

# The Meaning Of Democracy Among Working Class People<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

This paper has two objectives: first to analyze workers' interpretations of the functioning of the Argentine democracy; and second, to discuss a methodology that tries to capture working class beliefs and feelings. We shall pay special attention to the wording of the basic questions used to conduct the conversations, the selection of people to be interviewed, and the strategy to represent people's ideas.

The analysis is based on 39 open-ended interviews with a purposeful sample of working class people. During the interview, people freely spoke about two questions: first, their descriptions and interpretations of the Argentine social, economic and political problems and second, their ideas about the working of democracy and their expectations about the future. We try to recover their ideals of democracy and their theories that explain the present Argentine political and economic reality.

**Key words:** *democracy / working class / actors' perspective / witnesses' reflection*

## **Introduction**

Going to the polls, and having the chance of being elected or of choosing candidates for elected offices, are all basic conditions for democracy that have not always existed in the Argentine. Since 1983 people have enjoyed these privileges; nevertheless, its actual operation has frequently been questioned. Numerous sociological and political studies have focused their analyses on the institutional and individual conditions of the working of democracy and on the transition from dictatorship to democracy (Boron, 1999; Nun, 2001; Nun & Portantiero, 1987; O' Donnell, 2000, 1996; Pucciarelli, 2000). In this paper we will not follow this line of inquiry; we are not concerned with knowing whether there is actually a democracy in Argentina or with investigating whether the democratic institutions work effectively. Our objective is to represent the ideas, beliefs and feelings of a group of working class people about the working of democracy in our country. With this purpose in mind, two guiding questions were included in an open semi-structured interview with an intentional sample of 39 working class people, both men and women ages between 18 and 65. First: here in the Argentine, do we live in democracy? and second: Why do you think so? The majority answered "*Yes...but*". Very few dared say a definitive "*No*".

In the following pages we will try to reconstruct, using our interviewees' words, their ideas about living in democracy and their description of this democracy. That is, in people's interpretations: what have we eventually achieved as a democracy?

People's interpretations of democracy should be seen in their historical context. Very briefly, we must say that the Argentine has a tumultuous history, full of contradictions and a great deal of frustrated hopes. Elected governments have alternated with military dictatorships. Since December 1983 citizens have been able to choose their governments in free elections. In these twenty-two years the model of economic development turned up side down, from an import substitution model of industrialization based on a strong state participation (all basic

activities were state-owned) towards a free market economy, from nearly full employment to high unemployment (very young and mature and old people are the most affected).

### **What do we represent as people's meaning of democracy?**

As we have already said, people's interpretations of democracy have to be seen in their historical context and taking into consideration the actual present situation of the working class (Powers, 2001; Sautu, 2004a). We are not interested in subjective meanings but in shared interpretations or common responses, significations and in general interpretations or representations of issues (Maines, 2000). Our question is whether we will be able to approach it with a minimum of distortion of people's thoughts. In order to be as true as possible to our interviewees' interpretations we followed a series of steps, which are designed to control our own feelings, ideologies and inclinations.

First, we designed our research as a collective work: many people participated in the study from the design and testing of the basic guiding questions to the realization of interviews and their analysis.

Second, once the basic conditions for the selection of cases was established, members of the research team and sociology students organized the field work and carried out open interviews guided by a minimum of orienting questions (the interview included our own issues and a few questions related to people's interpretation of corruption). The fieldwork took place in October 2004.

Third, all interviews were tape recorded and verbatim transcribed. All these verbatim transcriptions were systematized, using an Atlas-t program for qualitative analysis, in as many content categories as they appeared in the text. To begin with, the research team divided the interviews among its members, who individually began the task of systematization and category construction. Subsequently, all the categories were collectively re-analyzed and a

new unified system of categorization applied to systematize all the verbatim texts (Boyatzis, 1998).

Fourth, all the transcriptions were treated as a unique text. Once the full text was systematized using that unified system of categories, the texts of all these analytic categories were pulled together into several grand categories created around the core issues contained in the texts. We drew as many grand categories as the material rendered (Dey, 1998). This set of grand categories containing diverse issues was analyzed by the authors of this paper so that each one would carry out an independent reconstruction of the interviewees' thoughts. These various representations were discussed by the research team and an agreement was reached about people's meaning of democracy, their feelings and expectations about the working of this system in our country. In this paper people's words are identified by the numbers of the interview and the paragraph.

Fifth, the joint research team (those who analyzed democracy and the authors of the paper on corruption, Boniolo & Elbert, 2005) made a selection of transcripts of our interviewees' answers and interviewed separately three working class persons. The selected texts were read slowly and simultaneously shown to our interviewees (witnesses). We requested their comments to each text; their answers were tape recorded and verbatim transcribed. A preliminary analysis of this experience is presented in the conclusion. A follow up to this study will be to carry out a pair of focus groups using as the discussion issues the short transcripts selected for this test of our representation of people's ideas of democracy.

### **Yes, we live in a democracy...but**

*‘Yes, indeed, I believe, that we live in democracy, but, some people live...( a silence) they are able to live more in democracy than others’ (I. 40/1).*

In the interpretation of working class people the idea of living in democracy is a relative one. Democracy may be enjoyed under certain social and economic conditions. Each person defines democracy and the possibilities that democracy brings about compared to dictatorship (or any other socio-political regime) according to her/his own personal experience and the expectations deposited upon democracy.

Most of the people interviewed believe that democracy is limited for a variety of reasons, either because it means exclusively an opportunity to vote or because democracy guarantees neither equality nor equity. *‘Well, if you vote this ( a candidate), vote this..., but your decision stands for the moment you are at the polls. Even under the pressure of somebody when you go to the polls...you go...and the freedom to choose is yours’ (I. 3/2).* This opinion shows a conception of freedom that is present in several of the testimonies gathered in our interviews. That is, many people conceive of freedom as a personal freedom to do whatever they like in spite of pressures. *‘Democracy? The obvious thing, I do not know...I say at the election polls one decides who to vote...I do not know I think that one is free to do and undo according to one’s personal beliefs’ (I. 33/1).* *‘We are all free, in fact....hum... but ...well to do whatever I wish; to do what I want...well it has its limits ...I do not believe that anybody would be able to force me...if he says do this I do not care...personally I think we live in democracy’ (I. 20/1).*

Nevertheless, many do not seem to be so sure of the existence of a complete personal autonomy because politicians *“...use people, perhaps not so much in the Federal District but in the Province! (of Buenos Aires) my father lives in (a neighborhood dominated by a political chieftain) and there there is no pavement. During the elections politicians come and offer everything, including a monthly allowance of \$ 150 (US\$ 50) just to get us on a bus and*

*participate in a (name of politician) rally. I do not know...but some people cannot refuse the offer because they have five, six kids to feed and need the money, you see? Each month they go to get a bag with food, powder milk, bread...just for the vote. I do not believe much in those things (referring to the polls & democracy)” (I. 23/6).*

The vision of democracy is limited; even among those who affirm that we lived in democracy, their answers show a conception of freedom as a personal liberation from constraints; or just freedom of speech (I 17/20) or the possibility to choose an education (I 22/22).

All opinions are tinted with doubts. People want democracy but they do not see it as an ideal system of coexistence. Even among some positive answers, preoccupation with personal safety or fear of unemployment emerge. *‘I would say...yes we are in democracy or perhaps not so much, not completely as we would like because of robbery...I do not know...not to be able to go out to the street or you can not be relaxed, but I do not know I believe we live in democracy. Perhaps not so much as we may wish but it is ok.” (I. 3/1). ‘Yes, yes (we live in democracy)...hum...murders...robberies...I think I do not know...in my own way there is a democracy” (I. 9/1).* In the speech the association between democracy and insecurity is very frequent.

Sometimes the researcher has the feeling that the interviewee wants to satisfy what he thinks it is the expected answer. After long periods of dictatorship, the government’s, the press’, the intellectual opinions are all in favor of a democratic rule. This atmosphere certainly influences people’s answers. They do not say *‘no”* (there is no democracy) instead they state yes...conditional. *‘Well I do not know, you see, what I want to say is that with all the situation we are now going through you see...and what I have lived, perhaps I experienced bad things on the one hand and also good things (on the other hand) because economically life was better you understand? Before you could make a living...now everything costs a bit more and with all that is going on and we have to bear...it frightens you, it frightens you, it frightens*

*you very very much because one cannot go out...and if one does not go out, one is at home fearing that anything may happen to you...anything” (I. 39/12).*

The statement *“yes, democracy yes; we live in democracy...but”* shows doubts, particularly what emerges once and again is their preoccupation with insecurity in the streets, even at home, and they yearn for the good times of the past (under president Menem) when *“one could find a job...I do not know...I had my money and was able to save one peso and was able to buy my own home...Perhaps at that time one was blind, as one could do whatever one wanted one did not see what we had at the top (refers to the government) and today one regrets ...” (I. 4/9).*

Those working class interviewees who express conformity with democracy in Argentina do not seem to be totally convinced of its advantages. This is a big difference with the middle class. In a study conducted three years ago among participants of middle class street demonstrations, the majority believed in democracy. They were very critical of politics and of the economic situation and many strongly criticized the neoliberal policies of the nineties, but in spite of all its drawbacks the majority believed in democracy (Sautu, 2004b).

### **I want to live in peace and have a good job**

Delinquency, untrust of corrupt authorities and fear fuel the feeling that after all *“we are not living in a complete democracy because we have to adapt ourselves to the wishes of those who are at the top” (I. 4/4)* He changed his opinions along the interview from a *“yes”* towards a *“not completely”*. Doubts about whether we actually live in a democracy are present in several other answers. *“Look I do not believe that we live in a democracy because of how the situation is today. A democracy means to be free and live in peace, but as things go on anything may be done. You see, children have no respect, kidnappings, that is too much. Too much freedom....democracy is one thing and freedom is a thing of two (he means*

it has to be shared by two people) *I think that people are too elevated of rhythm (he means excited) because of the lack of money and all those things...* (I. 2/1) *‘If we respect each other a bit more...perhaps we would be able to live in democracy. Here (referring to our country) we confused a lot what democracy is; what freedom means...confused freedom with licentiousness. If there is no respect...there is no democracy’* (I. 26/1).

That is, widespread delinquency invalidates democracy because *‘In democracy you can go out freely without fear of repression at all, without having...of course...recently I worry, no? I have...I think that everybody may be going through the same experience as me. I have three children, they go out for fun at the weekend to mess around, to dance....and in the meanwhile I am not in peace because I do not know whether they will be back home or....if the telephone rings, I get up desperate at dawn, at any time (his voice gets loud showing anguish). The things that happen, because, no, they are not choosing people for kidnapping say for example, they are nor choosing people...(he means they are not choosing exclusively wealthy people)...not only kidnappings. Everybody gets crazy for any (asshole) trick...for two pesos or for change (money) they shoot you down, yes I am worried and live awfully. That is’* (I. 15/1).

In several opinions democracy and community safety are assimilated. *‘Depends on what one calls democracy, because if democracy is what we are living now, that is a discontrol, a lack of safety such that everybody does what she/he likes...then...’* (I. 23/2). *‘With a democracy and delinquency such that we do not know whether we will back at home I guess that this is not democracy...I would like we all to go out from our home and have the security that we will see our sons or that somebody will not steal my bicycle which I use to come to my job ’* (I. 28/1-2).

Some people are annoyed with injustice *‘Why is there no democracy? Things are done for those who have money or acquaintances (in power). Things are not done for the middle or the*

*working class*” (I. 37/1). Widespread corruption in the elites is one of the explanations people offer to justify their refusal of the present working of democracy in Argentina. They believe *“The country is full of thieves”* (I. 38/9) *“I think there are no politicians who are honest to people...for this reason I do not believe that there is a democracy”* (I. 24/1). Distrust of politicians, judges and policemen (I. 23/8) along with what people evaluate as unbearable levels of delinquency, make up the background of their opinions. In addition, unemployment and economic insecurity make up an explosive combination that supports pessimistic interpretations of democracy. Against any test of reality, people’s imagination has given form to the idea that the Argentine is a rich country: *“It is ashamed that in a country where food is still wasted, we have to live like in (he mentioned two countries), ...with wealth and only 37 million inhabitants there is a starving population. This is very unfair...There corruption is shown. Unemployment has brought about a series of consequences...fear, distrust. To be walking by the streets is risky, because of kidnapping and police corruption. Nobody trusts the authorities...so many young people die in the streets by the quick gun (gatillo fácil)!...so many young people beaten (by the police)!”* (I. 1/11). In people’s eyes fear, distrust and economic worries attempt against the quality of democracy. *“We live in democracy but I do not feel as if we were living in a democracy, because of corruption because of the absence of justice that prevails in our country. Nobody protects you”* (I.13/1). *“Yes, I think yes, we live in democracy because I also lived in times of dictatorship...but...that is...as if....there are things that should be ...hum ....of paramount importance, like safety and labor, mainly labor, no? We should have this type of things (stuttering) the truth we are with a hand in front and the other behind (meaning naked).This is terrible”* (I.12/1).

In addition to unemployment and insecurity some testimonies stress *“lack of respect”* . *“School is not like in the old times..children were taught respect. Now the first thing you see*

*are drugs and violence. You cannot trust, be relax when you send your child to school. Schools deteriorated with teachers' strikes, with democracy..."* (I. 6/13).

### **After all democracy is better than dictatorship**

With all the complaints about the working of democracy, the researcher is tempted to believe that some people may be missing the times when the Armed Forces were in power. The rate of unemployment was low and Argentina was a safe country. It was a dangerous country for the young, or students who were militants, or people who had different ideas or disagreed with the government. Perhaps those past experiences explain that in spite of all criticism people do not seem to be thinking of a return of the Armed Forces. Exceptionally, and in a subtle way, some interviewees dare affirm that we were better off under dictatorship. Most answers show a consciousness about our past history. Recalling the past *"you see, as you know, many people disappeared. It was horrible. I prefer to be as we are now bah!... Were taken from their homes and never appeared again ...I never care about politics... now I think... I do not now...you see I prefer this, what we are living now and not everything that happened in the past "* (I. 39/1). Even so the interviewee thinks that economically life was better off in the past.

In the balance, most interviewees privileged democracy. *'Freedom of speech and the fact that there is no political persecution... I do not know... well all of us lived a very dreadful period. For us it is very important to be able to live, to speak freely, even with economic limitations, ehh!'"*(I. 21/3). In the past under dictatorship *"people comment that we did not have democracy"* (I. 7/2). As a balance, most interviewees preferred our present democracy...under protest. Exceptionally some people dared say that *"it is better to live under dictatorship, because I think that those who robes or murder should be executed (be directly killed)"* (I. 9/3).

The opposition between dictatorship and democracy, this democracy that we have, is a dilemma for many interviewees. Some, the majority, prefers this democracy; the one that at present exists in Argentina. *“Well in democracy you are still able to express yourself... well say there exists that freedom, say...there is no persecution, eh! That is...I do not know...that, that existed in the times of dictatorship; the deaths of innocent ones, of innocent people... that is everything that makes me think that we live in democracy, no?”* (I. 12/2). *“Even if times are hard... now we have freedom although we are going through very difficult times with an unsafe situation, but... well how to say it...we are not so pressed as in the times of the military. So I tell you yes I think we are in democracy. It is a hard time but still we are in democracy”* (I. 14/1).

There are voices of dissent in an atmosphere of resignation with what the Argentine have achieved as democracy *“At a formal level, yes. In practice no. Because democracy means a government elected by the people. Well we have chosen our representatives. What we have to choose, is not much, it is not bearable. There are no new proposals for change. Unfortunately we always end up with the same politicians”* (I. 22/1).

The most controversial opinions reject the bourgeois democracy. *“To me the bourgeois democracy has always been a covered dictatorship. Moreover, it can be seen today with unemployment; people who go to jail just for demanding a job. What else? I see the people violent; with a violence characteristic of the situation we are going through, because there are families that support themselves with a peso (U\$S .33 cents) daily. This is impossible; it is to condemn them to death”* (I. 1/8).

Resignation with what the Argentines have achieved as a democracy seems the best summary of people's feelings. In spite of those feelings, compared to dictatorship people choose this democracy.

**Democracy for whom?**

Democracy is a system based on the principles of equality of rights, opportunity, and treatment; principles that are sustained by people 's exercise of the ruling power either directly or through elected representatives (Webster 1980:375). This is a classic definition of democracy and of a democratic country which includes the construction of a space of political participation and the guarantee of the satisfaction of basic social, economic and personal human needs.

Democracy or dictatorship is lived by people. Their subjective and collective meanings depend on their experiences as members of collectivities, groups and social classes; these meanings of democracy are rooted in the theories they built up around their own interpretations of those experiences.

In a study conducted among middle class people of Buenos Aires (Sautu et. al. 2005) democracy was defined following three different arguments. First, in formal terms, democracy was associated to the chance of going to the polls and voting one 's own candidates. Second, in addition to going to the polls, democracy meant the actual working of justice, equality of educational and labor opportunities and its consequence, social and economic equity. Finally, democracy was rejected because it was at the service of capitalism. The absolute majority of our middle class interviewees believed in democracy as a legitimate system of co-existence (includes the first and second type of answers) but they complained about the poor working of democratic institutions in the Argentine and the social problems. None of our working class interviewees is fully convinced about the existence of a true democracy in Argentina. At best, one finds those answers that state 'yes we lived in democracy...but'. Their personal preoccupation is with employment and safety and a general hope of a better future.

First of all, democracy has to guarantee access to full employment. References do not insist so much on income as on the human right to a job; I hope *“that the present system changes; there must be labor opportunities; people must be able to earn a living with dignity, and their children go to school. As it should be”* (13/36). Democracy, labor and dignity (self respect) are a trilogy present in many of the interpretations of democracy. Moreover, as we have seen in the minds of many people delinquency and insecurity are a consequence of unemployment and low miserable wages. People who are afraid of their personal safety and that of their children have a restricted vision of democracy. In some extreme opinions democracy is blamed because under democracy freedom has been transformed into licentiousness (disregard of rules and moral standards).

The value of health and education are explicitly present in the majority of answers, these are two basic rights that in people’s expectations must be guaranteed by democracy. *“That my children have an education and health”* (I. 14/3) *“That our children may go to school”* (I. 18/5) *“That our children and grand children be able to study, to be in good health”*(I. 23/21). These hopes are repeated once and again. People want a job, which grants them self-respect (dignity); people look at the future and bestow their expectations on their children. These expectations demand a change in society *“in general terms I hope that everything will be a bit more fair, that the ideas of the human being will begin to clear up...; little by little there must be a unification of criteria about freedom, social welfare...all that, that is human”* (22/22). *“I want to live better, a little better”* (14/17). An idea penetrates some testimonies: democracy is an asset of restricted access. The workers believe that we do not have a full democracy because society is divided. Inequality is seen as an obstacle for the development of democracy as it allows only few people to enjoy freedom while the majority live in poverty. *“I think that there is democracy for only a few, a few who live well while the great majority live badly and this is getting worse, one chooses nothing, everything is predetermined. They live in*

*democracy because they have the saucepan by the handle, live well and do not have problems of survival, then this system allows them to live free, with equality, among equals, while unemployment increases and precarization increases. There are no possibilities...or I do not see that they try to change things. It is not convenient for them...they do not want, are not interested but neither are they able to change things much. That is, it is not that they cannot...it is, no? that they do not want, this system is perverse that makes...things like that, that they live well and in opposition to the large majority of people...they live well in private neighborhoods so that they are able to avoid seeing the poor, seeing them as occasionally as it is possible. They have their own schools, their own shopping, they go private. Democracy for them is the possibility of having their own governments or governments which defend their interests, there are deals between power groups...Distribution is inequality unequal, they increment their benefits against poor people” (I. 32/2)*

Yearning for a better past emerges sometimes like a dream, because their elders recalled the past or because they themselves have known it. Some workers made a sociohistorical evaluation of democracy. Most remembered the first and second governments of Perón (1946-1955). Their interpretations of this past political experience are also related to these ideas. Working people value either the possibility of having a good job or the security. *“When Peron lived...yes we lived in democracy and everybody was employed” (I. 2/3). “There were jobs, people left home to go to their jobs. There was insecurity, but not like nowadays. There were neither people walking around without a job nor people thrashing in the streets (cartoneando).. I think that people lived quietly” (I. 8/7). “Yes...there was democracy when I was young. It was a different historical moment, there used to be employment, my parents had a good job. We lived well, women did not need to leave home to find a job like nowadays, do you understand me? They could stay at home taking care of children...but now is constant a fight against each other...I do not see. You could walk safely in the streets, nobody stole your*

*things...We lived better than nowadays” (I. 13/3). “Working people enjoyed for what they produced, we had rights...Moreover the working class had also the possibility to go to the university...” (I. 1/4).*

Expectations of change are very strong. Changes in the political system required *‘non corrupted judges, non corrupted politicians, non corrupted policemen” (23/23)*. People expect changes in social conditions and in the opportunities of self-progress and access to basic rights. The careful reading of all the testimonies gathered during this study do not indicate that people are optimistic about their present or their future; on the contrary, the atmosphere of all the answers is extremely dubious, even in some cases cynical *“I would not expect anything from democracy” (I. 22/9)*.

What sort of representations of working class ideas and feelings are constructed from their testimonies? We are doing a patchwork pulling together arguments of persons with diverse individual trajectories assuming that they shared life experiences and therefore some core interpretations of those experiences. Applying a thematic analytic strategy we endeavor to discover lines of thought, interpretations of the social, economic and political situation of our country born in the minds of the interviewees. This re-constructed vision of democracy of course may be tinted with our own vision as observers. Multiplying the number of testimonies and the number of observers we expected to reach with our analysis a representation of people’s ideas as complete as possible.

In order to improve our confidence in our own representations of the meaning of democracy we selected some people, low class individuals to tell us what those transcripts meant to them. Those interviews were verbatim transcribed and a tentative analysis was carried out with the intention in the future of going profoundly into their analysis. We intend to design two focus groups in order to see whether collective discussions of the transcripts render similar representations of the meaning of democracy and of corrupt practices.

Very briefly, in a preliminary analysis of our three-witnesses' interviews we find: First, our interpretation that interviewees have reservations about the actual working and the benefits of democracy is correct. Even in their affirmative answers they showed their doubts.

Second, all the testimonies are critical; some of them only reflect specific grievances against democracy, particularly when safety in the streets is concerned. Others questioned democracy in a more general way disbelieving of its benefits.

Third, witnesses effectively confirmed our idea about the central importance people attached to health, education, and safety. Democracy should provide all these social goods. After all, democracy should guarantee respect for everybody disregarding his or her economic and social position.

Fourth, working class people in their interviews do not seem to be involved in the matters under discussion. Witnesses pointed out to a sort of detachment from the issues presented in our interviews. This was an aspect of our reconstructions that we, the observers, failed to discover.

Finally, in a very subtle way some people contrasted their experiences under dictatorship and under democracy. Here we sensed that many of them accepted democracy after all because of the abuses committed during the military government. Our witnesses were more categorical. They interpreted people's words as recognition that in certain aspects they felt that they were better off because of safety in the streets.

Observers that belong to the middle classes, either from their own personal experience or that of their parents, friends and colleagues reject anything that may even sound positive when the military dictatorship is concerned. Here we recognized that the effect of the media on our interviewees' testimonies must have been present. We thought that when people remembered dictatorship they accepted even reluctantly democracy. Perhaps some working class people privilege safety to political freedom or going to the polls. Who knows?

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