

Editor's note: English translation of Chapter I of *Incluso un pueblo de demonios: democracia, liberalismo, republicanismo*.

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# **Even by a Nation of Devils: Democracy, Liberalism and Republicanism.**

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## CHAPTER I

### DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CITIZENS

There are a copious number of signs that citizens have lost interest in politics. The affirmation of this state of affairs is usually preceded by a lament and, shortly thereafter, by a recommendation to embolden civic culture. It is almost always the case that the lament is not widespread and, frequently, it is not even truthful. For many conservative intellectuals democracy could do away with citizens. They would argue even further: it would behoove democracy to do so. Simply put, citizens cannot be counted on. Several arguments have been employed in order to arrive at this conclusion. In general, they are all different varieties of a rather simple idea: citizens can be considered little more than idiots and, therefore, their choices are the manifestation of supreme idiocy. Idiots can be understood in any meaning of the word: in the original Greek, it

applies to the citizen who turned inward, who ignored others and public life; in the more recent meaning of French origin, it applies to the unaware, uninformed; or in the most common usage nowadays, it applies to the mentally deficient, incoherent.

After weighing all the reasons to distrust citizens, it becomes evident that the problems have less to do with the quality of the citizens involved than with institutional design, a design that would meet the liberal requirement to assure negative freedom, to minimize the amount of interference on the citizens' lives, as will be shown below. In fact, modern democracy is intended to function with ignorant and selfish citizens who pay no mind to public affairs. As in the case of the market economy, the rules of the game would make sure that, without information and without virtue, satisfactory results would be reached: resources would be allocated in a more or less efficient fashion. There is some doubt as to whether the market, a truly free market, functions with such efficacy. With democracy there is no doubt. Simply put, it does not work; it does not assure that the best decisions would be made —if, for example, they were to be made by the best people. And this is no accident. The problem would not improve by sprinkling citizens in general with a few drops of “civic education”. Together, the institutional design of democratic processes and the very nature of political activity itself make it quite unlikely that the political market will function as it should.

In what follows, I will start by giving an overview of some of the areas displaying deterioration in civic culture. Next, I will evaluate the scope of the arguments made by those who favor doing away with citizens' voices. It will become clear that although the problems that they highlight are in fact real, these problems have more to do with institutions than with citizens. In a certain way, the condemnation of the loss of civic culture is somewhat paradoxical, if not hypocritical: they bemoan what is inevitable, what is part of the program. Liberal institutions, and democracy in particular, have been designed —as far as institutions are actually a result of a “design” and planning— to do away with the voice of citizens. Ignorance and disinterest are the natural “fuel”, which in and of themselves are not worthy of condemnation. It is not written in the stars that the fullest life is that of an active citizen, and there are institutions like the market that, one way or another, seem to function along with selfish nature and disinformation of their protagonists. The problem, as will be argued, is that this is not the case of democracy.

## THE DETERIORATION OF CIVIC CULTURE

From among the great number of trends that can be culled from the evolution of democracies, there are two in particular which give rise to more generalized complaints: the rise in number of abstentions and in citizens' disinterest regarding political issues. In a trivial sense, the two aspects seem to be related, perhaps even causally: ignorance, the lack of culture, would explain abstention. There is also room for an alternative explanation: abstention and citizens'

disinterest in collective affairs would explain the lack of culture. They might ask, “Why should I be informed if I not going to get involved in that?”<sup>1</sup>

Packaged together, these two tendencies have been described as symptoms of the “deterioration of civic culture”.<sup>2</sup> This is one way of exploiting the limitless ambiguity of the word “culture”.<sup>3</sup> But it is better not to skirt around these two issues, the two meanings of “civic culture”: the loose definition, almost anthropological in nature, points to one’s commitment to fellow citizens and to the values of the community; whereas the stricter definition refers to a specific knowledge about political mechanisms and of key political players. The former meaning also puts at our disposal diagnostic tools for its *raison d’être*: abstention would be a natural consequence of extending the notion of that which has been vaguely labeled “individualism”.<sup>4</sup> This obtains in a very direct and straightforward manner: citizens would not see any reason to waste time informing themselves, weighing the pros and cons of the candidates and then voting. For two reasons: one, because the vote is individual, being one among millions makes casting a vote irrelevant; and two, because political involvement carries with it a high opportunity cost —more and more, one’s time is almost always better used in other activities, productive activities that have improved in a way that does not seem achievable by any kind of civic comings and goings.

But, besides this, individualism also unleashes abstention indirectly through side channels as a by-product of other things: through processes of social atomization which go hand-in-hand with modern capitalism, like fatigue after exercise. These processes have torn traditional ecosystems of political socialization to pieces. Two processes in particular have gone unnoticed: one, changes in the family, the traditional focal point for electoral mobilization, resulting from the incorporation of women into the job market, and two, changes in the ways of producing goods, causing the disappearance of workplaces as an arena for discussing and propagating political ideas.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Several studies confirm that the likelihood of voter turnout increases with the voter’s educational level, but the explanation of this correlation is an entirely different matter. Cf. S. Tenn, “The Effect of Education on Voter Turnout,” *Political Analysis*, 2007, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> For a general survey on research into political culture see P. Lichterman, D. Cefai, “The Idea of Political Culture,” in R. Goodin, Ch. Tilly (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006, pp. 392-416 (and in general the diverse works contained in Section Five of the handbook: “Culture Matters”).

<sup>3</sup> For a review of the more traditional meanings of culture see R. Fox, B. King, *Anthropology Beyond Culture*, Oxford: Berg, 2002; A. Kroeber, C. Kluchohn, *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1952. In recent years, as a result of the debate on the complicated culture-nature relationship, definitions have placed greater emphasis on the individual transmission of information and on the type of support it receives: “Culture is information capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission” (P. Richerson, R. Boyd, *Not by genes alone*, Chicago: U. Chicago P., 2005, p. 5).

<sup>4</sup> One extensive explanation appeals to the loss of “social capital”, a controversial category which Putnam makes a rather elaborate attempt to refer to “fraternity as the French democrats intended it” (R. Putnam, *Solos en la bolera*, Círculo de lectores: Barcelona, 2002, 475). For a more polished treatment of this controversial notion: P. Dasgupta, I. Serageldin (Eds.) *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> C. Braconnier, J-Y. Dormagen, *La démocratie de l’abstention*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

Between one explanation and another, between the rise in selfishness and the consequences of the market expansion, a third one points to the changes in the cognitive structure of people resulting from the rise in a market mentality. To put it plainly, individuals begin to question and weigh the costs and benefits of ideas that they had previously taken for granted, thus causing norms to be undermined. Many people who were willing to collaborate for altruistic reasons in a public or fraternal activity would stop doing so if there were any hint of compensation. The payment for what they had previously done for free leads them to “classify” the activity mentally as a cost-benefit negotiation. And using such an accounting approach, the numbers will not match. The expansion of social processes regulated by the market, the ones that now have price tags attached to them, goods that at another time were supplied more or less altruistically out of the reach of the market, has caused almost everything to be viewed through an accounting perspective.<sup>6</sup>

For the more commonly used latter meaning of “civic culture” (or lack thereof), the meaning synonymous with simple ignorance, perhaps there are more data than explanations. Indeed, the data are abundant, and striking. After the Reagan-Gorbachev Geneva Summit, an event which garnered non-stop media attention, most Americans were still unaware of who the Soviet president was. In 1992, 86% of voters knew the name of the president’s dog, but scarcely 15% knew that both candidates were in favor of the death penalty. Thirty percent of Americans do not know who is in the White House, half are unaware that there are two senators, and three out of four do not know the length of their terms.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the data are not limited to politics: 79 percent of adults believe that the Earth orbits around the sun.<sup>8</sup> Nor are the data confined to a specific country. In England, one in four people believe that Churchill was a fictional character while 58% believe that Sherlock Holmes existed.<sup>9</sup>

These tendencies are not as telling as they seem. They lack a historical context, a time frame. When bringing up romantic visions of democratic revolutions, as events where political activism was widespread, as events in which throngs of informed citizens controlled the conduct of political administrators, perhaps it would be useful to point out that the protagonists at that time bemoaned the indifference of their fellow citizens and particularly lamented their abstention. They lamented and attempted to right the situation with a particular remedy: “three days of fasting to atone for the enormity of this crime” was the proposal of the French poet and revolutionary activist Théophile Mandar.<sup>10</sup> The quality of civic culture after the American Revolution also left much to be desired. Michael Schudson described how things really were: an illiterate individual (a property-owning white male) who spent several hours travelling to his polling station, would be obliged to publicize his vote in the presence of powerful local families

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<sup>6</sup> R. Lane, *The Market Experience*, New York: Cambridge U.P. 1991; K. Voks, N. Mead, M. Goode, “The Psychological Consequences of Money,” *Science*, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> M. Della Carpini, “In Search of the Informed Citizen: What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters,” paper presented at the conference on *The Transformation of Civic Life*, Nov. 1999.

<sup>8</sup> For other subjects see: <http://gallup.com/poll/>

<sup>9</sup> *The Telegraph*, 4/2/2008.

<sup>10</sup> P. Gueniffey, *La revolución francesa y las elecciones*, México: FCE, 2001, p. 212.

from which the candidates emerged.<sup>11</sup> He would vote on matters about which he had scanty and unreliable information, and it was quite likely that later on the way to final decisions, these matters would be changed time and again.<sup>12</sup>

These are the facts. In general, they inspire lament. At least for those who are greatly committed to democratic ideals. It would seem that the “deterioration of civic culture” has disastrous consequences: lack of legitimacy in decisions, the commandeering of politics by those with power, the loss of quality from the lack of transparency and the absence of checks and balances on power.<sup>13</sup> But there are those who maintain the contrary as well: that abstention is a form of legitimacy. Citizens’ indifference could be a sign that the democratic system is working as it should: citizens do not intervene in politics because, in their opinion, things are going well. It seems that the implicit assumption is that if citizens were unhappy with the situation, they would protest.<sup>14</sup> In a certain sense, this second interpretation seems to endorse a more optimistic vision of citizens: if they are not involved in politics, it is not out of apathy, but out of conviction. It offers this optimistic view not only of citizens but also of the democratic apparatus itself: it is sensitive to participation although it can function without it as well.<sup>15</sup>

Both perspectives place a positive value on participation. The only difference is that while for the former perspective, participation is a necessary condition for the proper functioning of institutions, for the second perspective participation is simply a sufficient condition. The former would say that democracy does not work because it does not do what the voters want. The latter, that it does work because it does do what they want.

Compared to both these perspectives, a conservative liberal tradition makes a more categorical assertion: democracy does not work when it does what the voters want.<sup>16</sup> Said another way, a better kind of democracy is that which pays less attention to the will of the people. This argumentation, which distrusts participation, has appealed to a variety of views. All of them share a pessimistic opinion of citizens. All have their problems.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Public Life*, New York: Free Press, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, at least in terms of short-term information, there are also reasons to believe that as of fifty years ago things have not changed much: M. Kent Jennings, “Political Knowledge Over Time and Across Generations,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1996, 60, 2, pp. 228-252; S. Bennett, “Trends in Americans’ Political Information, 1967-1987,” *American Politics Quarterly* 1989, 17, pp. 422-435; S. Bennet, “Changing Levels of Political Information in 1988 and 1990,” *Political Behavior*, 1994, 16, 1, pp. 1-20.

<sup>13</sup> C. Pateman, *Participation and Democracy Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970; B. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> B. Ackerman, *We the People*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1991.

<sup>15</sup> There is something paradoxical in this comparison: one would expect the least radical point of view to have a more optimistic and revolutionary opinion of citizens. It implicitly assumes that, if citizens did not like things, they would launch a protest, or a revolution.

<sup>16</sup> The perspective of the formerly famous “Trilateral Commission,” M. Crozier, S. Huntington and J. Watanuki, *Crisis of Democracy*, New York: New York U. P., 1975.

## THE QUALITY OF CITIZENS

Many an argument has been used when discussing history in general, something which is easily confused with the more specific history of democracy.<sup>17</sup> Here I will limit myself to those arguments that continue to be heard nowadays. In different ways, yet starting from real problems suffered by democracy, they have ended up taking aim at “problems with citizens”. They reached the conclusion that it would be better to limit or filter the citizen’s voice in the decisions affecting them; that it would be better to leave politics to the professionals. A hasty conclusion, to be sure. In reality, the frailty of their arguments simply encourages us to search for the explanation elsewhere, in the design of democratic institutions. Simply put, they were not conceived with citizens in mind.

### A) IGNORANCE

The first argument starts with the statement of a fact. Our societies are enormously complex. Legislative decisions concern multiple topics, each of them containing innumerable shades of meaning. An increasingly greater amount of knowledge is needed to deal with them. It would be unthinkable for citizens to be able to form carefully thought-out opinions about hydrological plants, environmental policies, foreign relations, exchange rates, or the administration of justice. Some would say that under these conditions, citizen participation would be a sure way to make the worst decisions.

The line of reasoning is not as compelling as it first appears. For starters, the fact that societies are complex does not necessarily mean that a greater amount of information is needed to be able to participate in them. This complexity is due to many circumstances, including citizens’ level of education, the collective capacity to process information, and the design of democratic institutions; more precisely, the background knowledge that they need to function.<sup>18</sup> The market provides a good example of how the administration of complexity does not require information management skills of the agents who manipulate it. Champions of the market have repeatedly asserted that all the relevant information needed in the competitive market is contained in the price: what should be produced, in what quantity, how resources should be assigned, and so on.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Sowell generalizes this view: “What then is the intellectual advantage of civilization over primitive savagery? It is not necessarily that each

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<sup>17</sup> S. Giner, *Sociedad masa*, Península: Barcelona, 1979; A. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992; J. Femia, *Against the Masses*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001.

<sup>18</sup> For ideas on how to improve civic competence, see A. Lupia, “Questioning Our Competence: Improving the Practical Relevance of Political Knowledge Measures,” *Paper presented at the annual meeting of The Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois*, April, 2005; S. Elkin, K. Soltan (Eds.), *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*, University Park: Penn State Press, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> F. A. Hayek, “Economics and Knowledge,” *Economica*, 4, 1937, 33-54. Cf. the more general G. O’Driscoll, “Spontaneous order and the coordination of economic activities,” *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 1, 2, 1977, pp.137-151.

civilized man has more knowledge but that he requires far less. A primitive savage must be able to produce a wide variety of goods and services for himself.... By contrast, the civilized accountant or electronics expert, etc., need know little beyond his accounting or electronics. Food reaches his local supermarket through processes of which he is probably ignorant, if not misinformed. He lives in a home constructed by an involved process whose technical, economic, and political intricacies are barely suspected, much less known to him.... Civilization is an enormous device for economizing on knowledge.”<sup>20</sup>

There is no denying the fact that with regard to the other two aspects, the level of education and tools for capturing and processing information, we are much better off today than two hundred years ago. From automobiles to computers, we have all experienced, as technology improves and becomes more sophisticated, how much less is required of the end users in terms of knowledge of the intricacies of technology’s inner workings. In the case of politics, the ability to transmit information without incurring costs associated with those new technologies opens up new opportunities. Today no technical impediment exists to keep anyone from accessing State budgets. That does not mean that every citizen is qualified to evaluate and understand all the information. The challenge is not for everyone to know everything but rather for anyone to be able to access information at will about public affairs and their management.

At any rate, even if we accept the argument regarding the complexity of issues, when it comes to democracy, it would be very difficult to take this as a premise in favor of political elites. Following this same line of reasoning could lead one to recommend doing away with politicians. Beyond the scope of their limited professional environment, a politician is no better equipped to deal with problems than a common citizen. A representative trained as a lawyer or a doctor is not likely to understand the workings of the financial market. At their best, political classes make use of professionals (e.g. economists or lawyers) whose disciplines are subdivided into multiple fields. An excellent labor economics professor might be completely ignorant about international economics or public accounting. A constitutional law attorney could be oblivious to the particulars of the penal or civil code. For most decisions, politicians are dependent on technicians who describe and summarize the problems, and who also provide a large part of the “solutions” later ascribed to the politicians. The acknowledgement of this circumstance is behind a significant part of the classic economic theory of bureaucracy.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, this theory shows that the different administrative institutions have a monopoly on the supply of information regarding political departments. This can have pathological consequences, e.g. they can control the gravity of problems as well as the relationship between an approved budget and the actual activities that were carried out. Politicians can be wary, but when push comes to shove, they are lost.

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<sup>20</sup> T. Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions*, New York: Basic Books, 1980, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> W. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Representative Government*, Cheltenham, U.K.: E. Elgar, 1971; “La peculiar economía de la burocracia,” *Hacienda Pública*, 1978, 18, 52, pp. 266-275.

At first glance, the solution for both citizens and politicians would be the same: reliable technicians to assess and take part in public debate by framing questions and dilemmas appropriately. In fact, things could get better with participation. For members of parliament, who are but a few, the amount of information becomes unmanageable. On the other hand, once information is accessible to anyone, the opportunity for interested parties (who are also capable of interpreting the information) to warn others arises, others with whom stable and reliable ties have been maintained. The solution is in the numbers: it will always be possible to find competent, interested citizens, which is not the case with parliament. The idea is not that everyone knows about everything but that there is always the possibility that someone can access the part of the whole that he is interested in and that he can make his conclusions known to others.<sup>22</sup>

## B) INCONSISTENCY

In this case, the criticism of participation starts by referring to certain results from social theory which would make it difficult to define the “will of the majority” or “general will” with precision. According to certain authors, there would be no way to translate the citizens’ private preferences into an intelligible collective preference.<sup>23</sup> The general will would be inconsistent in the same way that it is inconsistent for a person who prefers Andrea to Bertha, Bertha to Carmen and, at the same time, Carmen to Andrea. That said, in small doses, we all suffer from inconsistencies, but we are eventually obliged to resolve them because we have to make a decision; we have to choose one of them, which is what happens naturally when it comes to collective choices. There is a majority, from the same set of individuals, who prefers A to B, another B to C, and a third who —when faced with a choice between A and C— chooses to keep C.

Social choice theory has provided us with a solid starting point; it shows that no democratic decision-making mechanism (e.g. majority rule) exists that respects basic principles and is able to group voters’ preferences in an unambiguously “intelligible” aggregated preference.<sup>24</sup> Arrow’s theorem generalizes and formalizes the well-known Condorcet paradox, which tells us that, when there are at least three individuals participating in a choice with at least three options, there is no way to obtain anything similar to a collective preference that “aggregates” all parties’ choices. What is more, often an on-going cyclical movement can be seen amongst the options: option A beats B, B beats C, but C beats A, and the whole cycle starts all over again.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. P. Rosanvallon, *La contra-démocratie*, Paris: Seuil, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Rousseau distinguishes between the “general will”, a collective will with a common interest, and the “will of all”, which is a simple sum of all private wills, focused on private interests. Here “general will” is taken to mean “will of all”, but even if this is the case, the collective choice theory makes no mention about the quality of the preferences of the individuals that form the collective.

<sup>24</sup> K. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1951. Cf. the next chapter.



A significant number of commentators have interpreted Arrow's theorem as a rebuttal of the idea of general will: it is not that this cannot be known, but rather that there is nothing to know.<sup>25</sup> Their rebuttal refers to the idea of democracy and its underlying justification as a system that allows citizen preferences regarding the state of affairs (and, of course, as a just form of "collective self-government"). In their view, the idea of the general will shows a composition fallacy by extrapolating properties that are only valid for individuals to the collective. Rationality, will, and self-government are attributes of individuals, not societies. They then reach the conclusion that liberal democracy, the type of democracy that is viable, has nothing to do with participation and general will. It is a simple system to penalize and select political elites through the use of an electoral system.

The discussion surrounding the implications of this and other choice theorems is unending and hinges upon very technical arguments.<sup>26</sup> By way of rebuttal, opponents have traditionally adopted the strategy of weakening and reformulating some of the axioms, thereby debilitating the results that served as the starting points for critics of participation. On other occasions they have resorted to challenging its interpretation, by showing the limited empirical scope of such results, if not the outright falsity of the data used.<sup>27</sup> At any rate, it is difficult to understand why critics of participation limit their critiques to liberal democracy. Since the theories they invoke refer to any choice system, the arguments they use should also discredit the mechanism for selection and penalization of the elites.

On the other hand, it would be reckless to rule out that new institutional designs, including democratic ones, could avoid or alleviate the problems of aggregation.<sup>28</sup> In particular, it would behoove us to consider the deliberative processes that filter distinct options using impartiality and justice as their filter criteria. This line of reasoning would allow the number of alternatives to be reduced or it could allow them to be organized following a hierarchy of principles. The first possibility rests on a supposition that is fundamental to all deliberative processes; it states that although all opinions should be allowed equally to be expressed, not all are equally valuable. Before being "aggregated", the preferences should be justified in a public arena that thoroughly contemplated and sifted through them by means of a public discussion. With fewer options, the overtly irrational and immoral alternatives having been eliminated, it is less likely that problems of "inconsistency" in general will appear; even though the will is general, this does not mean that it should be made up of all things. This strategy allows some of the axioms in Arrow's Theorem, as well as its pessimistic conclusions, to be by-passed.

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<sup>25</sup> W. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism. A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*, San Francisco: Freeman, 1982.

<sup>26</sup> C. List, *Mission Impossible? The Problem of Democratic Aggregation in the Face of Arrow's Theorem*, (<http://personal.lse.ac.uk/LIST/research.htm>).

<sup>27</sup> G. Mackie, *Democracy Defended*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003.

<sup>28</sup> J. Coleman, J. Ferejohn, "Democracy and Social Choice," *Ethics*, 2006, 97; D. Miller "Deliberative Democracy and Social Choice," *Political Studies*, 40, 1992; J. Dryzek, C. List, "Social Choice Theory and Deliberative Democracy: A Reconciliation," *British Journal of Political Science*, 2003, 33.

The other possibility highlights the fact that deliberation allows common ground to be identified, proposals to be prioritized, and the scope of problems to be reduced. For example, it could be shown that, according to certain normative criteria, Initiatives A, B, and C all seem to be different and have been ranked in order. In this way proposals could be carefully evaluated—for example, grouping together those with similar energetic considerations—on the same scale. In this way the field of choices would be reduced to the most basic issues that are pertinent to the choice at hand. Thus something similar to what happens in the personal arena would happen in the political community. I may want to devote myself to dissipation (D) and, at the same time, cultivate my spirit (S), work on something that I like (K) and get rich (R). After some reflection on the idea of what seems to be a reasonable life, I can rank my preferences after contemplating the meta-preferences, the fundamental principles dealing with the type of life that it seems important for me to live. This would allow me to decrease the number of choices I have to make: if I want to be a libertine, I should choose package L, with the order (D, R, K, S); if I want to be a philosopher, package P with the order (S, K, D, R).<sup>29</sup> One way or another, by using filters or a hierarchy of preferences, deliberation would be useful in finding a solution to the problems of aggregation.<sup>30</sup>

### C) SELFISHNESS

This strategy implies that the zoon politikon is just a fairy tale, that “citizens could care less about politics.” And citizens would not be without reason for doing so. Political activity requires time and effort. One must be informed, make comparisons, and—at the very least—go out to vote. And all of that effort in the name of general interests. In addition, the likelihood that one’s own vote, one in a million, will have an impact on a decision is almost nonexistent. It is hard to believe that people devote time and effort to a practically useless task, which on top of that, will benefit everyone equally, even those who do not vote. Added to that is the circumstance mentioned above: by its very nature, politics always lags behind other activities when it comes to improving its productivity. Said another way, the (opportunity) cost of spending time on public affairs is ever increasing.<sup>31</sup> All in all, it’s bad business.

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<sup>29</sup> J. Harsanyi, “Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 63, 1955; H. Frankfurkt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 1971, 68.

<sup>30</sup> That said, it should be pointed out that things can go the other way too: before simplifying things, deliberation can complicate them. See Chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>31</sup> A characteristic of market-oriented activities is that, as a general trend, they have improved their productivity. We need less and less time to obtain the same results. (In reality, this is not quite the case: every technical change in production systems usually implies changes in the product; cf. N. Rosenberg, *Perspectives on Technology*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976). In other cases, as in the case of domestic production, productivity has not been easy to improve for technical reasons. Here, it is the opportunity cost which drives the elimination of the activity. It is normal to prefer devoting the time that previously was used to cook or clean to activities that are better remunerated and leave the domestic tasks to others – with more efficient production techniques such as those available in restaurants and Laundromats. But that does not happen with all activities. From an economic perspective some of them do not improve their

This line of reasoning is based on two premises: an anthropological one, according to which an individual is a selfish and rational homo oeconomicus; and an institutional one, which makes the individual ponder the costs and benefits of a wide variety of issues, making politics an uninteresting proposition. Both are debatable.

Homo oeconomicus has a cash register for a brain. Choices are registered as costs and benefits. He explores different actions that are before him; he examines their consequences, considers the possibilities, weighs the advantages and finally chooses that which benefits him. Everything else —affection, loyalty, rules, and so on— does not matter. Their existence is purely instrumental, which means they no longer exist as affections, loyalty and rules per se. We would be hard pressed to actually find such a character.<sup>32</sup> In our daily life, we often run into resistance to acting like selfish calculators.<sup>33</sup> It does not seem right that organs for transplant are auctioned off to the highest bidder. After an excellent Christmas dinner, it would not improve the relationship with the in-laws to offer compensation for the time they spent preparing the meal. The IT consultant who spends afternoons teaching free classes at a school would surely stop doing so if offered money. If our boss asks us to go to another city, we might half-heartedly accept even though it would mean being separated from our loved ones. If he says that he will pay us money to compensate us for being away from our family, we would not even consider the proposal. In all of these cases, someone acting out of pure selfishness would have acted differently.<sup>34</sup>

None of this would be comprehensible if humans as a species were put together exclusively with a simple homo oeconomicus way of thinking. This reasoning only takes into account benefits, but it lacks memory, feelings of justice and of loyalty; it lacks hate and envy. Threats are fulfilled and pacts are kept only because they are advantageous. The downside is that when “the costs and benefits are weighed” in the realm of emotions and morality, the possible benefits disappear. “Strategic” dignity does not matter. It only matters if it is

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productivity and cannot make up for it without turning into something else or losing sight of their original goal. It happens with friendship, “a relational good”; its consumption is not exclusive, it cannot be acquired by delegation, it has no price (the good would disappear) and, above all, its only input is time – the more time devoted to it, the more the product grows. For this reason, by definition, productivity cannot be improved. Said another way, when compared to other activities, its opportunity cost continually increases. Political participation could find itself in a similar situation. See C. Uhlander, “Relational Goods and Participation,” *Public Choice*, 1989, 62, 3; F-C. Wolff, L. Prouteau, “Relational Goods and Associational Participation,” *Annals of Public & Cooperative Economics*, 2004, 75, 3.

<sup>32</sup> C. Camerer, G. Loewenstein, R. Rabin, (Eds.), *Advances in Behavioral Economics*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Here I am referring to arguments, with some modifications, that I developed more extensively in *La libertad inhóspita*, Barcelona: Paidós, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Money makes “virtuous behavior” deteriorate in at least two ways: a) people who are willing to collaborate for free, stop doing so when they are offered payment (by putting a price on the activity, the good disappears; perhaps because at that point they think with another part of the brain – and ponder whether “for that price, it’s worth their time”; b) exposure to money drives people to stop helping in any kind of activity without being paid. Case in point: students, who had been paid for activity A, when asked for help by another student on activity B, do not offer their help. For experiments dealing with this topic, see D. Airely, *Predictably Irrational*, New York: Harper Collins, 2008, p. 67ff.

truly felt and unwavering.<sup>35</sup> This is a behavior that would be impossible for the homo oeconomicus, who always prefers something to nothing. If the values of an individual “work” to maintain an active social life for him, it is precisely because these are not based on calculations, but because they are values, because we get indignant and we are willing to act accordingly even if it means losing money. And thus, as we all know, we have another reason to resist unleashing in others behaviors that are “unwarranted”, to defraud or humiliate them. One way or another, society—including the market— works because a significant part of our actions are not bound by monetary calculations, because individuals are guided by values and the ties to these values are emotional. We are indignant when faced with injustice; we are ashamed when violating the rules. This is something that can only be explained if we are biologically disposed in some way to follow norms.<sup>36</sup>

We human beings are quite a bit more than just selfish. At times, in some contexts, we do put ourselves first; in others, we lack time to go to the aid of others. No informed person today can maintain that we are born as blank slates, that what we are is simply a question of education, of “culture”. It is part of our nature. We go through a variety of emotional processes, repertoires of flexible commitments, various links between norms and emotions.<sup>37</sup> We are innately disposed, or—even if they are not innate— our genes are programmed and they develop over the course of our lives, as in the cases of teething and sexual desire. We are born “knowing” many things: we have certain spatial notions and psychological ideas; we are born with the ability to master a language, to understand facial expressions, to make causal relationships, and to categorize.<sup>38</sup> What is debatable is the claim that only selfishness exists among these notions. There is nothing remotely similar to a “one and only motivation”, but rather there are distinct motivating factors that function and coexist in distinct cognitive processes, in different scenarios.

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<sup>35</sup> In this area, especially interesting results have arisen from experimental economics. One experiment consisted in dividing \$100 between two individuals so that one individual (A) first proposes a division of the quantity; if the proposal is accepted by the other individual (B), each one of them takes the agreed upon amount; if it is rejected, no one takes anything. The economic theory, which is founded on the supposition of selfishness, predicts that A would propose a \$99 share for himself and \$1 for B. The reason is that A supposes that B, between something and nothing, prefers something: B is also selfish and, for him, there is no other benefit. What happened when the experiment was carried out was that: a) the majority of A’s proposed a 60-40 split; b) the B’s rejected proposals that did not propose close to equal shares. These results invite thinking about the existence of feelings of justice and dignity and how they manifest themselves when removed from selfishness: J. Kagel, A. Roth, (Eds.) *The Handbook of Experimental Economics*, Princeton: Princeton U.P. 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Additional proof of this is that humans attempt to do the same thing in our moral dilemmas (even though we do not agree on how to justify the decisions made); cf. M. Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, New York: Ecco, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> A. Maryanski, J. Turner, *The Social Cage*, Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1992; A. Maryanski, “Evolutionary Sociology,” *Advances in Human Ecology*, 1998, 7.

<sup>38</sup> H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, J. Tooby, J. (Eds.), *The Adapted Mind*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992; D. Sperber, D. Premack, A. Premack, A. (Eds.), *Causal Cognition*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1996. There is no need to share the exaggerations of evolutionary psychology to recognize these results. See also the voices devoted to Biology, Physics, Economy and “Popular” Psychology in R. Wilson, F. Keil, (Eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999.

The existence of motivations for behavior leads us to a second premise: to the possibility of designing an institution with the idea of encouraging civic dispositions and channeling selfish ones so that the desired results are obtained, so that even homo oeconomicus is satisfied with the state of affairs. Being disposed to participate depends largely on citizens' perception of the importance that is given to their voices. If institutions are designed to do away with their participation, it is perfectly normal for them not to take part.<sup>39</sup> He who knows that no one is listening does not bother talking. This is not selfishness; it is simply sensible. And it just so happens that institutions are not sensitive to what we could call the public vocation of citizens.<sup>40</sup>

Institutions must detect sinful behavior without discouraging virtue. They have to be able to work if there is low public motivation but not allow this to keep them from absorbing and encouraging civic dispositions. This is the case of science, an institution which is designed to force seeking the truth and to produce "correct theories". In scientific communities, those who are passionate about knowledge can let their natural dispositions run free. But not only individuals as such. Those who have other objectives (money, fame, sexual success) know that to be able to obtain them, they must submit to a set of procedures (publicly making their arguments, being exposed to critics, empirical control, etc.) which force them to "seek the truth", behaving just like those who are so naturally inclined. The institution is able to function with low-intensity and "minimum services", without virtue ("love of truth") but it does work better when that virtue is truly achieved, so much so that it fosters it.<sup>41</sup>

#### D) IRRATIONALITY

According to this point of view, the crux of the matter is not that the voters are ill informed. If that were the case, there would not be any problems with

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<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the theory that participation is also a cost is debatable in light of results that show a positive relationship between participation and happiness; cf. B. Frey, "Happiness Prospers in Democracy," *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 2000, 1; B. Frey, A. Slutzer, "Happiness, Economy and Institutions", *The Economic Journal*, 2000, p. 110; R. Ryan, E. Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudemonic Well-Being," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2001, 52.

<sup>40</sup> There are two rules at play which act as foundations for the "functioning" of public organizations: a) the priority of the *realism of virtue* principle, according to which the design of institutions should assume that individuals are not interested in the public good, over the *possibility of virtue*, according to which institutions should be designed in such a way as to encourage public disposition; b) the priority of *passive responsibility*, understood as a simple capacity to justify an action taken, and which is associated with penalties in the case of violating a norm, over *active responsibility*, understood as the autonomous action that values consequences and seeks out appropriate behavior in accordance with the public interest. M. Bovens, *The Quest for Responsibility*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998; G. Brennan, "Selection and the currency of reward," in R. Goddin (Ed.), *The Theory of Institutional Design*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996.

<sup>41</sup> For an institution to function the theoretical challenges to its foundations must be made clear and the problems it will suffer must be investigated. The difficulties arise when the challenges are not clear, that is, when there is not a scientific community that shares a repertoire of theories and issues. A good part of this is the problem with social theories. In these cases, what is needed is virtue on the part of the researchers; cf. F. Ovejero, "Las batallas de la ciencia popular," *Claves de razón práctica*, 128, 2002.

participation. It would not matter if they voted blindly. The votes would be distributed randomly. It would suffice for an informed few to end up making the best choices. Citizens would opt for one choice or another, cancelling out each other's mistakes, and the reasonable few would make a difference in the decision. But, according to the critics of participation, this is not the case. They believe voters to be stupid in an orderly fashion. Their decisions are governed by regular biases, biases that are both irrational and persistent. Consequently, there is no compensation for their blunders but rather obstinacy in their error.

In its essence, those who defend this perspective point to citizens' empirical or inferential flaws, flaws that are regular enough to be considered a "constant" trait in their behavior. In some cases, it deals with beliefs, opinions about the world, like the four biases—which are debatable, just like the others—that Bryan Caplan posits: an anti-market bias, which makes it difficult to understand how the invisible hand harmonizes private ambition and general interests; an anti-foreign bias, which stops us from recognizing the benefits of the interaction with people from other countries, particularly in international business; a make-work bias, which conflates prosperity with employment and not production; and a pessimistic bias, which systematically leads us to think that economic conditions are forever worsening.<sup>42</sup>

In other cases, this approach deals with inferential biases, with errors when information is being digested or on the way from premises to conclusions.<sup>43</sup> Some of them are repeated with remarkable regularity: a) a representativeness bias, which leads an item to be related with a class and later to attribute what is known about the class to the item. This can be a positive trait (e.g. "he studies theology, so he must be a serious person") or negative (e.g. "he studies advertising and public relations, so he must be frivolous"); b) an accessibility bias, which leads to dredging up from memory the easiest aspect to remember (e.g. the PP is the war in Iraq; el PSOE, el GAL\*); c) an anchoring and adjustment bias, which works by successively correcting the basis for a rather hasty initial answer (e.g. voters who tie themselves for years to the first political party that they happened to choose in their youth); d) a simulation bias, which makes conjecture and causal reasoning based on limited information (e.g. having been given A leads to B and that to C); 3) an information cascades bias, in which people successively base their actions on what has been done before without being aware of the information that they can receive.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> B. Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2007.

<sup>43</sup> For more about these biases, cf. Z. Kunda, *Social Cognition*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999, 53.

\* Translator's note: PP (People's Party) and PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) are two principle Spanish political parties while GAL is an acronym for "*Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación*" (Antiterrorist Liberation Groups), groups illegally funded between 1983 and 1987 by the PSOE-led government under Felipe González to combat Basque terrorists.

<sup>44</sup> M. Delli Carpini, article cited above; S. Bikhchandani, D. Hirshleifer, I. Welch, "A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades," *Journal of Political Economy*, 1992, 100, 5. D. Hirshleifer, "The Blind Leading the Blind: Social Influence, Fads and Informational Cascades" in K. Ieurulli, M. Tommasi (Eds.), *The New Economics of Human Behaviour*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995.

The presence of biases seems irrefutable.<sup>45</sup> Doubting them would be tantamount to “irrational” behavior. This is a rather hasty interpretation.<sup>46</sup> To begin with, it should be taken into account that the scope “irrationality” reaches goes far beyond politics. It reaches almost all of our activities, starting with a good part of our folk theories, “theories” that control a large part of our daily activities without us even being consciously aware of them; they are often confused with “common sense”. Although they may be false or imprecise, they make it easier to go through life efficiently, and, on many occasions, they seem to be inscribed in our brain modules. Our mental physics (“the sun rises”, or “bodies fall”) is Aristotelian and incompatible with the results of modern physics, but it works well enough for practical purposes such as making causal relationships, avoiding danger, and making plans. And it is better than the alternative. We do not frequently deal with scenarios concerning the speed of light. At times it can also be imprecise and incompatible with the results of neuroscience. We are spontaneously driven to interpret facts as well as the behavior of others in terms of belief and desire. (At times, in primitive societies, when they take the form of animist attributes we call this “the behavior of nature”.) Another batch of theories deal with our “spontaneous” theories about biology and economics. And with our inferential strategies as well, starting with induction, the inference that leads us to make generalizations based on little observation. It is not sound reasoning (if it were sound, it would be a deduction), but in many contexts the speed or the ability to act with little information is strategically important. For example, it is desirable to conclude there is a predator nearby and flee when one sees the grass move and smells a certain odor. Our senses, starting with sight, also deceive us at times.<sup>47</sup> But no one denies that they work. Simply put, such “knowledge” constitutes —or constituted at another time— interesting adaptations, even though from a purely logical or epistemic point of view they are at times (or always) incorrect.<sup>48</sup>

However, this is not the issue at hand. Rather, it is more important that we will be able to take a step back, to escape from our natural disposition for a moment and place value on such adaptations. To use a Hegelian term, we should be able to attain “self-consciousness”. We must reflect and recognize “error”. This is something that we can do by using theoretical as well as practical reasoning. We know that there are wavelengths that we do not perceive and we have constructed theories about them; we know that it is healthy to avoid our natural tendency to eat sweets in excess; we know that certain systematic inferential errors are just that: logical errors; we know that our aggressive or possessive dispositions are susceptible to moral evaluation and we ought to overcome them in the name of other considerations. In all these cases, there is a basic

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. G. Gigerenzer, *Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. the controversial debate between G. Gigerenzer (“Moral Intuition: Fast and Frugal Heuristics?”) and C. Sunstein (“Fast, Frugal and (Sometimes) Wrong”) in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral Psychology. Vol. 2. The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Our brain is not a flawless machine. Natural selection has not produced the optimum tool to process data. The product is more a result of ad-hoc patchwork with the available material; cf. D. Linden, *The Accidental Mind*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> For treatment of a variety of “folk sciences” see R. Wilson, F. Keil, Ed. *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999.

disposition or a type of strategy that, on the one hand, is interesting in certain circumstances, but on the other, when more time is available, we can ponder such strategy and recognize its fundamental faults and make the necessary corrections. This simple possibility to revise and rectify our judgments in light of reasons, confirms our rational competence and capacity to develop it.<sup>49</sup>

Using good logic, each one of the inferential biases seen above corresponds to a certain type of fallacy. But that does not mean that the biases are simply irrational. They can also be understood as heuristics which aid in making “rational decisions under circumstances of limited ability to process information, limited incentives to become engaged, and limited information”.<sup>50</sup> It is simply the best that can be done with what is available. The problem is with “what is available”,<sup>51</sup> with the information that is processed. And that is a problem of institutional design. To be clear: the more manipulated the information is, the greater the likelihood that erroneous conclusions are reached, even if the information is in the hands of the likes of Russel, de Frege or de Gödel. Being aware of the existence of these biases is indication that we can take them into account when making decisions, just as central banks take into account selfishness when manipulating interest rates to control inflation. What is necessary if the goal is to make sound judgments is that the most truthful information must be guaranteed and then contrasted from several points of view. For example, take the case of a group of people with certain shared opinions about something that they are discussing amongst themselves – and only amongst themselves. Suppose they end up having the same more extreme opinion about that something.<sup>52</sup> For the sake of obtaining quality decisions, the parties ought to be shown institutional proposals that compel the parties to be exposed to other points of view and to deliberation, to say it with solemn brevity.<sup>53</sup> That this is the case, that judgment improves under these conditions, there is modest but noteworthy empirical evidence.

## WHERE IS THE PROBLEM?

In the end, in every case, we come back to institutions. Nothing surprising here. Apparently, the “problem” of the lack of civic culture has less to do with citizens than with the rules of the game they are playing. It is simply part of the design. It is at the heart of liberal suppositions that inspire democratic institutions. To put it differently, it is in the way that liberalism attempts to resolve its conflict with democracy: “protecting” citizens from politics. For liberals, the loss of freedom starts when decisions made by “others” from the political community

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<sup>49</sup> E. Stein, *Without Good Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> M. Delli Carpini, S. Keeter, *What American Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale U.P., 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Of course, things would get better if one is aware of the influence of biases because we know that the inductive reasoning used is not sure; for that reason, we know that the conclusions reached from inductive inferences are not indisputable.

<sup>52</sup> If they are moderately x (racist, conservationist, feminist, etc.) the most radical (racist, conservationist, feminist) thesis ends up winning out. With a certain degree of epistemological exaggeration, Cass Sunstein calls this relationship “the law of group polarization”; see “The Law of Group Polarization,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2002, 10, 2.

<sup>53</sup> C. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0.*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2007.



affect me, and my freedom increases when there is a corresponding increase in the areas of my life that are excluded from these decisions. Under these conditions it seems perfectly normal that political activities are first and foremost considered to be a threat to freedom before they can guarantee that freedom.

The liberal suspicion of democracy is radical. Democracy seems to demand the participation of everyone in decisions that affect everyone. From that point of view, democracy jeopardizes freedom in two very basic ways. Firstly, decisions that are adopted by what the majority thinks is good, regulate a large part of each individual's life. I can want A, but if everyone wants B, I won't have any choice but to accept something different from that which I desire. Secondly, for democracy to work a civic disposition may be required along with participation in the management of collective life which, even if these are compatible with certain life ideals, cannot be demanded easily or simply from—or presumed of—citizens as a whole. One way or another, democracy leads to intrusions; it establishes “impositions” that are not the result of freely given consent. Isaiah Berlin put it quite clearly: democracy does not get along with negative freedom, the liberal ideal of liberty, according to which, the best society is that which exists with minimum interference in the lives of individuals.<sup>54</sup>

Liberal democracy is the institutional solution for the compatibility problems between democracy and liberalism.

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<sup>54</sup> I. Berlin, *Cuatro ensayos sobre la libertad*, Madrid: Alianza, 1988, p. 59.