



POLYARCHY OR DEMOCRACY - THE CENTRAL THEME OF ROBERT DAHL'S REFLECTIONS

Mirabela Rely Odette CURELAR

PhD Associate Professor
“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Romania

Sheilla Patricia STAMATOIU

Faculty of Political Sciences, Philosophy and Communication Sciences
West University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: *THE POLYARCHY IS DEFINED AS A REGIME THAT OFFERS EXTENSIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR PUBLIC CONTESTATION AND PARTICIPATION, MATERIALIZED BY SATISFYING OF SOME CONDITIONS WHICH ALLOW CITIZENS TO FORMULATE THEIR PREFERENCES, MAKE THEM KNOWN AND ENJOY AN EQUAL TREATMENT FROM THE LEADERS' SIDE, IN TERMS OF "STRENGTHENING" OF THEIR PREFERENCES.*

Keywords: *POLYARCHY, DEMOCRACY, LEADERS, PUBLIC CONTESTATION, SOCIAL POWER*

Contact details of the author(s): Email: odette.sheilla@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

The term of Polyarchy was introduced by Robert Dahl in the modern political science in his book named *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), to describe a form of government based on the fundamental principle that, with regard to collective decisions, each individual is entitled to equal consideration of interests.

Polyarchy (Dahl, 1971, p.5) is a volume about democracy and democratization, more precisely about the necessary conditions for the establishment of democracy, in a nation-state.

“The polyarchy is a political order that is distinguished at the most general level by two characteristics: citizenship is extended to a fairly large proportion of adults and the rights of the institution of citizenship include the possibility to oppose and vote against the most important holders of positions in government. The first feature distinguishes the polyarchy from more exclusive systems



of government in which, although the opposition is allowed, the governments and their legal opponents are restricted to a rather small group, as was the case in Britain, Belgium, Italy and other countries before the universal vote. The second feature distinguishes the polyarchy from the political regimes in which, although the most adults are citizens, and the citizenship does not include the right to oppose and vote against the government, as is the case with modern authoritarian political regimes." (Dahl, 2000, p.8)

The Democracy is, without a doubt, the central theme of Dahl's reflections. "The Politics" is the best presented by "using, under conditions of constraints, of social power," and the study of politics aims at "the nature and the source of those constraints, as well as the techniques of using the social power, within those constraints." This perception of the politics and of the political science is by no means situated above of any challenge. There is, however, a certain spirit of the times that validates it as legitimate, without this automatically meaning the denial of their alternatives - for example, those of Platonic, Christian or Marxist inspiration. But the scientific approach took shape, at the beginning of the twentieth century, around the interpretation stated above, at the foundation of which is the concept of power. (Dahl, 2000, p.5-7)

We can recognize a definition of the political regime that Dahl characterizes as that type of the social order that is distinguished by the existence of seven fundamental institutions, without which no structuring of relations between the state and the society can be considered "democratic", that sustain the interests of the persons (Dobrițoiu, 2019, p.114) referring to the current manner of the term of "democracy".

The seven main institutions of the polyarchy, analyzed and presented by Robert Dahl are:

1. Elected rulers and control over government decisions should have the status of articles of law in the Constitution and be functional features.
2. Free and fair elections. The rulers are elected in regular and fair elections, in which coercion must not work.
3. Universal suffrage (right to vote) All adults have the right to vote in the election of governors.
4. The right to be elected. All adults have the right to apply for a position or position in the state, although age limits may exist for certain positions.
5. The freedom of expression, which refers to freedom of speech, including in matters of criticism of the rulers, the regime, etc.
6. The right to information and to use alternative sources of information, which are protected by law.
7. The autonomy and the right to association, which refers to the possibility to participate in associations or political parties in order to defend or promote your rights. (Dahl, 2000, p.19)

Dahl's approach starts from the critique of the two fundamental theses of James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers of the American institutional system, regarding the conditions in which a non-tyrannical republic can exist: the separation of powers in the state, respectively the system of levers and counterweights (checks and balances) between institutions, through which to control the influence of factions.

Dahl is of the other opinion: "The Madisonian argument exaggerates the importance, for the prevention of tyranny, of the specific control exercised over dignitaries by other dignitaries; he underestimates the importance of social levers and counterweights, existing in any pluralistic society. In the absence of these levers and counterweights, it is doubtful that all intra-government levers (...) will have the effect of the preventing tyranny": The factions (levers and social counterweights), which for Madison posed a threat to democracy, become, in Dahl, a necessary condition for its existence. (Dahl, 2000, p.7-9)



As an alternative to Madison's view of the state powers, Robert Dahl launches a definition of the concept of power in society: A's ability to act in such a way as to control B's answers. He notes, in this context, that "the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary do not cover all power relations or control processes in the society".

The political system included many activities that were not affected by constitutional norms and other legal norms; so "a much broader concept was needed, and Dahl sought it in the power,", a power that is no longer an abstract potential of any institution (Flavius Cristian Mărcău, 2019), but a resource that manifests itself, concretely, in the relationship between actors and materialized throughout the European construction.(Tomescu, 2019, p.45) Max Weber is the first a theorist who emphasizes the relational aspect of power, for him, power means "any chance to make one's own will triumph in a social relationship, even against the resistance." Against this background, Dahl considers, as an object of study - to see whether or not there was a power relationship - B's behavior; that is, the changes in B's behavior represent a measure of the power exerted on him by A. (Dahl, 2000, 10)

Through better perception of the world (Dudău, 2019, p.141), Dahl later adapts his conceptual system, understanding by the power relation that relation where there is the intentional element on the part of A, and introducing the correlated concepts of control (Flavius Cristian Mărcău, 2014, pp.105-110), the influence and the autonomy. By "control," Dahl means "a relationship between actors, such that the preferences, desires, or intentions of one or more actors provoke conforming reactions or predispositions to such actions to other actors."(Dahl, 2000, 10)

Dahl is trying to show that the phenomena highlighted by his critics are not limited to power relations between an elite (A) and the citizen (B) who would like to challenge the "logic" of the system, harming the interests of the elite.

Who Governs? it is one of the most important works of political science of the century, in which Dahl sets out to investigate and critique Charles Wright Mills' thesis on the existence of an elite that dominated American society. In Mills' view, this domination would be exercised behind democratic mechanisms, which in fact reconstitute and refresh the elite (political, military, business, trade union, etc.). Mills' approach is a "positional" one, in the sense that power is a resource focused on various "levels" of society. Robert Dahl believes that the power of an "elite" member should be manifested in his or her success in making others change their behavior. (Dahl, 2000, 13-14)

Dahl chooses New Haven as his field of study, which he considers "typical" for the United States, and uses the "reputable" method: that is, who were those who, in the local political process, are known to Is it true, however, that Dahl checks the influence rather than the power, and the concepts of the autonomy and the control are important tools in the analysis of a pluralistic democratic society.

Dahl supports the concepts of autonomy and control as important tools in the analysis of a pluralistic democratic society (Flavius Cristian Mărcău, 2014b, pp.93-102). For Dahl, the conclusions of New Haven represent the opportunity to present the empirical confirmation of some hypotheses, of some open paths in the work *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, through which, the American society represents "a strange hybrid [...] that cannot be exported elsewhere, but in which the social preconditions of democracy are present, there is an effective system of relations, strengthening the agreement between members of society, encouraging moderation and maintaining social peace ", (Dahl, 2000, 14-15), a real means of escaping the realities of the world. (Simion, 2015, p.56) And in terms of political decision, American democracy he faithfully approximated the model that Dahl then called polyarchic in 1956.

Dahl and Lindblom brought back to life the older concept of "the polyarchy," which later became the centerpiece of Dahl's democratic theory. In 1909, it appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary (polyarchy is the government of a state or one by several; in antithesis to the monarchy). Ernest Barker used it in 1919, in a close sense, after which the concept fell into oblivion, until it was



taken over by Dahl and Lindblom, who associated it with a set of socio-political processes through which those led exercise a degree relatively high control over leaders. (Dahl, 2000, 15)

In the volume *A Preface Democratic Theory*, published in 1956, before the volume *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, the polyarchy is broadly defined as a political system in which the following eight conditions are met to a relatively degree:

During the vote

1. Any member of the organization undertakes acts which we presume to be the expression of a preference among the alternatives set forth, for example, voting.
2. In the processing of these expressions (votes), the options of all individuals have identical weights.
3. The alternative with the highest number of votes is declared the winner.

Before the vote

4. Any member who perceives a set of alternatives, at least one of which seems preferable to the alternatives already listed, may insert the alternative his(her) favorite (s) among those listed for voting.
5. All individuals possess identical information about alternatives.

After the vote

6. The alternatives (leaders or decisions) with the highest number of votes remove any alternative (leaders or decisions) with the fewest votes.
7. The orders of the elected dignitaries are executed.

During the period between elections

- 8.1. Either all the decisions between the elections are subordinated or meant to apply the decisions adopted during the election period, ie the elections are in a way superior;
- 8.2. Either the new decisions, from the period between the elections, are governed by the seven previous conditions that operate - however - in relatively different institutional circumstances;
- 8.3. Either both. (Dahl, 2000, p.16)

The Polyarchy is defined as a regime that offers extensive possibilities for public contestation and participation, materialized by satisfying the eight conditions listed above (and which allow citizens to formulate their preferences, make them known and enjoy an equal treatment from the leaders' side, in terms of "Strengthening" of their preferences).

In the work named *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Dahl does not speak of an abstract organization that must govern itself democratically, but of "democracy in a large group of people".

Dahl believes that there are at least 3 conditions necessary for a democracy, for a government to maintain, for a certain period of time, its receptivity to the preferences of its citizens, which it considers politically equal, all citizens must benefit from unrestricted chances:

1. To formulate their preferences;
2. To make these preferences known to other citizens and the government through individual and collective actions;
3. For the government to weigh their preferences without bias, without discriminating on the basis of the content or source of the preference.

The following institutional guarantees are needed for the opportunity to formulate preferences:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations
2. Freedom and expression



3. The right to vote
4. The right of political leaders to compete for support
5. Alternative sources of information.

The following institutional guarantees are needed for the opportunity to signal preferences:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations
2. Freedom and expression
3. The right to vote
4. Eligibility for public office
5. The right of political leaders to compete for support
6. Alternative sources of information
7. Free and fair choices.

Being taken into account in the way equal preferences, the following institutional guarantees are required in the governing act:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations
2. Freedom of expression governance
3. The right to vote
4. Eligibility for public office
5. The right of political leaders to compete for support
6. Alternative sources of information
7. Free and fair choices
8. Government policy-making institutions they depend on votes and other expressions of preference. (Dahl, 2000, p.17-18)

The three opportunities to formulate preferences, to signal these preferences, and to benefit from an equal treatment of preferences, in the governing act) support a set of eight institutional guarantees for the citizens to enjoy. Given that, taken together; the three principles make the government open, for a period of time, to the preferences of the citizens (and this "open" character means that the government responds to the preferences), we arrive at an operational definition of democracy.

For Dahl, the principle that leaders must respond to the preferences of citizens (treated equally) is a key-principle of democracy. Therefore, the eight institutional agencies mentioned define a system with superior efficiency (Alecsoiu, 2019, p.72) that satisfies one of the essential characteristics of democracy.

The participation-challenge binomial helps Dahl to define the four "ideal" types of regimes, as well as, the future in which "the real" regimes are situated and evolve, and the persons involved in this process. (Manasia, 2016, p.24) Thus, the four ideal types are: closed hegemony (which limits both the right to participate and the right to contest), comprehensive hegemony (which grants the first but denies the second), the competitive oligarchy (which denies the first, but grants the second) and the polyarchy (which guarantees both of the highest possible degrees). (Dahl, 2000, 18)

Dahl and his collaborators obtained a profile of each state and highlighted the "scores". The control of the theory is performed by checking whether or not the respective states have, in fact, the type of regime that the respective profile would suggest. Dahl notes that, in general, the theory is confirmed, the vast majority of states with favorable profiles being, indeed, polyarchists. Dahl also discusses the deviant cases, such as that of Argentina (at the time a military dictatorship, although his profile indicated a set of conditions favorable to polyarchy) or that of India (where polyarchy remained, despite unfavorable conditions). (Dahl, 2000, 19)

The right to participate in the public contest would allow us to compare different regimes, depending on their scope. The public appeal and the coverage vary from person to person. By the end



of the eighteenth century, Britain had a very well-developed system of public contestation, but until the expansion of the right to vote - in 1867 and 1884 - it included only a tiny part of the population. Switzerland has one of the most developed public appeal systems in the world. There are few who could question the fact that the Swiss regime is very "democratic". And yet, is it an oposition between the evolution and decay, (Paliță, 2016, p.151) half of the populations - women - do not yet have the right to run in national elections.

Unlike Switzerland, the U.R.S.S. it has almost no public appeal system, although the right to vote is universal. Of course, a country with a universal suffrage and a completely repressive government offers less chance of opposition than one that has a limited voting right but a very tolerant government. By the way, if we classify countries only according to their scope, without taking into account other circumstances, we will arrive at incorrect results. And yet, distinguishing regimes by inclusion is a useful thing as long as it is very clear to us that the proportion of "suffrage" or, in general, the right to participate, is only one of the features of the systems, which can only be interpreted in the context of other features. Dahl considers in his study the conditions that lead to the process of democratization, and implicitly to the destructure of polyarchy.

CONCLUSION

Democracy has been understood as the result of far-reaching historical transformations. One of these is the transformation of hegemonies and competitive oligarchies into quasi-polyarchies. This is essentially the process that took place in the Western world in the nineteenth century. The second is the transition from quasi-polyarchs to polyarchs in the true sense of the word. This is what happened in Europe in the two decades that passed from the end of the last century to the beginning of the First World War. The third transformation is the full democratization of polyarchies.

This historic process took place with the rapid development of the democratic welfare state, after the outbreak of the Great Depression: being interrupted by World War II, and the process gained new momentum in the late 1960s, as a result of claims, especially from the youth part, regarding the democratization of various social institutions. The third stage of democratization will, of course, prove as important as the others.

In many countries where the polyarchists currently exist, political parties gained relative freedom of organization before suffrage expanded, with one of the first demands of the socialist and labor parties being the universal right to vote. Of course, after the working class gained this right, the respective parties focused their efforts on mobilizing this category.



REFERENCES

Dahl, Robert A, (1971) *Original edition: .Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Dahl, Robert A, (2000), *POLYARCHIES. PARTICIPATION AND OPPOSITION*, In memory of Mary and her hopes), POWER, PLURALISM, POLYARCHY: the conceptual route of Robert Dahl (review by LUCIAN DUMITRU DÎRDALĂ). EUROPEAN INSTITUTE, Iasi. Retrieved from <https://pdfslide.net/documents/robert-a-dahl-poliarhiile-institutul-european-2000pdf.html>

Dobrițoiu, R, (1/2019), *ASPECTS RELATING TO THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROMANIAN LEGISLATION IN THE FIELD OF ADMINISTRATIVE CONTENTIOUS*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series Supplement. Retrieved from <https://alss.utgjiu.ro/mdocs-posts/17-roxana-dobritoiu-aspects-relating-to-the-evolution-of-the-romanian-legislation-in-the-field-of-administrative-contentious/>

Tomescu, I, R, (1/2019), *PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series Supplement, Retrieved from <https://alss.utgjiu.ro/?mdocs-file=3585>

Dudău, A-M, (1/2019) *EXPRESSIVE VALUES OF NON-PERSONAL VERBAL FORMS*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series Supplement, Retrieved from <https://alss.utgjiu.ro/?mdocs-file=3615>

Simion, Minodora, Otilia, (1/2015) *A NEW HEDONISM IN OSCAR WILDE'S NOVEL THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, Issue, Retrieved from http://www.utgjiu.ro/revista/lit/pdf/2015-01/09_Simion.pdf

Alecsoiu, Olivia Roxana, (1/2019), *ASPECTS REGARDING THE APPEARANCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series Supplement, Retrieved from <https://alss.utgjiu.ro/?mdocs-file=3593>

Flavius Cristian Măcăru (2019), „*HINDERING THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN ROMANIA AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE SOCIAL PROTESTS IN THE EARLY 90S*”, in Research and Science Today No. 1(17)/2019, pp. 69-76,

Flavius Cristian Mărcău (2014a), „*UNDEMOCRATIC REGIMES*”, in Annals of „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, Issue 2/2014, pp. 105-110

Flavius Cristian Mărcău (2014b), „*CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE – NECESSARY STAGES OF DEMOCRACY CONSTRUCTION*” in Research and Science Today, Issue 2/2014, p. 93-102

Manasia, Mihaela, (1/2016), *THE BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND PERCEPTION VERBS*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series Supplement, Retrieved from <https://alss.utgjiu.ro/mdocs-posts/05-mihaela-manasia-the-biological-systems-and-perception-verbs/>

Paliță, E, (4/2016.), *THE HOLLOW CROWN, AN EXPERIMENTAL ADAPTATION OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA*, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series. Retrieved from <http://alss.utgjiu.ro/?mdocs-file=3105>