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Democracy and Civil Society in Latin America and the Caribbean in a Time of Change

Bernardo Toro is a Colombian philosopher and educator, one of the most important thinkers on education and democracy in Latin America. He studied Philosophy and Physics and Mathematics, in undergraduate courses. He has a postgraduate degree in Research and Educational Technology.

Bernardo Toro's keynote address

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Toro's address included, as a departure point, the definition of what he calls the **principles of democracy**, among them: secularity; self-foundation; uncertainty; ethics; complexity; the public sphere. These principles are to be built by all citizens and a democratic society accepts and acknowledges that the social order is built by all citizens, who are the sources of that order. Democracy is a decision of society, and laws and norms are constructed or transformed by the very people who will live, fulfill and protect them. This means that democracy is the space of freedom, since it is only possible when it results from the mutual agreement to fulfill and respect a free decision and collective agreement.

Toro alerted about the lack of an ideal model of democracy and the responsibility of citizens and society to create its own democratic order. Democracy is an everyday construction, a way of seeing, interpreting and ordering the world. It is possible to learn from the experience of other societies, but it is up to each society to build its own democratic order based on its history, its knowledge, its tradition and its memory; from what it is, what it has and how it is able to project itself. Although there is no ideal model of democracy, all democratic order is oriented to make Human Rights possible and to care for and protect life. Democracy is the project of human dignity. Respect for Human Rights should not be understood as a norm but as a way of living and a way of being; as criteria that lead to always choose what is right for the dignified life of all.

At the same time, conflict, diversity and difference are elements of democratic coexistence. Democracy is inclusive of all interests. For democracy, peace is not the absence of conflicts; peace is the result of a society that is capable of accepting rules to settle the conflict without eliminating the other (neither physical, if sociological, nor psychologically), because in democracy there are no enemies, there are opponents; people who think differently, who want different, have different interests that can collide with mine, but with which I can arrange common futures.

Toro elaborated about the importance of the public sphere (*lo público*) in democratic societies. Public matters are to be built by civil society. The public sphere goes far beyond the state, but it does not ignore that the public institutions par excellence should be the State and the Laws, precisely because the strength of the public comes from its ability to synthesize and represent interests, contradictory or not, of all the secrets of society.

The social construction of the public sphere requires moving from private language to collective language, from private goods to collective goods, from private or corporate perspectives to national or collective perspectives.

According to Toro, a condition for democracy to be strong is that civil society is strong, and citizens have real ownership of institutions and specially of matters such as **education**. People have to define the kind of education they want for the future generations and a public education system will be robust and resilient if it is supported by all citizens in society (i.e. if we all put our children in public schools and not in private institutions). If we neglect institutions and the education of each generation in democratic matters, then we can destroy democracy. Unfortunately, there is no accumulation and each generation must be educated in democratic values and principles. Otherwise we risk that coming generations can destroy what previous generations constructed, instead of strengthening and expanding those pillars and achievements.
