The United States was once a democratic country. A very, very long time ago!

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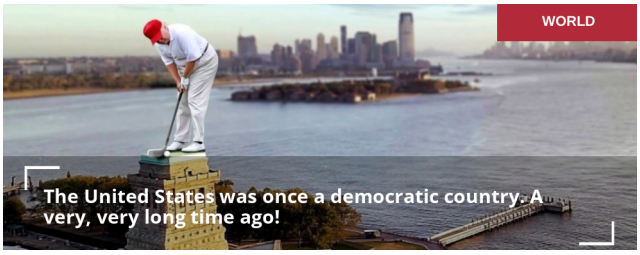

> “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.” The famous phrase uttered by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address in 1863 became one of the most well-known definitions of American democracy and one of the symbolic pillars of the national identity of the United States. Since then, generations of political leaders have invoked this image to present their country as an example of popular government, political freedom, and citizen participation.
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> Regardless of their ideological differences, virtually all American presidents have claimed for themselves the democratic legacy of the Republic founded in 1776 and consolidated after the War of Independence. Lincoln’s “government of the people” was real – once. In early America, weak state power, direct elections, and citizen militias made democracy tangible. But capitalism’s rise and elite consolidation would soon erase that world.

By Eduardo Vasco

This tradition remains alive to the present day. Donald Trump, for example, stated in his January 2025 inaugural address that the United States continues to be “the greatest democracy in the history of the world” and that his administration would have the mission of restoring the greatness of American institutions. This rhetoric

does not differ substantially from that employed by his predecessors, Democrats and Republicans alike, who over the decades have portrayed the United States as an exceptional nation whose strength derives precisely from the solidity of its democratic institutions.

On the coming Fourth of July, when the country celebrates the 250th anniversary of its independence, this narrative will almost certainly once again occupy the center of the official commemorations. Speeches, ceremonies, and public statements will extol the trajectory of the United States as a story of expanding freedom, strengthening popular representation, and defending democratic values. Once again, the public will be invited to contemplate the image of an exemplary democracy, presented as a model for the rest of the world.

But to what extent does this narrative correspond to reality? The answer requires a closer look at American political history itself. When comparing the functioning of institutions during the first decades of the Republic with the system in force today, a profound contrast emerges, capable of shedding new light on the meaning of democracy in the United States and on the transformations that have marked its evolution over two and a half centuries.

The expropriation of the peasant masses (the majority of the population) forms the basis of capitalist production. The bourgeois revolutions in England and France, for example, shortly after freeing the peasantry from feudalism by dividing large estates and distributing plots of land to former serfs, expelled these new proprietors from their land with the iron hand of the State and thrust them into urban pauperization so that they would sell their labor to the new capitalist ruling class.

But in the United States this was not possible. There was no peasant mass there. The country was almost entirely uninhabited, populated by settlers. There was no feudalism, and the parasitism of the British Crown was eradicated by the Revolution of 1776. It was therefore a land with a sparse population made up of small proprietors, with soil suited to small-scale production and thus to the free exploitation of the land by all.

In the following respect, capitalism encountered difficulties in developing: the worker possessed considerable bargaining power vis-à-vis the capitalist, because wage labor was scarce, and he too could become a small producer.

> “The dispersion of the means of production among innumerable proprietors working on their own account prevents capitalist concentration and thus

> eliminates every possibility of combined labor. Every enterprise of great scale, extending over several years and requiring a considerable expenditure of fixed capital, encounters obstacles that prevent its execution. In Europe, capital does not hesitate for an instant, because the working class constitutes its living appendage, with surplus elements always at its disposal. In the colonial countries it is different" [Marx pointed out that, economically, the United States remained a colony of Europe until the second half of the nineteenth century] (Marx, Capital).

It was therefore impossible for the capitalist to become a large owner of the means of production, because there was no mass of former individual workers expropriated from their own means of production. It was a land of small producers under exceptional developmental conditions, which provided freedoms and rights corresponding to the free circulation of their commodities.

Thus, starting from a relatively low level of economic inequality, Americans maintained legal equality, ensured through strict control over their representatives, through direct and frequent elections for essentially all offices (every year for representatives and every two to three years at most for senators and governors); the active participation of citizens in the implementation of local policy; the slight distinction between legislative, executive, and judicial functions, exercised under the people's control through assemblies; the right of citizens to bear arms, as well as the duty to serve in the popular militia, whose officers were elected by the militiamen; and the independence of community life from the Union, whose bureaucratic organs were weak, endowed with scant powers and lacking a structured public force—which, in the words of one observer, was nothing more than "the majority under arms" (Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America).

Every year, the body of citizens chose who would carry out routine functions such as tax collection—which was viewed as each citizen's contribution to the functioning of the community—security, record keeping, supervision of public roads or harvests, public education, and so forth. A man could vote and be elected to any office. A number of people were also elected to execute the laws. These representatives remained under the strict control of the citizens and, if they conceived of doing anything not stipulated by the community, they had to convene an assembly of all voters so that the matter could be discussed, approved, and decided upon regarding how it would be implemented.

The American state was extremely weak—and this was precisely what guaranteed democracy. Laws were made by citizens to control officials, not so that officials could control the people. State bureaucracy practically did not exist. The regime of individual small property within the community was reflected in political life,

sustained by the interests of the individual and of the community. The citizen still depended on nothing except his own effort. Thus, even while living in a community, he did not wish to depend on his representatives. Consequently, he also viewed with suspicion the very state authority that he had elected. Tocqueville recounts (although, as a liberal, he defended the idea that the State should combat the "tyranny of the majority"):

> "The inhabitant of the United States learns from birth that he must rely on himself in struggling against the evils and difficulties of life; he casts upon social authority a distrustful and uneasy glance and appeals to its power only when he cannot do without it. This becomes apparent from school onward, where children submit, even in their games, to rules they themselves establish and punish among themselves the offenses they themselves define. The same spirit is found in all acts of social life. Some problem occurs on a public road, passage is interrupted, traffic is halted; the neighbors immediately constitute themselves into a deliberative body; from this improvised assembly there emerges an executive power that remedies the problem before the idea of an authority existing prior to that of the interested parties presents itself to anyone's imagination. (…) In the United States, people associate for purposes of public security, commerce and industry, morality and religion. There is nothing that the human will despairs of achieving through the free action of the collective force of individuals."

The separation of powers was almost nonexistent: the people decided all questions, directly or, above all, through the legislature, and dissolved executive functions so as not to concentrate power in a single man. Even in cases where judicial authority was necessary, the people selected as judge a layman without profound legal knowledge; or, as in Connecticut, elected a professional judge every six months; or a jury was formed from ordinary citizens.

In the next article, we shall see how capitalist development and the consolidation of the political power of the bourgeoisie led to a process of annihilation of democracy in the United States.

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