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Democracy is like a good marriage

Josep M. Colomer and Ashley L. Beale see in the bankruptcy of the middle class a new social geography where inequality has originated an emptying of the center and a destabilization of our political systems.

Although a bit dated, the simile is powerful. Thus begins *Democracy and Globalization: Anger, Fear, and Hope*, the exhaustive essay that the political scientist and economist Josep M. Colomer and the expert in public policy Ashley L. Beale have written together. Democracy would be a marriage because everybody says they want it — there is even empirical evidence that it is the preference in totalitarian countries— although many who have it end up ruining it. Reading the book, I inevitably found myself thinking of the beginning of Iris Marion Young in *Inclusion and Democracy*: “Democracy is hard to love”, she said in the year 2000. And 20 years are enough time for the famous owl of Minerva to turn her attention to the democracies as they seem to closing down to help us gain understanding.

The fragility of democracy is, no doubt, the topic of our time and perhaps is true that much as in marriage, democracy and crisis seem to be a stable couple. We value democracy now as it seems to be shutting down, while in the beginning of our century our relationship with it was one of frustrated expectations. That’s why Colomer and Beale are right: we like it even if we don’t appreciate it, but it can wither in our hands if we don’t pay it enough attention.

The first part of the book titled ‘The Great Disruption: Anger and Fear’ concerns itself with this topic. In it, the authors address the phenomena that provoked its erosion and why we live in a moment of “democratic recession” (using the famous expression of Larry Diamond). It is not only because there is a practical freeze in the number of new democracies and some of them regress to authoritarian systems, but also because of the degree of deterioration of democracy in western countries where its stability and quality had been taken for granted.

In addition to growing anger among the governed, provoked by the fear and frustration generated by some of their leaders, the authors point to the bankruptcy of the middle classes as the main cause of this democratic decrease. This is what Branc

Milanovic indicated back in 2016 in his magisterial book *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, and the very same idea formulated by Aristotle himself when he talked about the importance of a wide middle tier between the few rich and the many poor to maintain a regime of freedom: a mixed government. The breach of the middle class defines a new social geography where inequality has produced an emptying of the center and the instability of our political systems. As in the verses of W. B. Yeats: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."

What is happening is the bankruptcy of that 1945 social contract reconciling capitalism with social peace and democracy. Nowadays, we know that the disarticulation of the middle class has a direct impact on the stability of democracies and its institutions.

Because democracy is always a question of degree. We perceive its deterioration, but it is difficult to distinguish when it crosses a red line: there are countries with limited freedoms and restrictive elections that would not be classified as dictatorships. That's why the book bets in the second part 'The global future: Hope' for gradual reforms to adapt it to globalization.

The formula is specified in some sort of multilevel unions like the European club: "Decisions about public policies should be made and public goods should be provided by multiple governments in a spectrum of territorial scales," affirm the authors. It thus offers not only a perspective that primes efficiency through the reassignment of powers from the local to the global, but a truly realistic point of view: "National sovereignty does not exist anymore," we read, and in a multilevel governance like the European Union "nobody is sovereign." Because these changes are taking place right now, and the key is to be able to orient them towards an adequate direction, avoiding division and polarization.

The book deserves to be read for its rigor, because it is propositive and because it not only reminds us --as other authors have done - that emotions are important in politics but also that the distribution of resources is essential in explaining social and political conflict. With Machiavelli we learned that politics is conflict of interests, but it was Marx who taught us that such a conflict is also informed by economic interests. We forgot it with neoliberalism, with the end of history, and that fiction that democracies would extend unimpeded after the fall of the Wall.

Today, we see that this has not been the case and that democracies are in a clear decline. And in this sense it is interesting that the authors mention that democracies can only be saved if they are effective. Because, despite seeming to be a convincing

argument, there is something that does not fit in with the hypothesis, above all because the legitimacy of democracies resides in their normative dimension.

The reality is that China has forcefully provoked a rupture of our democratic imaginary: If its virtues do not depend on a regime of freedoms deserving of the name, why we would prefer it above other regimes that do not share those virtues but that are efficient? Even if, paradoxically, the book is an explicit treatise defending democracy and its care, something in such an explanation smells of defeat.

Josep M. Colomer y Ashley L. Beale

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