

Relativism¹

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Why has relativism become the ideology of contemporary democracy? Following in the steps of Raymond Boudon², I would like to show that the cognitive and cultural relativism that tends to reign today reveals the internal dynamics, tensions and risks of democracy (**internal risks didn't quite work in English**). The past two decades, the victory of the democracies over the last of the 20th century totalitarianisms has given way to a probing interrogation of the tensions and risks inherent in democracy's own logic and dynamism. This questioning entails reconnecting with Montesquieu's chapter in *The Spirit of the Laws* entitled "On the corruption of the principle of democracy."³ You will remember that, according to Montesquieu, the "principle" of democracy is "virtue." Virtue is respect for the laws and the devoted attachment of the individual to the collectivity. "What I call *virtue* in a republic is the love of the patrie, that is, love of equality I therefore have called *political virtue* the love of country and of equality."⁴ "One can define this virtue as the love of the laws and the country."⁵

"Love of the laws and of the country"

Like every political regime, the republic runs the risk of corruption (to use once again Montesquieu's terminology) when men no longer conduct themselves according to the principle of the regime. Now, it belongs to the nature of democracies not to have intrinsic limits. One therefore has to ask about the possible effects of a democratic dynamism toward equality which appears to have no limits and which never is, nor can be, fully satisfied. In this regard some have spoken of "democracy against itself,"⁶ of "democratic melancholy,"⁷ or yet again of "democratic regression"⁸; some have invoked its "impatience before limits" or the utopian character of democracy.⁹ Isn't the "providential democracy" within which we live threatened by "the spirit of extreme equality"?

As Montesquieu again put it, this time reprising the tradition of classical philosophy: "Democracy therefore has two excesses to avoid: the spirit of inequality . . . and the spirit of extreme equality"¹⁰; "the principle of democracy is corrupted, not only when one loses the spirit of equality, but also when one takes on the spirit of extreme equality, and each one wants to be equal to those he has chosen to command him. At this point the people, not being able to tolerate the authority that it delegated, wants to do everything by itself,

¹ This is translated from the 30th anniversary issue of the French journal *Commentaire*, n. 121/Spring 2008, pp. 126-130.

² Raymond Boudon, *Renouveler la démocratie. Éloge du sens commun*, Odile Jacob, 2006.

³ *The Spirit of the Laws*, VIII, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Avertissement.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 5.

⁶ Marcel Gauchet, *La Démocratie contra elle-même*, Gallimard, 2002.

⁷ Pascal Bruckner, *La Mélancolie démocratique*, Seuil, 1992.

⁸ Alain-Gerard Slama, *La Régression démocratique*, Perrin, coll. Tempus, 2002.

⁹ Dominique Schnapper, *Providential Democracy: An Essay on Contemporary Equality*, Transaction Publishers, 2006.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, VIII, 2.

to deliberate for the senate, execute for the magistrates, decide in place of judges. ... Everyone comes to love this libertinage; the burden of command, as well as that of obedience, becomes intolerable. Women, children, slaves do not obey anyone. There no longer is any public morality, no love of order, finally, no virtue.”¹¹ “This is the difference between a well-regulated democracy and one that is not: in the first, people are equal only as citizens, while in the second they are equal also as magistrates, senators, judges, fathers, husbands, masters. The natural place of virtue is next to liberty; but it cannot be found any more alongside extreme liberty than it can servitude.”¹²

If one leaves to the side the “submission” of wives to their husbands, slaves to their masters, and even children to their parents, one can retain and employ the categories of this analysis. Modern democracy is founded upon the legitimacy of the community of citizens.¹³ Citizens are autonomous, free and equal. But it is inherent in the dynamic nature of democracy to extend itself beyond the strictly political domain into all the sectors of social life. The ardent aspiration for equality threatens to destroy the distinctions between different social roles and, hence, the very principle of all collective organization. Society presupposes hierarchy, it implies the division of labor and the differentiation of roles, in order to organize legitimate authority regulated by laws, so that it can address the inevitable conflicts of all collective life. These roles are also desirable in themselves, because they manifest the freedom of citizens. The “people” as Montesquieu said cannot “do everything by itself” – “deliberate in place of the senate, execute for the magistrates, decide in place of judges” – without calling into question the very principle of social organization. Today, however, the constant danger is that after having legitimately claimed the civic, juridical, and political equality of all, individuals in our society then demand identity instead of equality. This risks calling into question every legitimate principle of hierarchy and, even more, any regulated social existence.

When democracy becomes corrupt by becoming extreme, autonomy risks becoming corrupt by rejecting any and all sorts of “transcendence,” liberty becomes license, and equality becomes “in-distinction”. As for relativism, it too risks becoming corrupt by refusing any reference to the very ideas of Truth and Morality.

Cognitive and Political Relativism

Relativism is found at the foundation of the human sciences, as well as among the values of democratic society. The anthropological project – taken in a broad sense to mean the study of societies and cultures – was born of the desire to recognize and understand the diversity of human societies. But the idea of a plurality of orders, ideas, and systems also belongs to the intellectual and political patrimony of democracy, which includes the distinction between the political order and the religious order, between public life and private life, between the different powers that define democracy and distinguish it from theocratic or totalitarian regimes. Relativism is thus a good common to anthropologists and to democratic citizens. But in the way that each political order risks becoming corrupt, relativism as a mode of understanding the world risks corrupting itself

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., VIII, 3.

¹³ Dominique Schnapper, *The Community of Citizens: On the Modern Idea of Nationality*, Transaction Publishers, 1998.

when it becomes an ideology. The three forms of democratic corruption – the rejection of all transcendence, license, and in-distinction – can come together in a way that means that as absolute relativism relativism becomes an ideology(**these last two sentences needed to be conveyed more simply in English**).

From Equality to ‘In-distinction’

Democracy is organized on the equality of relations among its members. As we learned from Tocqueville and never cease to observe, equality is *the* passion of democratic societies. The *homo democraticus* of today has profoundly internalized the idea of the fundamental equality of all individuals, in a way, though, that every distinction tends to be perceived as discriminatory, every difference as inequalitarian, every inequality as inequitable. The idea of the equality of all becomes perverted when one seeks the identity of all: the other can only be the same.

The relations between equals gradually become the model for all relations. Informality in speech becomes the norm, the formal versions of “you” have pretty much disappeared in Italian and Spanish. The quasi-exclusive use of first names as terms of address – the American model – becomes more widespread. Unequal but complementary relationships—that of parent and child, or teacher and student, or doctor and patient, or elected and voter –give rise to awkward hesitations and reticences. The spontaneity or creativity of the child, the student, or the voter is respected in the same way as the experience and acquired competence of the parent, the teacher, the politician. Radio shows give more and more time to “call-ins” from their listeners, at the expense of guests who may have superior qualifications to talk about an issue. The President of the French Republic grants himself the right to lead his life like the rest of the citizenry, to divorce or to have an ‘official’ affair as they do, while his predecessors thought it was necessary to ‘respect appearances’ because of their official position. The demand for same-sex marriage or homosexual parenting implies that even in connection with marriage, sexual distinction is seen as an inequality and, as such, inequitable or unfair. The elected official no longer represents the entire nation as was the idea (or fiction) of representation in earlier days. He is tasked with promoting the interests of his constituents.

Each person is worth any other and thus all are equally worthy. Everything is equally worthy, as well. Thus relativism expresses an ideology common to all, founded on the ‘in-distinction’ of persons and orders (those of contemporary politics and history, of strict justice and equity, of dispassionate analysis and personal commitment, and so forth). The individual of “extreme” democracy refuses to make value-judgments – they are perceived as discriminatory. But can one think about the world without making value-judgments? In any case, opinion is worth the same as knowledge and reflection. “Everything is opinion,” as Tocqueville already wrote long ago. As appears from merely listening to the radio, every “opinion,” every “view,” is equally legitimate, given the fundamental equality of those who offer them. How, then, can we speak of Truth? How can one justify the idea that the “hard” sciences, as well as the human sciences, do advance some truth and have a different nature from opinion? (To be sure, these truths are partial and provisional in that they can be corrected in light of reason and experience.) How can we get people to accept the idea that the distinctions of different orders of thought and of social life are the very conditions of democracy itself? **(as you’ll see these last two sentences are less than literal)**

From the Relative to the Absolute

The idea of relativism is a genuine achievement. The modern development of anthropological studies in particular has led reflection on human societies to underscore the relativity of cultures. The idea isn't new, it antedates the birth of the academic discipline – in France, the tradition runs from Montaigne to Montesquieu himself – but the inspiration of human and social scientists is found in a desire to combat ethnocentrism and in the affirmation of cultural relativism, that is, a doctrine that maintains that all cultures have the same value. It is not cultural relativism itself, now universally accepted even beyond the circle of anthropologists, but the meaning and limits of this relativism which are the subjects of a “great debate” among scientists and, more broadly, students of modernity. Is relativism itself absolute or relative? Is each culture absolutely irreducible to others, making every objective value-judgment impossible? Or, beyond the relativity of cultures does there exist an horizon of universality which would authorize moral judgment? How should one reply to the question Raymond Aron posed to Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1979: “Are universal moral judgments on behavior or conduct compatible or incompatible with cultural relativism?”¹⁴

The debates of the anthropologists on the universality of morality are not simply academic but they are at the philosophical foundations of policies adopted with respect to individuals in countries established by European colonization and for certain populations of foreign provenance found in Western countries. If one adopts the positions of absolute relativism, then policy ought to aim above all at preserving from all foreign contact the Indian cultures found in the United States or in Brazil, since any process of acculturation or assimilation would cause the cultures to disappear. In France and Germany it would be necessary to respect the traditional African customs of female circumcision or forced marriages in the name of the equality of cultures. If, on the other hand, one takes up the more moderate position, one should encourage a gradual acculturation of the Indians into modern western civilization. To be sure, such an acculturation does not deny those cultural traits that do not conflict with the liberty and equality of all human beings. Nonetheless certain traditional practices would be condemned in the name of universal human nature.

All anthropologists do not adhere to absolute cultural relativism. Those who adopt a relative cultural relativism “consider the relativity of cultures to be itself relative, excluding neither the existence of universal values nor the possibility of intercultural communication, nor the advantages of acculturation.”¹⁵ They base this choice on a theory of knowledge according to which the criteria of meaning and truth are not entirely dependent upon cultural context. They reprise the classical critique of skepticism: there

¹⁴ The question was raised after a presentation by Claude Lévi-Strauss to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on October 15, 1979. His response was: “The ethnologist simultaneously recognizes the beliefs, customs, and institutions that he can study, and of which, without any particular moral concern, he proposes a typology, and the human beings whose creations they are. He shares something in common with them. I therefore will not attempt to answer the question. I will say that it is an aporia or perplexity that we must live with and attempt to overcome by means of experience in the matter, while rejecting – wisely – any theoretical answer to it.” Cited in *Commentaire*, n. 15, October 1981, p. 372.

¹⁵ Selim Abou, *Retour au Parana. Chronique de deux villages guaranis*, Hachette, coll. Pluriel/Interventions, 1993, p. 354.

is a logical contradiction inherent in the very concept of absolute relativism. By affirming his position, the relativist implies that it is true – therefore truth exists. Similarly, by succeeding in his inquiries the anthropologist demonstrates that he judges that it is possible to understand others – within certain limits, to be sure, but do we know ourselves perfectly well? He cannot not admit that beyond the differences of culture there exists the possibility of understanding, if not absolute, at least relative, otherwise what meaning could his conduct have? The ethnologist, like all scholars, thinks that knowledge is preferable to ignorance, that the progress of scientific knowledge is as such a progress for humanity – which implies a universal value. How could one think that error is preferable to truth? And isn't tolerance of others intrinsically superior to intolerance?

Against positivism (which equates itself with “Reason”), the “limits of historical objectivity” and, more generally, the limits of all knowledge that the sciences, and particularly the human sciences, can attain have been rightly emphasized. But this needs to be properly understood. It is true that historical facts do not exist outside of the framework of the scientific investigator. But from the fact that every fact contains a portion of interpretation, one should not deduce that it is *only* an interpretation. There are true propositions. The Holocaust occurred. The free economy is more efficient and efficacious in producing goods and services than an administered one. (This, of course, does not inhibit philosophical reflection upon what results from the accumulation of goods and services, or its meaning.) When it comes to understanding society, therefore, one cannot simply follow the “masters of suspicion,” as Raymond Boudon calls them, those like Foucault and Derrida who insisted upon the irrationality of man and the radical relativity of all knowledge.

‘In-distinction’ in Politics

Democratic society is founded on the separation of powers and the distinction of orders. The distinction between the political order and the religious order is a fundamental principle, even if the separation/collaboration which necessarily occurs between and among the state, the church, and religious groups takes different modalities depending upon the history of each nation. *In God We Trust*, they say in America, while we know how alarmed the partisans of strict *laïcité* would be if it were uttered here in France. But in both countries nationals are equally citizens, regardless of their belonging to a church or not. Therefore any confusion of orders to which the in-distinction of “extreme” democracy might tend calls into question this foundation of the democratic political order.

In this connection, therefore, one cannot fail to notice today just such a mixing or confusion between the public and the private. This results from the “mediatization” of politicians, as well as the heroes of modern times: athletes and entertainers. One cannot fail to notice the excessive intervention of the judiciary and the legislative in the order of knowledge. It ought not to be courts, or legislatures, or bureaucrats, who intervene in historical debates – that is the business of historians – nor in scientific debates – that is the business of scientists. The increased “judicialization” of social life is symptomatic of a growing in-distinction which is contrary to the authentic spirit of democratic pluralism. It is a sign of the incomprehension of individuals given over to “extreme” democracy,

who refuse to recognize that intellectual and moral relativism, as well as the legitimate criticism of institutions, themselves ought to be relativized or moderated. As we have said, beyond the relativity of cultures and of knowledge there also exist universal moral judgments and truths. They are provisional and partial, to be sure, but they possess a different nature than opinion, especially the opinion of “no matter who.”

How, though, to formulate what today can be a universal when we all accept the idea of the relativity of cultures? The universal is not some content, it is a reference point and an aspiration. Reason itself, finally, can only be, in Kant’s phrase, a ‘regulative Idea.’ The universal is the natural horizon of reason, the regulative principle that presides over any comparison of cultures and of intercultural relations. Man himself is characterized by the tension between his historically defined individuality, conditioned by his membership in a particular society and culture, and his being a “transcendental subject.” To recognize universal values necessarily implies transcendental subjectivity. What defines man finally is his ability to liberate himself from the specific determinations of his historical existence, it is his ability to be a man as well as a citizen, it is the possibility of reconciling the national spirit with the ideal of universality; in short, it is the ability to be a self-critical citizen. Man does not simply identify himself with his role in society, in fact he defines himself by his ability not to be the simple product of these historical, cultural, and social determinations. He is defined in philosophic terms by his liberty, that is, his (at least partial) autonomy vis-à-vis both nature and society.

All the thinkers that opt for relative, or moderate, relativism therefore attempt to conceive a modern universalism which will safeguard the transcendental horizon of universality even in the face of an acute awareness of the relativity of cultures and historical experiences. Modern society itself ought to respect the particularisms of men’s lives, all the while giving them the means of participating in the universality of Reason and of citizenship.

I end with a question: Can democratic societies dispense from sharing a common project, one based upon a shared conception of the world and of its symbolic system, one that would include respect for certain fundamental values – the search for truth, respect for the other, and proper distinctions between individuals, orders and institutions – that give a common meaning to the collective destiny of the community?

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