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The Subversion of Public Space: Clientelism and the Quality of Democracy

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**The Subversion of Public Space
Clientelism and the Quality of Democracy in Latin America***

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1. Introduction.

In the last decade, the study of political clientelism has gained renewed attention among scholars of Latin America. While patron-client relationships have been historically endemic to political life in the region, since the transition to democracy in the 1980s they seem to have further expanded and become even more entrenched. Some scholars have already referred to this paradox: the democratisation of formal political institutions in Latin America has come along hand in hand with the expansion and strengthening of “informal” institutions such as clientelism (O’Donnell 1996, Helmke and Levitsky eds. 2006). Today, thanks to extensive fieldwork we know much better the intricacies and internal logic of political clientelism. For example, there is significant empirical evidence that parties and candidates often channel public resources to mobilise electoral support (Auyero 2000, Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2003, Levitsky 2003). There is also evidence that not all parties benefit equally from clientelistic practices (Calvo and Murillo 2004), and that poorer rather than better-off citizens are mostly the target of these practices (Brusco et al. 2004). Regardless of some nuances in approach, these recent studies focus on clientelism as a strategy of electoral mobilisation and on citizens as simply voters. In spite of these important advances to understand the functioning of clientelism in the new democracies of Latin America, an evaluation of its effects on the quality of democracy is still lacking. To do so, I argue, we need to start by making explicit our definition of democracy, something that most recent studies on clientelism overlook.

Democracy is not only an instrumental arrangement to elect those who govern.

Behind the diverse definitions of democracy available lie different normative views of human dignity and rights. I would call this the *moral logic* of (democratic) institutions, upon which their political legitimacy ultimately rests. Any discussion of democracy and its quality remains incomplete if the ethical values that underlie its definition are not made explicit. This is of foremost relevance at a time when the moral logic of political institutions is ignored or regarded as a given, thereby reducing democracy's functioning and eventual improvement to a technical question of institutional engineering.

With this in mind, I argue that clientelism, understood broadly as the exchange of material rewards for political support, negatively affects the quality of democracy by subverting public space, the symbolic milieu in which citizens gather as equal agents (individually and/or collectively) to freely deliberate and participate in decision-making. By precluding the effectiveness of fundamental rights of citizenship such as voting, free speech and autonomous association, clientelism and its privatized exchanges subvert the constitution of public space and, in so doing, denies the realisation of the underlying pillar of democracy (as I define below): human agency.

2. Clientelism in Ancient Greece: A Historical Excursus¹

One of the most striking features of democracy in Athens was the near complete absence of clientelism in political life. Ancient Greece was a pre-industrial, agrarian society in

¹ This section is based upon Millett (1989). For a more comprehensive assessment of politics in the Ancient world see Finley (1973) and (1983).

which a few were rich and many were quite poor. While Athens stands out as the most developed and stable of all ancient democracies, inequalities of status and property did exist. But, oddly enough, in spite of the persistence of social and economic inequalities, Athenians considered clientelism inimical to democracy. For the almost one and a half centuries (462-322) during which Athenian democracy lasted, specific measures were implemented to avoid clientelism in political life. Why did Athenians consider clientelism inimical to democracy after all? Even though the historical sources are rather fragmentary, it is certain that Athenians shared the view that patron-client relationships were incompatible with democracy because, being originated in inequality, they imposed a constraint on individual freedom (Millett 1989:25). One of the main attributes of Athenian democracy was *eleutheria* (freedom) which was understood by both supporters and detractors of democracy as ‘freedom to do as you like or as you choose.’ A commitment to *eleutheria* defined as such poses an impediment to the acceptance of the personal dependence and obligation entailed by clientelism. In the same vein, Aristotle states in the *Rethoric* that a free man is one who does not live in *dependence* of another man, and in *Politics* he adds that if you do something because of the will of others, then you are in danger of behaving in a servile way. From this it follows that close dependence on others could be easily assimilated to slavery (Millett 1989: 29). As a consequence, under Athenian democracy, any compromise of one’s *eleutheria* by adapting one’s behaviour to please a patron (benefactor) was sharply disapproved.

A second constitutive aspect of Athenian democracy was *isonomia*, or equality before the law; this overall equality is also inimical to the differentials in status generated by clientelism. Above all Athenian democracy depended upon the *free participation of the members of the demos*. To avoid clientelism and its negative consequences on *eleutheria and isonomia*, Athenians took measures to preserve the independence of the poor from the wealthy. These measures were not at all attempts to reverse economic inequality; these were measures to partially redistribute income (not property) by way of cash-transfers to the poor (the public pay allocated for participation in the various collective bodies). As a consequence, poor Athenian citizens were not pressed to engage in patron-client dependency ties, and were capable to participate freely in the demos.

In this brief historical excursus we can grasp that the effects of clientelism on the quality of democracy are a function of basic underlying principles of democracy, in the case of Athens *eleutheria and isonomia*. In this sense, an evaluation of the effects of clientelism on democracy does not depend as much on the empirical model of clientelism one may adhere to; more importantly it depends, as it did in democratic Athens, on our understanding and definition of democracy. To this I turn now.

3. Changing Paradigms: Defining Democracy and Assessing its Quality.

Recently, scholars of new democracies have begun to question their “quality.” This timely debate results, in my view, from the paradigmatic crisis that current theories of democracy (basically understood as theories of the ‘political regime’) are undergoing, as

well as the limited results of democracy promotion efforts—mostly derived from such theories.² This paradigmatic crisis (which Kuhn³ defined as the emergence of growing anomalies or divergences between theoretical assumptions about, in this case, democratic theories and the observations of the democracies that actually exist) stems from the rapid expansion over the last two decades of political regimes that have adopted electoral forms of democracy while at the same time showing great deficiencies in other, no less important, attributes of democracy. According to Freedom House's ratings for 2006, more democracies currently exist than ever before in the history of humanity, 123 in all; these democracies include Ukraine, Venezuela, Sweden, Turkey, Costa Rica, Mongolia, to cite a few examples. Maps 1 and 2 below show the total number of countries considered electoral democracies in 2006 and the degree of freedom by country in 2005.

²For an evaluation of democracy promotion models, see Carothers (1999).

³Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

in basic aspects of the workings of the political regime. Although elections appear in some of these regimes as the main mechanism for gaining political power, these elections are far from clean, free, and (most importantly) institutionalised.⁴ Furthermore, in practice political power is exercised through a complex network of informal and essentially undemocratic institutions (such as clientelism). In short, in many of these countries public space is almost non-existent, thus placing the very meaning of citizenship at issue.

A no less relevant fact is that in many of these countries an unprecedented growth in poverty and economic inequality has accompanied the inauguration of democracy. As a corollary, we find a high level of citizen dissatisfaction with the overall performance of democratic institutions. Today it seems taboo to bring poverty and social inequality into the definition and evaluation of democracy. Yet we must not forget that in the nineteenth century the redistributive thesis of democracy⁵—that is, the supposition that introducing majority rule and universal suffrage would lead to greater social equality—was considered a legitimate and central issue in the debate about political democracy. The electoral path appeared to be the antecedent and to a large extent the *raison d'être* for social citizenship.

In this context of growing anomalies between democratic theory and praxis, and between citizen aspirations and social reality, it is legitimate to question the pertinence of

⁴ O'Donnell (2000)

⁵ For a discussion of this topic see Shapiro (2002).

assessing the regimes of such countries as democratic. Social scientists have adopted two strategies in response to these anomalies. On the one hand, they have produced a series of conceptual refinements about democracy, leading to the birth of "democracies with adjectives" (Collier and Levistky 1997). Thus we find democracies of various types: oligarchic, delegative, electoral, semi-democratic, etc. While the use of adjectives has been useful for advancing the classification of "hybrid" political regimes, their proliferation has generated more confusion than precision; consequently, democracy's definitional horizon has been lost. More recently, and partly in response to conceptual confusion, other scholars have chosen to reclassify some doubtfully democratic regimes as electoral authoritarianism (Schedler ed. 2006), attributing to them only a few of the characteristics belonging to a democracy.⁶ These are welcome analytical distinctions but, in my opinion, they are also indicative of the deepening crisis of meaning that, in any scientific field, precedes paradigm shifts.

In this sense, the debate about the 'quality' of democracy and its concomitants is timely. This debate acknowledges that the question of democracy is not only a question of classifying political regimes or choosing from among current definitions, whether minimalist or maximalist. Rather, a debate on the concept of 'quality' indicates that the *redefinition* of democracy's very content and the dimensions relevant for its study are at issue. To ask what dimensions are relevant for defining a country as (high/low quality) democratic as some scholars have begun to do (O'Donnell et al. 2004, Diamond and

⁶ For discussion see Diamond (2002).

Morlino eds. 2005) is a matter not only of academic but practical relevance, with the potential to develop more effective democracy promotion policies throughout the world.

We have learnt that the concept of democracy has travelled long through time and space, and has significantly changed its guises (Dunn 2005). Indeed, the democratic institutions of Athens profoundly differ from the ones of today's modern democracy. However, if we look carefully into (and beyond) democracy as just a political regime, it becomes evident that the basic moral principles of Athenian democracy are still at the core of modern democracy. Today, almost nobody openly denies that *eleutheria* (freedom) and *isonomia* (equality) should be the constitutive elements of democracy. Furthermore, likewise in Athens, *citizens* and not just voters are the proper demos in modern democracies. Consequently, the existence of a public space of citizen's deliberation, participation, and decision-making should be considered a constitutive aspect of modern democracy.

With this in mind, I adopt the definition of democracy put forward in O'Donnell (2004). The main propositions are:

- 1) A democratic regime is a fundamental component of democracy, but it is insufficient for adequately conceptualising what democracy is.
- 2) Democracy entails a particular conception of the human being *cum* citizen as an agent. This is the grounding factor of democracy.
- 3) *Agency* entails a moral conception of the human being as someone who is normally endowed with sufficient autonomy for deciding what kind of life she wants to live, has the cognitive ability to reasonably detect the options available to her, and feels herself,

and is normally construed by others, as responsible for the courses of action she takes.

4) This vision leads to the question of which may be the basic conditions that enable an individual to function as an agent.

5) A democratic regime includes elections that are fair, inclusive, and institutionalised, as well as some (boundedly) universalistic political rights. These basically are the rights of expression, movement, access to non-monopolised information and, most importantly for the purpose of the present paper, of association.

6) Political citizenship is the individual correlate of a democratic regime. It consists of the legal assignment of the above mentioned political rights, and of the rights of participation in fair, inclusive and institutionalised elections, including voting and being elected.

7) As a consequence, a democratic regime (or political democracy) is one in which the access to the main governmental positions is achieved by means of the kind of elections specified in the preceding point. Furthermore, in a democratic regime there exist and are legally backed, between and during elections, the various political rights also specified above.

8) After a long and complex historical trajectory that in most of the highly developed countries first included the rather extensive achievement of (mostly male) civil citizenship, contemporary democracy is based on the idea of political citizenship, which in turn is based on the conception of an agency that is legally enacted and backed.

9) In these countries, the issue of the capabilities that actually enable agency was faced in matters of civil and social rights. The underlying view of the resulting legal constructions is one of the fairness that is due to individuals who are construed as freely and responsibly choosing ones—agents.

10) The view of agency entailed by the democratic regime has direct, and concurrent implications in the civil, the social, the cultural, and the political spheres, because it is a moral conception, which in several aspects has been legally enacted, of the human being as an autonomous, reasonable, and responsible individual.

11) One of the corollaries of the above is that under democracy, the state institutions have the duty (correlative to the rights of citizenship) of treating everyone with the full *fairness*, consideration and respect due to an agent.

I believe that the main question underlying this characterisation of democracy is the following: How do we account for the coexistence of a democratic political regime based on the idea of citizenship and political equality in a context of high socioeconomic inequality and/or violation of fundamental freedoms and human rights? Based on ideas of *human agency* and *fairness* this definition has repercussions for rethinking, first, the core elements of a democratic political regime *qua* regime and, second, the relationship of the latter to the *minimal conditions for the exercise of political citizenship*.

Both ideas are fundamentally related in that they place human beings and the respect for their rights at the centre of the analysis of democracy. According to this view, political institutions are crucial to democracy, to the degree that they foster, or hinder, the constitution of individuals as beings endowed with agency. The question we can draw from this is, what institutions (formal or informal) are necessary to protect and promote citizens as agents? From this follows that clientelism (even though it maybe evaluated empirically as an effective strategy of electoral mobilisation) is inimical to the exercise of political citizenship and subverts public space.

4. Democracy, Agency and Clientelism.

Agency is the grounding element of citizenship and therefore of democracy. Posing the topic from this perspective, the minimal conditions required for the exercise of political citizenship—that is, the *thresholds* that make agency possible—become a constitutive

part of democracy. Expressed in another way, these minimal conditions are not external but intrinsic to democracy. From this follows that if democracy is based on citizenship, and citizenship is based on agency, then any violation of the conditions necessary for the existence of agency are violations of citizenship and must be considered part of the *problématique* of democracy and its quality. The violation of the conditions necessary for agency to exist and its impact on the effectiveness of citizenship is a crucial aspect for assessing the degree or quality of democracy.

The practice of clientelism violates agency (and consequently citizenship) in fundamental ways. First, it violates the political equality presupposed in the act of voting in democratic elections.⁷ In cases of extreme poverty and/or acute economic uncertainty, empirical evidence shows that in modern democracies disadvantaged citizens are often pressured to vote for candidates who extort them out of fear of being deprived of material benefits. Even if each person's vote is counted equally, in such a context citizens lack sufficient autonomy (or *eleutheria* in Athenian grammar) to formulate and express their true preferences. In this case, as Fishkin (1991) asserts, citizen autonomy and the equal "power" of the vote are violated.

Clientelism is also inimical to the idea of *fairness* entailed in the definition of democracy I suggested above. Under a democratic regime, the state is obliged to treat all citizens with the equal respect and consideration they deserve given their condition as

⁷ Legal scholars have extensively addressed this issue. See Rose-Ackerman (1985), Karlan (1994), and Hasen (2000).

agents. This implies providing the basic minimal material capabilities required for the exercise of citizenship. As I discussed above, Athenians knew best about it. This is the issue of the achievement of *a threshold of substantive justice*.

In addition to the minimal necessary capabilities for the actual exercise of citizenship, the question of *procedural justice* emerges; that is, the way policies aimed at facilitating agency, and therefore the exercise of citizenship, are decided and implemented. These procedures usually have a significant effect on the constitution of agency/citizenship beyond the specific content of such policies. In particular, the way social policies are implemented is a crucial sphere for the constitution of citizen's identities and interests and, therefore, of agency. In this context, evaluating the quality of democracy is important not only in terms of the state's efforts to generate capabilities but also to register *how* the state gives what it gives. Key questions emerge, such as those related to the ways of exercise and discretionality of state power. For example, the law may establish health care as a right, but if implementation is targeted to the point of stigmatising the beneficiaries, the question arises as to whether such a policy is facilitating or hampering the constitution of citizenship. Likewise, if social policies to promote equity force the presumed beneficiaries to change their lifestyles or exaggerate their social deprivations in order to obtain benefits, it is also worth asking whether this violates the agency of those citizens.⁸ Institutions of social welfare are a fundamental element of the relationship between democracy and the state; therefore, it is crucial that

⁸ I further discuss this topic in Ippolito (2004).

they be analysed not only as such policies but also from the perspective of how state institutions treat citizens; this, in turn, is central to the evaluation of the quality of democracy. Empirical evidence suggests that in Latin America, mainly as a corollary of economic restructuring and welfare state retrenchment, many social programs are being administered in a clientelistic way and are used to pressure beneficiaries to exchange their political support in exchange for some material benefits (Fox 1994, Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2003).

In sum, clientelism denies the human agency on which citizenship (and democracy) is grounded. It also deeply subverts public space. It does it by hampering the *right* of poor citizens to form and express autonomous political preferences and by injecting *fear* in the electoral process. As Dunn (2005) has suggested, in modern democracy, even if we do not govern ourselves as the Athenians did, we do grant legitimacy to government by holding regular elections in which citizens vote *freely* and without *fear*, and in which votes have a reasonably equal weight.

5. Clientelism and the Right of Association⁹

Voting is a basic right of citizenship, but it is just one of them. There are other very important rights of citizenship, without which the very effectiveness of voting is at stake. Even a narrow (procedural) definition of democracy needs to include other rights, such as the rights of associational autonomy and free speech. These rights are some of the

⁹ This section is based on Ippolito-O'Donnell (2006).

“surrounding freedoms” of the political regime, without which the act of voting is less than meaningful (O’Donnell 2004). In particular, as Fox (1994) argued, the effectiveness of the right of associational autonomy is of foremost importance, especially for those disadvantaged members of society who have practically only this resource to make their own voices heard in the political process. As Gutmann (1998) has noted: “Without access to an association that is willing and able to speak up for our views and values, we have a very limited ability to be heard by many other people or to influence the political process, unless we happen to be rich or famous (3).”

Clientelistic practices by state officials and party bosses interfere with the right of associational autonomy of poor citizens and prevent them to mount collective action by, first, coercing and/or co-opting grassroots leaders and activists; second, by creating incentives for zero-sum competition among popular organisations in a context of scarce resources and, third, by generating *mistrust* among poor citizens due to the often perceived inequality in the distribution of clientelistic rewards (some get anything, others nothing). Fear of losing material rewards and non-cooperation among organisations and individuals reinforce each other and hinder collective action.

At the local level, machine politics create a (dis)incentive structure for associational autonomy and collective action. It is a common experience in most countries of Latin America, and my own research in Argentina points in this direction, that to become a candidate one must win first intra-party elections. This is done primarily by creating a supporting constituency in the neighbourhoods, which prominently includes

promising and/or distributing clientelistic rewards. Machine politics operates not only by exchanging services for votes in general elections but also, and more importantly perhaps, for intra-party competition. Supportive local constituencies give leverage within parties for becoming a consensual candidate and thus avoid intra-party competition, for accessing resources from the state or national party organisations, and the like. In this scheme, acquiescent neighbourhood associations play a very important role, not only as recipients but also as components of a distributing network of clientelistic rewards. Furthermore, even though the electoral performance of local candidates usually depends upon the performance of their party in the general elections, if the performance of a local candidate is poor the party can prevent his/her future nomination and, hence, re-election. In this context, any expansion of autonomous participation at the local level is perceived as a situation that will hurt the chances of local politicians to become candidates. The paradox is that while at the national level elections tend to reinforce the legitimacy of democracy as a political regime, at the local level elections unleash antidemocratic and clientelistic practices that adversely affect the autonomy and organisational capacities of the urban poor. Of course, candidates at all levels use clientelistic incentives to attract constituencies, but in the neighbourhoods they affect, above all, the autonomous organisational capacity of the urban poor.

Why is the right of associational autonomy important from the perspective of poor citizens? Amartya Sen defined *Development as Freedom* as the “expansion of the capabilities of people to lead the lives they value—and have reason to value” (1999: 18).

This expansion depends upon the elimination of oppression and the provision of some basic services. Yet, as Peter Evans persuasively argues in his reply to Sen, the expansion of individual capabilities crucially depends on the achievement of *collective capabilities*.

“In practice, my ability to choose the life I have reason to value often hangs on the possibility of my acting together with others who have reason to value similar things” (Evans 2002:56).

It follows that “fostering the expansion of such means of collective action is central to the expansion of freedom.” (*ibid.*).

There is another important way in which violations of the right of associational autonomy subvert public space and, thus the quality of democracy. Recently, Peruzzotti (2006) has argued that democratic representation has two faces. One is elections as a source of vertical accountability. However, the process of representation not only happens at election time. In his discussion of Manin (1995), Peruzzotti suggests we should move beyond an election-centred approach, by looking into the actual activity of ‘representing’ that takes place *between* elections. He understands the second face of democratic representation as “a complex set of interactions that represented and representatives develop in the public sphere between elections. The key feature of representation is not the decisional electoral moment but the deliberative and bargaining processes that take place between elections in the public sphere.” (Peruzzotti 2006:19) In

this sense, this author concludes that we should also take into account how diverse forms of civic engagement feed the dynamics of representative government.

In sum, the violation of the right of associational autonomy—as it happens under clientelism—subverts public space by limiting the opportunities of poor citizens to deliberate, participate collectively, and make their voices truly heard in the political process. In doing so, it hinders the conception of human agency on which democracy is based upon.

6. Clientelism and the Subversion of Public Space: Conclusions.

I began this article with two observations. One, the unfortunate paradox that in many newly democratised countries, the Latin American ones included, the inauguration of a democratic regime has come along hand in hand with widespread clientelism. In the second observation I referred to the numerous studies that are focusing on the dynamics and on the short-term effects of clientelism. Yet I argued that, praiseworthy as these studies are in terms of advancing our empirical knowledge of some aspects of this informal institution, insofar as they omit a theoretical discussion of democracy, or adopt a narrow conception of it, they are unable to provide a proper assessment of the consequences of clientelism on the workings, and ultimately on the quality, of democracy.

In this respect, beginning with Athens, I argued that since then, despite the transformations it has experimented across many centuries, democracy presupposes the

conception of a citizen-as-agent who has the freedoms and the social conditions necessary for autonomously forming his/her preferences and expressing them individually or collectively in the realm of public space. From this perspective, the manifold—sometimes implicit but always present—coercions of clientelism over the poor and disadvantaged are a clear, and most serious, violation of basic principles of democracy. The resulting degrading of citizenship deeply damages democracy and its quality, well beyond the material, and always conditional, benefits that some may receive.

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