GOOD SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY AS CULTURE

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1. Introduction

My key questions in this paper are the following ones: what is the relation between democracy and a good society? Are they synonymous? Or is democracy just a part of a good society? Or is it an instrument for it? Is it also possible to have a good society without democracy? The answers, of course, depend on how we understand both concepts: democracy and good society.

2. Good Society

Who would not like to live in a good human society? But who knows *what good society is*? No doubt, the answers to this question are so variable that one might be tempted to say that they answer nothing at all. It definitely depends on individual preferences as well as cultural traditions: each social subject may have their own ideas of a good society. However, we can certainly identify some common and cross-cultural features that apply to any good society, and which have been highlighted by classic modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and French Enlightenment *philosophes*, etc. These features include, at least: peace, prosperity, liberty, equality, justice, human rights and rule of law in addition to many others, such as a satisfactory living standard; quality healthcare and education; security including low levels of criminality (or none); friendliness and generosity in human relationships etc. The concept of a good society thus reflects fundamental social and political values and principles.

Without analyzing this topic in great detail, let me just give you a few examples of explicit conceptions of a good society, all rather contradictory, but all with some relation to pragmatism, despite not being explicitly pragmatist.

Walter Lippmann described the good society in his book of the same title[1] as a new modern society to which humanity is oriented; yet, it is not only an idealistic project but also a realistic aim to be achieved by economic and technological transformations and which is to be based on both social reforms, leading to the reduction of exploitation and reconciliation of conflicts, and on moral virtues (such as responsibility, justice, etc). His vision of a good society was a relatively standard modern liberal vision drawing on developments within the USA. Nonetheless, John Dewey dismissed it in his review of Lippmann's book as "reactionary", "idealistic" and "utopian", resting on "abstract simplification", improper "legalism" and "economic determinism", and above all, declared it a failed conception on the basis of the means proposed: "Every system of social thought which sets up ends without reference to the means by which they are to be brought about tends in effect to support the status quo, no matter how good the intentions of those who paint the picture."[2] According to Dewey, the problem of any vision of a good society consists not so much in the features to be postulated and agreed on as goals, but in the means and ways in which they can be achieved: "Definite and systematic exploration of the means, compatible with a free society of free human beings as the end, is, to my mind, the central problem, intellectually and practically..."[3]

Another, more recent example of a theory on good society is the work of a liberal and Keynesian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006). He insisted on a clear definition of what the good society is and considered it achievable. He wrote:

> In the good society all of its citizens must have personal liberty, basic well-being, racial and ethnic equality, the opportunity for a rewarding life. Nothing, it must be recognized, so comprehensively denies the liberties of the

individual as a total *absence of money*…nothing so inspires socially useful effort as the prospect of pecuniary reward, both for what it procures and not rarely for the pleasure of pure possession it accords. This too the good society must acknowledge; these motivations are controlling.[4]

Therefore, according to Galbraith,

[T]he essence of the good society can be easily stated. It is that every member, regardless of gender, race or ethnic origin, should have *access to a rewarding life*…There must be economic opportunity for all… No one, from accident of birth or economic circumstance, may be denied these things; if they are not available from parent or family, society must provide effective forms of care and guidance.[5]

For him it is clear that: "The role of economics in the good society is basic; economic determinism is a relentless force. The economic system in the good society must work well and for everyone. Only then will opportunity match aspiration, either great or small."[6]

The communitarian sociologist Amitai Etzioni has dealt with the issue of a good society in a number of his works and provides perhaps the richest vision to date. He grounds his understanding of a good society in the concept of community (but completely ignores Dewey and pragmatism), and thus according to him,

[O]ne attribute of a good society is that it is one in which strong communal bonds are balanced by powerful protections of self. Such a society is not simply communal, but also firmly upholds both social ties and autonomy, social order and liberty.

And: "A good society, it follows, is one that keeps conflicts within the bounds of shared bonds and culture." In his search for the common good, Etzioni provides a number of signs of a good society such as the reduction of "inequality to a larger extent"; governance "not merely by contracts, voluntary arrangements, and laws freely enacted, but also by a thick layer of mores that are in turn derived from values"; bearing "heavily on such moral dialogues to determine the values that will constitute the shared cultures"; regulation "by reliance on the moral voice rather than on the law, and the scope of the law itself must be limited largely to that which is supported by the moral voice." Again, "the good society is defined as one that balances two values, social order and autonomy, rather than maximizing one."[7]

However, Etzioni, strangely enough, rarely mentions democracy as a dimension of a good society, and even criticizes the liberal idea of civil society as not being a good society. He argues:

The civil society rests on classical liberalism and its contemporary offshoots. Given that this philosophy seeks to rely on each person to define the good rather than the society, liberalism seeks to leave value decisions as much as possible in the private realm, keeping the public realm thin and procedural and hence of very limited substantive normative moral content.

According to Etzioni,

The good society builds on communitarian philosophy. It assumes social definitions of the good, and that a well functioning society, let alone a good one, requires a core of substantive (rather than merely procedural) shared values which in part define not only public but also private proper behavior. To transmit these values from generation to generation, the good society heavily relies on the family, schools, and the community (including its places of worship and civic associations).[8]

He further claims:

We aspire to a society that is not merely civil but is good. A good society is one in which people

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[4] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1996), p. 4.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 23.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 24.

[7] Amitai Etzioni, "The Good Society." *Seattle Journal of Social Justice, v*ol. 1, issue 1 (Spring/Summer 2002), pp. 83-96.
[8] Amitai Etzioni, "Law in Civil Society, Good Society, and the Prescriptive State," *Chicago Kent Law Review*, vol. 75, no. 2 (2000), pp. 355-377.

treat one another as ends in themselves and not merely as instruments; as whole persons rather than as fragments; as members of a community, bonded by ties of affection and commitment, rather than only as employees, traders, consumers or even as fellow citizens.[9]

For Etzioni, "The good society is an ideal. While we may never quite reach it, it guides our endeavours and we measure our progress by it".[10] He suggests many more trends and provides greater detail of this ideal within the framework of the "third way" between capitalism and socialism (e. g. mutuality of social services; new orientations in education, partnerships, disarmament of population; diversity of cultures; spiritual pursuits, and the like).

A different conception of a good society with explicit inclusion of civil society and democracy, drawing substantially on Dewey, has been proposed by sociologist Robert Bellah and his fellow academics.[11] From their perspective on institutions, they cannot imagine how democracy and citizen participation could be eliminated from the concept of a good society. Despite the fact that they outline some of its features, their standpoint is that "there is no pattern of a good society that we or anyone else can simply discern and then expect people to conform to it". It is central to their "very notion of a good society that it is an open quest, actively involving all its members."[12] These authors are well aware that democracy itself is "an ongoing moral quest, not an end state" and with reference to the democratic transformation in former Czechoslovakia they rightly expect "a long process of institutionalizing democratic participation."[13] They think of a good society much in terms of Dewey's concept of "great community" and apply his idea of creative democracy to the creation of democratic institutions whose purpose is to enable intelligent public opinion and the responsible social participation of all citizens.[14] There is an organic relationship between active citizenship and the reshaping of institutions.[15] In pursuit of a good society, they also call for a reshaping of democracy in theory and practice, based on the Deweyan conception of politics and a renewed public. Democratic citizenship for these authors is active democratic participation in all spheres of public life and democracy for them is "paying attention" to all the important things in life that matter, that is to the self-cultivation of all citizens.[16] A value-based approach, recognizing that "money and power are necessary as means, but they are not the proper measures of a good society"[17] is also essential in their approach to democracy. Such values as cooperation, responsibility and trust are both the values of democracy as well as the vehicles of a good society. As to the meaning of a good society itself, it is "to sustain a good life on this planet for ourselves and the generations to come."[18]

That it is hard to find any consensus amongst the theoreticians of a good society is clear from my last two examples.

One approach is exclusively positive and it sees a good society mostly as a "harmonious" society whatever its characteristics may be. For instance, a good society is a society, where neither institutions nor people humiliate one another; it is a society based on the premise that human nature finds its key expression in *work*; and a society that does not lose its sense of shame at the wrongs it commits is a society that may also be called a "decent society".[19]

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[9] Amitai Etzioni, *The Third Way to a Good Society,* (London: Demos, 2000), p. 11.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[11] See Robert Bellah et al., *The Good Society,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[14] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13.
[15] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 107.
[16] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 254.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 272.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[19] Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

On the other hand, does it mean that contradictions, controversies, conflicts, various kinds of struggle and power games should be eliminated from any type of a good society? The well-known post-Marxist Chantal Mouffe poses the question as follows:

> What is a 'good society'? Is it a society pacified and harmonious where basic disagreements have been overcome and where an overlapping consensus has been established about a single interpretation of common values? Or is it a society with a vibrant public sphere where many conflicting views can be expressed and where there is the possibility to choose among legitimate alternative projects? I want to argue in favor of this second view because I am convinced that, contrary to what is usually taken for granted today, it is a mistake to believe that a 'good society' is one where antagonisms have been eradicated and where the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete.[20]

This is the claim that Mouffe espouses particularly in her conception of democracy which she calls "agonistic pluralism". She considers the dominant liberal model of democracy to be impotent in understanding the nature of dissensus and antagonism, which are linked to the ways in which power operates in a democratic society. Since this can by no means be eliminated, it means

> [T]hat the democratic society cannot be conceived any more as a society that would have realized the dream of a perfect harmony or transparency. Its democratic character can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to oneself the representation of the totality and claim in that way to have the 'mastery' of the foundation.[21]

The substance of this is that power relations are constitutive of society, so "the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values."[22] She has proposed (along with

Ernesto Laclau) an alternative conception of democracy which does not privilege consensus. The second point that Mouffe considers important in changing current conceptualization of a good society is globalization.

I am sure there are a lot of points in these conceptions with which we, pragmatists, can agree. But we should develop our own specific pragmatist conception of a good society (and of a good human life). It can also be shown that: 1. To contrast civil society with good society is a mistake since civil society is part of a good society; 2. There is an alternative conception of a civil society to the liberal one denounced by Etzioni, that is the pragmatist conception; 3. Pragmatism is the middle ground between the unhelpful controversy between liberalism and communitarianism. 4. Pragmatism includes, but should further develop, a contemporary conception of social conflicts;[23] 5. Pragmatism includes, but should further develop, a contemporary conception of social and political power.[24]

3. Models of Democracy

Democracy is not a final goal – democracy, no matter how important it may be, is just an instrument used to achieve a substantial goal, which is the good society.

So, I began with the concept of a good society because I do not think that it makes sense to think of democracy in contexts other than this, and there are few today who would disagree with the claim that a good society is a democratic society, and *vice versa*: a democratic society is a good society. Setting apart all other conceptions that might consider a non-democratic or even anti-democratic society as a good society we may also pose the question: *What is a democratic society?* Again, although we may find some general features that might

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[20] Chantal Mouffe, "Pluralism, Dissensus and Democratic Citizenship", in Fred Inglis, ed.: *Education and the Good Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 42.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[22] *Ibid.*

[23] See e. g. William R. Caspary, *Dewey and Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000).
[24] See e. g. Melvin R. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

be present in all democratic societies of any kind, such as elections and voting at the very least, this question is not as trivial at it may seem. The reason is this: *there is not just one model of democracy and there never has been*. Democracy, apart from being both a celebrated as well as a contested concept, is also a *pluralistic* concept, which, seen from the pragmatist point of view, is a good thing. That is, democracy is a "democratic" concept and should be taken as such, that is, understood "democratically". However, this is not so simple, for at least one reason: there are those who think and insist that their conception of democracy is the one and only "true" democracy". Let us call them "democratic essentialists", who pretend to have the privilege of having grasped the nature of democracy as such once and for all.

If we look at the history of the idea and practice of democracy, we shall see that there is no such thing as the essence of democracy. David Held, one of the leading scholars in the field, distinguishes several models of democracy, which are basically the following three models: 1. Classical ancient; 2. Modern European; 3. Modern American. These basic models can be further broken down into sub-models, but this does not change the kernel of the matter.[25] What is important to understand is that it is *not enough to profess democracy as such*; it is the model or type of democracy that we are professing that matters. There are "internal" controversies among democrats themselves as to which model or type of democracy is better, more appropriate, most efficient, etc.

4. Democracy as a Matter of Culture

Democracy, whatever it is, be it a way of government or a way of life (which should neither be taken apart, nor put in opposition to one another), is a matter of culture.

There is no democracy that exists separately from a particular culture (I mean mostly ethnic, national, local culture; the issue of a global or "Western" culture is different but it also applies here – we may speak, for instance, of Western culture as traditionally democratic as opposed to other continental cultures). Democracy is and can only refer to the quality of the culture, and in that sense we may perhaps speak of more or less democratic or undemocratic cultures. There is no space for me to describe the features of "democratic culture" in any detail here, I just want to make it clear that democracy is possible only where and when that particular culture has developed in that direction internally with its own values and structures, and naturally demands democracy. Let us label this democracy *"organic democracy"*, one which has matured and reflects the character and level of progress of a particular culture. Of course, there are many organic democratic cultures around the globe, but this does not mean that these cultures, and moreover their democracies, are all the same, of one identical type and model. Nothing like that is the case. Democracy comes in as many colors as human cultures and its universality is on a par with the universality of human culture.

This cultural conception of democracy, according to which democracy is a matter of culture rather than of politics,[26] is encapsulated in the following claim:

> Democracy is a tradition. It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of action, events, or persons with admiration, pity, or horror. This tradition is anything but empty.[27]

Of these important components, let me point to just one: Deweyan habits. Unless the culture produces in its

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[25] David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

[26] See also Sor-hoon Tan and John Whalen-Bridge, eds., *Democracy as Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008).
[27] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 3.

members what we would call "democratic habits" of behavior, there is little hope of building and developing democracy. To my understanding, such habits include an open attitude toward others, a natural interest in public issues, etc.

Additionally, we may also speak of democracy as a phenomenon that is "imported" from one culture to another; that is, democracy which is foreign in nature rather than intrinsic and that has to struggle in adapting to the culture. This does not mean that this may be a negative or a pointless process as such, since it has always been the case that cultures interact and influence each other, especially in our contemporary multicultural world. However, this is a much more difficult process than that which has its own domestic cultural roots.

In either case, the fruits of democracy can only be grown in domestic cultural soils. The seeds of democracy must be sown sufficiently deep into the foundations of culture no matter whether planted by national or international agents. But the character of democracy will always reflect and express the specific features of that particular culture. When it comes to the "export" or "import" of democracy, the only way of succeeding is through the mutual interaction of cultures, that is, the acceptance by one culture of another culture along with its model of democracy, which will, nonetheless, have to be adopted and adapted in any case.

Where there is no cultural tradition of democracy, there is no democracy, not even any hope for democracy unless such a cultural tradition is to be established and developed in the long term. *To understand democracy is to understand culture, and to understand culture is to understand the "habits of the heart" of the people*. In particular it means understanding the phenomena of social power and social trust, without which we cannot solve the problem of democracy at all. I do not think that any set of enthusiastic ideas in any of the deepest of democracies can do the job. If democracy is to be real,

ideas alone, even when combined with the faith in these ideas, are not sufficient. It is only through understanding culture and the continual organic transformation of culture toward these ideas that may help. Transformation and the formation of everyday "democratic social habits" could be the key.

5. Participatory Democracy as the Outcome of American Culture

Modern western democracy has developed two basic traditions and models – European and American. These are different and this difference should not be neglected. The modern European model has as its dominant sub-model liberal or representative democracy; its accidental and secondary model is so-called "direct democracy".

If we consider Europe historically, then for centuries we have had a prevailing tradition of various kinds of kingdoms with their lords: emperors, czars, kings, princes, dukes, counts, marquises, barons, etc., that is the tradition of authorities with their sovereign, absolute power to whom all other citizens were subjugated. Not only did they obey them, but they also respected and worshipped them as the sponsors of their bare existence and perhaps also of a good society. This is the tradition of monarchy and royalty, aristocracy and nobility (currently there are 13 monarchies in Africa, 14 in Asia, 6 in Oceania, another 17 include the countries of the United Kingdom and Canada and Australia, dozens of others on the sub-national levels with their sultans, emirs and kings as heads of state. There are another 12 in Europe including such important countries as Spain, those in Scandinavia and Benelux, alongside smaller countries such as Andorra, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg and Monaco). Despite the fact that modern political revolutions in the West have sought to limit aristocracies and monarchies in the form of "constitutional monarchies" with their parliamentary systems, that is in the shape of "representative democracy", the overall

culture, spirit and mentality have still maintained the tradition of nobility, tacitly or openly, as something to which people aspire and which attracts them even today. The current forms of this tradition include various privileged social positions with their exclusive rights and prerogatives, titles and benefits, no matter that formally all of this may fall under the umbrella of "democracy" as a form of government (a kind of fake nobility is represented by the so called "celebrities" manufactured by the current media in the services of the financial aristocracy). Formal representative democracy is even compatible with various kinds of autocratic leadership, despotism and dictatorships of which the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century serve as clear evidence (the party elite in the USSR and its satellites had adopted the tacit manners of fake nobility or patricians, which were one of the causes of their being overthrown by their fellow plebeians).

Another danger to democracy, apart from various forms of aristocracy ("rule of the best", e. g. in the form of timocracy) is oligarchy ("rule of the few", e. g. in the form of plutocracy, "rule of the wealthy") in the form of different interest groups, financial elites and mafias even on a global scale. So it seems that the obstacles to democracy are extremely deep and broad in scope; one of these, which I wish to highlight here, is what I would call the *"anti-democratic mentality"*, a feature of culture, which consists, to my mind, of the *elitist or anti-egalitarian habits of the heart,* as exemplified particularly in the high-headed self-image of oneself (expressed as "I am/we are of some higher value than you/them") resulting in an attitude of dominance toward others and a desire to govern them; or the submissive self-image of oneself (expressed as "I/we are of some lower value than you/them") resulting in a slavish attitude toward others and a desire to serve them. Aristotle and Hobbes (despite their controversies) would simply argue that this mentality is part of human nature, but the Hegelian dialectics of master and slave would again be appropriate here. Even the modern conception

of meritocracy ("rule of the most talented") can be doubted from the standpoint of democracy. All these problems, that is, the cultural roots for democracy, social obstacles to democracy, mental dispositions towards democracy, elitism as a psychosocial phenomenon, aristocracy and oligarchy as alternative means of social order, are awaiting further pragmatic analysis.

On the other hand, American democracy, itself a complex phenomenon which includes various features, has come mostly to be associated with "participatory democracy" or with "Deweyan communitarian democracy".[28] It is a particular outcome of American culture, which has not emerged in such a way elsewhere, including Western Europe. Even if American culture is not fully or exclusively participatory, the potential for it to become so is much greater in comparison to other cultures. But this also means that to adopt this model of democracy within a culture that has no such tradition, or a different democratic tradition, may be accomplished basically in two ways: 1. either the domestic culture understands that this type of democracy is a good thing to be had and will start to develop it using its own power; 2. or it will start to be adopted and adapted via the influence of foreign culture, in this case of American culture that has developed participatory democracy to its furthest point (at least in theory due to pragmatism). All those who rely on this second method will have to take into account that this type of democracy will not be accepted unless at least some part of American culture is accepted as well. That is, even if someone understands that the idea of participatory democracy is an American idea, which might have worked on American cultural soil, it is hard to imagine that they will accept this idea unless they have also accepted some features of American culture, e. g. a similar way of life, their domestic culture. Even if there was someone who might accept the idea alone, without the American context,

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[28] See Sor-hoon Tan and John Whalen-Bridge, *Democracy as Culture*, p. 15.

they will always be confronted with the resistance of other local democrats who will argue that such an idea is not workable in this country and should be rejected. We can imagine how long it will take to plant an idea, with no local roots and traditions, into a culture with different organic ideas generally and of democracy in particular.

Pragmatist philosophy is the strongest agent for developing the idea of participatory democracy. It has developed classic Deweyan as well as several contemporary "neoclassic" variants such as deep democracy, radical or prophetic democracy, and the like (see e. g. the works of Judith Green, Cornell West and others). So the task is analogical here: to accept participatory democracy means to accept pragmatism, and *vice versa*.

6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I wish to make just one final point: there is no democracy, no democratic culture and thus no good society without *social trust*. I know of several works on this topic,[29] but of no work specifically analyzing it from the pragmatist perspective. And this (including such concepts as social and human capital) is what we should do if we want to ensure that our pragmatist conception of democracy truly keeps up with the times.[30]

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[29] See e. g. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
[30] The text is a part of the research conducted within the grant VEGA SR No 2/0053/12.