

Discipline and Civilization

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATUM*, March 29, 2015)

In her essay on the crisis in education published in 1954, Hannah Arendt criticizes the philosophy that positions the child at the center of the educative system. Her argument is that a permissive educative system engenders irreparable harm because it leads to the development of a churlish, demanding and disrespectful childhood in which the parents cede their function as educators to become their children's friends which, she affirms, has produced generations of adults who never learned to be that. The essay caused me to reflect on the radicalization of Mexican youth and what that bodes for the development of a political system that inevitably should be simultaneously participative and functional.

The theme is not a novel one. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the mid-XIX century that one of the deficiencies of democracy lies in that it erodes the structures of authority until the underpinnings that make it work disappear, leading to the "tyranny of the majority". More than concern with the reign of the majority, my reflection is on the way Mexico's immature democracy has evolved, opening spaces for protest and radicalization, without there being effective participatory mechanisms.

In mature democracies, the rub is that politics has been fragmented or Balkanized by special interest groups, ever more narrow in their intent, that seek the spotlight. Environmentalists don't care about growth, women privilege equality, the poor want more and more subsidies, no one wants to compete with imports, immigrants strike fear in the hearts of native populations. Narrow interests lead to sectarian actions. There's nothing better than observing the nature of the matters that consume European parliaments or U.S. legislative proceedings to conclude that the most stolid and close-minded views repeatedly have the upper hand.

In contrast with those nations, where the problem is "too much" participation, or what the shape this has taken, in Mexico the issue is to a greater extent democratic immaturity or an unconsolidated polity than excess. In developed countries participation materializes through mechanisms that are perfectly established and recognized as legitimate. The result of the process can be unsatisfactory for the participants (illustrated by the recent vote on migratory matters in Switzerland or the incapacity of the U.S. to legislate budgetary matters), but the mechanisms or responsible institutions themselves are not in dispute. In Mexico's case, a very substantial part of the population disavows the mechanisms and does not confer legitimacy on the political process. The problem in Mexico is one of essence.

Arendt considers that there is a deep contradiction at the heart of consolidated democracies, which is summed up as that authority or tradition cannot be spurned but, at the same time, we live in a society - and I would add, half a century later, in an era- in which tradition as well as authority are eroding at an unstoppable pace.

Mature democracies confront problems of process: how to make decisions in times of political fragmentation. We Mexicans face the challenge of how to organize ourselves to be able to construct that developed and consolidated society. It would be easy to say that I'd love to have the problems of the Swiss or the Swedes, where their decisions are, in relative terms, marginal in character. Mexico's democratic problems start with the fact that at least one third of the population denies legitimacy to the government and to the array of institutions that embody the State.

This circumstance generates doubts concerning the viability of the political system and the democratic model that has been an uphill struggle to fashion. The Pact for Mexico was a brilliant mechanism because it allowed for sharing the guilt or, at least, sharing the costs among the three big political parties, but it didn't resolve the essence of our dilemmas, which is reflected, for example, in the flagrant manipulation of the Constitution last year. I don't object to the reforms, far from it, but the procedure is at the very least doubtful because it implies that meta-constitutionality is cheaper than constitutionality, that vote buying expedites the passing of laws at (apparently) no cost. The problem is that this doesn't improve the capacity of the government to govern, it doesn't strengthen the legitimacy of the authority nor does it guarantee results in the economic plane, or in security or in the properly political. The Pact ends up being a useful media mechanism but it comes at an enormous cost to the development of the country. Worse yet, it didn't even attend to, never mind resolve, the problem of that enormous mass of Mexicans who feel alienated from the institutions, who rebuke them and who are not willing to engage in a democratic process unless they're sure of winning. The López-Obrador phenomenon is not about a person but, rather, the personification of the phenomenon of challenging authority, of rejecting the institutions and of a permanent leaning toward radicalism.

At heart, the problem resides in the absence of mechanisms of participation that permit consolidating politics and protecting the core institutions, affording spaces to all and legitimacy to the whole. Mexico requires XXI-century solutions, not the poor adaptations of an already surmounted era. In his book *The Revenge of Geography*, Robert Kaplan says, in reference to Putin, that a visionary statesman would see that the way to get out of the hole is to construct a strong and participative society, the only way that excesses are rendered impossible. Not a bad lesson for Mexico.

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