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Revista de Estudios Sociales of Universidad de los Andes (Colombia) invites the academic community to submit articles for its special issue devoted to the theme “**Democratic Erosion: Variants, Mechanisms and Consequences**”.

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Articles will be received from **February 14 to March 16, 2020**

Texts will be accepted in **English, Spanish, and Portuguese**. Authors should carefully adhere to the editorial standards and style guide established by *Revista de Estudios Sociales* (see: <https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/for-authors/res/editorial-policy>).

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Presentation

Democratic Erosion: Variants, Mechanisms and Questions

The “third wave” of democratization took place over the last three decades of the 20th century (Huntington 1993), when the number of democracies in the world reached an all-time high (Diamond 1999, 24-31). However, shortly afterwards, the advance of democracy had not only stopped, but some countries had suffered regression towards authoritarianism (Mechkova, Lührmann & Lindberg 2017). In analyzing these trends, Levistky and Way (2015) point out that many recent democracies faced dilemmas (political and economic) that halted their process of consolidation, but that the thesis of a democratic backsliding was not plausible. Other authors, in contrast, have found empirical evidence of a reversal of the third wave (Diamond 2015). Today it is recognized that a process of autocratization is underway (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). A recent report by the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-

Dem 2019) notes that the number of liberal democracies fell from 44 to 39 between 2008 and 2018, and that 24 countries are severely affected by a “third wave of autocratization.” These countries include Brazil, India, United States, Hungary, and Poland. Walker (2016) argues that the very anti-democratic activism of political leaders in authoritarian regimes has helped reverse what appeared to be solid gains.

Given the advance of authoritarianism (especially in the modes of exercising power, limiting the institutions of “contestation,” balance and counterbalance) in various democratic systems, many theoretical assumptions and empirical expectations have had to be revised. Few specialists maintain the expectation, for example, that transitions to democracy would lead to competitive regimes fully articulated with a public power governed by legality, with effective governance. Reality has shown that the integrity of elections is erratic and that controls over public power can be precarious, even in competitive systems. Weak democracies can stagnate or remain indefinitely at an unstable and defective level of functionality. And inequality remains a challenging undercurrent, even in highly institutionalized democratic regimes such as the United States. Therefore, there too, a certain regression to undemocratic practices of government is possible (Przeworski 2019).

All of this configures a reality in which the category of a *democratic breakdown*—originally coined by Juan Linz (1978)— is not enough to describe these processes of democratic erosion. Thus, new concepts have been incorporated into the recent debate, derived from diverse disciplinary perspectives, which have contributed to making the analysis of the political, social and institutional dynamics of democracies more complex but also more enriching. The aim is to capture the procedural and gradual attributes of regression with concepts such as *decline*, *recession* or *democratic backslide* (Bermeo 2016; Diamond 2015; Mechkova, Lührmann & Lindberg 2017; Tomini & Wagemann 2018; Waldner & Lust 2018).

Without taking a stand, from the outset, on any of these meanings, this call uses the term *democratic erosion* to designate a state of affairs in which attributes or qualities previously existing in a democratic regime are reverted. As in the case of materials, erosion implies a gradual degradation that deforms their initial nature. The question from an anthropological approach is whether it is possible to speak of a natural form of democracy, present in all times and places, or whether historical and cultural contexts shape and therefore modify political reality, as do the terms that denote it (Adler Lomnitz 1994). This therefore leads to a second question: what role do social actors play in this process, especially when democracy is claimed from below? Are these manifestations of activism and rebellion an attack on democratic institutions and therefore a mechanism of erosion, or on the contrary, do they represent paths for their extension and strengthening (Love and Mattern 2013; Gutmann 2009)? If, from a political definition, erosion implies situations in which public authority is

no longer subject, to some extent, to the controls, limits and weights and counterweights established by the law, how can we understand political processes where the institutionality functions in a relatively adequate and stable manner, but the regime loses its capacity to guarantee basic social rights, or social violence becomes a relatively frequent phenomenon in some territories of the Nation-State?

To these questions, we can add the following: to what extent do these processes of degradation of the democratic attributes of political regimes contribute to the definitive transformation of their nature? Are we then witnessing processes of instability that always lead to situations of degradation (by diminishing the capacity of social and institutional instances of expression and accountability), or on the contrary, are these variations (or at least can they be) necessary conditions for the strengthening of democracy, even if they modify its nature? How can we distinguish the potentially multiple dynamics of political erosion from the processes of virtuous transformation? How influential are the discourses that question the normative foundations of liberal democracies? Do democratic systems have the antibodies to deal with these threats? What is the nature of the latter and what can we expect for the immediate future?

Objective

The interest in investigating the variants, as well as the factors that trigger these processes of democratic erosion, has been rapidly spreading among the international academic community. However, many open questions remain, and there is little consensus on the concepts and theories that are appropriate to account for this phenomenon. Above all, few spaces have been opened for inter- and multidisciplinary dialogue on these issues, even though the confluence of multiple fields of knowledge may enrich our understanding of the phenomena of democratic erosion.

This special issue aims to contribute to the generation of empirically based theory about the mechanisms and processes of erosion in contemporary democracies. The fundamental interest is to promote an interdisciplinary dialogue about the processes of political erosion in Latin America and other regions of the world.

This invitation includes a call for original contributions from diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. The challenge is to rethink democratic erosion from the points of intersection and convergence of the fields of philosophy, history, sociology, political science, psychology, pedagogy, economic theory, communication studies, anthropology and cultural studies, among others.

Suggested Thematic Lines

- Forms of erosion: Developing concepts for the empirical analysis of democratic erosion.
- Skepticism about democracy in philosophy and the history of ideas.
- The importance of historical processes in the formation of movements, organizations and interests with weak commitments to democratic norms and institutions.
- The values of democracy under siege: Discourses, ideologies or political visions that relativize or reject the fundamental values of democracy.
- The chiaroscuro of institutional change in terms of party systems, electoral institutions or public policies.
- Political discontent, citizen protests and anti-system movements.
- Citizen attitudes, electoral behavior and public opinion associated with democratic instability.
- Ethnographic studies and dense descriptions of episodes or processes that generate dynamics of democratic erosion.
- The challenges of pedagogy, civic education and political socialization.
- Studies with an interdisciplinary perspective or that promote cross-fertilization in research on the dynamics of autocratization/democratization.

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