

DAHL, Robert A. *A democracia e seus críticos*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2012.

Jose Roberto Bonifacio*

The initiative of Martins Fontes publishing company is very promising in bringing to the Brazilian Portuguese speakers “*Democracy and its critics*”. It is true that the work, currently available to Brazilian researchers in their own language, was released almost a quarter of century ago. In other words, on a radically diverse world conjuncture from today; and the intellectual background of this contribution is much longer.

A brief contextualization of the wider movement of political ideas – in which Robert Alan Dahl is grounded –, hence, helps to better enlighten the reach of his intellectual work as a whole and “*Democracy and its critics*”, particularly.

Almost a centennial man, Dahl is certainly an intellectual whose trajectory is interconnected with the entire discipline, which he helped to found and propagate. He does not need any biographical introductions.

His first works may be interpreted as the way by which the philosophical debates put forward by thinkers such as K. R. Popper¹ (1945) and L. Strauss (1959), among others, were reflected on the rising Political Sciences, with the precedent historicist tradition represented respectively in authors such as Hegel and Marx, and in Heidegger. The way in which some philosophical currents were identified with the ideologies and political regimes of the defeated powers in World War II (1939-45), as well as the subsequent international order of the “Cold

* He is a sociologist (at UFES) and Political Scientist (at IUPERJ). He is also teacher of Political Science and International Relations (at UGF) and Procurement and Contracts (at Faculdades Unidas). Email: bonifacio78@gmail.com. Special thanks for Ursula Gribel (NYU) for cooperation on translation work.

¹ “Democracy (...) provides the institutional framework for the reform of political institutions. It makes possible the reform of institutions without using violence, and thereby the use of reason in the designing of new institutions and the adjusting of old ones. (...) It is quite wrong to blame democracy for the political shortcomings of a democratic state. We should rather blame ourselves, that is to say the citizens of the democratic state. In a nondemocratic state, the only way to achieve reasonable reforms is by the violent overthrow of the government, and the introduction of a democratic framework.” (Popper, 1945, p. 110-111).

War” (1947-1989), served as a background for the theoretical reflection on the theme of democracy, its origins among the ancient, and its outcomes among the modern.

“*Democracy and its critics*” basically keeps this strategy of intellectual dialog, but the interlocutors selected for such are others. By the time this book was released – and this book is radically different from Dahl’s first ones – another is the context of the western political philosophy. Here, the “Cold War” was finishing, with the collapse of the totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe and the apparent triumph of Western democracies. Despite this fact, the theoretical and even epistemological basis of the reflection on the functioning, the origins, and the characteristics of the performance of these societies’ political order were under open research for almost two decades.

Let us come back to the author. Certainly, Dahl did not face the institutional arrangements thought by Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle with the same motivation as Popper, nor does he extract the same theoretical consequences from them as Strauss. However, the rejection of historicism, of the collectivist and essentialist methods, and the distinction between “fact” and “value”, as well as the option for exploring the past through the lens of the present’s concerns, are reflected in a special manner in his work, as well in the rising research behaviorist program of the late developed Political Science. What triumphed in terms of choices then was the ambition of supporting the scientificity of the discipline on empirical parameters and systematically inquiring the classics by means of logical tools extracted from the Analytical Philosophy (logical analysis of language games, semantic examination of word usage and concepts, comparison of propositional structures or sentences and statements etc.)², as well as (less and less)

² “If they were, creativity and imagination would play a small role and it would be appropriate to speak of theorizing as a banal activity, as “theory construction”. If facts were simply “there” to be collected, classified, and then matched with a theory (or with the observation-statements derived from it), the political scientist might well declare, “Whether [a] proposition is true or false depends on the degree to which the proposition and the real world correspond”. But although everyone is ready to acknowledge that facts depend upon some criteria of selection or of significance, what is less frequently“ (Wolinn, 1969, pp. 1062-1082). For appreciations of the paradigmatic character of Behaviorism in Political Science and its epistemological limits, see Souza (1999, pp. 79-110).

the Public Choice Theory. With that former movement, Dahl seems to share the rejection by the philosophical idealism inherited from the 19th century in the Anglo-Saxon academy and that was materialized in the first half of the 20th century in several elitist theories.

The distinction between statements of fact and of value, so precious to analytic philosophers, has echoed in the very first works of Dahl (1961, pp. 770-71), in the following terms:

The empirical political scientist is concerned with what is (...) not with what ought to be. He finds it difficult and uncongenial to assume the historic burden of the political philosopher who attempted to determine, prescribe, elaborate and employ ethical standards values, to use the fashionable term in appraising political acts and political systems. The behaviorally minded student of politics is prepared to describe values as empirical data; but, qua “scientist” he seeks to avoid prescription or inquiry into the grounds on which judgments of value can properly be made³.

Dahl would have operated, over the years, a sort of reduction of the Political Philosophy to the analysis of theoretical language of political thinkers, if there were not another intellectual vector of his reflection. On the other hand, the influence of applying the economic reasoning about democracy (particularly the use of deductive methods and the comparison of assumptions and predictions with the real world), notably the works of K. Arrow (1951; see also Barry 1978, Chapter 1, about

³ Dahl himself (1966, p. 21) complements this crucial point that he deems the research program of the rising Political Sciences in the following terms: “It is common, in political analysis, not to distinguish a definition from an empirical proposition. However, nothing can be demonstrated as true or false in politics’ real world (or economics’) by simple definition. The definition is, that is to say, a pact to regulate the use of terms. The sentence that uses these terms, though, and which intends to say something about the world we live in, contains an empirical proposition. The proposition’s veracity or falsehood depends on the degree on which the proposition and the real world are correspondent.” (See also Dahl, 1966, Chap. VIII, pp. 145-155 and pages 166 and 167 of the Annex). In this regard, Dahl is especially different from Strauss’ position, for whom: “Moral obtuseness is the necessary condition for scientific analysis. The more serious we are as social scientists the more completely we develop within ourselves a state of indifference to any goal, or to aimlessness and drifting, a state of what may be called nihilism” (Strauss 1959, p. 19). For a study of the clash between Dahl and Strauss’ followers, see Saxonhouse, pp. 846-847.

this subject), is confessed by the author himself⁴. Alternating between a “normative theory” and an “empirical theory”, which is seen in his works, despite a repeated emphasis on the latter, within most of them, is made explicit and direct in “*Democracy and its Critics*”. Still, he makes use of the impressively simple approval of the famous Schumpeterian definition of democracy and an “empirical” definition, as opposed to a normative notion, not realizing that many times the adaptation of a definition is a normative exercise in itself (see Huntington, 1991, p. 6).

If, in the first half of the 20th century, the democratic theory was focused on the analysis of elitist thinkers’ accusations, e.g. Mosca and Michels, their antidemocratic echoes, the second half of the century was marked by efforts made by Joseph Schumpeter and Dahl intended to create a theory that explained democracy’s empirical reality (the demand for elite groups) and, simultaneously, kept their ideals. Schumpeter saw democracy as an institutional arrangement of elite competition in favor of the voters guaranteed by legal and procedural mechanisms. Twenty years later, Dahl saw democracy as a polyarchy of social groups whose competition was also guaranteed by procedural mechanisms, whereas thinkers such as Lipset and Barrington Moore Jr.

⁴ "Yes, it influenced it in the sense that that kind of abstract thinking and models, while I felt they often bore too little relation to the reality and the complexity of economic life, they provided a degree of rigor. Political systems are I think more complicated than economics, and political behavior is more complicated than economic behavior; nevertheless, economics provided the kind of model or hope of a model that we could make use of for increased rigor in political science (...) So I was influenced by that as a model, a way of thinking more abstractly, perhaps, than customary, about democratic theory. Making clear the premises, the epistemological assumptions and matters of that kind, and I think that sort of set the stage. And then once you get in of course, into that field, which was not highly I don't know how to put this properly as a formal field of political science was not highly developed at the time, once you get into it you quickly become aware of how rich the potential subject matter is. One of the enormous changes, perhaps anticipating your question, one of the changes in the world is the extraordinary increase in the number of countries that, by the standards that we use today, can be called democratic always, I repeat this and repeat this, but, always keeping in mind the difference between the ideal and the threshold at which we now accept a country as democratic, or a polyarchy as I would say. And the enormous increase in the number of those available for study when I was a graduate student, there were maybe half a dozen countries that you could study: France and Britain and, I'm not quite sure of Canada at that time...and then the expansion created out there a field...that was both a challenge and an opportunity" (Dahl, Levi, 2009, pp. 1-9).

sought to distinguish between democracy's normative and empirical criteria. All still discerned a contradiction between the majority government's statements and the empirical reality of the political-electoral mass. The attack on the classical democratic theory caused a fundamental reinterpretation of democracy itself, in a process of increasing self-awareness of the political theory, through cross-fertilization with the empirical research (Cf. Gerring, Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 103; see also Barry 1978, p. 165)⁵.

Thus, the Political Sciences inspired by the old pluralism would take a combating stand in face of emerging paradigms in the American academy, with Marxism, on the one hand, and Elitism on the other (Schwartzenberg, 1979, p. 673; Carnoy, 1986, pp. 19-61). We do not intend to debate this issue, as Dahl's works on it and the echoes (beneficial or constructive) that he caused for the discipline in the long term are sufficiently known. We merely mention that such a debate, epitomized by the famous "*Who Governs*" (Dahl, 1962), offered something that can be regarded as an anticipation of the wide cross-national empirical investigations carried out in "*Polyarchy*" (1971), as well as "*Preface to democratic theory*" (1956) at a large extent anticipates the themes and the approach adopted in "*Democracy and its critics*" (1989).

Thus some of Dahl's postulations can be understood – the key of his works –, initially in face of an appreciation of parameters in which the formulation of his democratic thought is developed, as well as the rising discipline of Political Sciences.

Whereas in "*Preface to democratic theory*", the author identified an unease in the basic theory on democracy, which, on one hand, has as a premise the political equality, which implied the majority government, and, on the other, the fact that democratic thinkers – particularly James Madison – were concerned with the minorities protection in being abused by the majority. It was known that "The Federalists" tried to balance

⁵ "Empirical study in the social sciences is meaningless if it has no normative import. It simply does not matter. Empirical study is misleading if its normative import is present, but ambiguous. It matters, or may matter, but we do not know how. Likewise, a normative argument without empirical support may be rhetorically persuasive or logically persuasive, but it will not have demonstrated anything about the world out there. It has no empirical ballast. Good social science must integrate both elements; it must be empirically grounded, and it must be relevant to human concerns" (Gerring, Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 133).

this antinomy through the combination of universal suffrage with the institutions that endow the legislative majorities with power.

Dahl showed, then, that Madison was wrong and his evaluation gave rise to antidemocratic consequences. Firstly, the continental dimensions of the U.S. democracy are not logically opposed (necessarily) to the emergence of a stable majority, as the institutional controls proposed could not detain a majority from acting.

After analyzing two modern theoretical concepts of democracy (Madisonian and Populist), Dahl (1971) proposed that the modern democracies be seen as polyarchies, in which he established several criteria that may be essentially summarized in two dimensions that he uses in “Polyarchy (Participation and Opposition)”. Evidently that Schumpeter (1961), much earlier, proposed a definition of democracy that broke up with the classical ideal derived from the etymology of the term. In this economist’s view, democracy is no longer seen as the “people’s government” and was redefined as a “method” or “procedure” of choosing leaders who should conduct the complex public affairs of modern societies. In the Schumpeterian theory, the only participation means open to citizens was the leader elections and the discussion. Obviously, the preconditions for the success of democracy were then largely disregarded by the theorists.

According to Ferejohn and Pasquino (2006), Dahl used the term “polyarchy” in a quite divergent and equivocal sense by thinking that he had introduced it in the political language. It had already been used by Abbot Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès in his polemic against Thomas Paine, in 1791, so as to qualify an Executive Power assumed by a plurality of members. What these authors do not argue is that the concept of “polyarchy” for Paine and Sieyès had been such as it transpired in Madison’s writings, i.e., having its prerequisites more in the institutional than the social order (such as Montesquieu would intend it to be, who came before them).

From “*Preface to democratic theory*” to “*Poliarchy*”, the Dahlsian thought moves from an anti-institutional claim, focused on the characteristics and attributes shared by the actually existent democracies, to another instance of concerns that is focused on the complexity and range of the social engineering involved in the democratic project. Therefore, there is an ideological shift between two competing

approaches in Brian Barry's (1978, pp. 3-11) analytical terms. Since Madison, in his perspective, the tendency to think that the Constitution refrains the majority caused the social controls and equilibriums to be neglected, which are, after all, more important than the *checks and balances*. In his words, "in the absence of certain social prerequisites, no constitutional arrangements can produce a non-tyrannical republic" (Dahl, 1956, p. 83).

"*Democracy and its critics*", at least in some passages (especially the Fifth Part, specifically Chapters 16 to 20), seems to resume this instance that is more clearly normative of Dahl's reflection. As it was seen in "*Preface...*", some preference distributions are compatible with democracy and others not. In short, a preference distribution would be compatible with the democratic decision-making, because the political decisions are acceptable (bonding) to the majority of citizens. However, the bimodal preference distributions are not compatible with democracy (e.g., the U.S. in Civil War times or Brazil prior to 1964), in which two equal groups show strongly rooted and opposed beliefs, which assumes a considerable seriousness in the case of an apathetic majority and a minority with strongly detained preferences. Although the U.S. constitution, as it has frequently been said, has been designed to restrain this type of preference distribution, assuring that the minority will prevail, neither the judicial review, nor the equality of representation of states in the Senate provides a solution. To the despair of many people, in Dahl's understanding then, as in the book reviewed herein, there is "no solution to the intensity [of preferences] problem through constitutional or procedural rules" (Dahl, 1956, p. 119).

Hence, why has the democratic experiment survived in the U.S.? According to Dahl, the majority of citizens shared a consensus over important values and their representatives also maintained such values, thus the political decisions rarely went astray from the preferences of the core's majority.

With such a consensus [on basic values] the disputes over policy alternatives are nearly always disputes over a set of alternatives that have already been winnowed down to those within the broad area of basic agreement (Dahl, 1956, pp. 131-132).

Without such previous consensus over the fundamental values, democracy would not survive for long (Dahl, 1956, p. 132). The consensus about norms and values does not protect the minorities, but the institutional arrangements that assured their rights and interests *vis-à-vis* to the majorities. “To assume that this country has remained democratic because of its Constitution seems to me an obvious reversal of the relation; it is much more plausible to suppose that the Constitution has remained because our society is essentially democratic” (Dahl, 1956, p. 143).

The investigation on the rule of majority and the very conception of common good is much more regarded in this reviewed work than the “*Preface...*”, a work based essentially on a microeconomic approach of the agents interacting in democracy, with emphasis on their utility functions and on the formation of their preferences (manifest or exposed). Dahl also extensively and singularly appreciates the developments of the equality idea in the contemporary Political Philosophy, by discussing conditions of the personal and moral autonomy, and the idea of intrinsic equality subjacent to the decisory processes authentically regarded as democratic (Dahl, 1989, p. 86-129; for other parallel understandings Barry 1978, Chapter III). In this regard, Dahl (1989, p. 175) effectively refutes the democracy critics and contests the procedural or Schumpeterian definition of democracy, in the following terms:

because it [the democratic process, by incorporating substantive rights, goods and interests] is a kind of distributive justice. Nor is [it] merely an “abstract claim”, it is instead a claim of general and specific rights that are necessary to it. [...] [It] endows citizens with an extensive array of rights, liberties, and resources sufficient to permit them to participate fully, as equal citizens, in the making of all collective decisions by which they are bound.

In *Democracy and its critics*, democracy is opposed to two theoretical alternatives. The first would be anarchism. Dahl (1989, p. 42) reproduces this viewpoint in very strict propositional terms: because all States are necessarily coercive, all States are necessarily bad (major premises), therefore, no one is forced to obey or support any State (minor premise), and, furthermore, a society without a State is feasible,

therefore, all States ought to be abolished (conclusion).

After demonstrating the inconsistencies and limits of this alternative, Dahl continues defending democracy against what he calls *Guardianship*. He defines it as the idea that a minority of persons “who are qualified to govern by reason of their superior knowledge and virtue” should govern the rest (Dahl, 1989, p. 52). In Dahl’s conception, the *Guardianship* rests on a series of propositions that are difficult to be justified. If a small minority of persons should be more qualified to govern due to their knowledge (moral or instrumental), this implies that: (a) there is an objective, the absolutely true science of governing; (b) it can only be acquired by some people. Moreover, on empirical ground, this is falsified by the historical experience, as well as a series of intellectual obstacles (Dahl, 1989, pp. 65-76). In the author’s words:

it is essential to democracy not only that individuals are morally equal (...), but also that, on average, individuals are better able to know, and more motivated to serve, their own interests, values, and goals than any agent or class who might seek to rule over them as guardians (Dahl, 1989, p. 390).

Weakening these theoretical adversaries enables Dahl to resume his traditional investigation of democracy through the polyarchic lens, which makes the continuity of this reflection in this reviewed book more symptomatic, as Dahl (1989, p. 223) argues that

polyarchy provides a broad array of human rights and liberties that no actually existing real world alternative to it can match. Integral to polyarchy itself is a generous zone of freedom and control that cannot be deeply or consistently invaded without destroying polyarchy itself. [...] Although the institutions of polyarchy do not guarantee the ease and vigor of citizen participation that could exist, in principle, in a small city-state, nor ensure that governments are closely controlled by citizens or that policies invariably correspond with the desires of a majority of citizens, they make it unlikely in the extreme that a government will long pursue policies that deeply offend a majority of citizens. What is more, those institutions even make it rather uncommon for a government to enforce policies to which a substantial number of citizens object and try to overturn by vigorously using the rights and opportunities available to them. If citizen control over collective decisions

is more anemic than the robust control they would exercise if the dream of participatory democracy were ever realized, the capacity of citizens to exercise a veto over the reelection and policies of elected officials is a powerful and frequently exercised means for preventing officials from imposing policies objectionable to many citizens.

Being the term “polyarchy” exalted back then in his first works as a fundamental attribute of the pluralist democracy, we saw that Dahl, since then, already examined the theme of democracy inquiring the antinomies freedom versus control, participation versus opposition, and conflict versus consensus, as it can be seen in the excerpt *supra*. For, if autonomy may generate the digression of the Anarchist Model (such as seen in Chapter 3 of the book), the emphasis in control, in “governance”, in its turn, may lead to the security exaggeration, typical of the Guardianship Model (discussed in Chapter 4). Hence, “*Democracy and its critics*” translates, maybe better than any other work, this *normative turn* diagnosed by Gerring and Yesnowitz (2006) in the course of the discipline.

As you all may know, the concept of “competing elites” is a pivotal element in theories of democracy, chiefly on the assertion of this system as the best possible. The basic argument is that the existence of competing elites is crucial for people and, particularly, those who are not part of the “elites”, to use their initiative and capacity to choose from among them, and, thus, be able to influence these same competing elites. For example, in “*Democracy and its critics*”, Dahl argues about what he calls a Modern Dynamic Pluralist (“MDP”) society as being incorporated into what he previously characterized with the term “polyarchy”. This, according to the new “institutionalist” definition (and not conditioning any longer) offered by the author, refers to

a set of political institutions that, taken together, distinguish modern representative democracy from all other political systems, whether non-democratic regimes or earlier democratic systems (Dahl 1989, p. 218).

Certainly, as it can be seen, by comparing “*Preface...*” to “*Polyarchy*”, in the reviewed book, Dahl resumes one of his earliest themes – namely, the problematic distinction between the Populist and “Madisonian” models of democracy, now retranslated as “Anarchism”

and “Guardianship” – intended to redefine it as an entity or process analytically derived from a peculiar social engineering of modernity. Despite that, these parallelisms are superficial and asymmetrical, as the “Guardianship” Model is incorporated more into a previous theoretical adversary, the Elitism, whereas the “Anarchist” Model is only represented as a more extreme logical development of the current participative theories. Evidently that this reduction in the scope of the polyarchic concept enhances the structural differences between unsuccessful and successful cases, in addition to translating a much less assertive attitude than before (Dahl, 1989, pp. 208-222, 263).

In any case, echoing the pessimism of other currents and their critics, Robert Dahl (1989, p. 333), a former enthusiast and optimist, was led to deeply reconsider his viewpoints:

the consequences of economic order for the distribution of resources, strategic positions, and bargaining strength, and hence for political equality, provides an additional for concern over ownership and government of economic enterprises. For the prevailing systems of ownership and control result in substantial inequalities not only in wealth and income but in the host of other values attached to work, job, ownership, wealth, and income.

This review is concluded by emphasizing that it is a modest and particular interpretation. It does not aim at, nor does it reach, in fact, a goal of exhausts the theme. It only shows the ways, options, and alternatives that we find useful and compensating for Brazilian and foreign political scientists. The extent to what this goal was accomplished, only the reader can say.

REFERENCES

- Arrow, K. (1963). *Social choice and individual values*, New York: Wiley, 1st ed. 1951; 2nd ed..
- Barry, B. (1978). *Sociologists, economists and democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carnoy, M. (1986). *Estado e teoria política*, Campinas: Papirus.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1966. *A Moderna análise política*. Rio de Janeiro: Lidador.

_____. (1989). *A preface to democratic theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (Ed. Bras. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar).

_____. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

_____.; LEVI, M. (2009). A conversation with Robert A. Dahl. *Annual Review of Political Science*, n. 12, p. 1-9.

_____. (1971). *Poliarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

_____. (1961). The behavioral approach in political science: epitaph for a monument to a successful protest. *American Political Science Review* 55, December, p. 770-771.

_____. (1962). *Who governs?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ferejohn, J., Pasquino, P. Emergency powers. In: Dryzek, John S.; Honig, B., Phillips, A. (Eds). 2006. *The Oxford handbook of political theory*. Oxford University Press inc., New York, pp. 334-333.

Gerring, J., Yesnowitz, J. (2006). *A normative turn in political science?* Polity. Northeastern Political Science Association. Volume 38, Number 1. January.

Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Popper, K. R. (1945). *The open society and its enemies*. Volume One. 5th ed. London: George Routledge & Sons.

Saxonhouse, A. W. Exile and reentry: political theory yesterday and tomorrow. In: Dryzek, J. S., Honig, B., Phillips, A. (Eds). 2006. *The Oxford handbook of political theory*. New York: Oxford University Press inc., p. 846-847.

Schumpeter, J. A. ([1942]; 1975), *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. New York: Harper.

Schwartzenberg, R. G. (1979). *Sociologia política*. São Paulo: Difel.

Souza, J. C. de. (1999). Filosofia Social, Ciências Sociais: Teoria, progresso cumulativo e verificação empírica no conhecimento da sociedade. *Ideação*, Feira de Santana, n.4, p.79-110, jul./dez.

Strauss, L. (1959). *What is political philosophy*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

Wolin, Sheldon. (1969). Political theory as a vocation: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Dec.), p. 1062-1082.