



**La democracia amenazada.
¿Por qué surgen los populismos?**

(Democracy Threatened. Why Do Populisms Exist?)

Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla

UNAM, Center for Research on North America
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Undoubtedly, reflecting on democracy and populism has become fundamental for political philosophy and science in these first years of the third millennium. Neither democracy nor populism are one-dimensional concepts; both depend on multiple theoretical, political, ideological, cultural, and even religious issues. One of this book's main virtues is that it recognizes this diversity of approaches and practices from the start and explores the development of democracies—democracies, plural—and the emergence of populisms. In fact, the author maintains that it is also not a matter of necessarily counterposed concepts or realities, but of multiple forms with different intensities; hybrid political systems exist that mix char-

acteristics of both categories, naturally, in different proportions and with very different consequences.

For all of these reasons, the author presents a broad, comprehensive picture of the main and most influential theories about democracies that the Western world's foremost political theoreticians have produced, with emphasis on U.S. political thinking. Starting with the classics, Locke and Rousseau, she reviews and analyzes those conceptions of democracy centered, for example, on the strength of democratic institutions, on the constitutional design of republics, and on respect for the rule of law. At the same time, she looks at the positions that emphasize social justice and equal economic opportunities, the construction and consolidation of a welfare state, or positions that focus on fostering responsible, free, and informed participation of the citizenry and the strengthening of civil society, or that concentrate on the importance of the inclusion of minorities, the respect for those who are different in all the meanings of the word, and the culture of non-discrimination. According to the author, all these conceptions must share basic convictions, which, taken together, result in a minimum definition of democracy that shares certain common characteristics, such as the unavoidable commitment to representative democracy; checks and balances; the guarantee of individual freedoms and human rights, such as the freedom of information and opinion, the right to free enterprise, and religious freedom; together with the fundamental rights to life, education, health, and the pursuit of happiness, among many others. These are the fundamental characteristics that no democracy can do without. It also cannot do without a minimum degree of coherence and electoral transparency. It is inconceivable without unrestricted respect for the vote of the citizenry, as well as the acceptance of the results, which implies the ever-present possibility of alternating in office. Along these lines, the book underlines how important it is for a democracy to develop political culture and civic education. The more society is involved in collective matters and government policies, the greater the possibility that the decisions involving the common good will be the product of dialogue and consensus and not of manipulation and imposition.

Perhaps for all these reasons, the author maintains that the most fully developed theoretical position about the democratic system is the deliberative democracy current, which she ascribes to. This current has been led above all by English-speaking political philosophers like David Held, Jon Elster, Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann, and Seyla Benhabib, all followers one way or another of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. For this group of thinkers, the best possibility democracy has for consolidating is deliberation, which is nothing less than the practice of the highest form of rational dialogue. This is the case, according to the author, because it builds consensus and, above all, because it generates agreements based on argumentation and persuasion, and, therefore, on the recognition that there is always truth in the position of the "others," which means that negotiating also implies conceding.

In all these senses, Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla's book is also characterized by its outstanding conceptual wealth, its intention to delve deeply into something that many have tried to explain, but few have been able to with sufficient theoretical rigor: What happens in many of today's democracies in which contemporary populist movements have emerged and triumphed, several of which have done so via elections? Why do societies lean toward leaders and movements that promise a utopia, but end by undermining the pillars of the freedoms and institutions of liberal democracy? What conceptions of democracy and justice underlie regimes classified as populist, which have managed to be so attractive for broad segments of the population? Why, according to innumerable surveys and public opinion studies, can we see growing disillusionment in democracy as conceived by liberal Western theories? This book aims to respond to these questions as well as others: Is democracy under threat today? Is populism an undeniable step backward for democracy? Why do forms of populism come into being? Are there moments in history in which democracy is put on a trial? What has the role of the new technologies and social media been in strengthening or weakening democracies?

The author expands on some of the answers to these questions. For example, she comments that, while it is the case that globalization has created higher levels of well-being in general and has reduced world poverty,

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paradoxically, it has also created extreme concentration of wealth and huge socioeconomic inequality between countries and in societies. This has given rise to social polarization, which has increased because of the emergence and consolidation of digital social media; despite their promise of fostering unity and solidarity, they have really brought with them negative consequences. Among these are the formation of tribes or cocoons, large or small segments of users who are self-referential and have closed visions of reality, who, therefore, generate hate speech about all those that do not share their convictions or ways of life, about the "others," those who are "different." This creates fertile ground for the rise of the recent populist movements, both on the right and on the left, which at the same time may or may not become threats to democracy.

The book proposes an analysis of certain historic events to better understand the weight of the social and economic context in putting forward democratic ideals. For that reason, it compares the results for the development of democracy of the French Revolution and the U.S. War of Independence. It does this with the idea of showing how social conditions and political practices necessarily influence the way regimes are put together and how the types of democracy develop. It would be paradoxical, in this sense, as the author argues, to try to export or impose democracy, as some of the most conservative sectors of U.S. society have attempted to do. The author also extends this methodology of historical analysis to the reflection about the current moment, as she does when she looks at the two most controversial elections in recent U.S. history: those of 2000 and 2016. The former showed a nation that trusted in its institutions and, therefore, a place where conflicts are resolved through legal-institutional means and all the actors accept the outcome. However, the 2016 elections also alerted to the fact that

these same institutions can enthrone positions and movements that, paradoxically, threaten them.

Another of this book's merits is that it includes an epilogue in which the author explains why, despite their contradictions and imperfections, the battle to defend democratic institutions cannot wait. This defense must not be acritical, but it must be based precisely on the deliberation of the possibility of preserving what must remain and jettisoning—or at least pondering—everything that erodes the practices of the democratic state from within. For example, she maintains that the concept of majorities should be constantly reinterpreted and reconstructed with a historical perspective. Today, this implies finding ways of balancing market and state, reducing inequalities, and guaranteeing both individual and collective freedoms and

rights. Defending democracy and confronting populisms presupposes letting go of prejudices and stigmas, recovering the good ideas they might have, but at the same time combatting the concentration of power in charismatic leaders, who, most of the time, think that the ends always justify the means, regardless of the risks that this implies for individual freedoms and democratic societies.

This highly recommendable work offers many other contributions to the debates about democracy and populism, but space limitations make it impossible to enumerate them here. ■■

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