperian paradox, is played by the political opposition. Parties can and should eradicate the extremism at the base of their ranks. They can avoid all alliances with anti-democratic parties and candidates, and systematically isolate, rather than legitimize, the extremist forces.

Although formally, it can be a guide to be considered, it is believed that Ziblatt and Levitsky's proposal does not fully satisfy the problem posed. This idea only manifests a new paradox; if political parties should play the "determining" role, then, who guarantees that the opposition will appropriately take the "responsibility" of "cornering" the possible undemocratic government? It does not seem very wise to grant that "determining" role only to the opposition side, when it has been possible to see how the opposition is also part of the political game of a specific society and, therefore, can also, through their actions, foster the paradox of democracy.

After these conclusions and the partial result of the diagnoses applied by other authors, it seems that the text throws us more towards the pessimistic hypothesis. That is, although democracy has proven effective, not always it has offered the epistemological reasons to justify its choice. In this sense, the field that deals with how epistemic goods "manifest within democracies (a broad and imprecise set of forms of political organization)" is often referred to as "democratic epistemology" (p. 155). This is the perspective that argues

that, in questions of political philosophy, the correct alternative is a democracy.

In *Knowledge and justification in democratic epistemology*, Marc Jiménez Rolland presents his demonstrations in favor of epistemic democracy. His article focuses, on the relevance or not of epistemological democracy as a new field that offers certain contradictions, but that could help us in understanding the democratic process.

This is done using two theorems; on the one hand, the *Condorcet's Jury Theorem* and on the other one, the *Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem*, which, apart from its controversial conclusions, states that:

...when selecting a problem-solving team from a diverse population of intelligent agents, a team of randomly selected agents outperforms a team comprised of the best-performing agents. This result relies on the intuition that, as the initial pool of problem solvers becomes large, the best-performing agents necessarily become similar in the space of problem solvers. Their relatively greater ability is more than offset by their lack of problem-solving diversity." (Hong & Page, 2004, p.1)

Thus, Jiménez Rolland, based on the findings above mentioned, concludes that democratic epistemology can play a role in legitimizing certain forms of collective organization that we may call democratic. However, he finishes defining the foremost critics on these models and highlights more the possibilities than the actual progress of the field.

In her article, *Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey in the face of deliberative democracy and the role of scientific knowledge*, Ana Cuevas brings us back to the classics. This is done to respond to the arguments in favor of deliberative democracy. Although the thinkers mentioned above tried to analyze and solve some of the problems surrounding the concept of deliberative democracy, the analysis has not been exhausted. One of the original points of this contribution lies in the inversion of the historical reading: going first to Habermas and then to Dewey.

² "In a footnote to Chapter 7 of 'The Open Society and Its Enemies' Karl Popper describes what he calls the 'Paradox of Democracy': the possibility that a majority decides for a tyrant to rule. This is the lesser known paradox of the three to which

he pays attention, the other two being the 'paradox of freedom' – total freedom leads to suppression of the weak by the strong – and the 'paradox of tolerance' – unlimited tolerance leads to the disappearance of tolerance" (Rijpkema, B., 2012).



Despite the similarities in their conceptions of what democracy should be, there are also profound differences. Although both authors share the emphasis on deliberation and dialogue, the main discrepancy between them is epistemic, and it has to do with the conception that both defend about “truth, scientific knowledge and the search for consensus” (pp. 183-184).

Even though the article leaves us with some expectation for more, perhaps motivated by the eloquence and extent of the questions posed in the introduction, it gives us at least one orientation that reinforces, yes, what has already been said by other authors. Here, the radical change has been the confluence of democracy with Habermas and Dewey.

Another aspect that introduces this book has to do with the democratization of knowledge. One of the issues that set the daily pace in our societies is the importance and relevance of the ICT. Anna Estany addresses issues related to that topic in *Challenges for the democratization of knowledge: the role of cognitive design*. The objective of her collaboration, in particular, is to analyze the main challenges that these transformations entail.

The article explores the consequences of technological development and democratic access to new technologies. This must be achieved in several ways. There are institutional structures that facilitate access to knowledge. Also, there is the role that design plays in the construction of technology and social organization. And finally, she mentions there are cognitive models. The gaps that prevent us from talking about more widespread and democratic access to technological facilities is related to interdisciplinary and collaborative solutions at all levels. The final recommendation calls us to continue thinking about this problem, due to its multiple edges and possible solutions,

... The challenge is that access to this technological and changing environment is as universal as possible, an objective that affects from macro institutions and social structures to the designs of technological products and educational, health organizations, business, etcetera. Cognitive models that have emerged in recent decades - especially those of third-generation cognitive science, which address cognition as located, embodied, extended and distributed - constitute a theoretical framework to make feasible and save many pitfalls so that knowledge reaches all citizens of the world, and thus implement the values of the Enlightenment: freedom, equality and fraternity” (pp. 222-223).

Understanding the mechanisms of democratic negotiation from cognitive enactivist models of David Casacuberta, deals, as the name implies, with enactivism and the possibility of understanding democracy from this theoretical reference.

Enactivism is a group of theoretical models from which one tries to understand cognition. This perspective highlights that thinking is not only an exercise that involves the processing of formal symbols but, the relational character of our knowledge towards the reality that surrounds us and our body. This is also linked to the term third generation of cognitive sciences, presenting itself as an alternative to both the symbolic and connectionist paradigm.

The originality of Casacuberta's contribution is that this link between mind and reality occurs from “the proposal of the metaphors of everyday life, developed by cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson, and that Lakoff has successfully applied to understand the negotiation and political processes between Republicans and Democrats in the United States” (p. 227).

We think it is vital to point out areas as new as this one, because in turn, it indicates how our point of view about a correct political action is based, according to the research commented by Casacuberta, on a series of experiences that are organized “as a moral principle.” Continuing with this idea, Lakoff argues that political life is organized partially around family metaphors that allude to the father, or society as a large family. He also emphasizes that from the enactivist model, we can see that knowledge does not work linearly, but more like a network. Given the above, this contribution allows us to look more closely at a second phenomenon. As a result of the dynamics of defending ethical positions from a politics based on the experience and the metaphor, we can also say that diverse narratives organize the political negotiation, and we must think in that as well.

In his own words, “The party or political position that is capable of winning the battle of the story is the one that will win a political negotiation or elections, regardless of how coherent or functional their specific political proposals are” (p. 241).

During the 1961 trial in Jerusalem to the SS war criminal Adolf Eichmann, many were surprised by his statements about his Kantian ethical principles during the responses to Judge Yitzhak Raveh. Taking this fact as a reference, Jordi



Vallverdú begins his *Kantians Nazi? The 'homo politicus' from the limited rationality or The banality of Ethics*, one of the two case studies that close the volume. His proposal focuses on the congruence or not between apparent moral contradictions; which, in the author's opinion, will serve to study the coexistence of moral systems in complex environments, both cognitive and social. This, in turn, would help to understand and defend a critical vision of democratic deontological ethics, which have led to repressive systems referring to the "defense of supreme values" (p. 245).

In the last collaboration of the book, *Can we justify liberal democracy as a better alternative to Chinese meritocratic epistocracy?* The author, Armando Cíntora G., wonders if we can know if liberal democracy is the best contemporary political system or not. The primary motivation of this question is the desire to find a minimalist characterization of democracy so that it is not confused or unnecessarily associated with other positions. Thus, the inevitable plurality of contemporary political systems, as well as the variety of definitions and problems we have listed above and of which we witness daily, legitimately prompts us to ask ourselves, which of all democratic alternatives is the best.

In this article, in addition to delving into the definition of what is a liberal democracy, the author defines what the *illiberal* and *protected democracies* are. In the case of the first concept, he emphasizes on the cases of Poland, Turkey, Hungary, and Israel. Moreover, among the second group, China's political system is the most severe example. After focusing on the specific variable of human rights, and its discussion in the Chinese context, we come to the partial conclusion that, in this case, the human is placed in a second-place behind the right to development of the whole, which may seem contradictory according to western standards.

However, it is also concluded that we cannot justify as rationally superior the hierarchy of values of liberal democracies (in particular their priorities for human rights). According to the author, "the values priorities of the People's Republic of China and its political system are a rational alternative, and one that could even lead, as the prosperity of its people increases, to a regime closer to the ideal of liberal democracies, assuming that China wants to adopt this ideal instead of its current ideal (political meritocracy)" (p. 277).

CONCLUSION

In general, as the reader has appreciated, the book shows an undeniable variety and heterogeneity not only in methodological approaches but also in the thematic intentions of their authors.

A possible criticism is that the text is inevitably halfway between the reading inscribed in the academic and non-academic fields. At times the tone is excessively academic for an audience with little or no training in political philosophy, social sciences or related fields. At other times, the tone is too introductory if specific topics that inevitably require specialization are taken as a reference. However, the latter, more than a determinant factor in the general appreciation of this work, it is just an aspect that does not overcome the many virtues this book have in terms of political education.

The book goes to the limit of the democratic, moral, and political subjects. Going to the limit, it forces us to inevitably think about the unthinkable, and therefore, forces us to reconsider the position of critical thinking in current debates about democracy.

As already described, commented, and analyzed above, one of the tremendous assets of this reading is the variety of questions the book attempts to answer. Among others: Can a person be fascist and Kantian at the same time? Is democracy a reliable and necessary decision-making method under current conditions? Where does it extract its argumentation strength, from intrinsic values that self-justify or from external values that we must think critically, is there another alternative? What influence can new technologies have on contemporary political thinking? What knowledge has the person to deliberate democratically? How does he or she acquire that knowledge?

If the fundamental reasons for a radical change in our perception of democracy are not attained, at least we will have sufficient for acting, as Lledó states at his epilogue: "The philosopher had explained it centuries ago: no more reflections on the meaning of the justice, the good, the right ... teach me, once and for all, to achieve them."



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