

## PEACE AND DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS

By Eduardo Posada

If we stay on the “surface, we may generate a degree of agreement despite the broadest and deepest disagreements”. This is one of the central conclusion of the recent book by George Klosko, *Democratic procedures and liberal consensus* (OUP, 2000). Klosko shares the concerns of those who interest themselves in studying levels of possible consensus in pluralist societies. His starting-point is thus the same as other influential contemporary thinkers: given the diversity of political, moral and religious opinion in modern society, what could the reasonable basis be for a social pact? His work goes further however, than speculations in political philosophy. Klosko combines a theoretical debate on liberalism and democracy admirably with empirical evidence available on civic values and beliefs. The result is an excellent study, useful to understand how democracies work, and relevant to societies which like ours, is trying to build a democratic future, without violence.

It is important to have a clear appreciation of the starting point of the discussion. In all conflicts of societies, people defend diverse values which often come into conflict. Further, moral concepts are sometimes vague, and subject to challenge. Klosko gives us as an example the notion of justice “if people emphasized different aspects of justice, they may easily be talking about very different things”. By definition, therefore, a privileged society cannot be in agreement about everything. But a certain consensus is necessary: both for civilized coexistence, and for the stability of the political regime. These postulates pose a formidable challenge to all pluralist societies -how do we define that possible consensus for their existence?

Klosko identifies three aspects of any consensus: its “popular acceptance” (that is to say, how many people agree); the “extent of the agreement” (the proportion of values and beliefs which are part of the consensus); and the “intensity of commitment” (the levels of passion with which the agreement is adhered to). The nature of this consensus varies, depending on the emphasis in the above points. As Klosko says, consensus over wide systems of values is accompanied by deep commitments, of the kind adopted by religious sects, and usually exclusive for a small number of people in society. Klosko’s hypothesis is that the “extent of the agreement” and “the depth of the commitment” may be directly related, but their relation is inverse to levels of popular acceptance. The need to have a high degree of acceptance -a basic premise of democracy- requires that consensus be relatively restricted in its extent, and confined solely to certain principles.

What then are these basic principles on which a consensus should exist in a pluralist society? To answer this question, Klosko makes a systematic examination of a significant number of investigations of values and beliefs of citizens in the United States, and to a smaller extent, in some European countries.

His analysis of tolerance is revealing. The study suggests that although American society is generally intolerant, there is stability, and the civil liberties of the majority is respected. There is a major paradox here: people say that they support democratic principles in the abstract, but when they are asked about the practical application of specific tolerant

attitudes, that support disappears. In other words, “a careful examination of the beliefs of democratic citizens shows a wide lack of support for democratic values. If citizens were to make their beliefs truly effective, the consequences would be a problem”. This, says Klosko, means that there is no general consensus on strong and substantive principles. On the contrary, “there seemed to exist considerable disagreement on democratic rights”.

Klosko makes a detailed examination of religion in the United States, and its relationship with democratic values. The investigations examined show that the stronger the religious conviction, the greater the intolerance “while the evangelical denominations and the fundamentalists are identified as specially intolerant”. Special mention is made of attitudes of prejudice, also linked to religion, although the relationship here is not very clear. In effect, people who are identified as deeply religious, after a certain point also seem to have fewer prejudices. It is not religion in itself that is the problem, then, but some of the aspects tied to intellectual rigidity, which prevents certain levels of reasoning from entering free discussion (his observations on religion may also extend to secular views of the cosmos, such as Marxism-Leninism which have encouraged extreme fanatical attitudes). Higher levels of education would help to close the bridge between religious fundamentalists and other citizens. But as Klosko warns, it can be expected that the extension of pluralism in education reinforces moral and intellectual differences in society even more.

The discussion on religion allows Klosko to underline the point. In multicultural societies where there are different visions and values opposed to each other, find formidable obstacles for democratic consensus. Where then, can we find the basis for consensus?

According to Klosko, Americans seem to subscribe more than anything else to principles and procedure and not to substance: to the steps to be taken to arrive at decisions more than the content of those decisions. This is the central proposal of his work. From this point of view, the protocol process and the democratic institutions which arise from it, acquire special importance. Although Klosko is forced to review certain other stereotypes on levels of trust in the democratic regime. It is certain that Americans profoundly mistrust their politicians -a feeling of suspicions with regard to power, deeply rooted in the level of tradition at least. But the public knows how to distinguish between individuals who temporarily occupy positions in the State, and the structures which form democracy.

What is important in the end, is the social commitment to the rules of democratic procedure: “they provide the means for solving disagreements not only on level of principles, but on the form and spectrum of those same democratic procedures”. The legitimacy of institutions also finds its basis in these procedures. To the extent that the principles are seen as just, people are prepared to obey the law, even if some specific positions are not favorable to them. The democratic effectiveness of these procedures is at all events subject to certain conditions, and to the general respect for a series on important rights and the will to accept the decisions which arise from those procedures.

Klosko recognizes the weak points for his proposal for consensus: the limited concept of rights which it is able to support, and the degree (also limited) of economic equalities which it can foster. The practical reasons in favor of his argument, and the empirical evidence which supported are nonetheless very strong: “democratic processes which give rights of

participation to all citizens are favorable to a generation of greater support than other mechanisms of decision taking”. In modern democracies, there are greater levels of agreement as to the principles which are related to procedures than the substantive issues. And this consensus on procedure -the mechanisms for solving disputes peacefully - is the basis for political stability, and civilized coexistence.

Although the work of Klosko is centered on the United States and some countries in Europe, it seems to provide lessons for experiences in Colombia in several respects. First, it may be useful to make a deep study of the methods we use to examine democratic values in Colombia. It will also be useful to review some commonplaces on the relationship between tolerance and democracy. And above all, Klosko’s conclusions may stimulate new reflections and new considerations of the type of consensus which is being looked for in the current peace process. When Klosko suggests that we stay on the “surface” he is precisely arguing for this minimum consensus as to procedure, perhaps the only one possible in pluralist societies which wish to live in peace and democracy.