DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD

Governing complexity: an essay on democracies in exceptional times

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We live in a time of maximum complexity. From a sociological perspective, history is presented as a constant evolution of the degree of complexity that mediates human relations. New technologies, migrations, and pandemics, among many others, are elements that have habitually *complicated* our relationships and forced governments to evolve in responding to them. But what response? A democratic community must be precisely a space to deliberate on how to adapt to complexity, a space in which to debate on the measures that need to be put into place to respond to it. However, as the pandemic has shown, this space for debate is weak; when a state of emergency is declared, political debate is subordinated to protective measures.

"We had become accustomed to being a society of free individuals. But we are a nation of citizens in solidarity." As part of the response to the health crisis, Emmanuel Macron, the president of the republic of *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity*, thus problematized the concept of liberty, contrasting it with that of solidarity. It is not just an innocent narrative device, it is a justification of the renunciation of freedom to protect us from the pandemic, and

essentially condenses the exceptional character with which complexity has tended to be governed lately.

Macron and the motto of the republic should help us to reflect on the widespread tendency to declare a state of emergency, not only to contain the virus, but also any other external element that could destabilize our community. The paradox that this text seeks to explore is that, far from protecting our community, the security measures accompanying the state of exception sabotage the space for public deliberation and prevent the political community from agreeing on how to govern the new layers of complexity. Now that we have reached the end of a long period of state of alarm in the Spanish state as a whole, it seems an opportune moment to jot down some ideas in this regard.

Governing in exceptional times

The incremental tendency of complexity, especially when it is subjected to the accelerating effects of, for example, a crisis such as that of COVID-19, overwhelms the mechanisms of governance and makes it easier for rulers to resort to exceptionality. It is in this sense that we must understand Macron's declarations: in the face of unforeseen events, the ordinary functioning of democracy is suspended, and recourse is made to a state of exception in which principles different from the usual ones operate. However, who determines these conditions of exceptionality that justify interrupting the normal functioning of a democracy? And how long does this altered state have to last?

According to the Schmittian conception of power [1] —the first modern author to theorize on these questions— the decision on the state of exception is a prerogative that corresponds to the sovereign and that, by definition, would have to be provisional. However, we already know that there is nothing more permanent than the provisional and lately we find that the media concatenation of *crises* has led us to naturalize a climate of perennial exceptionality. The concentration of highly complex episodes in a short period of time has fostered a public climate of exception in which resignations such as those proposed by Macron are accepted uncritically. A true perversion of the use of sovereignty.

In other words, we have ended up giving exceptional status to phenomena that are simply complex. Scenarios such as COVID-19 in particular, but also robotization or the refugee crisis, to give just a few examples, have sought to fall into this exceptional category. Because they are seen as potentially destabilizing, these episodes have prompted some voices to propose suspending the normal functioning of our communities in order to protect ourselves from their impacts. We assume losing our freedom to fight against the virus, arbitrarily hindering the progress of automation to protect some sectors or limiting our fraternal conception to exclude refugees. We do so believing that we safeguard our community from an external threat and, paradoxically, we consent to renounce the principles to which our democracies aspire in order to confront it.

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In the face of these exceptional conditions, a climate of threat is generated in which it seems that we can aspire to nothing more than the survival of the community. Any renunciation is justified for the sake of our *protection* and we are told that the exceptional measures adopted are for our security. The warmongering language in which the communication of the COVID-19 response strategies was framed is a good illustration of this securitization narrative that is set in motion and in which the ultimate goal is defence against supposed external threats to our status quo. The priority in this "security paradigm" is to contain the otherness —whatever its form— that *complicates* the day-to-day functioning of our community. "The security paradigm is a habitual technique of government in modernity" [2], Agamben tells us, and recourse to exceptionality is its justification.

Rise of populism

One of the main effects of this constant recourse to exceptionality is the rise of populism. Climates of threat are fertile ground for the sentimentalization of politics, and the narrative of securitization finds in fear and guilt the two main pillars on which to base community protection measures. However arbitrary they may be, it is reckless or uncivil to question these measures taken to protect us. And, as an example, the pandemic.

On the one hand, we find that the fear generated by what we do not know activates selfish impulses that lead us to accept any renunciation that allows us to protect *us*. In other words, taking advantage of the climate of threat that has been created by the state of alarm, a kind of individualistic populism grows that only proposes to be fraternal with that to which it is capable of attributing traits of its own identity. This kind of discourse is comforting for all those individuals who harbor fear and resentment towards a world they see as beyond their control, and Donald Trump is their redeeming messiah.

At the other end of the populist spectrum, but using similar instruments and with identical objectives, we see that the feeling of guilt aroused by not obeying the exceptional containment measures is sufficient force to accept them. Beyond democratic principles, communitarian populism takes advantage of the state of alarm in order to agglutinate legitimacy on the basis of a certain idea of moral good. In other words, in order to protect ourselves from the new threat, it is necessary that all individuals, at the individual level, share the same idea of what is good for the community. Macron's gesture is part of this dynamic: the response to the pandemic depends on the members of the community acting *correctly*. Like individualistic populism, its communitarian variant perpetuates the dynamic of identity versus otherness: a certain idea of moral good *cancels* out everything that is not considered good and reduces the community to the homogeneous identity that is constructed on the basis of this conception of good.

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In short, what the two populisms have in common is that they react with an immune will to any element that upsets us, that does not correspond to our identity, that forces us out of our comfort zone. The paradigm of security leads to reduce the community to a single identity that now expands in a totalitarian way. Roberto Esposito elaborates this discourse on the basis of the contrast between the concepts of communitas and immunitas[3]. In essence, community is the space in which a shared identity is built, because a world made only of differences is unthinkable. Now, in the same way, a world made only of watertight identities is also unthinkable. It is in this sense that immunity is presented as contrary to the notion of community: it represents a flight from the community's openness to difference, from the reciprocal obligation and mutual provision that underlie it. Immunity acts here as a castrating element of freedom, of openness to otherness, of the risk to identity. And it is in this closure to difference, in this self-absorption, that immunized communities become homogeneous and suffer the threat of totalitarian expansion that Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, or Judith Butler have explored so well.

Depoliticization of common life

The recourse to exceptionality a priori problematizes any element external to our everyday life. Its objective is to neutralize it and to ensure the preservation of a community which, in this way, becomes isolated, homogeneous and, ultimately, totalitarian. In other words, exceptionality incorporates this desire for immunization, this irrational, prejudicialized and fearful repression of otherness, which leads to the isolation of the community. The measures of protection of the community that are put in place during the state of exception are measures of an immunitarian nature. That is to say, they make us impermeable. The result is that, by annulling contact with these elements external to the community, we do not make the conflict disappear, we are only refusing to include in the public debate the way in which we should relate to it. In short, we are depoliticizing life in common.

Locking us indoors might slow the spread of the virus at first, but it does not resolve the debate about the tools we should equip ourselves with to deal with future pandemics. Denying asylum to refugees might block one of their access routes, but it does not prevent us from having to prepare our communities to accommodate an ever-increasing flow of people. Slowing the advance of automation in some economic sector could temporarily prevent a social crisis, but it does not free us from the responsibility of regulating a new industrial revolution that is moving the world towards a new paradigm.

In this game of balances between identity and difference that takes place in the community, living together implies, precisely, to assume difference as a constant phenomenon, to naturalize the presence of the *other* as an element that could transform our community.

The immunitarian pretension is simply irresponsible because, no matter how much we want to deny the difference, it will not disappear. It is in this tension between identity and difference, in the management of this potentially transformative contact for community identity, that we find the most propitious terrain for politics, understood as dialogue, negotiation and leadership of this process of change. And, contrary to what exceptionality promulgates, it is precisely in this situation that the transcendent principles to which our democracies aspire —liberty, equality, and fraternity— should operate.

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Recovering the paradox we referred to earlier, some present COVID-19, robotization, or the refugee crisis —among many others— as threats to our community. However, in reality, the real onslaught against the democratic principles that define it lies in the exceptional way we have of responding to them. Politics must be the tool with which we face complexity, not from an immunization desire, but with the pretension of leading the transformation processes that occur in this contact between the community and the difference that challenges us.

In praise of transcendence

As we noted at the beginning of this text, contacts with complex events are commonplace in the history of mankind. Indeed, in a certain way, political communities are founded to collectively manage the challenges they pose to us. At the level of this relationship with complexity, liberty, equality and fraternity act as teleological principles, aspirational elements that guide and give meaning to the daily functioning of our communities. They have a character of projection and horizon, even of transcendence, which —and this is what is most relevant for us here— make of them the limits of the political community's public deliberation. In other words, it is only within the framework of this constellation of principles that the members of a community can agree on how its government should respond to the external elements that challenge it. In short, the prevalence of these democratic principles is essential to guarantee the democratic deliberation of a political community.

The revisionist temptation is natural and instinctive because it promises a (false) sense of control in times of uncertainty, but the recourse to exceptionality, by suspending some of these principles that delimit the space for public debate, will inevitably undermine it. The immunizing tendency in which the state of exception is inscribed takes us back to a previous stage in which democratic deliberation is not possible. A true political community is one that keeps this space for public debate intact even at times when complexity threatens to overwhelm the usual management mechanisms. The political dimension of the

community thus involves resistance to this securitizing eagerness that takes hold of communities with the declaration of a state of emergency.

The continuing trend of declaring exceptionality predates COVID-19 but the pandemic, as with so much else, has accelerated it. As a result, we find ourselves with communities dominated by the sentimentalization of politics in which we consent to waivers that impinge on our basic democratic principles. These exceptional measures act as a short-term firewall against external elements that challenge our community bubble, but the problem is that they torpedo the space for public debate and prevent the community from democratically agreeing on the most appropriate response measures.

Contrary to what Macron proposes, the republican aspiration should be to live in a community that is able to put in place the necessary instruments to respond to this external element without any renunciation, not one that has to entrust this indispensable aspect of life in common to such an arbitrary and unequal element as solidarity. “Freedom is the gift of a healthy community”[4], not of an immunized community and implies precisely not having to be subjected to the arbitrariness of states of alarm and extraordinary measures to manage contact with otherness[5]. A truly democratic community is one that is capable of dialoguing with the otherness that challenges it without renouncing its fundamental aspirations, not an immunized nation that renounces its principles for the sake of containing otherness.

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