



ORIGINAL PAPER

Democracy and socialism before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall: An analysis of the interpretations of the intellectual and activist Francisco Weffort in Brazil*

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Abstract:

This article presents Francisco Weffort's principal interpretations concerning socialism and democracy. The research was conducted taking in account his articles and books, written between 1979 and 1992. We argue that his thought about socialism and democracy, developed during his academic career later underpinned his participation in the central nucleus of the Workers' Party (PT), first as general secretary between 1983 and 1987 (before the fall of Berlin Wall) and after as the main coordinator of Lula's presidential campaign in 1994 (after the fall of Berlin Wall). His theorizations were initially in tune with Western Marxism in Brazil, when a group of intellectuals tried to comprehend Marx writings from a scientific approach, trying to leave aside the Leninist political perspective, adopted by the Brazilian Communist Party. This perspective influenced the PT from its foundation in 1980 until the late 90's. The Worker's Party emerged proclaiming himself as a socialist revolutionary party, built by workers, trade unions, Catholic Church believers and intellectuals but not by politicians. The party arose as a new option for the Brazilian society, which were tired of old politicians. That is why the scientific approach (far from political perspectives) used to interpret Marx by this group of intellectuals was deeply connected with the party, which denied the importance of politics and had the revolutionary socialist horizon as target. After some time as a PT's member in the late 1980s, Weffort started to privilege the role took by politics in his analysis and writings under the influence of Eurocommunism, through the reception of Gramsci in Brazil. This reception was responsible for an interpretative turn in his work, when he began to privilege democratic political ways instead of a revolutionary rupture as a path to be achieved in the Brazilian political horizon. Our hypothesis is sustained by the idea that the writings about democracy and socialism are deeply connected to the period before and after Berlin Wall and can be seen as an excellent portrait of the dilemma lived by many Brazilian (and worldwide) intellectuals, the paradox represented by the opposition of a socialist revolutionary scenario *versus* the democratic way.

Keywords: *Democracy; Socialism; Intellectuals; Marxism, Post-communism, Weffort.*

* A first version of this paper was presented in the XXX Congress of the Latin American Association of Sociology. We would like to thank the participants, who contributed with the improvements of the manuscript final version.

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The consolidation of social science as a field in Brazil was encouraged by several intellectuals, among whom, Francisco Weffort (b. 1937), who acted decisively both in defense of this area of study and of Brazilian political institutions, especially in the struggles for democracy. He acted as a researcher at University of São Paulo (USP), at CEBRAP (Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning), and at CEDEC (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies). In addition, in 1980 he participated as founder and general secretary of the Workers' Party (PT). Then in 1994 he took up a position in the Ministry of Culture during President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, which he held on 2002. After that period, Weffort began to write essays on the political and cultural formation of Brazil. His intellectual production – from the academic context to the political field – focused on three main themes: (1) populism and syndicalism; (2) democracy, citizenship, and political participation; (3) Brazilian political thought.

However, to understand Weffort's contribution to political theory, the reader must keep the following contextual factors in mind. First, his work arises within the Western Marxism that was based in University of São Paulo - USP. Second, the military coup that took place in 1964, which installed a right wing authoritarian regime and had an immense influence on Brazilian social thought. Third, international events played a role, especially the weakening of the communist rule in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Fourth, the embodiment of Antonio Gramsci theory and the Eurocommunist movement that took place in countries such as Italy, Spain and France.

Although this article focuses on Weffort's thought and activities from the late 1970s to 1992, Weffort also published an essay in 2009 in which he, once again, argued that democracy is key to achieving political reform in Brazil. It's interesting to know that after nearly 30 years he still keeps his commitment with democracy.

Weffort explains and examines democracy (or its absence) at the moment in the broad context of the Brazilian federation, in which the states, in his view, have been subordinated to the federal executive. That condition of dependency and subordination can be explained, Weffort argues, by inequality in parliamentary representation, especially between the southeast and northeast regions of Brazil. This is one of the factors that led Weffort to argue that Brazilian representative democracy is so fraught with distortions that the national debate on improving democracy is vague or non-existent, leading inevitably to a "political reform in slices". (Weffort, 2009)

Although acknowledging that Brazilian democracy has its peculiarities, Weffort also highlighted the centrality that the vote has actually achieved in the electoral and representative system. The freedom to vote, usurped under the dictatorship, now exists in full, although this fact alone does not ensure the hegemony of democracy, considering the other factors that make Brazil *sui generis*. Based on these considerations, we can then see how Weffort situates democracy, as well as socialism, in his works. To that end, this article proceeds in two sections: a section on the Brazilian political left and democracy, followed by a more closely focused conceptual consideration of democracy itself.

Weffort: between the left and democracy

Weffort started his studies of populism and syndicalism at the University of São Paulo during the military dictatorship. His investigations developed in a period of increasingly authoritarian rule that began with the establishment of the AI-5 (Institutional Act) in 1968, which curtailed the activities of "left wing" intellectuals. At

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the international level, the decay and disintegration of the “Soviet empire” during the 1970s and 1980s –together with the collapse of Soviet agricultural stocks caused by the Chernobyl disaster – greatly contributed to the change in the way that Weffort and other Brazilian Marxist intellectuals understood communism/socialism.

Initially Weffort’s view of Brazilian politics was influenced by his participation in the university *Seminário do Capital* (seminar on *Capital*). That group attempted to interpret Brazilian politics through Marxist theory. Their methodology was based on Western Marxism, so their major concern was to distinguish themselves from intellectuals in the government’s Advanced Institute for Brazilian Studies (ISEB) and the Brazilian Communist Party, which were used to Leninist interpretation perspective.

Some years later, in 1968, Weffort joined CEBRAP (Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning), a research center comprised of USP professors who had been forced to retire by the military dictatorship, and who had also taken part in the seminar on *Capital*. In contrast CEBRAP concentrated on criticizing the vanguardist political tradition in Marxism, and on attempting to understand the social basis of support for military rule. They tried to demystify the economic miracle by arguing that it was not a consequence of state policies implemented under the authoritarian rule, basing this on an interpretative approach closer to formal political science*.

At CEBRAP Weffort – through his theorizations of populism and corporative syndicalism – achieved a certain prominence and formed a group which addressed the emergence of new political actors and social movements in Brazil, which joined together those dissatisfied with military rule with those protesting bad working conditions. This group founded CEDEC (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) a few years later.

The foundation of CEDEC, and the working alliance with centrist intellectuals, represented an important step in reviving democracy in Brazil. CEDEC did not emerge from dissent with CEBRAP, but rather reflected research that was more strongly oriented to themes of citizenship, political representation, mass movements, and new political actors. Those issues and interventions were emerging as military rule was in decline, raising hopes for a restoration of democracy. Based on those studies, Weffort, and some CEDEC researchers, drew closer to emerging social movements, which were getting stronger, and which formed the Workers' Party in the late 1970s. After many CEDEC members joined the new party, the question of democracy became more salient, and their theorizations began to gravitate almost entirely around that theme.

That change in the interpretative framework, towards arguing the importance of democracy, depicts a time in which radical changes “outside the legal order” were no

* Factors such as the internationalization of Social Sciences, the institutionalist theoretical approaches – present mainly in North American universities – the relationship with private institutions that initially funded CEBRAP and the international experience of those intellectuals in institutions such as ECLAC, ILPES and FLACSO exerted wide influence on the investigations and research that privileged the institutional and formal aspects of democracy at CEBRAP. Fernando Henrique Cardoso is perhaps the highest expression of these influences. His perspective, which was closer to an institutional reading of politics, may also be related to the experience of “concrete politics” in its approaching the MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) in 1974. Carlos Estevam Martins, Bolívar Lamounier and Vilmar Faria also represent the importation of a new research model in the theoretical and methodological milestones of Political Science, as they brought with them from abroad, both from the USA and England, the “teachings” of *Political Science*. “The three of them took graduate courses abroad (USA and England), where the influences received were considered somewhat diffuse. This, however, meant the assimilation ‘of a certain standard of scientific work’ and the concern with themes of political nature, more specifically: democracy, elections, parties etc.” (SORJ, 2001: 36)

longer seen as practicable. Marxist intellectuals had previously been concerned with denouncing contradictions in capitalist production and with theorizing conflict between its corresponding classes. At this particular time, then, intellectuals were proceeding in some cases to change their horizons, their interpretations of political realities, and their role as public intellectuals. That shift expressed the abandonment, by some of those intellectuals, of radical leftist views of a democratic ideal. Faced with the possibilities for democratic openness in the country, those intellectuals began to formulate theories and analyses of a *de facto* democratic sphere in Brazil that would break definitively with the contemporary authoritarian political culture. This new perspective was deeply influenced by Antonio Gramsci and Eurocommunism theories.

Weffort and Democracy

Weffort's work on democracy developed two slightly different, albeit complementary strands. In one strand he discussed the issues in a conjunctural way within the national and Latin American contexts. His work presented broad interpretations of the main characteristics of military rule, the possibility of regression in the process of re-democratization, and the importance of workers' participation in developing a national plan for democratic advance. The second strand, rather more abstract, was related to democracy as an idea and as a value. That theorization was not limited to the national or Latin American contexts, but rather referred to the socialism vs democracy paradox experienced at the international level. In that way it reflected the experience of those intellectuals who were trying to demonstrate the need for peaceful coexistence between socialism and democracy, just at a time when the Cold War was coming to an end.

In the first set of articles, which had a more conjunctural character, the work "Democracia e Movimento Operário: Algumas Questões para a História do Período 1945 – 1964" [Democracy and the Labor Movement: Some Questions regarding the 1945-1964 Period] (1979) developed strong criticisms of the elitist institutions of 1945-1964 and the ineffectuality of the left wing, represented by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) of that period. In this work, Weffort emphasized the importance of workers for the strengthening of democracy and its institutions. With the phrase "There is no independent workers' movement without democracy and there is no democracy without an independent workers' movement" (Weffort, 1979: 7), Weffort reaffirmed his criticism of corporative syndicalism and of the elitist character of PCB, which was typical in its populist period. He examined the re-democratization process, which took place in 1946, and argued that it had left more orphans than heirs, since it had instituted a formal democratic process, but not one rooted in the Brazilian political culture. He asked, what after 1945, would re-democratization mean for the the Brazilian left? Would it continue to act as an "enlightened conscience" of the workers' movement, or would it embrace the whole people democratically?

The book "Direito, Cidadania e Participação" [Right, Citizenship and Participation] (1981) – organized by Weffort, Benevides and Lamounier – was a compilation of works presented in the 1º Seminário de Direito, Cidadania e Participação [1st Seminar on Right, Citizenship and Participation], which was organized by CEDEC and CEBRAP in 1979. Those intellectuals feared a type of democracy that would surpass the merely instrumental political character of the democracy forged in the historical past by oligarchic elites. The meeting was sponsored by the Order of Attorneys of Brazil (OAB), the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research

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in Social Sciences (ANPOCS) and the Ford Foundation. In addition, it was attended by academics and important actors in politics and economics. That first set of articles and discussions addressed topics such as the need for a real movement for democratization in different spheres of society, the processes of economic development through state mediation, political and social rights, citizenship, socioeconomic inequality, and social and political justice in state decision-making processes.

By 1981 the seminar had clearly demonstrated a concern with citizenship and the integration of the people into the political sphere. In addition, it developed a critique of the authoritarianism characteristic of the political culture in the country, embedded during the period of military rule, and fueling demands for re-democratization.

“*Incertezas da Transição na América Latina*” [Transition Uncertainties in Latin America] (1988) was written a year before the first direct election for president after the military dictatorship. Weffort was still PT's general secretary, warning of the ghosts that surrounded Latin American democratic transitions. Weffort evaluated the possibilities for regression after this political advance, and pointed to the fact that disenchantment with democracy was related not only to the problem of social participation, but also to the actual consolidation of a genuinely democratic regime, such as in Brazil and Argentina. In Weffort's words, “In Latin America the question of participation in democracy calls into question the possibility of democracy itself” (Weffort, 1988: 2). In that work, he still emphasized the possibility of coexistence between socialism and democracy. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, together with his disappointments over the PT's main political orientation, perhaps explains how his viewpoint changed about three years later.

In “*América Errada*” [Latin America is Wrong] (1990), Weffort addressed the relationship between the advance of democracy over the period 1980 to 1990, and the social and economic crises experienced during that time, questioning whether the mere existence of democracy would be enough to bring the country into “modernity”. Although Latin America had been “saved” by processes of socio-economic democratization, everything had come out “twisted”, as opposed to what Latin Americans would have considered normal, since the strongest link between the countries of the region and the modernized world remained external debt. Between 1950 and 1960 debt repayment obligations had caused setbacks in the painful import substitution processes attempted by the state, so Brazil and some other Latin American countries were once again transformed into essentially agricultural exporters. Weffort wrote that Latin America had lost its “place in the world” during the technological revolution, which had allowed technologically advanced countries to gain an advantage in the production of raw materials, previously exported by underdeveloped/peripheral countries.

Weffort warned of the dangers that Latin American countries, coming into modernity, would face as they attempted to strengthen democracy on the continent. In that situation he also feared a resurgence of authoritarianism. For that reason, he described Latin America as “wrong” in this article: compartmentalized in obsolete national states, introverted among themselves, and marginalized in relation to the international context. He questioned whether Latin American democracy would be doomed to decay, given the possibility for chaos and regional disintegration.

In Weffort's view, any strengthening of democracy depended on its capacity to face the challenges imposed by economy and society, otherwise that achievement

would be threatened. He also pointed out that the situation of anomie* experienced by Latin America – crises of governance, super-inflation in some states, increasing inequality, increasing violence – did not contribute in any way to political advances. On the contrary, it provided space for disasters, that is, violence and extremism in politics and society.

In the article “Democracia Política e Desenvolvimento” [Political Democracy and Economic Development] (1991), Weffort diagnosed the difficulties Brazil was going through in relation to democratic rule and the economy. He addressed the problems that an economic crisis would bring to the process of strengthening democratic institutions in a country that had only recently emerged from military dictatorship. He pointed to various causes for this political-economic crisis, among them the difficulty for Brazil in positioning itself transnationally when competing with international economic powers. In addition, he cited the exhaustion of the economic growth model, as supported by state intervention, and the state's inability to control inflation and currency exchange rates, among other failures.

At the political level, he pointed to disbelief, rooted in the difficulties of governance, and to the inefficiencies of political parties in fulfilling their essential functions. This was a work of conjunctural analysis, articulating the relationship between economic crisis and democratic rule, questioning whether the crisis would be a “cause or consequence”, and proposing solutions: mass participation in decision-making processes, integrating Latin America into the world economic plan, and reconfiguring its position in relation to stronger economies.

In an article “Por que Democracia?” [Why Democracy?] (1984), in his second set of works, Weffort presented the concept of democracy as a universal value, endorsing Carlos Nelson Coutinho's idea of democracy, taken from his essay of the same title published in 1979. Carlos Nelson Coutinho's text, which in 1979 opened the discussion on the theory of “democratic socialism” in Brazil derived from the Eurocommunist view and was a turning point in the renewal of the Brazilian Communist Party. It had a strong influence on formulations by Weffort, by the research group accompanying him, and on the theoretical formulations of the PT – of which he became a member in 1989, but with which he already had conversations since its foundation ten years earlier. This text is perhaps the high point in representing the dilemma of the intellectuals of the time when thinking about the paradoxical relationship between socialism and democracy. This was a clear expression of the historical and political impasse experienced, at that time, by intellectuals divided between ideas and politics.

According to Weffort, democracy is not a simple instrument of power, as practiced by oligarchic elites during the conservative transition to the former republic. What Weffort tried to make clear in this present situation was the form that democracy should assume in Brazil. According to him, “A value that belongs to everyone, a space for achievement of human dignity that cannot be given up” (Weffort, 1984: 61-62). For Weffort democracy is a value in itself, surpassing any merely instrumental character.

Democracy, according to Weffort, should be founded on the notion of giving rights and citizen status to individuals in an absolute way. Thus, inequality and economic-social polarization, which excluded many from culture, would instead be a spur to their achievement. The existing abyss between elites and the least-privileged groups precludes democracy as a general value, he argued. Therefore, in that sense,

* Expression used by Weffort in this work.

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society would be compelled to overcome those obstacles in order to achieve a new political and social order founded on a democratic basis.

In addition to Weffort's theoretical efforts, this work was almost an "official document" because he had taken on the position of general secretary of the PT exactly one year before the publication of the book. According to Weffort, "This book is an argument for democracy in Brazil. ... And I hope it fulfills a political function and stimulates discussions on democracy" (Weffort, 1984: 9). In addition to supporting democracy with theoretical arguments, the book addressed the authoritarian tradition in Brazilian politics, the fragility of Brazilian democracy from 1945 to 1964, the dilemmas of post-1964 democratic transition, the ideological and state traditions preceding conservative transitions, and the role of the working class in political and social transformations.

In the work "Qual Democracia?" [Which Democracy?] (1992), Weffort gathered together a series of essays. In the article "Democracia e Socialismo" [Democracy and Socialism], unpublished at the time, he presented a review of the post-1989 socialism vs democracy paradigm in Brazil and in the wider world. He again promoted his understanding of democracy as a value in itself, as a method of social constitution, and as an instrument of representation. Weffort also brought up – notably in 1992 – the possibilities for coexistence between political freedom and the market, in other words, between democracy and capitalism.

In that text there is a change in Weffort's interpretative framework. Unlike his thinking in 1984, Weffort recognized the impossibility of socialism, or at least the difficulties involved in democratizing it while recognizing market freedom, democratic rule, and economic development. Weffort refers to Eduard Bernstein's concept of "moving" rather than "reaching an end", and he recognized that the journey itself – in the case of the political left – would be more important than the endpoint.

Conclusion

It seems that after this moment – added to his disappointments over PT, his withdrawal from the central core of the party, his moving to the USA in 1989, and then experiencing the fall of the Berlin Wall, all in the same year, Weffort "resigned" from active engagement and changed his way of "journeying" towards the socialist horizon, both in his political and his academic life. It is not by chance that he joined the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) in 1994, and that he reconciled himself to the Brazilian cultural political and historical traditions after that period. Ultimately he included socialism in his work as a horizon to be reached by the "traveller" – relevant, but utopian. In that analysis, socialism refers more to justice and social equity than to a political-economic governance, as it had in most of his pre-1989 texts.

From that point Weffort defended a radicalized democracy, one that did not resolve the rulers vs ruled paradox, but was able to move towards a horizon of self-management. That was his idea of "democratic socialism". In Weffort's words this was "... a huge effort towards political democracy and civil society institutions, especially the improvement and growth of social and political institutions linked to the labor world" (Weffort, 1992: 151).

To some extent Weffort was responsible for the reinforcement of the PT's "political imaginary" by constructing an ideological and theoretical democratic basis. In the context of the dissolution of Soviet rule, and his advocacy of democratic openness, socialism was giving way to the question of democracy in Brazil. Thus democracy was

no longer understood by Weffort, and by some intellectuals in his group, as a mere instrument of transition to socialist rule. It became an end in itself and a *sine qua non* for the improvement of political culture and institutions.

Weffort's "Por que Democracia?" [Why Democracy?], written in 1984, was a milestone, a clear attempt to resolve the paradox between democracy and socialism. That text – which, as mentioned, was written when he took over as general secretary of the PT – provided an accurate account of the Workers' Party at the time: a political association, with a socialist ideological orientation, trying to fit itself into the context of re-democratization and the realignment of political forces, given the ideological polarization of the Cold War.

The article "Democracia e Socialismo" [Democracy and Socialism], published in the book "*Qual Democracia?*" [Which Democracy?] (1992), can be interpreted as a justification, an *ex-post facto* explanation of the challenges that the PT had to face in the new national and international scenario: democratization in culture and society, direct elections for president in 1991, changes in the PT's political guidelines, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "defeat" of Soviet rule, liberalization of world markets, among other factors. It is in this sense that we interpret the works on democracy that Weffort wrote between 1980 and 1990 as a reasonably accurate picture of the period: a substantial change in the "ideological" course of the left in Brazil that cast "socialism" aside in pursuit of "democracy".

We affirm that Weffort's work focuses on interpreting Brazil: it identifies national domestic problems, as well as factors that prevent Brazil from being a strong nation in the international context. As Arruda (2003) states, Weffort's lively thought and his political trajectory inaugurated a well-defined cultural policy, marking him as someone who promoted a "remarkable transformation". (Arruda, 2003: 180).

From the projects developed at USP, CEBRAP and CEDEC, we can see that Weffort was eager to consolidate democratic political thought so that it addressed cultural and social processes. Thus, his interpretation of Brazilian politics in the 1980's/1990's still serves as a basis for interpreting the current political scene, if we follow his distinction between the right and the left. Weffort has left a legacy for future generations, who will confront similar issues with similar sentiments.

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Article Info

Received: March 30 2021

Accepted: April 09 2021
