

## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

### Considerações sobre a crise da democracia

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**Abstract:** Is liberal democracy in crisis? The question above guides this reflection, which unfolds in two parts, to examine how the two anchors of liberal democracy, the market and political representation, are faring. Let us suggest that the separation between democracy and the market could reestablish politics as an instrument of decision-making, thereby strengthening the institutions of representation. Broadly speaking, the present reflection analyzes democratic theories developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to assess the extent to which they can still help us understand the current scenario.

**Keywords:** democracy; crisis; the political; representation.

**Resumo:** A democracia liberal está em crise? A pergunta acima norteia a presente reflexão, que se desdobra em dois momentos, com o intuito de verificar como andam as duas âncoras da democracia liberal: o mercado e a representação política. Vamos indicar que a separação entre democracia e mercado poderia restabelecer a política como instrumento de decisão, o que também poderia fortalecer as instâncias de representação. Em linhas gerais, a presente reflexão analisa algumas teorias democráticas desenvolvidas no final do século XX e no início do século XXI, com o intuito de verificar em que medida ainda podem ajudar a compreender o cenário atual.

**Palavras-chave:** democracia; crise; político; representação.

### Preliminary Considerations

It is almost commonplace today to claim that democracy is in crisis. At the very least, this notion seems to unite various political sectors, as well as political analysts and philosophers. However, it is far from clear, let alone consensual, what form of democracy we are referring to when we speak of its crisis. An important question raised by Marcos



Nobre (2022) sheds light on the issue: Is democratic theory in crisis, or is it the political organization that claims to be democratic? The problem appears to stem from the theoretical failure to comprehend the new transformations unfolding within the democratic landscape, suggesting that the issue is not solely with democracy itself, but also with those who theorize about it.

After all, as Rosanvallon (2020) reminds us, democracy has historically been understood as indeterminate, that is, it does not always manifest in the same form or with the same characteristics. Understanding its various nuances and historical differences presents a significant challenge to any theorist and any political actor. For this reason, the aim here is not to develop a broad and detailed analysis of the current democratic phenomenon, but rather to understand whether, and to what extent, a particular way of experiencing democracy is reaching its limits.

The current scenario suggests that a specific form of democracy is indeed in crisis, but which one is it? The most common response is that liberal democracy is the one facing decline. Let us consider this more closely. Broadly speaking, liberal democracy is based on the market economy<sup>1</sup> and the idea of political representation. In this model, citizens are understood as bearers of individual rights, and the central aim of political organization is to ensure their protection. In other words, since Locke (1998), the primary purpose of the state has been to provide the conditions for individual development; thus, political disputes revolve around the best way to ensure these conditions. As it is not feasible for all individuals to hold power simultaneously in defense of their interests, representatives are elected through contests for positions and electoral competition. The focus on market and representation does not imply that they exhaust the liberal-democratic order, but rather that they concentrate some of the central tensions affecting contemporary democracies.

The problem is that both anchors of liberal democracy appear to be under threat, or at the very least, are showing signs of strain. The market has failed to ensure that people can achieve their goals and interests. In addition, a significant portion of citizens no longer feel represented by their political leaders. This disconnection has contributed to the rise of authoritarian figures who offer simplified solutions to highly complex problems. Their

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<sup>1</sup> Market here is understood as the instance that regulates economic transactions. I generally follow Honneth's conceptual understanding (2014, p. 178). "But according to the customary view, it is only with the emergence of capitalism that the relations between all those involved in economic reproduction – workers, consumers and entrepreneurs – only relate to each other via market-mediated transactions." We are therefore dealing with the instance that mediates all our economic activities, which implies the vast majority of our daily activities.



discourse is appealing because it promises to resolve issues that traditional political leaders have failed to address over the years of political engagement. Of course, this is not the only reason behind the rise of authoritarianism, nor does it fully explain the phenomenon, but it is a factor that cannot be overlooked.

In Brazilian democracy, as in other contexts around the world, a shared sense of indignation is accompanied by small-scale revolts, often stemming from the precarious living conditions many face.

More than ever in the postwar era, people are outraged at the social and political consequences unleashed by the global liberalization of the capitalist market economy. On the other hand, this widespread outrage seems to lack any sense of direction, any historical sense of its ultimate aim (Honneth, 2017, p. 1).

I do not overlook the fact that Honneth's analysis primarily aims to criticize the current economic model, which is not the central focus of this text. What I intend to highlight with this citation is that the widespread feeling that living conditions are inadequate has not found a clearly defined solution—at least not one that is widely shared. Another point I want to emphasize, drawing on this citation, is the connection between a specific model of economic organization and the form of democracy we concretely experience in our societies. This means that if it were possible, to some degree, to decouple these two elements, then democracy itself might be “salvaged”.

What I now propose is to examine the extent to which a separation between democracy and the market could help revitalize the former, while also analyzing how political representation is transforming. It would certainly be possible and worthwhile to delve deeper into the foundations of democracy. However, the approach taken here aligns with the objectives of this text, as any reflection on representation necessarily engages with other concepts such as sovereignty, legitimacy, and the people; likewise, any reflection on the market implies ideas such as freedom, equality, and, why not, fraternity. The goal is to assess to what extent the market fulfills the promise of equality, or at least equality of opportunity, and to what extent political representation can ensure that the people function as true political agents who, as a result, feel genuinely represented. This article does not assume from the outset that democracy itself is in crisis. Rather, it examines a contemporary diagnosis that holds that a historically specific form of liberal, market-oriented representative democracy appears to be undergoing instability and transformation.

Contemporary debates on democratic backsliding, populism, post-democracy, digital



publics, and plebiscitarian tendencies have offered important diagnoses of the current democratic moment. This article does not intend to provide a comprehensive reconstruction of these debates. Rather, its more modest objective is to examine whether some central elements of representative democracy, especially the relation between market and political representation, still offer conceptual and institutional resources for understanding current democratic instabilities. More specifically, the analysis seeks to explore to what extent the relationship between democracy and the market can be reconsidered, and whether political representation still includes mechanisms that enable citizens to participate, exercise oversight, and exercise democratic control.

### **Democracy, the Market, and Its Social Promises**

Democracy became consolidated alongside a particular model of economic organization: liberalism. Rosanvallon (1979) defends the thesis that there is no clear distinction between political liberalism and economic liberalism, since the values of liberty and equality are, in theory, present in both. The point, however, is that the market has almost entirely taken over this role, relegating politics to a merely bureaucratic function. Just as politics once replaced religion, the market has now replaced politics. The market determines the principal directions of a society, but, in general, it fails to fulfill its promises, namely, the guarantee of freedom and equality.

Within this line of reasoning, one must ask: Is it democracy itself that is in crisis, or is it a specific model of democracy directly linked to the market? Even if it is not possible to empirically separate the two, we can at least ask whether this model of democracy has made promises it cannot fulfill. In this way, the ongoing mutations and crises of economic liberalism would also be crises of democracy. In the end, democracy has had to assume responsibility for the problems of economic organization<sup>2</sup> and attempt to reconcile them, an effort that seems to have reached, or to be reaching, its limit.

An argument along these lines is found in the work of Wolfgang Streeck (2013), who analyzes how democracy has had to address problems derived from economic organization. His thesis asserts that, from a political standpoint, the democratic process “bought time” to save capitalist democracy. In other words, it merely postponed an unavoidable crisis and outcome. Three strategies were adopted to delay the crisis: first, inflation; then, public debt;

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<sup>2</sup> Yascha Mounk (2018) also argues for the need to rethink economic policy.

and finally, private debt.<sup>3</sup> Streeck (2013) argues that in recent years, the limits of these strategies have become evident, and that economic crises have worsened, especially after 2008.

The German thinker's argument moves toward the idea of the inseparability between democracy and economic relations:

After what has happened since 2008, no one can understand politics and political institutions without closely relating them to markets and economic interests, as well as to the class structures and conflicts arising from them (Streeck, 2013, p. 23).

I do not intend to directly challenge this thesis, but I do wish to question the feasibility of maintaining a minimal, purely theoretical separation between democracy and the economy. More precisely, the underlying argument calls for reclaiming the political dimension over the economic one. Rosanvallon (2020) refers to this as a “reclaiming of the political.” The path I propose is quite simple: to reflect on the theoretical elements that underpin democracy and, from there, to consider its independence. It is essential to clarify that I do not overlook the empirical connection between democracy and capitalism in the democratic West; however, I do not believe this should prevent us from considering the autonomy of the political sphere. The proposed “separation” between democracy and the market should not be understood as the abolition of market relations, but as the recovery of democratic autonomy vis-à-vis financial imperatives and market-driven constraints on political decision-making.

One argument in favor of the thesis presented here is the consideration of the political problems associated with democracy. Undoubtedly, one of the most pressing challenges of contemporary democracy is to understand the resurgence of populist movements and, in some cases, even totalitarian tendencies. The answer to this issue is not found entirely in the economic order, for it is politics that must account for the effects of its own actions. I do not deny that economic factors influence people's actions and perceptions, but they do not offer a complete explanation. There is no strict separation between the political and economic dimensions; I aim to demonstrate that it is possible to reflect on democracy's problems from a specifically political perspective. In this sense, my intention is relatively straightforward, though not without its challenges and potential objections.

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<sup>3</sup> See the analysis developed by Streeck in *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. In this text, the German thinker seeks to show that democracy apparently manages the crises, but deep down it is merely buying time in the face of an outcome that is already clearly identified.

To affirm the political is to highlight its incompleteness and its constant need to grapple with antagonisms and differences. From this perspective, another difficulty of liberal democracy becomes evident: its inability to account for political conflict because of its restriction to the pursuit of consensus, even a minimal consensus. Chantal Mouffe defends this argument by showing how liberalism confuses<sup>4</sup> morality with politics, treating political conflicts as if they were moral in nature. The confusion lies in ignoring that politics involves antagonism and the clash of forces; consequently, consensus will not always be possible.

Politics, as the attempt to domesticate the political, to keep at bay the forces of destruction and to establish order, always has to do with conflicts and antagonisms. It requires an understanding that every consensus is, by necessity, based on acts of exclusion and that there can never be a fully inclusive 'rational' consensus (Mouffe, 1993, p. 141).

From this perspective, politics is not about pursuing a consensus that eliminates all traces of conflict, but about balancing positions so that different groups can sustain their ways of life. This argument implies the importance of pluralism for the development of democracy. I now wish to return to the debate surrounding consensus and the potential confusion between morality and politics.

According to Mouffe (1993), consensus leads to the elimination of the adversary's place and the exclusion of what is inherently political, namely, antagonism and the power struggle. This aligns with Lefort's (1981) thesis that democracy brought with it the impossibility of exclusive occupation of power; in other words, there is a constant dispute over who may exercise it.

La légitimité du pouvoir se fonde sur le peuple ; mais à l'image de la souveraineté populaire se joint celle d'un lieu vide, impossible à occuper, tel que ceux qui exercent l'autorité publique ne sauraient prétendre se l'approprier. La démocratie allie ces deux principes apparemment contradictoires : l'un, que le pouvoir émane du peuple ; l'autre, qu'il n'est le pouvoir de personne (Lefort, 1981, p. 95).

A constant dispute is incompatible with the pursuit of consensus. This is precisely where, according to Mouffe, the limitation of consensus lies: the idea of a final, unifying element does not exist. To better understand this point, we might consider the debate

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<sup>4</sup> This is a somewhat problematic claim, I must admit; however, even though liberalism does not require consensus on all elements of political life, it demands consensus around core values such as freedom and equality. On this matter, Rosanvallon (2020) can help us understand that democracy is an ongoing construction. What I mean here is that the core values of the democratic process are not fixed once and for all, which means they also need to be politically justified.



surrounding the notion of the common good. Could a consensus be reached in such cases? Let's take an example. One of the major issues in Western democracies is defining the state's role in managing the economy. On this matter, there appears to be no consensus. Various interpretations of the state's role have been proposed, debated, and implemented. Yet no final or definitive answer has been reached, precisely because it is a political dispute, just as, on a broader scale, the reconciliation of liberty and equality is.

It is essential to note that consensus need not occur at the practical level, as is the case with the state's economic role. Consensus also operates at the level of democratic principles and procedures, such as elections and other decision-making mechanisms. The problem is that such a consensus requires political justification; in other words, it must be continually presented and defended as a necessary element of the political process, as its explanation is not given once and for all. What I am analyzing at the moment is the possibility of a broad consensus on values, which social plurality suggests is impossible. This does not mean, however, that a minimal consensus regarding principles and procedures cannot be achieved, as I will seek to demonstrate in the second section of the text.

A more stable form of consensus may be achievable in moral discussions, for instance, regarding respect for human dignity or animal welfare, but it does not seem reasonable to expect the same in political matters. The degree of uncertainty and potential change is greater in the political realm, as decisions are tied to social, economic, and cultural factors that cannot be reduced to moral categories. If this confusion persists, there is a risk of losing what is unique to the political domain. In Mouffe's words: "Conflicts, antagonisms, relations of power disappear, and the field of politics is reduced to a rational process of negotiation among private interests under the constraints of morality." (Mouffe, 1993, p. 113)

What emerges from this reflection is the limit of rationality in grasping the entirety of the political phenomenon. Affects and passions can mobilize individuals in various directions that are not easily understood through a purely rational lens. I will not delve deeply into this here, but many aspects of contemporary political life require analysis that considers which affects and passions are driving individuals in the political arena.

The argument developed in the previous pages aims to show that politics has not disappeared from the social sphere; on the contrary, it is very much present. And only by reestablishing its central role can conflicts undergo the necessary transformation to convert enemies into adversaries, as Mouffe puts it. This does not mean that conflicts will cease to exist; instead, they are constitutive movements of politics itself. As Lefort puts it:

La démocratie inaugure l'expérience d'une société insaisissable, indomptable, où le peuple est dit souverain, certes, mais où son identité sera constamment mise en question, et où cette identité demeurera latente (Lefort, 1981, p. 180).

Precisely because power becomes a space of constant dispute, it is not possible to fix an identity or grasp social reality once and for all. Any attempt to predict or fully comprehend the movements of democratic politics is likely to fail, or at least reveal its own incompleteness, since there will always be the possibility of new arrangements, new disputes, and new questions.

If our understanding of democracy is in crisis, can we clearly identify which form of democracy we are dealing with? As previously indicated, the evidence points to the limits of liberal democracy. This is why a revival of the political dimension could offer new perspectives on the problems of liberal democracy, problems that have, fundamentally, been tied to the economic dimension. In other words, the recovery of politics entails overcoming the economic answers offered to the challenges faced by contemporary democracies.

According to Streeck (2013), what led to the massive public debt was not demands arising from democratic processes, but instead the needs of the financial sector, which, amid constant crises, insists that the state provide resources to ensure its continued operation. The 2008 crisis, as previously mentioned, is a striking example of such actions by the financial system. Suppose the problem lies not only in democratic decisions, but also in the pressure exerted by the financial system on democracy. In that case, it becomes necessary, by reclaiming the political, to formulate responses to such pressures.

We may be living under the regime of market justice, which fails to address people's real problems. What could offer genuine solutions is the adoption of social justice.

By market justice, I mean the distribution of production outcomes according to the market's evaluation of the individual performances of those involved, expressed through their relative prices. The remuneration criterion that corresponds to market justice is marginal productivity—that is, the market value of the last unit of production, extracted under competitive conditions. Social justice, by contrast, is governed by cultural norms and based on statutory rights, not contractual rights. It is guided by collective notions of fairness, equity, and reciprocity; it grants rights to a minimum standard of living regardless of economic performance or capacity to perform, and it recognizes civil and human rights such as the right to health care, social security, participation in community life, job protection, union organization, etc (Streeck, 2013, p. 84).

The long citation presents a significant challenge: moving from market justice to social justice, that is, strengthening the democratic process and diminishing the power of economic

forces over human relations. The recovery of the political and the recognition that the democratic process is inherently conflictual can restore discussion and reinforce citizenship. I am not advocating here for the abandonment of liberal values; on the contrary, they would form the basis of public debate, serving as a guiding thread that enables the resurgence of social protagonism. The problematic point, it seems to me, lies in the claim that the current model of liberal democracy is sufficient to establish social justice. It is not enough, at least as long as there is a close relationship between liberal democracy and the market<sup>5</sup>.

The liberal model of market organization that accompanied democracy is clearly in crisis, mainly because it is unable to deliver on its promises: at the most basic level, it does not provide the material conditions for people to live their lives as they see fit. In this sense, it needs to be rethought. Obviously, the question of what should be done arises here; however, we do not have satisfactory answers from either a theoretical or an empirical standpoint. At least, not in a fully satisfactory way, since pathways have been and continue to be proposed<sup>6</sup>. This is not decisive for the present text; what is decisive is that the return of the political, with all its ambiguities, opens up space for the resurgence of citizen participation, debate on opinions, and the exchange of arguments. There is no guarantee that the outcome will be positive, but the mere recovery of the political dimension already constitutes a considerable advance.

Following this line, the next section of the text analyzes how the elements presented here affect representation, the second foundational pillar of liberal democracy. The goal is to examine the extent to what extent representation can capture people's dissatisfaction, especially regarding their economic conditions, and how representatives do or do not address the problems present within society.

### **Limits and Scope of Representation**

Is representation within the democratic process in crisis, or is it transforming? If it is in crisis, this reinforces the idea that democracy itself is shaken at one of its foundations. If it is not in crisis but merely undergoing mutations, then democracy is not truly shaken, and

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of the "practical and objective expansion of neoliberal culture in the world," as Brum Torres (2021) does. Taylor, Nanz, and Taylor present the same argument when they seek to reflect on the elements of disconnection between people and democratic institutions, stating: "Third, in recent decades, neoliberal illusions about the nature of markets, and their supposed benign operation to secure fair distributions of new wealth, have obscured some of the most blatant inequalities, or underplayed their significance, on the grounds that things will work out in the end." (Taylor, Nanz & Taylor, 2020, p.12)

<sup>6</sup> Streeck (2013) points out some possibilities at the end of his book, as does Rosanvallon (2020), to mention two examples.

what is revealed is the inability of theorists, in general, to grasp the characteristics of the present time. The following argument is based on Manin's (1995) analysis of the transformations democratic representation has undergone.

Quatre principes ont toujours été observés dans les régimes représentatifs depuis que cette forme de gouvernement a été inventée: 1 – Les gouvernants sont désignés par élection à intervalles réguliers; 2 – les gouvernants conservent, dans leurs décisions, une certaine indépendance vis-à-vis des volontés des électeurs; 3 – les gouvernés peuvent exprimer leurs opinions et leurs volontés politiques sans que celles-ci soient soumises au contrôle des gouvernants; 4 – les décisions publiques sont soumises à l'épreuve de la discussion (Manin, 1995, p. 17).

The four aspects of representation will be analyzed here to determine whether, as Manin argues, there is a crisis or a metamorphosis in the relationship between representatives and the represented. Once again, the goal is not to exhaust the topic, but rather to offer some lines of reflection and questioning regarding one of the anchors of democracy as we know it in the West. Distrust of the market helps explain the instability of representation. To some extent, this thesis will also be present in the following pages.

(I) The election, the first principle presented by Manin, provides the conditions for the represented to choose the “best” representatives and consequently the best policies. It also provides a means to periodically evaluate the performance of those elected and, if necessary, replace them. The electoral process brings various policy alternatives into competition, offering voters a significant opportunity to analyze them. Another relevant factor is the periodicity of elections, which allows for reassessment and potential change of direction, while also placing pressure on representatives—those who seek reelection or wish to remain in public life must fulfill their promises or, at the very least, offer programs that improve people's lives. “Il faut noter, surtout, qu'une campagne électorale constitue ce que l'on appellerait en langage judiciaire une procédure contradictoire. Elle oppose en effet plusieurs messages ou plusieurs images qui entrent en conflit les uns avec les autres.” (Manin, 1995, p. 292).

The images presented are not always clear and often contain elements crafted to appeal to what a large portion of the electorate wants to hear, elements that the winners will not necessarily implement after the election. However, the clash among the candidates' images reduces the degree of indeterminacy and limits each candidate's policy proposals. This limitation allows voters to better understand what is at stake and how different political projects intend to address the electorate's demands.



Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999) recognize that voters do not have all the information necessary to judge their candidates for office, nor do they possess full knowledge to evaluate the policies implemented during an elected term. The key point here is the electoral process itself; thus, the means by which constituents exert control over their representatives will be discussed in the next part of the text. The clash between different candidate images, the confrontations among them, communication tools (especially social media), and official campaign platforms offer voters spaces to improve their understanding of who the candidates are and what they propose.

Of course, these elements do not guarantee the best choice, neither in terms of the individuals elected nor the policies enacted. The authors mentioned above, in their essay *Elections and Representation*, remind us that electoral processes are not always informative. Candidates choose a platform, test it (in terms of popularity), and, if necessary, revise their proposals. There is no denying that the aim is to appeal to the largest segment of the electorate to win the election.

Once the electoral process is over, a candidate's platform may prove inconsistent or even contrary to the interests of the electorate. This may occur for various reasons, including flawed analysis, insufficient information, shifts in the economic landscape, and others. This raises the question: must the representative remain faithful to the platform on which they were elected? The following section will address the relative independence representatives have from their constituents. Still, for now, it is enough to note that representatives are constantly evaluated. The next election can determine the political future of a representative who either fulfills their platform and disappoints voters or breaks from it and pleases voters, perhaps due to changing economic conditions.

My analysis here is limited<sup>7</sup> to presenting only two such scenarios (listed in the previous paragraph), although others certainly exist. The essential point is that representatives will be judged in the next election, and their actions will always take this context into account. Even if only incipiently, this serves as a tool that favors the represented. Although voters may resent elected officials who renege on their pledges, they generally do not hold politicians accountable when those officials break their mandate in ways that advantage the electorate. (Manin; Przeworski; Stokes, 1999).

In this sense, accountability, despite the limitations of incomplete information, is an

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<sup>7</sup> A more detailed analysis of all the elements involved in elections can be found in the text by Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999).

essential tool for evaluating elected mandates. Even when detailed data are lacking, it is still possible to assess living conditions, observe overall economic development, employment rates, and other key indicators. At the very least, this forces representatives to pay attention to these indicators and implement policies, even if only minimally, that benefit people's lives. The electoral cycle allows for this kind of evaluation and, at the very least, compels representatives to be attentive to their constituents' needs. Urbinati defends a similar thesis:

The right to vote engenders a rich political life that promotes competing political agendas and conditions the will of the lawmakers on an ongoing basis, not just on election day. It encourages the broad development of extraelectoral forms of political action, although with no guarantee that political influence will be distributed equally or become authoritative (Urbinati, 2006, p. 26).

There is no fixed causal relationship here, but the points presented allow us to conclude that elections play a significant role and can serve as a tool to strengthen the relationship between the representative and the represented. One factor that has altered this relationship is the emergence of a new form of representation, which Manin calls *audience democracy*, where the relationship is established directly between the leader and the audience. This phenomenon has gained even more traction with the rise of social media in the electoral process. It is worth noting that a change is underway, and we are not yet in a position to measure what comes next. This prevents us from making definitive value judgments.

Despite these ongoing changes, the process still confers legitimacy on the elected and on the policies presented during the campaign. "L'élection est une méthode de désignation des gouvernants et de légitimation du pouvoir." (Manin, 1995, p. 206). There are many other instruments of democratic participation. Still, it is the election that objectively appoints the representative and, through them, the policy most likely to address the demands of a given locality.

(II) How is the partial independence of representatives beneficial to the representative democratic process? Two points are crucial here: a) Independence allows the representative to reflect autonomously while also listening to their peers. As Araujo observes: "Representatives thus seek a double complicity: with their constituents, of course, but also with their adversaries in the public arena." (Araujo, 2006, p. 258)<sup>8</sup> b) Independence enables a broader exchange of reasons between representative and represented, because there is

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<sup>8</sup> Loose translation



no relationship of identity between them.

By relatively distancing themselves from their constituents, representatives create space for new arguments and deliberative arenas to emerge. Their responsibility is not directed solely at those who elected them, but toward the needs and challenges of all citizens. Of course, they cannot become disconnected from their voters. Otherwise, they risk what Young (2000) identifies as a constant danger in the space of representation: if this connection is lost, constituents no longer feel they have any influence over policymaking. The natural result is a growing detachment from political activity among these individuals.

This is also detrimental to the representative, as they lose political ground and jeopardize their chances for reelection or any future political projects.

The representative's responsibility is not simply to express a mandate, but to participate in discussion and debate with other representatives, listen to their questions, appeals, stories, and arguments, and with them to try to arrive at wise and just decisions (Young, 2000, p. 131).

Relative independence allows representatives to develop a sphere of argumentation that detaches itself from the immediate desires of the people. This detachment is by no means absolute, as demands always arise from the concrete lives of individuals; however, they will not be debated purely on the basis of individual or group interests. Young herself reminds us that in some specific situations, such as the case of Indigenous minorities, it is necessary to develop specific and targeted policies that meet the demands of these groups. However, this has a multicultural<sup>9</sup> rationale that justifies such exceptions. This opens space for exceptions for cultural groups and others who have historically been discriminated against and excluded from the political process.

Beyond that, independence at least provides the conditions for discussion topics to acquire a more reflective character, making debate more receptive in the public arena. In other words, representatives have the task of translating local, or theoretically local, demands into broader ones that, to some extent, address a larger number of citizens, or at least make sense to those who are not directly benefited. One may question the extent to which this is achievable, but it hardly seems debatable that it is at least possible and desirable within democratic processes.

Unforeseen economic, social, and environmental changes reinforce the need for

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<sup>9</sup> There is an extensive debate on this topic; it is worth examining the contributions of two fundamental authors in this context: Charles Taylor (1995) and Will Kymlicka (1996). These Canadian philosophers hold distinct but complementary views regarding the treatment of cultural minorities. This is not an uncontested point in the philosophical debate; however, I broadly adopt the arguments of Young, Taylor, and Kymlicka.

independence, as in such scenarios, representatives often must act quickly without the possibility of direct consultation with their constituents. Government programs and campaign promises are essential for guiding decision-making, but they may not provide all the necessary answers, and new paths may have to be pursued. Independence allows for this flexibility, which will ultimately be subject to direct evaluation in the next election and indirect scrutiny through other participatory mechanisms, especially today, in the digital arena.

Manin (1995) reminds us that in no democratic organization are representatives legally bound to follow their government's plan. The new circumstances mentioned above, the pursuit of reelection, and new popular demands may all change a government's course and force it to shift direction. Such a shift may not always be forced; it is possible for a political platform to win an election with a discourse that convinces the majority, even as it harbors a different political project. A new election can pose a barrier to this project, as can opposition, the media, and other oversight bodies. In fact, Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999) advocate expanding oversight bodies and increasing their independence from the executive branch. In theory, this would ensure greater accountability from parties and political leaders in aligning their government programs with their actual governance.

Thus, there is no identity relationship between representatives and represented. Manin and Young defend this point, and also Pitkin (1989), who provides a retrospective analysis showing how this separation is intrinsic to modern democracy: "And the meanings are obviously in transition, from the older 'standing for' others through substitution, to something like 'acting for' others." (Pitkin, 1989, p. 13). Acting for others does not mean assuming an identical position to that of the represented individual, but rather acting on their behalf or, at the very least, taking into consideration the demands presented by individuals or the context that elects a representative.

This transformation is accompanied by tensions and conflicts, or, in Araujo's analogy, by dramatic contours, because there is no guarantee that disputes will not arise, either among the representatives themselves or between representatives and represented. The political game feeds on these conflicts. To return to what was stated in the first section of this paper, we may be witnessing the return of "the political." There are no guarantees regarding the outcome of the process, but there are rules that, in theory, ensure the proper conduct of political disputes.

**(III)** Freedom of public opinion provides the conditions for the free participation of citizens. The goal here is not to conduct an empirical analysis of how citizens' views affect government or legislative decision-making. Each context has its own opportunities and



challenges in this regard, and we are not in a position to evaluate all possible scenarios. The goal of this brief section is more modest: to reflect on opinion as a powerful instrument in the process of political representation.

Manin precisely summarizes the essential elements for the exercise of public opinion:

La liberté de l'opinion publique requiert deux conditions. Pour que les gouvernés puissent se former des opinions sur les sujets politiques, il faut qu'ils puissent avoir accès à l'information politique; cela suppose une certaine publicité des décisions gouvernementales. (...) La liberté de l'opinion publique requiert, en second lieu, la liberté d'exprimer des opinions politiques à tout moment, et donc indépendamment même des élections (Manin, 1995, p. 214).

We have already addressed the first aspect above. In general terms, it is essential to recall that even if the representative does not have access to all information, the information available to them still provides elements for forming an opinion and for future decision-making. Obviously, it would be beneficial for the democratic process if all information were accessible to citizens. Still, as previously noted, certain political decisions require secrecy, such as matters of national security. Outside of these more delicate issues, the more access people have, the more qualified the process of opinion formation will be.

The second aspect leads us to a central element of democracy: the free expression of political opinions. One may go further and speak of freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and so on. All of these are, in a way, sacred spaces for the exercise of democracy. They allow citizens to express their opinions and submit them to the judgment of their peers, enabling the consolidation of an opinion, its partial revision, or even a complete change in one's way of thinking. Of course, this process is marked by conflict and tension, but these can be overcome if democratic procedures are respected.

Within this reasoning, freedom of opinion is linked to the basic principles of democracy: liberty, equality, and respect for established rules. What is required is not substantive consensus, but rather consensus<sup>10</sup> around these core values<sup>11</sup> and their preservation. Otherwise, democratic spaces could be used to endanger democracy itself. In this regard, there seems to be a clear limit to what is acceptable in the public sphere: "It would thus be more correct to say that democracy (in that it functions and lasts) requires

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<sup>10</sup> I assume that democracy requires different levels of consensus and that consensus on values should be understood as referring primarily to those values necessary for the maintenance and stability of democratic procedures.

<sup>11</sup> We can also consider here the informal rules of the democratic game, as proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).



some basic consensus because it pertains to discord and instrumental reasoning.” (Urbinati, 2006, p. 35).

This basic consensus enables the free expression of opinion within the bounds of the democratic process. At this point, one may ask about the role of institutions and how they might provide spaces for opinion-building without creating room for self-destruction. Or, conversely, whether the way institutions operate exacerbates tensions and imposes a heavy burden on the democratic game. What is decisive is that citizens have institutional spaces to express their opinions.

The return of the political does not imply the disappearance of consensus, but rather a redefinition of its scope. Conflict becomes constitutive of democratic life precisely because societies are marked by plural and competing interests. However, such conflict can persist democratically only when there is minimal consensus regarding the legitimacy of democratic procedures, political liberties, and the rules that govern disagreement itself. In this sense, the tension between the social and the political helps explain why democracy simultaneously requires both conflict and procedural consensus.

It is precisely this line of analysis that guides Young’s (2000) proposal, namely, the expansion of spaces for participation. If opinion-building is confined solely to official public spaces, there is no need for statistical studies to show that participation will not involve a significant number of citizens. Expansion involves opening new forums for discussion that give individuals, immersed in their daily activities, the space and time to express their ideas and hear other points of view.

The crucial argumentative point in section III concerns the control, however imperfect, that citizens have over their representatives. For even if opinions do not change a specific decision, they influence the deliberative process and provide strong arguments for the opposition in future debates and electoral contests. Opinion may not alter a particular decision, but it raises a series of elements that political actors cannot disregard. This is what Urbinati has called the “negative power of the people,” for it is always possible to judge, influence, approve, or reject any governmental action.

The control enabled by public opinion reinforces the idea that democracy is a space where different actors have roles and responsibilities, and that, if they fail to fulfill them, they will face consequences. Of course, political opinion is malleable, capable of being reconstructed and transformed, but this is not a rapid or straightforward process, as it requires crafting narratives that are at least minimally acceptable to the relevant audience. A more in-depth analysis would be warranted here on the role of social media in shaping

political opinion and how it has transformed the process of opinion formation within the political sphere. This remains an open topic; thus, we refrain from any hasty judgments<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, the freedom of public opinion ensures that the people can always speak for themselves, preventing any ruler or even any public figure from speaking in the name of “the people.” Manin (1995) argues that this aspect prevents representatives from saying “we the people,” because, as we have already affirmed, representation does not establish an identity between citizens and those elected by them. Speaking in the name of the people as a “we” would create a dangerous opening for representatives, allowing them to evade many responsibilities and act without proper oversight. In this way, public opinion becomes a fundamental element of democratic control and assessment of representative action.

Following this reasoning, one may raise important questions: To what extent is public opinion solidly constructed? To what degree is opinion susceptible to manipulation? What role do emotions play in the formation of opinion? All of these are valid questions and would make for a rich discussion. I do not ignore them here; instead, I take as a premise that, despite the difficulties in forming public opinion, it constitutes a fundamental space for democratic control and development. I am not claiming that opinion is unproblematic, but rather that, despite its shortcomings, it is a healthy mechanism in the relationship between representatives and the people they represent.

**(IV)** Political decisions made after deliberation, in theory, offer both opportunities for participation and a broader consideration of diverse opinions on a given issue or problem. I understand that two points are crucial to the concept of deliberation in democracy: (i) the deliberative process as the source of legitimacy; and (ii) the idea that deliberation allows preferences to be adjusted over the course of the discussion, that is, individuals do not hold definitive decisions before deliberation, or at least they are not in a position to affirm them categorically.

Here again, one could raise numerous criticisms about the feasibility of actual deliberation, such as whether all participants are equally informed and whether economic inequalities significantly influence the process. I will assume that, despite the difficulties, a certain degree of deliberation guarantees legitimacy and creates the conditions for adjusting individual preferences.

Democratic legitimacy resides in the deliberative process and in the opportunities it

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<sup>12</sup> Here, it is worth referencing Habermas’s recent text, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*.

provides. This thesis is grounded in the work of Habermas (1996), Benhabib (1996), Cohen (1989), and Manin (2007), among other authors who operate within the framework of deliberative democracy. Deliberation theoretically allows everyone to participate in the process, present their arguments, challenge others' arguments, weigh reasons, and reach a result that has value for all, even if there is no consensus on the outcome, since legitimacy is achieved through the process and the conditions it provides.

Democracy, organized in a *diarchic* manner, as Urbinati (2014) states, deliberates within the spaces offered but also decides by majority rule. The deliberative process does not end with the election. It is always possible for the “loser” to present new reasons and arguments in favor of their position, even if they must wait until a new election to become a representative. One does not need to abandon one's position; one only needs to find more suitable elements capable of convincing other participants in the deliberative process, as well as elements that persuade citizens to vote for that position. (Habermas, 1996)

The following analysis examines how deliberation adjusts or clarifies individual preferences. As Manin states:

There is no reason to assume that individuals possess a complete set of preferences from the outset. When they enter a public debate, they probably have certain desires, but these do not apply to all the issues raised in the debate, nor to all aspects of the decision to be made<sup>13</sup> (Manin, 2007, p. 29).

Individuals do not possess all relevant information beforehand. They may be unaware of how public policies are implemented; they may seek a better understanding of others' preferences; they may desire solutions that serve not only their own interests but also those of others. All of these aspects reinforce the importance of the deliberative process, as it informs individuals about a range of things previously unknown to them. Preferences can be adjusted, and there is the possibility of understanding problems more broadly and completely.

Decision-making processes are usually marked by dualities: yes or no, this or that. Deliberation goes beyond these dualities by opening space for new and promising possibilities. Moreover, individuals are not limited to simply saying yes or no to the issues under discussion; they can argue, offer reasons, and accept or reject counterarguments. In this sense, deliberation opens up a less restrictive horizon of analysis than the moment of decision itself, and it may better prepare citizens for the decisions they will face.

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<sup>13</sup> Loose translation.

Following Young's (2000) thesis that participation and deliberation go hand in hand, the deliberative process gains even more significance because it is through this process that individuals can participate more effectively, provided that the necessary conditions are at least minimally guaranteed. It is from this space that representatives can draw arguments, explore possibilities, and discover new alternatives to fulfill or improve their government programs. And when that is not possible, this space also enables them to offer and receive reasons when choosing a new administrative course.

Even though certain criteria must be met in the deliberative process, the outcome is not predetermined.

What is distinctive about the discourse model is that although it presupposes that participants must recognize one another's entitlement to moral respect and reciprocity in some sense, the determination of the precise content and extent of these principles would be a consequence of discourses themselves (Benhabib, 1996, p. 79).

It is possible for participants in the exchange of reasons to change their own positions or to influence their peers' positions. Without entering into the merits of the criticisms of the deliberative procedure, it is still possible to recognize both its weaknesses and its advantages for democracy. Precisely because it is an open process, deliberation can lead to significant social advances; on the other hand, it may also be dominated by those who are better positioned to participate, especially in terms of economic resources. However, the conditions for deliberation can be improved without discarding the achievements already made.

This second section aimed to develop an analysis of representation based on the four points proposed by Manin. Elections contain mechanisms that allow citizens to make choices, reinforce them, or revise them. At the same time, representatives act with a view toward current and future approval by their voters. Even though electoral processes have their limitations, certain mechanisms help evaluate the work of representatives. Partial independence allows representatives to change course when necessary and negotiate with others to pursue better solutions. This is not absolute independence, since they must always remain accountable to the represented, but it enables them to perform their duties with a minimum degree of autonomy.

Freedom of opinion allows all citizens to express themselves within the boundaries of democracy. These expressions may at times place stress on the democratic process, but if well managed, they can help improve it over time. Ultimately, deliberation provides a forum

where everyone's arguments can be considered to determine the best path forward. The process can and should be improved, but it already constitutes a privileged space for clarification and the potential reconciliation of interests.

Therefore, based on these four aspects, it is possible to affirm that representation, despite facing a moment of instability, still offers mechanisms and instruments for citizen participation and oversight. The risk of disconnection between representatives and the represented is always present, but so too are the possibilities for deepening democracy. There is no denying that representation is, at the very least, unstable. However, the tools are available to improve their use and to support the continued development of democratic representation. This text does not aim to present definitive solutions. Still, the path outlined throughout — namely, the strengthening of existing mechanisms of oversight and control, along with the creation of new mechanisms to bring representatives and citizens closer together — appears to me to be promising.

The persistence of Manin's principles should not be understood as evidence that representative democracy continues to function exactly as originally described. Contemporary transformations, including audience democracy, digital communication, and the growing influence of market dynamics on political agendas, clearly affect the operation of these principles. Nevertheless, their continued institutional presence indicates that representative democracy still contains democratic mechanisms and resources that can be mobilized, contested, and potentially renewed.

## **Final Considerations**

It is possible to conclude that democracy is undergoing a moment of instability, marked by transformations in forms of participation, in the relationship between representatives and the represented, in the economic conditions that influence the democratic process, and by a considerable difficulty on the part of theorists (here especially theories from the late 20th and early 21st centuries) in capturing and understanding such transformations. This does not mean that democracy is facing an unprecedented crisis; rather, it is in a transitional phase, and it is not yet possible to determine where these changes will lead.

This uncertainty does not prevent us from affirming that the liberal model of market-based democracy has reached its limits, as people's living conditions have, in general, not improved. In fact, they have worsened. Thus, democracy must either sever its ties with this model or continue to be perceived as responsible for the decline in people's quality of life,



since it makes promises it cannot fulfill. Political independence may allow democracy to fulfill its promises, or at least to reassess them, identifying which are viable and how they might be achieved.

On the other hand, even though individuals may not feel represented by elected politicians, mechanisms for participation and oversight are available. One could object that these mechanisms are insufficient or that they impose requirements that make individual participation nearly impossible, but one cannot deny their existence. It is both possible and desirable to consider ways of making these mechanisms more accessible<sup>14</sup> and closer to ordinary citizens, thereby strengthening the link between representatives and the represented, a fundamental point in representative democracies. If such mechanisms do exist, even if they are not functioning at full capacity, it is not accurate to claim that representation no longer plays a role in contemporary democracies. Perhaps, once again, what we are facing is a theoretical inability to adequately grasp the changes taking place in the process of representation.

Democracy is experiencing instability and challenges that are not solely the result of its own functioning but are also shaped by external factors, such as a market-based economic system. Although the current scenario poses significant challenges, it is possible to observe that democracy possesses institutional and political mechanisms that can be mobilized to address these problems, especially if there is some degree of detachment from market dynamics and if alternatives rooted in open public debate are explored, where conflict and antagonism are recognized as constitutive parts of the political process.

Therefore, contemporary democracy should not be understood solely in terms of collapse or exhaustion. The current scenario points rather to a process of instability and transformation affecting both the relationship between market and politics and the functioning of representative institutions themselves. Yet these transformations do not eliminate the democratic resources embedded in representation, public opinion, participation, and deliberation. On the contrary, they reveal the need to rethink and strengthen these mechanisms in light of new historical conditions. Democracy remains marked by conflict, uncertainty, and dispute, but precisely for this reason, its institutional and political forms continue to be open to revision, contestation, and renewal.

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<sup>14</sup> A reflection of this nature is developed by Kevin Elliott (2023).



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