Politics and the pandemic

Politique et pandémie

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UN MONDE EN TRANSFORMATION

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POLITICS AND THE PANDEMIC

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« Democratic countries implemented measures that a few months before were unimaginable »

The health crisis that humanity is currently going through must not prevent us from thinking about how we want and how we are going to come out of it. Undoubtedly, despite the very serious sacrifices this pandemic will demand of all of us, humanity will survive. But how? What are we ready to sacrifice to overcome it?

This article will deal with recent authoritarian, populist, and democratic forms of government that have been emerging and how they have been strengthened or weakened as a result of the present state of emergency.

The authoritarian form in the time of the pandemic

Since before the outbreak of the current pandemic, two contrasting models were being offered to global society: the democratic model and the authoritarian one,

exemplified by China, which has been rapidly developing its economy, expanding its infrastructure, upgrading its industry to reach high technological standards, lifting 600 millions of its inhabitants out of poverty, and ensuring that the emerging new middle-class can access the comforts of the developed world.

The leaders and partisans of this model claim that democracy and individual freedom, as we know it in the West, would jeopardize the state's ability to continue this impressive process. The majority of the Chinese population accepts this premise: democracy and individual rights can wait, and in exchange, their country – that was poor until recently – develops at surprising speed. The values that are at the base of democratic societies could be delayed in exchange for strong economic development. Some disagreed with this premise: the youth of

Tiananmen at the end of the 1980s and those from Hong Kong today.

The current health crisis and the effective manner in which the Chinese government has been able to stop the infections and deaths, is giving arguments to those that defend this model. Byung Chul Han (2020) writes that what democratic countries and their populations consider as an intrusion on their privacy is what has allowed Asian countries to fight the health crisis with lesser human, social, and economic costs. They have achieved this through the administration of their population such as the state's capacity to credibly threaten their citizens and to make use of various control devices. This allowed, for example, the Chinese government to test millions of people, measure their temperature, force them to isolate themselves if they had any symptoms and monitor their slightest displacement and that of their families. In sum, authoritarian governmental control over the population has been extremely effective to stop the spread of the virus. Although, we must remember that the promoters of this model do not mention that the Chinese government hid for a month the existence of this new disease and that we probably still don't know the real number of infected and dead.

The population control mechanisms implemented by the Chinese government have included: supervision of mass media, censorship of social networks, access to cell phones and other private media, access to electronic payment data, and facial recognition (Garcia 2017). Information collected from commercial transactions carried out through electronic means allows

the government to tell what products individuals buy, if they pay their debts on time, if and where they travel, etc. By matching the individual data with that of other consumers the government can uncover the interactions of each person. This has been perfected in the current epidemic for the sake of detecting the contacts of those that are contaminated. Using these surveillance instruments, the Chinese government had begun to rank individuals based on their observance of social rules, allocating « social credits » to every individual, to give discounts on public transportation, hotels, and other types of activities, to those positively ranked. Those individuals however negatively ranked, will have either to pay more for those events, or they would be barred from attending them, from traveling on vacation, etc. It is expected that all these instruments for population management will be reinforced in the future due both to the technical expertise that was perfected during the pandemic and its relative acceptance by the population. It is almost certain that authoritarian countries will continue using these mechanisms, imposed at a time of crisis to strengthen and perpetuate their control, and also to uncover political opponents.

The democratic form in the time of the pandemic

The situation of the democratic governments in times of pandemic is both similar and different. Similarly, because the pandemic forced almost all countries in the world to impose restrictions that would have been unthinkable in other circumstances. Different,

in that, they were imposed in countries that had democratic governments and populations accustomed to a great array of individual freedom. Democratic countries implemented measures that just a few months before were unimaginable. Executive decrees, that often ignored national legislatures, forced citizens to stay home and imposed a safe-conduct to go to the pharmacy, to the corner store, or to do exercise, in sum, to impose limits on their whereabouts. In some countries, the police were even allowed to fine or arrest individuals if they could not justify being outside during curfew. Although numerous democratic countries imposed these measures with relative success, the authoritarian countries, according to Han (2020), fared much better in terms of infections and deaths.

Moreover, democratic countries may not disarm all those authoritarian mechanisms that have been temporarily implemented, with the justification that they may serve for other crises, as it happened with the fight against terrorism. While authors like Habermas (2020) consider that this is not a source of danger in the case of democratic countries like France or Germany, other authors consider that even in these countries there is a real risk that population control may become compatible with democracy. For Agamben, in times of fear a population might accept restrictions that in normal situations it would not. When a population is faced with the choice between health and freedom it will choose the first. As this author puts it: « [...] the state of fear that has spread in recent years in the consciousness of individuals and that translates into a real need in situations of collective panic [...] [leads to] a vicious circle :

limits to freedom imposed by governments are accepted for a desire for security [...] [from a threat] induced by the same governments that now intervene to satisfy it ». In the reaction to the epidemic, Agamben has also raised the idea that it reinforces « [...] a growing tendency to use the state of exception as a normal paradigm of government » (Agamben 2020).

Naomi Klein considers, in the final count, that there is a real threat coming from the measures imposed during this exceptional situation: they may lead to a world of control that will destroy democracies and individual rights; something that may be achieved through an association between politics and capital, and not centered on the state as in the Chinese case. With the information technology devices, business and government would « permanently integrate technology into every aspect of civic life, not as a painful necessity to save lives, but as a living laboratory for a permanent – and highly profitable – no-touch future [...] a future in which our every move, our every word, our every relationship is trackable, traceable, and data-mineable by unprecedented collaborations between government and tech giants » (Klein 2020).

It was Michel Foucault who first analyzed how modern forms of control are no longer exercised by a centralized command, by the king or the state, as Machiavelli thought, but that power has been diffused. Starting with the invention of the police, capitalist economy, state administration, and statistics, the population is administered by apparatuses focused on each individual,

defining what is normal and abnormal, regulating what is allowed or not, and what are our obligations. Modern states possess increasingly sophisticated mechanisms to bring individuals to internalize these norms and comply with them, without any external pressure (Foucault 1991). Agamben writes that fear has become another way of controlling the population, an emotion that was reinforced during the war against terrorism and that threatens to be fortified with the contention of the pandemic.

Foucault's main idea is that in modernity, external domination carried out by political power, centralized in the state, becomes « internal » domination driven by language, classification, and money. Domination is no longer exercised in a restrictive way, by a prohibition external to human freedom, it is deployed from within freedom itself; the freedom that modern man enjoys is his domination. According to Foucault « [...], the freedom that is left to the population is used by power for control purposes and discipline is included in the freedom that modern governance grants us » (Grenier & Orlan 2007).

Foucault's sociology is based on the concept of the individual who faces « [...] forms of incentives instead of coercion ». In sum, « the law prohibits, the discipline prescribes, the biopolitics cancels, restraints, favors, or regulates » (Jeanpierre 2006: 90, 92). This explains why Foucault was so interested in neoliberalism as the final phase of a self-regulated society, based on the freedom of all and self-regulation through freedom.

Liberalism is defined as the government by the economy:

« [...] liberalism values the preservation of life, the freedom to move, to take risks ; on the other hand, it limits these freedoms at the same time that it makes them possible ». « Liberalism and neoliberalism move away from the disciplinary society insofar as they are not based on restrictions, even self-imposed, but on individual freedom. In the society based on the approach of Foucault, conflict is internal to the control mechanisms and resistance gives rise to new control measures and a greater capacity for domination. Now everything is being played amid the individual and the system » (Jeanpierre 2006 : 93).

The current pandemic strengthens this individualization of control that has already been maximized by the neoliberal economy. Both Harari (2020) and Agamben (2020) consider fear to be an even more powerful factor than the neoliberal economy, as it is more subjective. While neoliberalism pushes the human being to increase his capacity to succeed in the market and privatize the social policies that were allocated by the state's apparatus, the current epidemic fear of death leads the individual to adopt an even more defensive attitude. A situation that further strengthens individualism and may extinguish any type of social action as the fear of the other as a source of infection becomes unbearable.

Two alternative models : populism and authoritative democracy in a time of the pandemic

The populist form of government

In contrast to the two models of population control that we have analyzed in the first part of this article, populist governments have failed to efficiently combat the pandemic, as shown in the experiences of the United States, Brazil, or Great Britain. In this article we limit our definition of populism to its most common and « external » characteristics, we will thus not make the necessary distinctions between left and right, popular and elitist populisms, or national-popular and proto-fascist forms of government as we have done in another paper (Bizberg 2020). We will circumscribe this form of government by the struggle between friend and foe. Its demagogic discourse is focused on the leader and his communications in the name of the unprotected sectors of society against the privileged strata, or of the national group against the immigrants and foreigners. According to Hermet:

« [...] populism aims to abolish the distance, the barriers, and even the existing differences between government and the governed, between those above and those below. It is an anti-political movement that rejects traditional political mechanisms because they delay the resolution of fractures and social injustices. It also denies the temporality of politics, demands and promotes an instantaneous response to problems and to the aspirations that no governmental action has the power to resolve » (2001 : 49-50).

Targuieff adds that, in this manner, the time of populism is a mythical time and its action highlights the magic of politics (2003: 285).

Populism is the opposite of representative or participative democracy since it calls for a direct and voluntaristic policy that both deepens and purifies democracy, and that strips it of what it considers to be « [...] its false institutional and constitutional limits » (Hermet 2001: 70).

Facing the pandemic, populist leaders first started questioning its gravity, thereby significantly delaying the adoption of measures to deal with it, and thus having much higher casualties. The main reason why these governments acted belatedly is that as they are based on a very close relationship between the leader and the people (or his followers) with the latter expecting performance from the former often measured in economic terms. This is why populist governments hesitated to shut down the economy, long before being convinced (if ever) that there were scientific reasons to do so. On the other hand, while economic performance is measured every month, avoiding deaths is not easily quantified, but the death toll is. Therefore, governments in Brazil, Russia, or Turkey managed to hide the real number of COVID-19 deaths, but not in the United States or Great Britain. Furthermore, insofar as the populist leader concentrates power and decisions, occupies the totality of the political scene, and thus depends highly on public opinion, he is hesitant to stop production; he quickly reaps successes, but also failures. This also prevents him from speaking clearly and transparently about the challenges, the problems, and the mistakes. And just as the leader hesitated long before sacrificing the economy to the fight against COVID-19, he tried to open it as soon

as possible claiming the fight against COVID-19 had been won. Thus, countries led by populist leaders, mainly Brazil, the United States, and Britain all had the highest number of infections and deaths (Galindo 2020).

Political form based on democratic values and authority

The health crisis has revealed that there is another form of government, a democratic option that does not aspire for greater control of the population but is based on democratic authority and values. How this political form tackled the health crisis exposed the basis on which it rests: fundamental truth, authority, and a strong democratic and civic culture. The message that the government addressed to its citizens was focused on the sheer necessity of radical measures to be taken and on the need that they are respected individually and collectively. This political form has not only been the most democratic, but it is among the most successful in tackling the pandemic.

We will focus on one of the most exemplary cases, which is that of Germany, although we will also make references to other ones such as Taiwan, New Zealand, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, but also Portugal, Uruguay, and the province of Kerala in India; several of them governed by women, something which should arouse more attention but is out of the reaches of this paper.

Contrary to the attempts by the authoritarian and populist governments to hide or withhold information on the seriousness of the epidemic, an action that eroded the confidence of the population and, therefore, the effectiveness of the measures once they

were decided, in the German case, the gravity of the situation was recognized and communicated from the very beginning.

The following speech by Angela Merkel is a very clear example of founding the response of the government on transparency, authority, and civic culture.

« The coronavirus is changing daily life in our country dramatically at the present. Our idea of normality, of public life, social togetherness – all of this is being put to the test as never before [...] part of what open democracy is about : that we make political decisions transparent and explain them. That we justify and communicate our actions as best we can, so that people can understand them [...] this is serious. Please also take this seriously. Since German reunification, no, since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge for our country in which action in a spirit of solidarity on our part was so important » (Merkel, n.a).

This speech revolves around the fact that the government intends to be transparent. The population is asked for its collaboration to stop the epidemic while respecting democratic principles and upholding their civic responsibilities. This is not an imposition on individuals of a set of instructions that has been decided by the central state. Nor are these measures to be implemented through the intensification of governmental control mechanisms or the end of deliberation between the different political powers and levels of government as some central European governments did. On the other hand, Merkel's speech makes it clear that the

main goal is to save lives; that no other principle prevails, that no utilitarian compromise may predominate, and that the government is not looking for a compromise between the economy and the health of the German population. The president of Argentina was equally clear about this fact when he declared: «The economy has gone through a lot of bad times and we've recovered, but we will not recover our dignity if we let our countrymen fall into illness and death » (El Pais 2021).

Conclusion

Although one may be led to think that these forms of government – the authoritarian and the democratic – go in the same direction of population control that Foucault described as both imposing surveillance mechanisms to tackle the epidemic, it is not the case. An authoritarian government uses the capacity offered by new technologies to reinforce its

totalitarian nature à la Arendt or Orwell. We are in a pre-Foucaultian situation, in which power and control are being centralized and concentrated in the state. In contrast, as uttered by Klein (2020) and Harari (2020), a democratic government is effectively imposing population administration mechanisms, as described by Foucault, in a situation in which individuals voluntarily accept the restrictions and even internalize the rules.

But the main argument of this article is that the democratic governments, based on truth, authority, and empathy, as well as on a strong democratic and civic culture, have done a very good job in preserving lives as well as democracy and freedom. Whether this impression will be confirmed in the future or not depends on the next steps, the way these countries will deal with the economic crisis that hovers upon the world.

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