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“DEMOCRACY IS PRIMARILY ACHIEVED THROUGH VOTING”: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Various studies have recently revealed that a political representation crisis is taking place worldwide. The aim of this study is understand the social representations of democracy showed in the narratives of Argentine adolescents (N=32) aged between 16 and 18 years. A semi-structured interview was used, which was based on Piaget’s clinical method. The results obtained show that adolescents represent democracy as a fundamental mechanism for the operation of the representative democratic regime and the inherent principles of this form of government. It is concluded that these ways of representing democracy seem to overshadow the possibility of regarding it as a system of government, that is, a broad political institution.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION • DEMOCRACY • NARRATIVES • PIAGET’S CLINICAL METHOD

“LA DEMOCRACIA SE HACE PRINCIPALMENTE POR VOTACIÓN”: REPRESENTACIONES SOCIALES DE ADOLESCENTES

Resumen

Distintos estudios realizados recientemente muestran que una crisis de representación política está ocurriendo a nivel internacional. El objetivo de este estudio es conocer las representaciones sociales de la democracia expresadas en las narrativas de adolescentes (N=32) argentinos con edades entre 16 y 18 años. Se utilizó una entrevista semiestructurada basada en los lineamientos del método clínico piagetiano. Los resultados obtenidos muestran que los adolescentes piensan a la democracia como un mecanismo fundamental para el funcionamiento del régimen democrático representativo y principios inherentes de esta forma de gobierno. Se concluye que estos modos de representar la democracia invisibilizarían la posibilidad de pensarla como un sistema de gobierno, es decir, una institución política amplia.

REPRESENTACIÓN SOCIAL • DEMOCRACIA • NARRATIVAS • MÉTODO CLÍNICO PIAGETIANO

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“LA DÉMOCRATIE PASSE PRINCIPALEMENT PAR LE VOTE”: REPRÉSENTATIONS SOCIALES D’ADOLESCENTS

Résumé

Plusieurs études menées récemment montrent qu’il existe une crise de représentation politique à l’échelle internationale. L’objectif de cette étude est d’analyser les représentations sociales de la démocratie, dans les récits d’un groupe d’adolescents argentins (N = 32), de 16 à 18 ans. Un entretien semi-directif basé sur les lignes directrices de la méthode clinique piagétienne a été utilisé. Les résultats montrent que les adolescents considèrent la démocratie comme un mécanisme fondamental pour le fonctionnement du régime démocratique représentatif et les principes inhérents à cette forme de gouvernement. La conclusion signale que leurs façons de représenter la démocratie compromettraient la possibilité de penser cette dernière comme un système de gouvernement, c’est-à-dire comme une institution politique au sens large.

REPRÉSENTATION SOCIALE • DÉMOCRATIE • RÉCITS • METHODE CLINIQUE DE PIAGETIAN

“A DEMOCRACIA É FEITA PRINCIPALMENTE POR VOTAÇÃO”: REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS DE ADOLESCENTES

Resumo

Diversos estudos realizados recentemente mostram que está ocorrendo uma crise de representação política em nível internacional. O objetivo deste estudo é conhecer as representações sociais da democracia expressadas nas narrativas de adolescentes (N=32) argentinos de 16 a 18 anos. Utilizou-se uma entrevista semiestruturada baseada nas diretrizes do método clínico piagetiano. Os resultados mostram que os adolescentes consideram a democracia como um mecanismo fundamental para o funcionamento do regime democrático representativo e princípios inerentes a essa forma de governo. Conclui-se que essas formas de representar a democracia invisibilizariam a possibilidade de pensá-la como um sistema de governo, isto é, uma instituição política ampla.

REPRESENTAÇÃO SOCIAL • DEMOCRACIA • NARRATIVAS • MÉTODO CLÍNICO PIAGETIANO

THE PURPOSE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IS TO REPRESENT CITIZENS IN REPRESENTATIVE democracies. However, in the last few years, they have lost their influence, efficacy and legitimacy as society's representatives (CORRAL, 2010). Moreover, recent technological progress in telecommunications have provided new ways of doing politics without intermediaries. Thus, the social movements that have recently emerged with different claims related to both traditional social demands (focalized public policies) and new emerging topics (e.g. abortion, same-sex marriage, environmental issues) have leveraged these technological changes, apparently dissociating themselves from political parties (ALBALA; VIEIRA, 2014). In this sense, the canalization patterns of social conflicts seem to have changed, where the political (the social conflict itself) falls outside the scope of politics, that is, it is expressed through unconventional forms of political participation (FLANAGAN *et al.*, 2007; MOUFFE, 2007; PARÉS, 2014; TORNEY-PURTA; BARBER, 2011).

Various works have stressed citizens' increasing loss of trust towards institutions and political representation agents, such as political parties. In addition, people are increasingly reluctant to consider them as their intermediaries in the political system (SCHNAPPER, 2004; UNZUÉ, 2007). Therefore, it might be said that there is a political representation crisis worldwide (CAICEDO ORTIZ, 2013; CORRAL, 2010; MAINWARING; PÉREZ-LIÑÁN, 2015; MORALES QUIROGA, 2011; PNUD, 2010). This crisis occurs as a result of the low levels of identification

between voters and political parties; in other words, citizens do not think that political parties properly represent their concerns and interests (CAICEDO ORTIZ, 2013; CORRAL, 2010; MAINWARING; PÉREZ-LIÑÁN, 2015; MORALES QUIROGA, 2011; PNUD, 2010). Young people, in particular, identify to a lesser extent with political parties than older people (CORRAL, 2010; MONSIVÁIS CARRILLO, 2017; MORALES QUIROGA, 2011) and tend not to get involved in conventional forms of political participation, such as political parties and voting (PARÉS, 2014; INGLEHART, 2014). Particularly, the low engagement with political parties as representative institutions poses a problem for contemporary democracies since they play a fundamental role in supporting such political system of government (CAICEDO ORTIZ, 2013; CORRAL, 2010; MORALES QUIROGA, 2011).

DEMOCRACY AS A REPRESENTATIONAL OBJECT AND COMMON SENSE KNOWLEDGE

Democracy, as a study object of Social and Political Sciences, has been studied by different scientific disciplines and from different historical contexts (PNUD, 2004), which has resulted in the polysemic nature of the term (HILLMANN, 2001). The various definitions of the concept are remarkably different (e.g. elite democracy, pluralist democracy, among others) (GREBLO, 2002; HELD, 1996). The different conceptualizations of democracy refer to both a kind of operation of political systems and their dependencies (e.g. executive branch) and a form of social organization that promotes citizen expansion (ABERCROMBIE; HILL; TURNER, 2000; PNUD, 2004, 2010; SARTORI, 1990).

Although there are different meanings associated to democracy in social and political sciences, in their everyday interactions, individuals use a common meaning to refer to this object and communicate with others. In fact, this common sense knowledge that people use to guide their everyday actions constitutes the study object of the theory of social representations (hereinafter, SR). A SR is a meaningful structures which makes it possible to categorize the world from a specific social position, that is, a point of view supported by consensus (MOSCOVICI, 2001). Simultaneously, this meaningful structures enriches the representational object since individuals attribute meanings to it that mediate their social interactions. It should be noted that only through the process of construction of SRs do new phenomena become familiar objects in everyday social practices (WAGNER; HAYES, 2011).

When a meaningful structures of a SR is formed, there is a selection of the aspects that are represented and those that are not, which is the result of the power relations between and within social groups (BARREIRO; CASTORINA, 2016). Indeed, what might undermine the current social order and tradition, that is, question the distribution of power among social groups, becomes intolerable and it is repressed in order to perpetuate the status quo. This presence of the absence of the object (what is repressed) or of certain features of the object in the SR is not the result of a lack of interest of the social group, but rather expresses

the impossibility to recognize its symbolic status (BARREIRO; CASTORINA, 2016). Such absences may adopt different forms, expressing the ways in which social power relations might constrain the construction of a SR (BARREIRO; CASTORINA, 2016): in the case of polysemic objects, only one of the possible meanings becomes part of the SR and the rest are excluded from the representational field. In this way, some possible meanings of objects become absent since they are intolerable for a specific social group and the only way of coping with them is to deny their existence. Were those meanings to become overt to the social groups, they would undermine social organization (BARREIRO; CASTORINA, 2016).

Furthermore, there are power relations between the different SRs about the same object – when there are more than one – found both within each social group and among different social groups. From this theoretical perspective, there are three kinds of SRs: *hegemonic*, *emancipated* and *polemic* (MOSCOVICI, 1988). The first are shared by a large part of society. These representations implicitly prevail in different affective or symbolic practices since they entail values and ideas deeply rooted in such practices and, therefore, they are considered long-term structures (MOSCOVICI, 1988). In contrast, emancipated SRs are the result of the exchange of ideas and knowledge of minority groups which have some kind of contact with each other. In this sense, each group creates their own version of the representational object and shares it with the others. These representations are considered short-term structures (MOSCOVICI, 1988). Finally, polemic SRs, also short-lived, are formed as a result of social conflicts or controversies and they are expressed as a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor (MOSCOVICI, 1988). It should be pointed out that emancipated and polemic representations, unlike the hegemonic ones, are expressed in debates, since the different social groups discuss them in order to legitimize their points of view on the object (DUVEEN, 2007).

Various research works conducted in different European and Latin American countries agree that young people have a representation of democracy as mechanisms of operation inherent to the representative democratic system and they associate it to principles and rights which are constitutive of that form of government (MOODIE; MARKOVÁ; PLICHTOVÁ, 1995; RODRÍGUEZ CERDA *et al.*, 2004; RUIZ PERÉZ; COY, 2004). In addition, democracy is understood in terms of opposing terms such as ideal-real; good-bad; means-ends; normative-descriptive; inexistent-necessary; good-fallacious (CÁRDENAS *et al.*, 2007; GONZÁLEZ AGUILAR, 2016; MAGIOGLOU, 2000). Indeed, the convergence of such studies conducted in different countries in the last decade seems to indicate that this is a hegemonic SR, shared by different social groups (BRUNO; BARREIRO, 2015; CÁRDENAS *et al.*, 2007).

DEMOCRACY IN ARGENTINA

In the specific case of Argentina, after many years of *coups d'état* and bloody military dictatorships, in 1983 the democratic system was restored with the constitutional government of Raúl Alfonsín. Therefore, democracy in Argentina is very recent

and it has enjoyed a little more than 30 years of institutional stability, elections and public liberties (ROMERO, 2013). In addition, it is worth mentioning that the current Argentine political system is characterized by fragmentation, weakening of the party system, electoral volatility, personalization of politics and a high level of presidentialism (CHERESKY, 2004, 2011).

In particular, a study carried out by Bruno and Barreiro (2015) about SRs of democracy shows that Argentine young people think of it as a set of *rights* and *representative procedures* (voting). According to the authors, this is in line with Schumpeter's (1942/1961) ideas, who states that democracy consists of a method in which individuals periodically choose from possible teams of political leaders. Young people also associate the term with the typical values of the contemporary democratic system (equality, freedom), in line with the liberal tradition, which defines democracy in terms of values inherent to this political regime (BOBBIO, 1989). There are also elements which indicate that democracy is associated to *the people* and *participation*, excluding any other political subjects or agents (BRUNO; BARREIRO, 2015). This SR is based on a strong consensus and it extends across different social groups. Therefore, as in the studies mentioned in the previous section, it would constitute a hegemonic social representation. The study by Bruno and Barreiro (2015) was conducted from the perspective of the central core theory of SRs (ABRIC, 2001; MOLINER; ABRIC, 2015). It used the technique of word association as the data collection tool and a prototypical analysis was then carried out. However, this type of analysis is only an exploratory method for enquiring into such a complex phenomenon as SRs. Further studies are required to provide more certainties about the interpretation of the results obtained (WACHELKE; WOLTER, 2011). According to the results, there were no relevant differences in the SR structure of democracy of the participants in terms of gender, educational level of their parents, self-perceived social class and political participation. Nevertheless, in the contrast zone of the SR of democracy where there are relevant elements for a minority group of subjects (SARRICA, 2007), certain meanings were expressed which associate democracy with political representation and express a negative opinion. Bruno and Barreiro (2015) point out that these results might be indicating the presence of a polemic SR, which warrants further research.

Consequently, building on the exploratory study conducted by Bruno and Barreiro (2015) on the SR of democracy, this work aims at enquiring the potential existence of representations other than the hegemonic one identified by the authors, going beyond the first approach taken, which relied on the word association technique and the prototypical analysis. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the meanings and beliefs which might be influencing the negative attitude of young people towards political representatives and conventional forms of political participation typical of representative democratic systems and essential for their operation (PARÉS, 2014; TORNEY-PURTA; BARBER, 2011; INGLEHART, 2014).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample was selected through theoretical sampling, which consists in simultaneously collecting and analyzing the data until theoretical saturation is achieved, that is, when the information obtained during the data collection process starts to become redundant (CORBIN; STRAUSS, 2008). The study was conducted with a group of high school adolescents (N=32) from the City of Buenos Aires aged between 16 and 18. This age group was chosen because, in Argentina, voting is optional from age 16 and mandatory as of 18. Therefore, the adolescents participating in the study had the opportunity of becoming part of the portion of society that is entitled to voting in the federal representative system. Fifty percent were women and 50% were men. Thirty-four point four percent belonged to the lower class, 31.2% were middle class and 34.4% were high class.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

Participation was voluntary and the adolescents were guaranteed that their identity would not be revealed at any stage of the investigation. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data, based on the guidelines of Piaget's clinical method (DUVEEN; GILLIGAN, 2013; PIAGET, 1926/1984). The main feature of this kind of interviews is that they focus on understanding the meaning of the answers given by the interviewee, asking as many questions as necessary in order to achieve that. Therefore, guided by a basic script, the interviewer tries to delve deeper into the subjects' answers, posing new questions, following up on existing ones and exploring the motives underlying the subjects' arguments in relation to the object under study (BARREIRO, 2013a, 2013b). At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to build a narrative about their experiences with democracy based on the following instructions: *"Please tell me about a time when you had an experience that in your opinion is related to democracy."* After the participants talked about the experience they were asked about, they were asked the following: *"In your opinion, how is this experience you are telling me about related to democracy?"* Then: *"In your opinion, what is democracy?"* The purpose of this question was to learn about the meanings that the participants gave to democracy in a more abstract way. It should be noted that they were asked to justify their answers in all cases, as established in the guidelines of Piaget's clinical method.

Since the interviewees were asked to provide narratives of their everyday life, the political practices studied were the ones they informed. The use of the narrative was a tool which provided a closer look at the way in which democracy is present in the interviewees' everyday life as well as indirect access to their practices in relation to democracy. The latter aspect is essential considering the constitutive link between SRs and the subjects' practices (JODELET, 1989/1991; MOSCOVICI, 2001). Specifically, narratives were used for two main reasons. First, narrative thinking is one of the primary ways of learning about how subjects experience and attribute meanings to the world that surrounds them. Consequently,

narratives make it possible to understand everyday knowledge in the personal and cultural interrelation, identification and reconstruction processes (ACEVES LOZANO, 2001; BRUNER, 2001). The second reason is that the way in which the question is posed, asking interviewees to talk about what the object democracy evokes to them, is similar to the word association technique, typically used in SR research, thus moving away from the main purpose of the classical use of Piagetian interviews designed to explore the development of notions or concepts (BARREIRO, 2013a, 2013b).

Finally, sociodemographic questions were also included: age, gender and self-perceived social class. Since there was no funding available to establish the subjects' socio-economic class more objectively, self-perceived social class was used instead, a subjective measure which consists in asking participants to indicate their social position in a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1=*very low* and 7=*very high*).

RESULTS

The participants' narratives and answers to the questions asked in the interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (STRAUSS; CORBIN, 1990). A systematic comparison was performed regarding similarities, differences and recurrences in the narratives and arguments presented by the subjects that showed their beliefs about democracy and what kind of practices they associate it with. Then, four categories were created showing different SRs of democracy: A) Electoral, B) Principle-based, C) Participatory and D) government system. Each of them is defined below, followed by interview extracts that illustrate them.

A) *Electoral*: It includes those answers expressing meanings in which democracy only consists of a method through which political representatives are chosen. Democracy is reduced to a specific procedure (voting) to which the whole population should be entitled to. In addition, at no time during the interview did the subjects whose answers were included in this category consider democracy as a form of government.

Mateo (18¹): [Request for narratives about an experience related to democracy]²: *The closest things are the typical group elections that we have when we decide about something in soccer (...)* [In your opinion, how is this experience you are telling me about related to democracy?] *Elections is what I mostly associate democracy with. Because democracy is mainly made through voting* [In your opinion, what is democracy?] *Voting representatives, it is essential to have that right; I think it is very positive but people should vote on a wider variety of topics.*

1 Indicates the age of the participants.

2 The following criterion was used for the transcription of the interview extracts: the interviewer's words are written in square brackets []; the interviewee's words are written in italics. Whenever a fragment of the interview has been omitted, (...) is written and when the omitted fragment belongs only to the interviewee's words, (...) is written.

Mateo's answers reveal that democracy is related to voting and elections. However, as the interviewee expresses, people should be able to vote on a wider variety of topics. The latter statement seems to indicate that voting is something positive for him.

B) *Principle-based*: This category includes the answers of subjects expressing meanings of democracy that reduce it to specific liberties and values of liberal democracies, such as equality and freedom of speech.

Laura (17): [Request for narrative] *Well, it might be an experience I had in Sala Alberdi, a room in San Martin theater which was occupied in 2013 (...). [In your opinion, how is this experience you are telling me about related to democracy?] Well, because everything was decided there, everybody decided on the same thing, nobody had more power than anybody else. It was all so equal, so egalitarian (...). [In your opinion, what is democracy?] Well, it means that everyone is the same, that is, there is no higher force, nobody that is more important with more power than what people decide (...).*

Laura's answers express a meaning of democracy that reduces it to equality among citizens or participants. To her, democracy means that all subjects are the same and have the same decision power.

C) *Participatory*: This category receives this name because it includes those answers which express that democracy is understood as everyday participation in the public arena, unlike the answers included in the electoral category, which exclusively associate it with conventional forms of political participation, such as voting.

Florencia (18): [Request for narrative] *It might be when I went to a student demonstration from my school and we marched along Córdoba street. [In your opinion, how is this experience you are telling me about related to democracy?] Well, when you know that what you are doing will make a difference, you do it. [In your opinion, what is democracy?] For me, democracy is participation, it is demonstrating in the streets and participating in different community spheres.*

Florencia's answers express meanings that regard democracy as participation in different areas of everyday life, such as a demonstration organized by high school students.

D) *System of government*: In this category, democracy is understood as a representative system of government and its mechanisms of operation. Democracy would therefore consist of a form of government, a broader institutional system, which includes voting as a method of operation but it is not limited to it, unlike the answers included in the *electoral* category.

Pablo (18): [Request for narrative] *Well, uhh, in the World Cup we will root for Argentina.* [In your opinion, how is this experience you are telling me about related to democracy?] *Well, because I think that Argentina is a land of opportunities, because I'm from Paraguay and you come here and there's a system of government that helps you; you can study, make progress and move ahead (...).* [In your opinion, what is democracy?] *I think democracy is a system of government; and that it is organized, a governor is chosen and representatives are elected.*

Pablo's answers reveal meanings according to which democracy is associated to a system of government in which political representatives are chosen and whose purpose is social assistance.

In relation to category distribution, two large groups are observed: electoral, accounting for 50% (N=16) of the answers and principle-based, accounting for 28% (N=9). Fewer answers fell into the other two categories; system of government, 13% (N=4) and participatory, 9% (N=3).

An analysis was performed to determine whether the participants' SRs of democracy varied according to interviewees' gender $X^2 ((3; n=32) = 4.111; p=0.250)$ and self-perceived social class $X^2 ((6; n=32) = 5.335; p=0.502)$, but no statistically representative differences were found.

DISCUSSION

Two main categories were identified during the analysis of the results obtained: *electoral* and *principle-based*. In the first case, democracy is exclusively regarded as a specific mechanism (voting) through which political representatives are selected and at no time during the interview is democracy considered a form of government. In the second case, democracy is reduced to specific liberties and principles of liberal democracies, such as equality. These two categories may be considered included in the SR identified in previous works. Therefore, the results of this study are in line with previous research on the hegemonic SR of democracy, based on a strong consensus affecting different social groups (BRUNO; BARREIRO, 2015; CÁRDENAS *et al.*, 2007). As stated in the introduction, such studies argue that, in general, young people from different European and Latin American countries think of democracy as a set of procedures of the representative democratic system and they associate it with values constitutive of such form of government (BRUNO; BARREIRO, 2015; CÁRDENAS *et al.*, 2007; GONZÁLEZ AGUILAR, 2016; MAGIOGLOU, 2000; MOODIE, MARKOVÁ & PLICHTOVÁ, 1995; RODRÍGUEZ CERDA *et.al.*, 2004).

In addition, it is interesting to consider the problem of thinking of democracy without taking into account the conventional forms of political participation, apart from voting, since that would mean not understanding the way in which it works and the mechanisms that might currently lead to its transformation. This might help to understand the negative attitudes of young people towards politics, in the context of a representation crisis, as stated

in the introduction (CAICEDO ORTIZ, 2013; CANTILLANA PEÑA *et al.*, 2017; MORALES QUIROGA, 2011; MONSIVÁIS CARRILLO, 2017). Furthermore, this way of representing democracy seems to overshadow the representation associated to system of government.

In this sense, previous works state that, when democracy is associated with a system of government, it encounters rejection, strong criticism and questioning (CUNA PÉREZ, 2012; NAVARRETE YÁÑEZ, 2008; TORNEY-PURTA, 2017). This would contribute to explaining the exclusion of democracy as a system of government in most participants of this study. Since this representation might imply a negative opinion of democracy as a system of government, it might become intolerable for social groups because it might defy the status quo and question the established public order.

As stated in the introduction, during the selection of aspects of the object to be represented, the threatening elements of the object are excluded from the representational field since they might defy the dominant view of the social world (BARREIRO; CASTORINA, 2016). Moreover, when analyzing whether this SR of democracy varies according to the different social groups considered (gender and self-perceived social class), no significant differences were found. Therefore, it might be possible to regard it as a hegemonic SR, enjoying the consensus of different social groups (LO MONACO; GUIMELLY, 2011; MOSCOVICI, 1988).

However, a minority of the adolescents who participated in this study regard democracy as a system of government, that is, they think of it as a broader political institution related to a representative government regime which goes beyond its mechanisms of operation (e.g. voting), unlike the responses included in the electoral representation. These results are in line with the findings of Bruno and Barreiro (2015), who suggested the possible existence of a polemic SR of democracy in the SR contrast zone, since they expressed meanings which associate democracy with a negatively valued representative system of government. As a result, this SR found in a minority group reveals meanings which defy the hegemonic SR based on voting and democratic principles.

In this sense, some future lines of research might open which might include more heterogenous samples or different geographical contexts from the one considered in this study in order to analyze whether the hegemonic SR of democracy is maintained or it is different in social groups of other generations.

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