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## **An essay on participation and political consciousness**

Un ensayo sobre la participación y la conciencia política

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## An essay on participation and political consciousness

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### Abstract


The main objective of this essay is to review how community and citizen participation can facilitate the development of democracy, and limit the power of tyrannical systems. In the following pages I have examined the concept of participation as described in psychological and philosophical literature in order to demonstrate how open debates regarding communities' normative values can mobilize efforts to create more inclusive and engaged cultures in groups, societies and governments. I illustrate how this process happens and give theoretical arguments for promoting it.

*Keywords:* democracy, dictatorship, culture, consciousness, social change

### Resumen

El objetivo principal de este ensayo es revisar cómo la participación comunitaria y ciudadana pueden facilitar el desarrollo de sistemas más democráticos, y poner límites al poder de los regímenes tiránicos. En las siguientes páginas he revisado literatura psicológica y filosófica con el fin de demostrar cómo los debates abiertos sobre los valores normativos de las comunidades pueden movilizar esfuerzos para crear culturas más inclusivas y comprometidas en grupos, sociedades y gobiernos. Aclaré cómo este proceso ocurre, y ofrecí argumentos teóricos a favor de su promoción.

*Palabras clave:* democracia, dictadura, cultura, conciencia, cambio social

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Community and social psychology are essentially political disciplines, in the sense that they investigate -and promote- ideational and structural changes in community groups that favor local wellbeing and participation. Often studies in these disciplines deal with the results of social experiments, opinion studies or other projects that professionals in the area have carried out. One of the major tools used in community interventions is to increase neighborhood participation.

It is important to reflect on the theoretical aspects of neighborhood and citizen participation. It can happen as a result of professional intervention, but it can also be the outcome of “naturally” occurring processes. Even when it originates in the relatively spontaneous movements of concerned citizens, it is important for professionals who are active in community work to understand the dynamics of these events.

In this essay I have considered the role of culture in fomenting participation. While it is possible to “create culture” in a community intervention, it is important to understand naturally occurring beliefs and customs in order to help people redress injustices or correct damaging practices. It is also important to understand the term “consciousness” in the sense of the awareness that people have of their place in the world, their aspirations for change, and their possibilities of achieving it.

I have reviewed certain conceptions that describe how culture works in this way, and its relationship to consciousness and participation, together with the manifestation of contradictory values such as domination and competition. Participation can be defined as taking part in, or being involved in something. It can be a component in organized human activities that rely on the voluntary contributions of many people such as in war, voting systems, pension plans, and collaborations in collective endeavors like charity activities. In smaller groups participation happens, for example, in community meetings, friendly encounters, musical and theatrical productions, and family celebrations. The word can also refer to smaller collaborations between two or more individuals.

In the following pages I have reviewed: a) participation as described by George Simmel (2016) in which people’s multiple allegiances -even in conditions of political domination- can be a resource for liberation efforts, b) the nature of normative values from Kant to Habermas, including the possibility of a hierarchy of values, or cultural relativity, c) culture and the lifeworld as a social environment, and d) the relationship of all these concepts to the possibility of a participative government.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

### **Participation, competition and dominance**

To understand participation, it is important first to review the influences that hinder its development. We have just developed a broad definition of the term that includes both large group endeavors and small face-to-face experiences. It is possible that in a given system or culture that large-scale participative actions are repressed, while small-scale interactions are encouraged. Also, in modern political environments that prohibit dissident participation, public acts of political support for the existing regimen are encouraged and even fabricated.

The sociologist George Simmel (2016) has written about people’s political subordination to a leader or a group of powerful individuals, and about their possible reactions to domination. In a long, interpretative introduction of his book, Sociology, Zabłudovsky and Sabido (2016) point out that in Simmel’s analysis, subordination is a reciprocal action in which the dominated class forms an active part. They say that domination for Simmel is not limited to a simple exercise of coercive power and passive obedience, since the subjected community retains a sphere of personal freedom and spontaneity.

The subjected individual sometimes seeks a higher authority to protect them. But on the other hand, people also resist this power. Thus, for Simmel, "obedience and opposition constitute two aspects of the same conduct» (Simmel, p. 214). Simmel considered that this duality in power relationships extends from large-scale political references, to work environments, to marital relations, and even to the relationships between children and their parents.

Simmel referred to a sociological "split personality". People have multiple allegiances, and no one "is entirely [just] a citizen, nor a member of a Church, nor of an economic unit There are always aspects of the individual that remain outside these spheres" (Zabludovsky & Sabido, p. 42-43). These multiple allegiances are complex, and Simmel said that divided loyalties can even help tyrants to control the masses. On the other hand, it can also happen that, given these divided loyalties and values, the seeds for overturning tyrants can be found in this same dispartateness.

Simmel referred to a "differentiated spiritual structure". This structure is important for understanding the contradiction between submission and liberation, because there are some elements that are susceptible to domination and others that are not.

Simmel even referred to the bureaucrat's (or the employee's) submission to his or her agency or company. When the individual subject "disappears" into a collectivity that lacks subjective states of mind, they may facilitate power abuses, because it is difficult for compassion and kindness to be manifested in situations of dominance (Zabludovsky & Sabido, p. 44). But people have principles or a sense of responsibility as well. And even when majorities are formed, there can be "active minorities."<sup>1</sup> That is, when majorities are formed by voting processes or other mechanisms, minorities can survive. We remember that Simmel was writing shortly before the success of the German fascist movement.

People can also be subordinated to an impersonal and objective principle. This reminds us of Émile Durkheim (1999) or Eric Fromm's (1959) use of the word "obedience". These principles can emerge from an individual's internal dialogue, and one can "obey" a principle, or a religious precept. In Simmel's work this refers to principles like the rule of law. It can refer to an imperative and moral conscience, almost in the sense developed by Emmanuel Kant (2012). Simmel says that "once normative forms have taken hold [...] they are liberated from their primitive sociological supports" (p. 196). People then adopt them, and they begin to represent "needs that we call 'ideal needs'" (p. 196). These needs can be emancipatory.

Simmel also refers to the mutual relations between distinct dominated groups or individuals, as in collective agreements. We can think of the relationships between employees in a company, union members or even countries (as in the formation of the European Union after their experience with German domination in the 1930's and 1940's).

These relationships can be liberating when the organizations express emancipating principles, but can also increase the subordination of their members when their leaders have political agendas with regard to their own potential aspirations.

Simmel points out that one of the most powerful strategies for retaining power is for the tyrant to share enemies with the dominated class. For this reason, xenophobia has often been used as a political lure or "bait" to attract followers.

### **Culture and the "lifeworld"**

"Culture" is the favorite topic of anthropologists and sociologists. As a general rule, anthropology studies small communities, often tribal and isolated groups. Sociology, on the other hand, tends to

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<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of Moscovici's active minorities. We will deal with this topic later.

analyze large institutions with the aim of making social trends and structures visible. In the reflections that follow, I will concentrate on the idea of culture as a social-political environment.

Martínez, Bermudez, Cediél, & Beltrán (2022), in an article on the role of culture in the economic and political development of nations, say that it has a fundamental role in the creation of well-being and the full participation of citizens in the processes of their state. They point out how the United Nations, together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are promoting culture as one of the pivots of development, within the framework of fundamental freedoms. They say that culture strengthens political participation, invigorates social solidarity and cooperation, refines value formation, and strengthens people's understanding of their historical heritage. The authors offer various definitions of culture, such as a complex whole that expresses the life of a given human group, and also as a "textile of meanings". In their third definition, it is a means of social transformation that includes Nation-States, local communities and different social actors in decision-making.

The authors say that "culture is expressed as artistic creation and reference, identity, education, patterns of conduct, life models, social representation, symbols, values and practice, as well as an element of power". The role of the individual is to "recreate" the meaning of the world and of his or her own existence, always within the framework of their cultural history.

This approach to culture incorporates the ideas of intentional and contemplative change in favor of humanistic values. It does not abandon the idea of tradition, but puts it at the service of the well-being of all members of society. Even in countries where leaders have used cultural aspects to strengthen their own power, cultural diversity allows people to question old practices. In South Africa, for example, apartheid was challenged by members of both the white and black populations, and eventually Nelson Mandela became the nation's first black president. Both he and the previous (white) president, Frederik de Klerk, shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 for their efforts, which were backed by an immense collective effort.

### **Common Sense**

Common sense is usually defined in contrast to scientific knowledge (Moscovici, 1961/1976; Lévi Strauss, 1959/1987). For their part, Moscovici & Hewstone (1984) distinguished between automatic and critical thinking. Montero (1994) has compared the two types of knowledge, finding that between them "there is a continuous interrelationship" (p. 14). She says that "they are two contexts of knowledge production" (p. 14) and represent attempts to make sense of the world through language.

Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989. p. 168) define common sense as "a series of beliefs accepted within a given society, whose members assume that any reasonable being shares them." This definition points to the validity of these beliefs, in the sense that acceptance by "everyone" allows the content of given cultural agreements to be declared correct, appropriate or acceptable. There is in this formulation a faith in the correspondence between objects and thought: the red of the rose is in the rose and "everyone reasonable" who has the use of his eyes would agree. Similarly, people "know" what they should do or not do, what produces pleasure and what causes sadness. It is common sense that places community members as points of reference in a system that assigns social meaning to individual perceptions and actions, and provides the criteria for judging them.

On the other hand, the existence of these criteria does not imply the absence of discrepancies. Billig et al (1988) state that common sense consists of statements that occur in opposites, that is, a menu of possible positions and options that exist within popular knowledge in an abstract way, which can be applied in concrete conditions according to people's intentions. They are sometimes conflicting. People deliberate with others and even with themselves about ethical, legal and, in general, dilemmatic issues,

and they do so within the structural axes of their culture. This appreciation echoes Simmel's idea of cultural diversity.

### **The plausibility of values and cognitions**

The definitions given by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989) and Billig et al, (1988) also complement each other; Billig et al propose the existence of reasonable alternatives, to which people can resort when they need them; at the same time, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to the set of what is acceptable, including the mechanisms for the establishment of agreements and the mediation of disputes. For Billig et al these alternatives are especially embodied in adages which appear in pairs: the saying, "The early bird gets the worm". It is a rhetorical vehicle to justify the intentions of those who use it, or a recipe for good advice. It can be said that it represents both a "reality" and a value. On the other hand, the saying, "Take it easy, take it as it comes" is a proposition whose meaning is opposed to the first saying. We can say that both are components of common sense; both can be true when the contexts are appropriate.

### **Arguments in favor of the hierarchization of values and cognitions**

Many cognitions can be subjected to criteria to judge their plausibility ("that cat is black, not white"), but when cognitions contain value judgments, they are open to discussion, and there are historically elaborated criteria for judging them. These are agreements or social constructions that structure value judgments; One of these criteria has to do with the benevolence of certain social practices. Examples include: a) tolerance is better than racial and ethnic prejudice; b) respect for human rights is better than the use of torture and other humiliating means of punishment; and c) it is better to protect children than to leave them helpless.

Both values and cognitions can be subjected to acceptability criteria in these terms. Savater (1986), applying criteria of rationality to ethics, uses the word "meaning" as a criterion that transcends cognitions and values; meaning would be a higher category that contextualizes the actions and subjectivity of human groups. Meaning would be a collective fund of knowledge about what is good, effective and in general, in use or accepted in their cultures. Ethics would be: "... a rational attempt to give a totalizing sense to human actions... [Ethics] does not consist in asking whether this or that particular behavior is 'good' or 'bad', nor what I should do at any given moment, but rather: what is the meaning of my deliberation and my choice?" (Savater, 1986, p. 11).

Defined in this way, ethics consists of more or less coherent systems of thought, that is: "... a normative claim of knowledge... rationally articulated... (which) tries to make rationally intelligible what the human subject as such, in the end, wants." (Savater, 1986, p. 11)

Its elements can be classified as valid, or invalid, within the context of which they are part. The last element, volition (what the subject wants), cannot be subjected to these judgments, but the intentions and acts with which they are associated can be judged in terms of the normative body of cultural knowledge.

Habermas (1987/1992, p. 72), on the other hand, distinguishes between several types of validity criteria: a) the validity of the objective world, to which criteria of truth and falsehood can be applied, or propositional truth, b) normative rectitude, which, although defined by "current" cultural criteria, can be rationally criticized, and c) expressive veracity which can be summarized as subjective sincerity.

Habermas says that rationality has less to do with knowledge than with the way in which subjects capable of language and action make use of it (Habermas, 1992, p. 24). For Habermas, rationality must embody "a fallible knowledge" (p. 26) and must also be "a disposition of subjects capable of language and action" (p. 42).

In this sense, we can say that there is a basis for: a) applying criteria of plausibility to values and subjectivity, as well as to cognitions, and b) hierarchizing the lifeworlds or cultures in terms of said validity. This is true especially because there may be in a given culture opposing value systems that at the same time may defend both tolerance and xenophobic and repressive standards. People eventually must defend their norms.

We can postulate that the creation of plausibility criteria for judging cognitions and values can be achieved through argumentation; that is, the criteria of acceptability are historically elaborated through persuasion. The distinction made by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989) between the acts of persuading and convincing will be useful to illustrate the difference and similarity between: a) local and temporal values and cognitions, i.e., those that are actively debated and that have supporters and opponents, and b) values and cognitions that could be postulated at some point as absolute in the Kantian sense, that is, those that are universally and a priori valid for all people. These authors say that persuasive arguments "are only intended to serve a particular audience" (p. 67) insofar as the verb "persuade" refers to a particular situation in which it is possible to give reasons for the adoption of a belief, a value or an attitude. On the other hand, convincing arguments can obtain "the adhesion of every entity of reason" (Perelman, & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1989, p. 67).

We can doubt the "real" existence of universal values and convincing arguments. But for each particular audience there are bases for "problematizing" (in Freire's sense)<sup>2</sup> about each category of values and cognitions. This supposes an underlying communality to the human condition. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989, p. 69) say that "from the moment it is accepted that there are means of proof other than the necessary proof, the argumentation that is addressed to particular audiences has a scope that goes beyond the merely subjective belief". Argumentation that is directed at the production of "non-appreciative reasons" (i.e., reasons that are not bound by pressure, the use of power, and coercion) is the vehicle for particular audiences to reach agreements with each other about the hierarchies they will establish between their values and the plausibility of their cognitions. In the communicative sense, the difference between values and cognitions disappears, leaving in its place argumentative elements that are supported by reasons. I can convince an audience that I am right about "facts" such as air pollution or the guilt of a prisoner; similarly, I can convince them that something that historical prejudice has condemned as ugly is really beautiful (as they did to end racial segregation in the 60s: "Black is beautiful").

### **The relationship between truth and plausibility**

The true and the plausible are established in terms of some body of reference. "Truth" exists in more or less closed systems such as axiomatic mathematics or a body of legal proscriptions where a person can be declared guilty or innocent. However, mathematical and legal "truth" can be distinguished from each other. Although in mathematics the truth can be proven in the inductive sense if there is no counterexample, and deductively if there is proof, in the law there are degrees of guilt, and binding decisions can be modified. Legislation can even change the criteria for establishing the "truth", according to the values of the people who make up the society where the laws are in force. In a similar sense, plausibility is historically constructed in common sense, not as in progress or evolutionary structures, but cumulatively in the sense of what is acceptable or the best option. When a conflict occurs between two plausible solutions, the resolution of differences occurs through debate.

However, in general there are many "almost" established solutions. For example, one of the highest possible values since World War II is the condemnation of human rights violations. Also, democracy

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<sup>2</sup>Freire, P. (n.d.) wrote about "problematization", above all in relation to education. He used an almost Socratic method of questioning students about their lives and their social reality in order to stimulate them "to find themselves" and work together in elaborating alternatives to unacceptable conditions.

has been an "invention" of common sense (which has since been formally elaborated) that regulates individual confrontations. In this way, we can say that democracy "is" better than tyranny, but at the same time there remains the possibility that other forms of consultation and control are also possible.

### Relativity

The results of community problematization and awareness can be considered relative. Rappaport (1977), for example, in his classic book, *Community Psychology*, has chapters devoted to the analysis of some traditional concepts of clinical psychology, including intelligence, mental health, statistical normality, and social deviance. In relation to these concepts, the author considers certain political and ethnocentric implications related to the imposition of values by dominant sectors of North American society. He proposes that one way to deal with these implications is through a relativistic position, where social change would be the product of the problematization of the felt needs of a specific social group, which are contextualized historically. This means that the social reality of one group is not transferable to other groups and cannot be imposed by an external agent of change. Problematization, in this sense, occurs at the level of individual communities when they "become aware" of both their needs and appropriate ways to satisfy them. Rappaport questions the right of psychologists to establish their own criteria about what is healthy, normal, correct and good, outside the context of particular groups, precisely because of the political influence suffered by these professionals.

However, I consider that the relativity of cognitions and values is a weak solution to the problem of the multiplicity of values and cognitions. I propose the possibility of replacing it with the notion of pragmatic and limited tolerance. This would include a community's (or an individual's) acknowledgment of normative differences within given limits. Thus, people can accept the existence of different religions, but reject the idea of gender discrimination.

The Lifeworld and social change: The idea of "lifeworld" is closely related to that of culture. It is important to review the two notions because they incorporate the possibility of critical consciousness in groups and individuals. The lifeworld is an original concept of Husserl that was later developed by Alfred Schutz and others in which the phenomenon of common sense inserted in a given culture is examined. Ricardo Salas (2006) summarizes Schutz saying that people presuppose that their fellow beings have conscious life and that intercommunication is possible. (Salas, p. 172). And then Salas describes the life-world as an accumulation of knowledge transmitted between people of a given social group. In this way, one's knowledge about the natural world can be contrasted with their knowledge of the "significant world", that implies an implicit reference to the "Other". (Salas, p. 174).

In Cronick (2024b) the author describes the foundations of the concept of "Lifeworld". In what follows I use some of these reflections. The lifeworld is not private. We share it with our fellow human beings. It is an intersubjective world through which we can understand a reality that is intuitively shared and considered valid by most members as an interpretative framework. Through it we understand social stratifications and modes of interaction. Through it we can build relationships with our fellow human beings and expect the same from them.

Consciousness We may need to consider that consciousness is a cultural phenomenon, not in the sense of a mental capacity, but rather in terms of self-perception. The way people perceive themselves makes a difference in what possibilities they see for themselves and others. This self-perception has cultural roots and has influenced humanity's ways of relating to the world and to others, and has had a profound political impact.

Juan Manuel Navarro in his introduction to *Descartes' Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1996) quotes Hegel who said that self-consciousness, as described by Descartes, is an essential moment of truth for modern thinking. It was the beginning of the "principle of immanence", in which philosophy's attention

switched from “the object to the subject, from the world to the self, from the exterior to the interior” (p. 8). Meditation about objects becomes a meditation about the essence of “what is”, in this case, an appreciation that arises from the thoughts of a being who is thinking.

In his fifth rule, Descartes (1996) talked about the need to substitute ontological reflections (in the scholastic sense) for epistemological ones, which, although objective (scientifically speaking) implies subjective criteria (Navarro 1996, p. 21), or, at least a conscious decision to decide to think in one particular way and reject others. Method underlies Descartes’ philosophy. Given that the method is chosen by the thinker, it determines the direction of his thoughts. In Descartes, the method is a requirement for the critical spirit who is confronting his or her own cultural and historical legacy. The method is not something merely procedural, but rather is an intimate motivation and an anthropological demand. What is questioned is the self itself, and therefore the method gives rise to the birth of “secularized man” (p. 26). This has important implications for modern-day political and ethical reflections, because they should be accompanied by more than feel-good emotions. They also require a conscious, methodological backup.

In John Locke we find reflections, not only about how conscious thought leads to a true appreciation of reality as conceived by a conscious mind, but also the mechanics of thought and self-awareness. Gideon Yaffe (2011) has analyzed Locke’s approach to consciousness. Consciousness and awareness can be distinguished from sensory perception. Perception is an appreciation of what goes on in the world according to one’s visual and auditory appreciation. Consciousness, however, is directed inward. As Locke puts it, “[c]onsciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man’s own mind [...]” (Yaffe, p. 2). Locke described how one is aware of both individual events or thoughts in time, and a continuous stream of awareness. The thinking person is then capable of abstraction in which general ideas are created from particular ones that stem from experience. The next analytical step happens when the person combines ideas to create complexes that may or may not be found in experience. And finally thought permits comparing, in which one creates ideas of relations from these ideas.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2024) refers to how Kant enlarged on these reflections. The authors tell us that Kant’s idea of phenomenal consciousness is not a mere succession of associated ideas, but rather a reflection on the experience of a conscious self, situated in an objective world, and structured with respect to space, time and causality. This observation is crucial for the growing awareness among Enlightenment philosophers about the role of responsiveness in the development of man’s role in determining political awareness.

### **Truth and ethics**

It is interesting how, in popular language, ethics is linked to the idea of “what is true”. Daniel Figuera (2025) refers to Alain Badiou’s idea of social truth. For Badiou, truth is not a static fact or a universal revelation. It is a cultural recognition of a new way of defining what is true. A new process or “event” introduces a new logic within a given system. There are plural “truths” that necessarily have to be partial and linked to specific contexts. He gives as examples the current ideas on climate change or economic inequalities. General conceptual structures would then be built through participation.

However, one of the characteristics of truth, for a very long time, has been that it has to be based on rules that determine its acceptability. One of these basic rules, as I have been saying, is that any statement must be accompanied by an awareness of the method used to establish it.

To establish the truth in scenarios such as historical accounts or legal testimonies there are also rules. There must be previous writings or stories that sustain them in order to be labeled as truths. In this sense, an account, such as Homer’s description of the Trojan war, drawn up before the historical period of written records, is not the same as the stories recorded by identifiable authors. And even in the latter

case, the stories must be subject to analysis and verification. We can ask, for example, about the total veracity of Plutarch's Parallel Lives. In the same way we can critically analyze modern narratives. Thus, people can learn to require "evidence" to support a politician, or a sect leader- for claims about the supposed risks posed by vaccinations, or xenophobic accusations.

### **Freedom or lordship: military and other human bonds**

For as long as there has been historical evidence, kings have exercised exclusive power, and have attempted to conquer nearby realms, enlarging their own territories or creating colonies. There is evidence that human beings were not always like this. In fact, in their book "The Dawn of Everything", Graeber and Wenfrow (2021) state that in the first millennia of human history, human groups exhibited cooperative and deliberative behaviors. This collective decision-making was not limited to tribal life; according to these two authors, some very large settlements were governed by these principles.

It was only in the last four or five millennia that kings, conquerors and dictators have dominated the human experience. This period covers almost all documented history. For as long as we have historical references, there have been colonialists and monarchs who have imposed their authority by force.

Once in power, the acquisition of new territories was not only attractive among the kings, but also a requirement for their survival. When Agamemnon went to conquer Troy, and when Alexander the Great ended Athenian democracy, they obeyed the same cultural mandates that the European colonizers followed in Africa and the Americas. It was a similar mandate when the Germans launched a major war to increase their "lebensraum" and Russia and the United States invaded Afghanistan in turn. Still today, tyrants try to claim whole territories and their inhabitants as their own.

These military endeavors required the participation of people from the less advantaged classes. There were implicit benefits to following orders. Soldiers could often merit certain privileges, and even profit from the plunder of war. Later, as in the case of Napoleon's armies, the generals might recur to the nationalistic loyalties to motivate their soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

### **The "Bands of Brothers" in military life**

In terms of military bonds, "Warrior ideologies"<sup>4</sup> appear in literature, from the ancient Greek phalanx' shoulder-to-shoulder hoplites, to Shakespeare's "band of brothers"<sup>5</sup> to Cotton's (2017) description of the relationship between United States' soldiers in Afghanistan. Cotton talks about a masculine "warrior ideology"<sup>6</sup> in which "in combat, your motives don't matter really. [...] As bad as it sounds, you don't fight for what you believe in. You fight for the person next to you" (Eiden, n.d., cited by Cotton, p 23).

Thus, war contains its own kind of participation. It is important to understand these bonds in order to formulate alternative ways of relating. It is also important to understand the appeal that war can have for certain cultures and their members.

<sup>3</sup> "When nationalism implies a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders, both micro- and macro-level studies find that it correlates with conflict at higher rates. This category includes the distrusting and oppositional worldviews that characterize aggressive citizens and leaders. [...] (Powers, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> A term taken from Jacob William Cotton's undergraduate thesis, "Brotherhood" in war: a rhetorical approach to understanding the unity among soldiers (2017).

<sup>5</sup> The term comes from Shakespeare's play, Henry V (n.d.). The poet describes a small, invading army like this:

"...We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile..."

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps a masculine ideology but women have participated since the times of the Anatolian Amazon warriors.

### Tribal cooperation

In traditional, tribal communities, personal relationships are based on kinship and age-hierarchies. Decisions are often reached collectively with especial respect given to “chiefs” and elders. Tasks like hunting, food gathering and house-building are often undertaken specifically by women, men or almost-grown children, and these are traditional activities. There are also intertribal collaborations that Justo (2024) describes as: “... alliances, forged bonds of friendship, and engaged in collaborative efforts that have shaped the very fabric of human civilization. From the ancient confederacies of Native American tribes in North America to the cooperative ventures among African kingdoms [...]”.

### Participative government

Monarchy, oligarchy, and dictatorships have been the predominant kinds of governmental systems in historical times. In general, they concentrate the power of decision and action among few individuals, and usually have strong military components. We will not concentrate our attention on these systems, because in this section we are interested in two ideas with respect to government: a) where does the initiative for increased citizen participation come from? And b) how does massive political participation work?

The promoters of change tend to surge from the ideas of artists, playwrights, writers, philosophers and intellectuals in general, who at certain critical moments in history have made proposals for social transformation. Likewise, philosophers and poets paved the way for European and American democracy in the eighteenth century. The origin of these movements had a long preparation, that began with the Renaissance (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), and continued with the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these times authors, artists, scientists, and philosophers (who were not in power) such as William Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolaus Copernicus, Sir Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and later, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Thomas Hobbes, Denis Diderot and Adam Smith debated each other in the publications, theaters and meeting houses of their time. Each proclaimed his particular perspective. These people did not need to agree, the important thing was their shared discussion.

We can cite poetic and theatrical sources from very long ago. The tradition continues, with modern authors, who, while not political leaders, helped elaborate the lifeworlds of their times, for example, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, George Orwell, John Steinbeck, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Harper Lee, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and Langston Hughes among many, many others.

Within the power structures of centralized systems, it would be very rare for dictators to propose a participative system, except as a subterfuge for concentrating even more power in fewer hands. They might propose elections, but usually they would have control over the results. Normally, the changes initiated from a profound cultural level have to do with the need increase the well-being of the great majorities. Intellectual dissidents (such as the active minorities -Moscovici 1996)<sup>7</sup>, groups such as non-governmental organizations, ad hoc committees and other similar organizations, pick up the call for change.

In other words, free debate, far from causing havoc and chaos, produces critical thinking that empowers people of all ranks. It would be better if the whole population were literate, but at many critical moments in history, few could read. It was enough for the information to come through word of mouth from those who could understand the written word.

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<sup>7</sup>Serge Moscovici coined the phrase “active minorities” to describe individuals and small groups that are the first to publicly challenge majority values, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did with his book. *Gulag Archipelago*.

We rely on national and international organizations, congresses and parliaments, political parties, businesses, and other organizations to solve our social problems. However, it is becoming more and more evident that the only organizations that are going to "save" us are those that promote widespread reflections about who we are and what we wish to become. One example would be renovated and critical education systems and another would be non-governmental organizations such as "Care for Peace", "Save the Children", "Doctors without Borders" and others that offer relief and reflection in emergency situations. We have mentioned dissident authors. We have to evaluate our true needs, and reconsider what our most transcendental values are. And we have to do it as interconnected collectivities. It has to be an explicit and intentional process, if we want to stop being xenophobic, violent, vindictive and fearful.

Normally participative governmental systems have founding constitutions that make the basic laws of the land explicit. They have distinct governing instances, each with unique powers, the members of which are chosen by some sort of popular mandate, habitually through elections. There are pre-arranged means for communicating with these officials, and there are legal courts through which their decisions can be challenged. Legal democracies are complex structures, based on free debate, and held together through both tradition and current law. The armed forces are restricted in their internal repressive capacities, and are usually deployed only in foreign engagements. Local order is maintained by police forces, regularly controlled at a local level by elected officials. Legal change is possible in constitutional democracies through complex systems of debate and suffrage. When laws are successfully challenged, they are no longer valid, such as the infamous Jim-Crow laws in the southern states of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

This legal complexity is considered to be a protective system for guaranteeing popular sovereignty and preventing take-overs by dictators, kings or small governing commissions. But it only works if the population understands the need for these checks and balances. When the population no longer understands the logic of balanced authority, then the system becomes fragile and can be broken.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Accept the challenge**

In general, I believe that these propositions obey, not only a desire to seek acceptable ways of living together. They reflect a trend of thought that, although not new, suddenly has greater relevance among current thinkers. It is clear that the existing patterns of coexistence can be rethought.

We must accept this challenge. History and philosophy must be revisited, and the choices they offer must be re-examined. Our societies are often determined by naked power relations, but it doesn't have to be that way. Power is not deterministic, and communities have a wealth of experience to share in this regard. We must return to social relations based on empathy (Cronick, 2024a), distributive justice and debate that is founded upon culturally aware consciousness.

### **Where will the changes come from?**

There are a number of naturally occurring sources for social change, some of which we have alluded to in these reflections. There are many resources to support the idea of popular sovereignty provided by concepts that come from history, philosophy, social psychology and other sources.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Crow laws were laws in the United States, enacted in the late nineteenth century, by the southern state legislatures. These laws permitted racial segregation in all public facilities.

<sup>9</sup> Resources developed by social psychological research include: active minorities (Moscovici, 1996), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), Learned helplessness

I have reviewed several ways of considering participation and social awareness including Simmel's (2016) idea that usually people do not form exclusive allegiances with despotic power. They may profess allegiance to, or vote for a potential tyrant, but they reserve the possibility of dissent. This possibility may be liberating, and democratic interests can make use of it. I have considered how normative values have cultural and historical sources, and how they are open to discussion, although some may be absolute in the Kantian sense of the "Categorical Imperative". All this is incorporated into the ongoing debate that exists in our cultures. And finally, it all influences what kinds of government people will tolerate, given the liberty to choose. These debates are ongoing. It is important for all citizens to understand their roles in government and power structures, and for emerging leaders to listen to them.

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(Seligman, 1975), Labeling theory of deviance (Becker, 1963), and obedience (Milgram, 1963), Many of these references have been reviewed in detail in Cronick, 2025d). These concepts are useful in community psychology as well.

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