

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

21 – 24 November 2012
Córdoba, Spain

Report

Forum II
Democracy between distrust and participation:
Re-thinking the relationship between citizens and state?

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Inputs:

Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani, University of Fez (Morocco)

Pablo Oñate, University of Valencia (Spain)

Moderation:

Ondrej Matejka, Civic Education Centre (Czech Republic)

Introduction:

The first speaker Pablo Oñate from the University of Fez in Morocco summarized his core ideas 'to provoke thought and debate,' and described his input as an attempt to try to think aloud about the problems that democracy is facing these days in the Western world, driving citizens to a *fatigued situation*. He further described his presentation as an attempt to arrive to several reasons, or pillars, that are fastly eroding the support for democracy in our (Europe's) political systems (an incremental eroding). Pablo Oñate stated that citizens don't seem to be trusting political actors and institutions, and that the solutions offered by the state to the population's problems through the traditional democratic procedures do not satisfy our populations. Citizens' trust had been vanishing in the last 2-3 decades. We were facing democratic fatigue. Why?

First session:

Pablo Oñate described the four pillars, or common traits, that could metaphorically stand behind the incremental erosion of trust between citizens and state as follows:

1) Certain influence by non-democratically elected actors – namely, an increasing amount of authorities that do not have a political, but technical backgrounds. He argued that a number of strategic decisions are made not by individuals with political backgrounds, but by

individuals with technical backgrounds. There are no political arguments, he added, so “we are leaving politics aside and we are talking about management, not politics... they don’t talk about values ideas or collective aims or politics, but about management”. When a technical criterion replaces a political one, citizens are faced with a political maze. “Our politicians have transformed themselves into managers,” added Pablo Onate.

2) Lack of democratic control or oversight of those making political decisions, in essence – a lack of accountability amongst the political elite. This lack of responsiveness, or rather democratic deficit points to *our* politicians lack of attention to what citizens feel, want, need, propose and discuss, need to know and so on (explaining why decisions are being made in this sense, not the other). Citizens don’t feel the political collective actors as parts of themselves – instead they feel as if they don’t belonged to the political system anymore. There is a divorce between the political class and the citizenry. This lack of control deals also with accountability, not just bottom-up but top-down accountability, creating a very sad democratic deficit.

3) Threat that corruption poses to democratic institutions. Data figures provided by Transparency International make clear that there are no exceptions to corruption in democratic institutions. [[As an example serves the Corruption Perception Index in 2011; out of 118 countries there are only 25 which have a 7 in a 10-point scale while 10 points stand for no perception of corruption in the public scale – *figures require precise check*]] This is a problem for democratic support. “Once again we feel that it will be practically impossible, and citizens are not going to trust the political system if they are aware that there are corrupt practices.” Transparency and good governance should prevail to get rid of corrupt practices in democratic systems.

4) Lack of a truly enduring democratic commitment by citizenry. Pablo Onate argued that “if citizens do not organize themselves in a vibrant civil society – if they do not act neither offensively nor defensively – probably the democratic system will not prevail,” and he further described the need to transform all uprisings into long-lasting political commitment and involvement by the population. “We found in our society that we behave/act politically in a momentary-basis, but do not engage in a permanent basis.”

Following his presentation on the four pillars obstructing trust between citizens and state, Pablo Onate proceeded to present recommendations and mechanisms for how citizens could override these problems through civic education:

- Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provide nowadays an opportunity to enlarge citizens involvement with their political lives, to organize everyday involvement in political activity. Moreover, ICT allows the possibility of this kind of permanent participation. It opens ways for new challenges for effective participation for permanent participation (or, a long lasting commitment to arrive to a deeply participative political system).
- Political managers vs. Political leaders. In this framework of democratic fatigue, leaders shouldn’t adopt short-term approaches to political problems, (they are concerned about forthcoming elections and do not look forward to improving citizens lives). We need to empower citizenry and find ways to institutionalize their participation. We need active, intense and vibrant commitment by the citizens. Socio-cultural mobilization is changing our values; what remains is that citizens should be linked better to the political system.
- We are living under a new political paradigm, civil society is measured not by results but by the number of topics that they can raise in society... that is the solution of a permanently engaged citizenry, he adds.

The second speaker Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani from the University of Fez in Morocco presented his input by reading out the text from the attached document (*please see attached*). Following his input, the moderator stepped down from the panel carrying the microphone in order to open the floor for questions and discussion. The moderator summarized as follows: *we heard two analytical inputs on how to regain trust again between citizens and states a) Permanent participation using ICT – and b) taking into account the local traditions and customs. Does it work? What do you think about it? What would work? What could work? What are the pros and cons of those proposed approaches?*

Question & Answer – Open forum about the first Session:

1. On civil society having a permanent action, I am one of the kids of this generation that rejected the parties, in the 90s I thought that NGOs bring the issues maybe, but they refuse to take a political stance. They make politics at the grassroots level but at the same time reject to take the responsibility of political action. Do you think the time came because of this crisis to MOVE in civil society to take the responsibility of what they are saying and being permanent participants – otherwise I don't see that they can operate in a 'little' structure. Second question: I embrace everything with regards to local culture- I work in Berlin, in one of the worst parts – my very observation in the field – it is good to use customs & traditional ways but these people are bringing the problems of social organization that is the basis of the problems. (Tita Cazari, Greek citizen living in Berlin)

2. On civic education – What is your perception of the role of political parties for the future? In Germany they have not had a very important role in the constitution, but have played an important role from civil society into political action. (Samia Cazar, Bonn)

3. Today we are talking about democracy, we know that the system is not designed for young people like us – change is strongly enforced by the youth movement, people are still fighting in the streets – in a practical way according to your academic experience, which ways can we use to push people to stand up and promote active participation of young people? (Abdallia al Hajj, Morocco)

Pablo Oñate's response to this: *A clarification – sometimes we forget that when we talk about civil society, the meaning is not limited to Non-Governmental Organizations. It is the domain of organizations that are not owned or part of the state – so there is a lot of private interest, banking industries, entrepreneurs, associations – it is a complex domain of actors who do not always share the same human rights or well being interests. Sometimes we have to understand that NGOs are issue actors vs. political parties who are ideological actors. Political parties have a wide program of different political attitudes towards different fields. NGOs only deal with small portion of the wide ideological spectrum. That is probably part of the trade of civil actors – we shouldn't suspect NGOs always as responsible as we would like them to be – I think we shouldn't have to choose either between political parties or NGOs, I think we should try as citizens to participate in both ways. In selection of candidates and election of party members at the same time being reactive in civil society. I don't think that we should choose either way. CUSTOMS is not my answer to this. This is micro-politics, you cannot build macro-politics without taking into account micro-politics without taking into account traditions of the culture & the historicity's – but there should be room and space for common aims, values, objectives that a group wants to achieve as a political community. What about the role of political parties in the future? They are not doing that bad – they have never been such a strong organizations as they are today. As citizens we have probably never been as far from them as we are today. Political parties will probably still stay there*

throughout time. We don't channel our political activity only through political parties. In the future, I guess they will be there as they are today. Maybe they will pay more attention to angry citizens – I hope they are there. Let's hope they are better, more democratic political parties. What is the way in which we can drive our society to become more democratic? My presentation was on the Spanish transition. Do we need democratic citizens to have a system that is democratic or vice versa? The only way is to educate citizens through civic education and at the same time political socialization. We should try to enhance this civic education and transparent democratic practices in order for them to see they can get experience and influence. Of course there is the question of trust.

Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani's response: I am starting from the idea of Hegel – from the idea of rights that history is a way to achieve the will which is sometimes right or bad. It is the history. For this reason there are good customs and bad customs. The good ones work for more equality equity and freedom. The question of will is only a means to solve conflicts – customs is a way that the community uses to solve a conflict. The law is for all of society, the customs is only for a local community. We must always observe the historical contexts because otherwise we are using abstract view.

Further Question & Answer – Open forum to first session

1. Who should say how civic education should be taught? Is it the government? Or is it the civil society or political parties? Ex. a class for children, in Spain, that was directly refused because it was said to be too liberal. Anna is working in Latin America, Spain & Europe.

Response by Pablo Oñate: HOW should civic education be organized? Who should be teaching? The whole society should be, probably. Most of the European education assistance has civic education in the syllabus. Not only the schools, but families, associations and all of society should partake. I don't think it should be one actor – but more than teaching civic education it should be.

2. Following up on the question of trust – what about the trust between the state and NGOs and other groups that are facing a clampdown?

3. On NGOs in Poland – what are our priorities in civic education? One answer was that we should work with public institutions, teachers and local communities to teach them to be more democratic. “When I started working with civic education, I was very frustrated because of the fact that it is very hard to take part in civic or citizen work in the institution that is not democratic itself! An example to when you spoke about the permanent systematic participation in the public domain. It is possible again but the school itself should be a democratic institutions. In Poland we still have very authoritarian institutions – it is very hard to tell students to be active... Now we are really thinking about solving the problem of not having democratic institutions. They really want to invite people to participate, it is a very hard process to show them that they will be more effective in delivering public politics when they involve people, without this conviction we cannot make any step forward.”

(Question from Warsaw, Poland)

Response by Pablo Oñate: Trust and political support are interlinked, when citizens enjoy support they trust their institutions. We can talk about legitimacy on the one side, or short-term specific political support, which is satisfactory in the way democracy works. We all are probably democrats and share democratic values, and through democratic means and institutions, decisions should be made. The problem of the trust of citizens in their political

systems has to do with the way that democracy works, so that I say that it is a matter of the quality democracy has. We are facing a problem with the democratic practices in our systems.

4. On the question of trust from the Italian perspective and the failure of democracy-representative, democracy unfortunately does not work, so we have had a little leap towards participant democracy. But we know that this is a big problem at any level (national, local, European or international level). I want to refer to three plans launched by the EU: *debate, dialogue and democracy*. Since the 1980s, politics has been calmed by the economy, and now politics is defeated by financial failure- so in which way can we mend that if politicians don't have the real power, but are they the representatives of the people if they don't have power towards economic plan? (A member of the Italian council of European women, Italy)

5. What if you have a case from Egypt, for example, of government vs. civil society? Civil society is now, after the revolution, the main way for change, European experience for democracy was through the political will – while in Egypt it is through the grassroots movement that pushed for change.” (Dalia Asem, Egypt)

Response by Pablo Oñate: *Civic Society and State: that's why its called civil society! There are many NGOs that exist due to the support of the state. There are some NGOs that do not want to have anything to do with the state and rely on their citizens and have to be good enough to convince their citizens – they should be able to operate without state support. They should be able to manage by themselves. This is Spain 35 years ago; society has to find a way to organize itself and to fight. How can society turn? Civil Society will have to organize better; this has been an issue in all states in traditions. Civil Society has been an important actor but there are others, political parties and other actors. The very existence of some NGOs is under threat.*

Comment by Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani: *Civil Society is fighting for civic, economic and cultural rights, while the state increases the indifference of people. Emotions are hightened here where the indifference decreases. Civil Society must always be in the streets – and there is a difference in street culture of the Middle East, and the street culture of Europe (akin to the salon culture). In the Arab world we have the culture of the street - streets in the cities can increase the solidarity – but in this way the social and civil society aims for the ideals for humanity without political programs (which is a question of parties). Political parties have short-term programs but Civil Society and NGOs are striking for years. HABERMAS had a model of speaking, as model of process, not only based on the model of conversation but participation. Therefore – the revolution is ongoing.*

Response to Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani from an audience member: I am not sure that HABERMAS will agree with you with your interpretation. You mentioned that there is a failure of this kind of representative democracy therefore we should go for deliberative democracy – therefore I think we should try to emphasize – even if we consider that they are short term programs// but they are the only actors that complete a whole program.

Question & Answer – Open forum to second session

Comments, thoughts and ideas that were raised during the Question & Answer Session transformed into a strong, energetic debate between participants, speakers and the moderator – below are core points various comments and debates exchanged.

1. How do you define good local customs, and who defines what are good and bad local customs?

Response from Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani: *Society is multi-cultural but community is monoculture. In an example from a Moroccan village we have one religion in presence, but in society at-large, we have multiple religions. We need a law that goes across families and tribes; I am starting from the idea of Hegel when he states there is the idea of rights and history of law.*

2. How do you deal with a situation where, for example In the Czech Republic, our customs are actually 'corruption'?

3. Today in Arab countries we have legally elected parliaments, but without any legitimacy. Today, Arab political systems address the person as an isolated individual – he goes to give his voice for a party, and his rights are always the political interest, not always the economic or social interest.

4. I totally agree when it comes to teaching civic education, that it is important to start with local customs – and to start with what local communities know and have practiced. I have 3 issues with that: At first, when you have activity on that level via social organization, how do you transfer engagement into the political sphere? How do you transfer negotiation process in neighbourhood and villages – how do you connect on that level? If you fail to connect them the distrust will only grow and second, when it comes to local community self organization, where do you draw the line? It is always difficult when it comes to the field of justice.

Response by Pablo Oñate: *How to question or connect civil society activity with the domain of public political domain – this has to do with governance. That this political participation, involvement of stakeholders of the civil society (considering them as a multi-polar actor that is vibrant, asking for accountability and responsiveness that is the way in which civil society can be transferred to the decision making arena. This is accountability top down. Both ways are necessary.*

5. On justice and the system – The French colonialists in Morocco introduced the distinction between cases that can be resolved between the community, and those that can be dealt with in the judicial system in the tribunal. In principle, all citizens have the same rights to go to the tribunal. In Tanzania they have the same problems with the courts that are not able to fulfil their laws, the 'barefoot lawyers' that go through the villages as the mediators – but they have minimal education in the laws. But who is the one to tell you what is good vs. what is bad?

6. Technical innovations that can be used to broaden citizenship participation – there is an interesting thing here, these are techniques but there was nothing about the substance or values of democracy in (Pablo) Oñate's presentation. If you are talking about bringing politics back (philosophy of the right-wing government as well) they are directly political and they have a new kind of political philosophy – they refer to the east that it will over run the west, it is interesting that now in Hungary there is no accountability (but there are elections!) – that politics came back but not democratic politics. Somehow this should be stressed, the substance, not exclusively the techniques.

Comment by Pablo Oñate: *I could not agree more, ICT are means to ENHANCE political debates (values, what, who, or how things should be done). Accountability is more than voting – this is procedural democracy. We all agree that it is much more than that – these*

procedures should not be considered democracy. Decisions are taken on expert opinion that are taken place in a technical fashion... what do we want to do and how in the political community?

7. In Hungary, people like to avoid political questions, in order to avoid conflict; *if you don't mess with politics you won't get into trouble per se* – this kind of passivity will contribute to the situation... it could be the role of civic education to make it clear for the people that these are important things. There is a very vibrant blogosphere in Hungary, and it can even substitute an independent civic society. Problem with ICT is only those people have access and only those people who are already concerned are active.

8. There is a sense, an insinuation, of the middle classes disregarding the concerns of the lower classes (*imagine a 19 year old in Germany without education, participation, gets a serviced apartment, health care etc. gets all this while people of his same age in North African countries that work – will at best have a fourth of the purchasing power of this young man*). We might discuss specific issues or specific groups of those who have benefiting from the situations in the economic sphere. To condemn the middle-class is problematic.

9. Morocco and Habermas – Problems of accommodation and harmonization between these communities and the rest of the society. For example, in France there are problems in the banlieu/ suburbs because there is a grave misunderstanding between the communities of the second and the third generations and the state, and from my point of view, I am for the solution given by Austria. There is a partnership/ cooperation between the state and the communities. And we can solve problems- does not mean that the community is another society. But can have a judicial solution to these problems.

10. Cooperatives and ideas to raise participation and ways to overcome barriers to these challenges. But who decides who should be part of the cooperative system – how is the general interest guaranteed? What about the interest of the people who are not able to organize, who is taking care of their interest? There has to be a public authority that is taking care of the general public interest of those who cannot participate in the discussion.

The moderator Ondrej Matejka of the Civic Education Centre from the Czech Republic commented: *Living community is democratic of itself, and has the ability to discuss all the issues and that's the power of the community / that you don't need to make these procedures / a good instrument to involve the people because it is not that complicated, it is more natural. The point is of course how the community is built. Participation barriers are usually very strong// to be elected is so hard // but to be active is not so difficult.*

11. On another level – regulation of labour markets would be one of the most promising way to get politics back to the public – that the state provides some kind of security – for citizens to have more time, passion to be politically active – because I think they would have a feeling that this democratic political system has a promise made to me – and this is the reason why I am part of the system...

12. What about education? Most students/ people in Germany are not aware of how much it costs the taxpayer to be in the classroom!