

## 4. Participation as a spearhead for inclusion in the democratic system: Promises, scope and limits

In the field of comparative politics we find many different typologies of democratic regimes: consociative or majority, presidential or parliamentary, representative or participative, etc. The numerous possibilities present a common interest to stress some defining trait considered more relevant than any other and based on which a specific model of democracy is defined. Concepts thus appear such as liberal democracy, parliamentary democracy, republican democracy and also, significantly, inclusive democracy<sup>38</sup> and participatory democracy<sup>39</sup>.

The question we have to deal with at this point is whether participatory democracy has the potential to develop and perfect democracy, in the sense of promoting inclusion and minimising the excluding logics we can see in all democratic systems.

### 4.1 The model of participatory democracy

Participatory democracy has been one of the most successful types of democracy in recent decades, especially in local government. But, what do we mean by “participatory democracy”? Mostly it refers to a series of mechanisms enabling a direct involvement of the public in the affairs of government, which is conceived to complement and enrich the habitual devices of representative democracy. Nevertheless, the coexistence of representative and participatory institutions and logics is not necessarily peaceful, but there are usually tensions. In fact, there is a powerful strand of thought which denies the possibility of this coexistence. The absence of academic consensus on the subject is also shown by the development of highly diverse models of participation –all of them under the “participatory” label-, different with respect to the type, scope and protagonists of the participation: direct democracy, associative democracy, deliberative democracy, etc.

The existence of a model known as participatory democracy does not suggest that the other models can do without participation. Democracy can be considered a set of three key elements in necessary coexistence: representation, deliberation and participation. The proportion, combination and specific establishment of these elements might vary, but they can never completely disappear if the regime is to remain democratic. A democracy without participation would be illegitimate, a democracy without

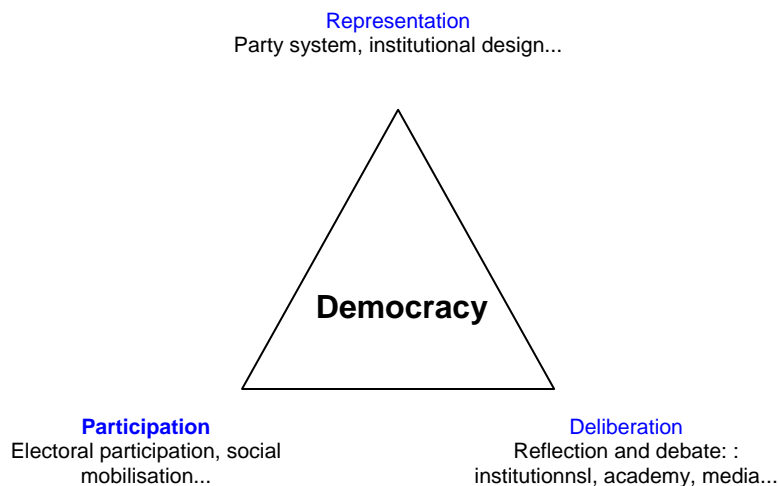
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<sup>38</sup> Fotopoulos.

<sup>39</sup> Pateman.

representation would be ungovernable and a democracy without deliberation would be completely unstable and unpredictable.

Figure 2. Democracy as participation, representation and deliberation.



Source: Author.

Taking the words literally, the name 'participatory democracy' would actually be tautological, because democracy is either participatory or is not democracy. However, we use this concept to designate a form of democracy that places the main stress on participation, over and above the other two elements of the equation (representation and deliberation).

Theoretically, participatory democracy not only favours public participation and social inclusion, but makes of them its own political foundations, because here, political representation aspires to coincide fully with the whole of the social body considered in its complex plurality. For democracy known as participatory, social inclusion is therefore an end in itself and the exclusion of any group intrinsically means a lack of legitimacy; therefore, the effective exercise of citizenship cannot be limited to the election of representatives every x years (as happens in representative democracy) nor to the representatives producing supposedly inclusive consensus without counting on public participation. On the contrary, the election of representatives or their deliberative practices should be considered no more than moments and parts of a wider democratic process which would always have to be subordinated to the principle that citizens must have the effective capacity to decisively intervene in the decision-making.

## 4.2 The values of participatory democracy

Until the 1960s, the theories and forms of democracy based on the primacy of the elites and the limited, if not residual, role of the citizens in public decisions predominated. These adjusted better to a fordist kind of industrial society based on instrumental rationality and hierarchies, in a general context of remarkable social and cultural homogeneity. The change towards a new kind of society that started in the 1970s was accompanied by the vindication and revitalisation of a forgotten part of democratic tradition that started with Rousseau, Paine and Stuart Mill, who believed that beyond a procedure for choosing governments and preventing tyranny, democracy was a value in itself, able to promote human development in the most positive sense of the term.

This idea of stronger democracy is based precisely on participation, a participation which is attributed all these public benefits in so far as “*it increases the sense of political efficacy, feeds concern for collective problems and contributes to form an active, informed citizenship*”<sup>40</sup>. Through participation, individuals, and especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged social groups, can learn to govern themselves by assessing and expressing their own interests and preferences and taking the interests and preferences of others into account, to become aware of the complexity of public questions. We can see in this process of learning and perfecting, of humanisation through political activity, one of the purest expressions of human freedom because each person can decide on their future as a member of the community, with results that are always open and unpredictable<sup>41</sup>.

To finish this point, we add that this ‘democratisation of democracy’ through greater participation should not only affect the public institutions, but also drive the transformation of the family and work, to make them less oppressive and more open to human creativity.

Having come this far, we can see that the similarities between the ideal of participatory democracy and the ideal of social inclusion understood as the kind of critical autonomy we considered in the previous section are strong, not only because participatory democracy requires the inclusion of all citizens in taking decisions, but also for their optimistic view of human nature. Nevertheless, as we will see later, in the real world participatory democracy has edges, contradictions and side-effects that remove it from the simplicity of the ideal.

## 4.3 The different views of participation

In the 1990s, participatory democracy achieved a high degree of acceptance, both in public institutions and outside of them, among the academics, the public officials and

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<sup>40</sup> Gallego (p. 6) quoting Carole Pateman.

<sup>41</sup> Gallego (p. 7), quoting Hanna Arendt.

the practitioners. For a moment, the old school elitists seemed to be secluded to their winter quarters, i.e. the headquarters of the political parties and big employers' organisations. Participation is imposed, but not all the authors, and less still all institutions and political players do speak the same participative language. The discourse of participatory democracy might be said to be *adopted* and *adapted* by the main political ideologies of the time, and placed at the service of very different projects. Assuming the typology proposed by Barnes, Newman and Sullivan<sup>42</sup>, we might identify four large discourses on participation:

- The responsible public discourse, which stresses the public duty towards others and towards the state for the democratic system to work correctly. An appeal is made to the decisive importance of the family and the non-governmental entities in setting out society. To this comes a stress on the importance of self-government, understood in several ways: as individual self-discipline, as community self-government and/or as the individuals and communities' relationships with the public administrations, which should be based on autonomy.
- The consuming public discourse fixes its interest on individuals' expectations and experiences using public services. According to the premises of methodological individualism, this discourse conceptualises participation as the public capacity to choose in a free market of goods and services. Inheritor of liberal tradition, the consuming public is not simply a passive receiver of the consumerist machinery, but aims to become an active player in choosing the public goods and services to which they are entitled as taxpayers.
- The stakeholder public discourse is based on a public which has (individually or collectively) an interest (material and/or ideal) in the good government of public matters. In this context, participation is valued and practised as a way to express one's opinions on public matters. From a pluralist conception of public interest, the discourse is concerned with identifying different individual and/or collective interests at stake and with establishing mechanisms to enable the effective incorporation of these interests in the decision-making processes.
- The empowered public discourse focuses on the disadvantaged or cast aside groups and communities, i.e. the excluded. Considering that behind this exclusion we will find the institutionalisation of discrimination by reason of class, sex, origin or any other, the discourse of the empowered public claims the need to generate processes to collectively train the excluded, so that they might be able to act in their own name, that is, autonomously with respect to the beneficiaries of the status quo.

Here we are talking about ideals which would be difficult to find in the institutions in pure state and applied exclusively. Most frequently, elements are combined from the different discourses, with specific accents depending on the government's political

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<sup>42</sup> See the introduction part of Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2007).

colour and other national and local factors, for each discourse on participation is backed by different implicit normative frameworks (liberal, republican, autonomous, communitarian...) and their adjustments to (and congruence with) the democratic variants can vary significantly. The following table shows the basic features and implications of each model.

Table 5: the participation discourses and their implications

Discourse	Player	Priority purpose	Preferential instrument(s)	Closest ideology
<b>Responsible public</b>	Individuals as members of society	Strengthening of the State through the traditional social structures (status quo)	Corporate based participation bodies; councils of nobles	Conservative
<b>Consuming public</b>	Individuals as consumers	Efficiency and efficacy of public services (value for money)	Councils of users, channels for making complaints and claims	Liberal
<b>Stakeholder public</b>	Organised groups and associations	Integration and equity (a cohesive and fair society)	Bodies and processes of deliberation; political and union militancy	Social Democrat
<b>Empowered public</b>	Excluded groups and communities	Strengthening and emancipation	Community development plans; direct democracy (referendums)	Radical-democratic

Source: Author, departing from Barnes, Newman and Sullivan.

Beyond the ideological presuppositions inherent to every discourse, there is nothing to make us think that these models exclude each other. To put an example, the fact that a city's rotary club organises a beneficent campaign does not prevent that in this very same city a participative process is organized to draw up a strategic plan of the city, in which all relevant stakeholders are invited. This in turn does not impede that a local council of users of the health centre is set up, as this does not prevent the realization of a project for the self-organisation and skills-raising of the community of immigrant women. Obviously there may be points of friction and conflict between the different processes, when for instance the participants of the strategic plan process touch upon interests of some conspicuous Rotarians, or when the members of the council of users of the health centre require health issues to be given priority in the strategic plan, or when the immigrant women demand a chair (or two) in that council of users. But all this, far from being negative, would be a sign of the democratic health of the community. We would therefore dare say that Barnes, Newman and Sullivan's four discourses of participation are not only mutually compatible, but it could be even positive that they exist together, for each addresses a type of public, has specific goals and uses specific instruments. If it is done properly, the interplay generated by the four models can provide a kind of checks and balances between the different institutions and groups, with a tendency to new and better power equilibrium in each community.

### **Note: The role of the consuming public in improving social policies**

The consuming public discourse, which at first might not seem very suitable in a progressive approach of inclusion, provides potential for improvement, too. In the case of social policies, the classical welfare state in this area has been characterised as working from a strongly technocratic logic, with well-known results: apparatuses capable of managing monetary transfers and certain basic homogenous public services with relative efficiency and efficacy, but, on the other hand, structurally quite incapable of receiving signals from the environment (personal, users, public) on the possible problems, shortcomings or chances for improvement, in order to be able to adapt to the changes through sophistication and quality. The constitutional principle of equality does not only mean “equal treatment for that which is equal”, but also, through pure logic, “different treatment for that which is different”, and in a society of accelerating differentiation, the state's effort for inclusion cannot be sustained on a few simple, homogenous and stable policies, but rather the actions have to be diversified, the target groups have to be segmented and provided with tools that enable the assessment of the results of the actions and the adaptation of the policies to the new needs. In this context, it might be entirely functional for beneficiaries/consumers to participate more in the social policies at are at the basis of inclusion.

Nevertheless, wherever participatory democracy has been driven from the institutions, as it has been in most cases, the most commonly used and applied discourse has been that of the shareholder public. Why? Given the intrinsically conservative movement of institutions set up and regulated from a system of representative democracy, we can consider the hypothesis that the discourse of the shareholder public has been chosen because it is universalist, aimed at all citizens, and above all, because it gives the state a large role without questioning its way of addressing problems, or not as radically as would be the case of the consuming or the empowered public discourses. The stakeholder public discourse is moderate and therefore easier to accommodate institutionally. The problem, however, as we will see below, is that excessive prioritisation of this kind of less risky and less transforming discourse to the detriment of others, has contributed to the progressive deterioration of the ideal of participatory democracy.

#### **4.4 Difficulties and mistakes of participatory democracy**

After the 1990s, and especially in Western Europe and Latin America, there was almost no political programme or city project that did not turn to public participation as a universal remedy, applicable to all kinds of public policies and especially the new and emerging. It was then that, alongside the regulations of participation, we began to see everywhere advisory committees constituted by citizens and organized around issues, territories or services, together with more elaborate concepts such as the agenda 21, the *educative city* projects, the public councils, the participative integral plans, the

participative strategic plans and even participative budgets, with almost mythical resonance in the case of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. These processes gave new wind to local governments and helped them to make the transition towards systems of local governance, build up, at least apparently, with more open, permeable and thus potentially more inclusive institutions.

However, with the years participatory democracy has accumulated not only successes, but also some disastrous failures. It has become obvious that public participation finds it difficult to deliver what it promises, and its application has lost force. Significantly some of the accusations brought against participatory democracy are similar to those that the paradigm of social inclusion has had to face.

#### **4.4.1 Which players? Participation for inclusion or exclusion?**

The participation discourse based on the involvement of stakeholders in preparing public policies first of all poses the problem of who defines and grants to whom the status of stakeholder. As the public institutions start these processes, it is normally the governments who reserve for themselves this key prerogative and use it to ensure that the participants' universe lies within parameters of "normality" defined from the institutional logic itself. This simple fact, which is usually presented as "logical" and "natural", opens the door to inequality and exclusion in participation.

Beyond this form of deliberate exclusion, there is another one which is implicit and acquires a specific weight if nothing is done to correct it. We refer to the fact that not all people make the same use of the participation opportunities the institutions offer. Participation is clearly unequal<sup>43</sup>, and the bias are socially structured: Men take part clearly more than women, the elderly more than the young, nationals more than immigrants and the middle-upper classes, usually people with high education levels, more than the middle-lower or low classes. This is a serious, structural problem that brings with it that the new mechanisms and processes of public participation too often end up reproducing the existing power structures, without promoting any kind of transformation; participation is supposedly made for inclusion but fails to reach the vulnerable persons, not to mention the excluded, with sufficient force.

Inequality in participation is a very serious threat for participatory democracy, because it undermines its legitimacy and support in the ranks of the people committed to inclusion. There is a progressive anti-participation discourse which, arguing from fully democratic positions, committed to equality and equity, doesn't admit that a weak and biased participation gains influence over the decisions of governments. They believe that a representative democracy is better to guarantee equality for all citizens in their access to public resources and services.

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<sup>43</sup> By "participate", we refer both to the fact of taking part and, in the specific case of commissions, councils or discussion forums, to the fact of effectively present one's own positions and interests.

**Note: Selective exclusion as a tool of positive discrimination to improve participation**

Paradoxically, a certain kind of exclusion may sometimes be used in participatory processes to favour a more inclusive participation. Analysing the experience of participatory processes in Denmark, Agger and Larsen identify, alongside the structured exclusion of players (who defines and awards the category of “stakeholder”) and the discursive exclusion of the subjects (who defines the agenda and what is open, or not open, to participation), a third kind of exclusion, temporary and instrumental, that the promoters of the process may use to increase participation. It is about silencing players who have an excessive role in the process, so that other players who normally get little or no attention can be listened to. This is a risky, but apparently effective, way to counter the tendency to the elitisation of participation.

The selective exclusion is also used in policies intended to promote the self organisation of minority (or minoritised) social groups. One example of this would be the exclusion of men from women's groups in order to enhance their empowerment by allowing the latter to define their own needs and demands, not intervened by the former. This clearly shows that this kind of temporary or partial exclusion may be functional to generate freer, fairer and more inclusive conditions of participation. The same could be said for indigenous minorities and other singular groups that require specific treatment so that effective conditions can be guaranteed for their democratic participation.



#### 4.4.2 What purpose? Participation to make politics or to hide them?

The effective public use of instruments of participatory democracy very often does not come up to the initial expectations. Few people tend to take part in it and it is very difficult to keep them participating once they have tried. Apart from occupational and family difficulties, which reduce the amount of time that could be devoted to public affairs, probably many people who have time have decided not to take part because they are not sure what the purpose of participation is. Is it just to get informed personally by the decision makers? Providing feedback? Making real decisions? What should we understand by “participation”? We know that, in a representative democracy, the elected governments define the agenda and decide what will or will not be open to participation, and it’s a fact that, in most cases, those governments have chosen low profile participation, one that is less risky for the state but also less attractive to the public.

Cleaver<sup>44</sup> hits the nail on the head by saying that the main cause of participatory democracy’s loss of prestige has been the assumption of an excessively optimistic, a-critical discourse of participation, stripped of all kind of real vocation of social transformation. According to this naive view, participation is good in itself, and its success is only a question of choosing and correctly applying the right participative techniques in each kind of process, without considering the basic objectives and the meaning of the activity. Needless to say that, acting in institutions, these enthusiasts of participation have often been victims of *realpolitiker*, who have manipulated and used “participation” for all kinds of distraction and delay manoeuvres. This was certainly another way to understand participation, as a smokescreen for the better hiding of the real issues and decisions.

Beyond the error of considering a mechanical model of participation, based on constructions that are very neat but also rigid and incapable of taking society’s pulse, failure is accelerated by the sensation of deceit and/or waste of time. When the public realise that the proposed participation is false, because the institutional power is playing with marked cards, or that it is irrelevant, because what is put on the line in the participative processes is very small compared with the size of the basic problem or problems, or that it simply does not compensate in terms of cost-profit (participation always has opportunity costs), disappointment falls upon the participant public. Disappointment may be big or small, but most often it leads to a resigned or maybe furious “*I am not going to do it again*”.

#### 4.4.3 Consensus and Dissent: Why so much participation, if we don't like conflict?

Participation and inclusion affect the regulations, procedures and values by which the political battle is regulated in pluralist societies. As a particular variant of democracy,

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<sup>44</sup> Cleaver, pp. 598-600.

participatory democracy is characterised by the fact that citizens take a direct part in producing, managing and resolving of conflicts of interest. Democracy is not the same as eradicating the conflict of interests, but rather the institutionalisation of its organised and peaceful treatment.

Unfortunately, the discourse on participation and inclusion in practically all variants and forms has tended to displace the conflict of interests from the core of its arguments, as though the point of democracy was to conjure it and not to express it institutionally. On the contrary, we think that, democracy today should turn to an agonistic model, a decision-making organisation that starts from the irreducibility of the interests inherent to pluralist societies, which places the inevitable nature of the conflict at the centre of the discussion and confronts the viability of its resolution by means of democratic proceedings<sup>45</sup>.

The proceedings of participatory democracy, especially in their application on the local level, have typically sought out and produced social consensus. This has linked the participative models directly with social inclusion, but only accepting one kind of resolution, namely a consensus that eradicates the existing conflict. By stressing so much the consensual aspects, participatory democracy on a local scale has tended to be seen by authorities more as a way to legitimise their governmental action than as the institutional structure that makes possible a direct involvement of the public in the policy process.

#### **4.4.4 Building a stool with a single leg. Where are the representation and deliberation?**

A final structural problem of participatory democracy comes from the lack of clearness concerning the rules and relationship between the three elements we have considered key for democracy: Participation, Representation and Deliberation. It is not clear whether participatory democracy was intended to complement and improve the representative system, or to overcome it. What has been seen on a fair number of occasions is how the stress placed on participation meant that less attention was paid to the other two and their key role both in regulatory models and in the true operation of democratic politics was ignored.

There has been a tendency to underrate the logic of representation, as if the parties, programs, elections and the democratically elected governments were no more than secondary actors or figurants on the participative stage. Democratic governments actually still hold the main power devices, and their neglect has but reduced the quality of their composition and the consistency and transparency of their practices. What's more, by presuming that it is enough to "do participation" for brilliant ideas and very powerful results to come out, the dimension of deliberation has been excessively

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<sup>45</sup> See: Mouffe (2000).

ignored. Participative processes have therefore abounded which have ended up giving poor quality results through poor conception and execution.

#### **4.5 The participatory democracy we need**

There are many terms to be taken into account in the relationship between democracy and inclusion. Inclusion and exclusion seem to be two sides to the same coin; a coin that is tossed into the air when building a democratic regime. In this game, some individuals, the well-to-do men of the dominant ethnic group have always drawn heads, whereas others, poor and immigrant women or the members of minority ethnic groups have always drawn tails. History has revealed clear signs of progress in this sense, but much remains to be done to minimise this dark side of democracy. If the aim is to achieve inclusive participation, the institutions should check the exclusion generated in their constitutional framework, the electoral system and the administrations' normal functioning, and should set up spaces and processes to offer participation also to the most disadvantaged, least powerful social groups.

By now we know that labelling an institution or policy “participatory” is no guarantee of anything. Be it with or without intention, the fact is that the best organised, most culturally developed public and private players know how to place these mechanisms at their service and to impose their objectives, often presented as solutions of consensus. And a participation which is poor in diversity, in methods and in results casts serious doubts on the democratic nature of participatory democracy.

However, the criticism of participatory democracy does not mean that we have to abandon it and return to a purely representative model that is suffering a still deeper crisis. Participatory democracy is still valid and necessary, but it has to be reconceived and restored in a broader context, that of a democracy that combines representative, deliberative and participative elements to achieve institutional quality and social inclusion.

To eradicate the styles and logics that separate individuals and groups from the political processes, the institutions committed to participatory democracy must take risks and, by overcoming the crude mechanisms of political “profitability” that have been habitual up to now, associated with individual and resolving leaderships, they must give much more importance to the community, by particularly promoting self organisation and education among the people who are excluded and/or are at risk of being so.

The argument used to deny the empowerment of the weakest, which is their supposed incapacity for discerning and deciding what is best for them, does not have a sufficient base. While accepting the limitations of the human condition, we also know that each person is the best qualified to identify their own true interests. We are also told that only specialists are sufficiently prepared to take decisions for the whole of the public; however, the complex problems that affect contemporary societies are particular and

context-bound, in the sense that they do not entirely respond to the logic of a universal instrumental rationality. There are too many variables with multiple relationships between them and chains of causality that are very difficult to establish. Therefore, the role to be played by the specialists in resolving them is limited, and always insufficient. Democratic politics is not superfluous on a complex stage, but rather more necessary still.

The argument of mistrust at the lower social classes' capacity for judgment is still more suspicious when we compare it to the quite generalized, naive confidence in the leading elites, albeit traditional, patrimonial, party-based or technical-scientific, when it is taken for granted that their judgments are based only on objective reasons, devoid of their particular or class interest. While admitting that this phenomenon can be given in isolation and individually, historical experience shows that the elites, as a group or class, have made use of ideology as a tool for defending their interests and have only made significant concessions to subordinated classes and groups when these have effectively mobilised and pressed. Civil, political and social rights have ever been "awarded"; they have always been conquered by mobilisation<sup>46</sup>.

At this point we can turn the argument of mistrust in a way that strengthens the case for participation. People should be mistrusted, yes, but especially those who hold and administer positions of power, because it is here where people have the resources and therefore can really do significant harm (or good). This approach, masterfully developed by the French historian Pierre Rosanvallon, leads us to the conclusion that participation of those who do not have power must participate in order to monitor, control and assess the leading elites' use of power, even though they have been chosen by democratic proceedings. Rosanvallon calls this current of mobilisation and participation caused by the basic, radical, permanent mistrust of democratic governments "counter democracy". Well applied counter-democratic practices based on constructive mistrust can be a powerful weapon to force governments to implement truly substantive inclusion policies. The solution would be, therefore, to give more powerful role to the public in preparing, monitoring and assessing policies.

Up to now, participatory democracy has operated complementary, as a form to improve the democracies based on representation and deliberation, but this extension of democracy, beyond the praiseworthy reinforcement of deliberation often induced by a greater participation, has revealed the limits of liberal democracy, which are marked by the autonomy of civil society and the negative conception of freedom as non-interference. However, in democracy participation cannot be conceived as an exchange of legitimacy for occasional access to the decision-making arena or worse still, as a tool for blaming the citizens for the contradictions of public management. If it is to reach fulfilment, participatory democracy must accept that social autonomy is inevitable and that the very complexity of pluralist societies cannot be represented. In this sense too, the participative discourse will also recover its credibility by honestly opening up to dissent and criticism.

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<sup>46</sup> We write these lines in the first weeks of 2011, at the height of the mobilization of the Arab peoples for democracy in their countries, from Tunisia to Bahrain, through Egypt and Libya.