Relativism: the silent threat to democracy

Ramón Cardozo Álvarez

The title of the most recent annual democracy report from the V-Dem Institute, 25 Years of Autocratization: Democracy Trumped?[1], is a clear warning sign. This report, published by the prestigious project at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, warns that the so-called "third wave of autocratization," underway since the beginning of the 21st century, shows no signs of slowing and has not yet reached its peak.

The data presented in V-Dem 2025 are striking: in 2010, 13 countries were undergoing autocratization; by 2020, the number had tripled to 34; and by 2024, it had risen to 45. For the first time in more than two decades, the world counts more autocracies (91) than democracies (88). Moreover, nearly three out of every four people on the planet (72%) now live under autocratic regimes —the highest level since 1978[2].

A vast body of specialized literature has documented multiple explanatory factors behind this global decline in democracy[3].

1 Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, & Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization–Democracy Trumped?,* University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2025.

2 Idem, pp. 6, 18.

3 Nancy Bermeo, "On democratic backsliding", *Journal of Democracy,* 2016, 27(1),5-19, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Among the most prominent are extreme polarization, political disaffection, the weakening of social capital, erosion of institutional trust, the rise of populist leaderships, and processes of autocratization within the democratic system.

There is, however, a factor embedded in the cultural background of several of these autocratizing dynamics whose effects, in our view, have not been sufficiently taken into account: the premise that no shared truths exist, only individual perspectives. This logic —now permeating both public discourse and political practice— is what we refer to here as "relativism."

This dimension of the problem has received little attention in studies on global democratic backsliding, partly because of the difficulty of operationalizing and empirically measuring relativism as a philosophical-normative category, and partly because of the modern tendency to develop political science and political philosophy as separate disciplines with limited spaces for dialogue.

This article offers a general approach to the problem of relativism as a silent threat to democracy. Its purpose is to show that this philosophical current operates as a background factor that significantly contributes to contemporary autocratizing dynamics. Ignoring this cultural and philosophical dimension leaves the diagnosis of democratic decline incomplete and limits the possibility of articulating a deeper political response. An additional objective is to serve as a resource for the training of political cadres, hence the pedagogical tone adopted.

Anna Lührmann, & Staffan I. Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?", *Democratization*, 2019, 26(7), 1095–1113.
Larry Diamond, "Democratic regression in comparative perspective: Scope, methods, and causes", *Democratization*, 2020, 28(1), 22–42, 2021.

1. The establishment of social order: a fundamental task of politics

Since classical philosophy, Aristotle affirmed that the human being, social by nature, possesses an intrinsic inclination toward transcendence: to move beyond oneself in order to know reality and relate to others. Only in living together with others can a person fully develop his or her capacities, both physical and spiritual. Life in community is indispensable for attaining a truly human existence.[4]

The need for such order arises from the multiplicity of interests and the inherent contingency of social life. Without an organizing principle to harmonize the diverse human actions and aspirations, the achievement of common ends —which justify the very existence of society— would be impossible.

For this reason, Caldera argues that the establishment and preservation of order is the fundamental task of politics: "To bring order to social life, not in everything but precisely in what we share in common —that is, what concerns existence itself, the preservation and development of society."[5]

2. The foundation of social order: a core of shared values

Social order cannot be sustained by force alone. Aristotle already emphasized, when discussing civic friendship, that what holds the polis together is not coercion, but a concord among citizens founded on a deep consensus regarding the ends of the community and the means to achieve them [6] In the same line,

4 Aristotle, *Política,* (M. G. Valdés, Trad.), Editorial Gredos, 1997.

5 Ídem, p. 7.

6 Aristotle, *Ética Nicomáquea,* (J. Palli , Trad.), Editorial Gredos, 1998.

Pope John XXIII asserts in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "a regime which governs solely or mainly by means of threats and intimidation or promises of reward, provides men with no effective incentive to work for the common good."[7]

Thus, for communal life to be possible, a core of shared values is necessary to give cohesion to society.[8] Without this common foundation, any political order is reduced to a forced coexistence, incapable over time of generating the bonds of unity and cohesion required to transcend particular interests, overcome internal tensions, and achieve the highest ends of the community.[9]

3. The true good of the human being

But what are these values that can and should be shared by all, and why do they deserve such recognition? This question leads us to the very heart of ethical reflection.

The classical tradition offers an illuminating answer. As Aristotle teaches in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the proper good of the human being consists in that which allows him or her to achieve their telos, or ultimate end, fully actualizing the potentials inherent in their rational, free, and social nature.[10] From this teleological perspective, the true goods of the human being are those that enable a person to bring out the best in themselves and attain their full flourishing.

---

7 Juan XXIII, *Pacem in terris,* Encyclical Letter, 1963, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jxxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html

8 Aristotle, *Política...* 1997, III, 1280b–1281ª.

9 Rafael Tomás Caldera, *El poder y la justicia para jóvenes políticos,* pp. 4-18.

10 Aristotle, *Ética Nicomáquea...*, EN, I, 7, 1097b.

The knowledge of human nature —the truth about what a human being is— thus becomes the key to identifying which goods are truly indispensable for the full development of one's capacities. If it is recognized that the human being is, by nature, rational, free, and social, it follows that their most precious goods must necessarily be connected to the cultivation of these essential dimensions.

From this anthropological premise, it becomes clear why certain values possess universal and objective validity and constitute the true goods of the human being. For example, human dignity emerges as a fundamental value for political coexistence, recognizing the intrinsic and inalienable worth of every person as a rational and free being; responsible freedom appears as an indispensable condition for moral perfection, for only through the free use of reason and will can a person attain their full potential; and justice and solidarity manifest as guiding principles of social relations, because human beings require frameworks that ensure equity and mutual support to achieve the common good.[11]

Ultimately, each of these values expresses the rational recognition of an objective good aimed at human perfection. Since they derive from human nature —that is, from the essential characteristics that define us as rational, free, and social beings— these values possess a universal character and present themselves as objective requirements for a person to achieve their full potential. It is precisely on this basis that the possibility of a common foundation for social life and of a legitimate and stable political order rests.

---

11 *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,* Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, nn. 160–163, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_sp.html

4. Relativism: the radical objection to truth and the true good

However, this conception of social order —grounded in the truth about human nature and its authentic goods— faces a fundamental challenge: relativism. This philosophical stance denies that universal truths exist concerning human nature and instead maintains that what we call the "true goods of the human being" are nothing more than variable, contingent cultural constructions, dependent on particular historical contexts.

Although the term "relativism" is of relatively recent coinage (19th century), positions and doctrines with traits akin to contemporary relativism date back to classical antiquity[12]. Protagoras, in the 5th century BCE, expressed his famous maxim, "Man is the measure of all things"[13],), anticipating the idea that truth depends on the individual perspective. At the beginning of the Modern Age, Michel de Montaigne continued this line of thought by emphasizing the influence of customs on the notion of truth. In "Of Cannibals", he warned that European judgments about the "barbaric" were conditioned by the Europeans' own cultural viewpoint.[14]

Later, the influence of skepticism[15] in 18th-century Enlightenment thought laid the groundwork for Friedrich Nietzsche, who radicalized this perspective by denying the existence of absolute

12 Maria Baghramian, "Relativism", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/relativism/

13 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 1993, 152a.

14 Michel de Montaigne, "The Cannibals" (original work published in 1580), in J. B. Brañes (Ed., Trad.), *Ensayos,* Acantilado, Barcelona, 2007.

15 An outlook that questions whether universal and definitive truths can ever be attained.

truth and asserting that "there are no facts, only interpretations."[16] In the 20th century, postmodern currents —led by Michel Foucault— conceived discourses of truth not as reflections of an objective reality, but as historical constructions inseparable from relations of power,[17]), while authors such as Thomas Kuhn extended relativism into the realm of science.[18]

After its impact on philosophy and the theory of science —with authors such as Thomas Kuhn, who extended relativism into the realm of scientific paradigms— these ideas also spread to other disciplines. For example, in cultural anthropology, relativism became a highly influential current: Franz Boas argued that culture constitutes the fundamental framework for understanding human beings and that all cultures have equal value within their own parameters.[19] Likewise, Melville Herskovits maintained that moral and truth judgments are determined by specific cultural contexts, thereby denying the existence of absolute universal moral norms or truths.[20]

In its contemporary manifestations, we can distinguish three main forms of relativism: epistemological, which denies the possibility of objective knowledge; moral, which rejects the universal validity of ethical norms; and cultural, which reduces truth and values to mere conventions specific to each society.

---

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Fragmentos póstumos,* Tecnos, Madrid, 2008, Vol. IV (1885-1889).

17 Michel Foucault, "Verdad y poder", in *Microfísica del poder* (J. V. Álvarez-Uría, Trad.) 1992.

18 Thomas Samuel Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* University of Chicago Press, 1962.

19 Franz Boas, *Race, language and culture,* The University of Chicago Press, 1940.

20 Melville Herskovits, *Man and his works: The science of cultural anthropology,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.

The fact that relativism manifests across such diverse fields of knowledge indicates its significant influence today. This breadth suggests that it is not merely a philosophical current, but a mind-set or cultural paradigm that has permeated broad sectors of contemporary society

In this context, it is relevant to examine how this stance has influenced the understanding of the political foundations of our societies, particularly concerning democracy —a topic we will address in the following section.

5. Relativism empties democracy of ethical content and reduces it to procedures

Through the works of authors such as the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen and the American philosopher Richard Rorty, relativism became prominent throughout the 20th century, shaping the very understanding of the foundations of modern democracy.

In his book On the Essence and Value of Democracy,[21] Kelsen begins with the fundamental premise that "truth and absolute values are inaccessible to human ."[22] Considering that pluralism is an inherent feature of modern democratic societies, he argues that democracy must value "everyone's political will equally."[23] This epistemological equality —derived from the impossibility of accessing absolute political truths— justifies democracy giving all opinions and political doctrines an identical opportunity to express themselves and compete freely.

---

21 Hans Kelsen, *Esencia y valor de la democracia,* (E. Labor, Ed., R. Luengo Tapia y L. Legaz y Lacambra, Trad.), Editorial Labor, 1934.

22 Idem, p. 156.

23 Idem, pp. 156-157.

From this perspective, the Austrian jurist argues that the most characteristic goods of a democracy —freedom of thought and of the press, tolerance, equal consideration of each individual's political will, protection of opposing minorities, and the organization of state order as a system of general norms— would be incompatible with any political system grounded in the belief in absolute goods and values.

Kelsen's reasoning is as follows: those who regard themselves as bearers of an absolute truth —valid for everyone— would have no rational incentive to submit it to the democratic process of deliberation and majority decision. Instead, they would inevitably tend to impose it authoritatively on those they see as mired in error. For this reason, the Austrian author concludes that "the idea of democracy thus presupposes relativism as its worldview."[24]

This relativist conception of democracy would, in the following decades, find a more radical development in the work of the American philosopher Richard Rorty.[25] From a pragmatic standpoint, he did not limit himself, as Kelsen did, to grounding democracy on the absence of absolute truths; rather, he went further, questioning the very notion of truth as correspondence between our judgments and an objective reality independent of us.[26]

In his book Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty proposed abandoning the search for ultimate foundations altogether and excluding the notion of truth from the public sphere. He argued that the attempt to establish absolute values and goods is not only

24 Idem, p. 156.

25 Richard Rorty, *Contingencia, ironía y solidaridad,* (A. E. Bixio, Trad.), Paidós, 1991.

26 Idem, p. 20.

impossible but incoherent.[27] Instead, he proposes a pragmatic conception of truth. For him, truth is simply what a community comes to agree upon through conversation and deliberation.[28]

According to Rorty, the values, institutions, and ways of life on which human coexistence rests are radically contingent. That is, they do not derive from universal truths about human nature or absolute moral principles, but are the contingent result of historical processes. This contingency does not mean that values were established arbitrarily or capriciously; rather, they have proven over time to be "useful" in creating societies that most of their members consider desirable places to live. Truth is not something to be discovered; it is something to be constructed.[29]

From this perspective, the American philosopher argues that democracy must be grounded in its utility. Democracy represents the best available tool for negotiating and reaching provisional, workable agreements within a pluralistic society marked by diverse interests and values, thereby enabling peaceful and prosperous coexistence.

Thus, for Rorty, democracy should rest solely on "tolerance" and "solidarity" as its new common creed. Personal convictions are to be kept within the private sphere, while in public life the essential requirement is to accept the contingency of every belief and the impossibility of accessing universal truths.[30] From his

27 According to Rorty, the quest for absolute values is impossible —since no neutral tribunal exists beyond language—and incoherent, because it attempts to justify without presuppositions while inevitably relying on them. Ibid., pp. 25, 215

28 Idem, p. 102.

29 Idem, p. 23.

30 Idem, pp. 18, 86, 110.

perspective, what safeguards peaceful coexistence is not agreement about truth, but the explicit renunciation of it.

The questioning of the metaphysical foundations of democratic values—an inheritance from thinkers such as Kelsen, Rorty, and others—has penetrated deeply into contemporary democratic practice, even though institutional language continues to maintain a universalist rhetoric. From this has emerged a contingent universalism: a set of values proclaimed as universal, yet whose authority is acknowledged as the product of historical, cultural, and political negotiation processes.

From these perspectives, democracy is no longer fundamentally understood as a "way of life" grounded in a stable core of shared values, as Jacques Maritain defended it, but is instead conceived predominantly as a "form of government" aimed at ensuring peaceful coexistence and the institutional channeling of conflict between radically divergent worldviews.

6. Relativism imposes its dictatorship on the contemporary world

Since the mid-20th century, some postwar thinkers such as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Alasdair MacIntyre began to warn about the risks that moral and epistemic relativism posed to the stability of liberal democracies[31]. However, it was in the last decades of the 20th century that this critique began to acquire a global dimension, thanks to the intellectual and pastoral leadership of Pope John Paul II and the theological

31 Eric Voegelin, E. *The new science of politics,* University of Chicago Press, 1952. Leo Strauss, *Natural right and history,* University of Chicago Press, 1953. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* University of Chicago Press, 1958. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: A study in moral theory.* University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

and philosophical work of one of his closest collaborators, the German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

In 1991, in his encyclical Centesimus annus, John Paul II warned about the dangers facing a democracy that has lost its moral foundation: "if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism."[32] The Pope's reference to the possibility of a "disguised totalitarianism" operating under the guise of procedural democracy is particularly revealing.

For his part, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—beginning in the 1990s and closely aligned with the pontificate of John Paul II—developed this critique in multiple writings, lectures, and doctrinal documents.[33] It was he who, in 2005, coined the famous expression "dictatorship of relativism."[34] to characterize this drift in contemporary culture, which had replaced truth with opinion and promoted relativism as the only valid approach in public life.

In his well-known homily of April 18, 2005, delivered during the conclave just days before he was elected Pope, the future Benedict XVI warned that, in the absence of objective truth, humanity ends up subjected to the accidental and the arbitrary: "We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as definitive and has as its highest

32 John Paul II, *Centesimus annus,* Encyclical Letter, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, n. 46, 1991, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

33 Joseph Ratzinger, *Verdad, valores y poder,* Rialp, 1998. "

34 Ratzinger, J., Homily, Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

value one's own ego and one's own desires."[35] In this way, the ultimate criterion of what is "good" or "permissible" becomes whatever an accidental majority —or the dominant cultural elites— arbitrarily consider "acceptable" at a given moment.

Ratzinger argues that by denying all truth accessible to reason, the public sphere is emptied of shared criteria, leaving society at the mercy of power, technology, or emotion. If there are no longer rational reference points to discern what is just, then —Ratzinger warns— power replaces reason: whoever controls the media, institutions, or dominant language determines what "works," what "is acceptable," or even what "may be said." In this context, public debate is no longer grounded in arguments but is reduced to strategies of persuasion, marketing, or political correctness —a dynamic that erodes the very essence of deliberative democracy.[36, 37]

7. The false tolerance of relativism: from indifference to civic enmity

In this way, the relativist thesis —which originally sought to facilitate civil coexistence and protect freedom in pluralistic democratic societies— paradoxically ends up functioning as a silent factor that promotes social fragmentation and democratic decline.

In his study What Can Democracy Be?, Francisco Plaza argues that relativism, by replacing "shared truths" as the foundation

35 Idem.

36 Idem.

37 Benedicto XVI. "Lecture of the Holy Father at the University of Ratisbonne." Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html

of social coexistence with a mere code of conduct that demands, without exception, the privatization of one's own convictions while simultaneously accepting and respecting all differing convictions as valid, transforms genuine tolerance (enduring what we reject for a greater good) into indifference.[38]

As Plaza explains, if one does not distinguish between upholding a good and tolerating a wrong, tolerance ceases to be a virtue and degenerates into mere indifference: "With indifference, one does not act against the other, but one also does not act with the other or for the other."[39] Far from being neutral, this attitude functions as a form of "passive aggression" that encloses individuals within themselves: citizens "close themselves off from one another and exclude each other from their life horizon," obstructing "that openness which is the preamble to solidarity and fraternal love" —the foundations upon which civic friendship is built.[40]

However, the harm does not stop at indifference. As Plaza warns, it gradually evolves into distancing, then mutual suspicion, and ultimately into open enmity: the other ceases to be perceived as a fellow citizen with whom to cooperate in building the common good, and is instead seen as someone from whom one must guard oneself [41].

In this context, public debate becomes polarized to irreconcilable extremes. Without a shared horizon of meaning, politics are reduced to the mere administration of rules and the

38 Francisco Plaza, "¿Qué puede ser la democracia?", in J. Borges, P. Matheus, y P. Bautista (Edits.), *La renovación espiritual de la democracia: Antiguos fundamentos, nuevos horizontes*, 2025, e.p., p. 4.

39 Idem, p. 5.

40 Idem, p. 6.

41 Idem.

appointment of arbitrators, ultimately splitting societies into hostile factions that have lost the will to live together. In this way, the apparent peace of "relativist tolerance" degenerates into polarization, discord, and social fracture.

8. Relativism in the background of contemporary autocratizing dynamics

As can be observed, these philosophical and political reflections on the impact of relativism on democracy have a clear direct and indirect correlation with some of the factors that empirical literature identifies as causes of the third wave of autocratization.

The argument that relativistic tolerance leads to "open hostility" among citizens—who stop seeing each other as fellow citizens and instead perceive each other as adversaries—finds a notable correspondence with contemporary political science findings on **extreme polarization**. Recent studies document how polarization is no longer limited to ideological disagreements but has transformed into affective animosity toward the "political other."[42]). This phenomenon, described by various authors as "pernicious polarization"[43] or "toxic polarization," occurs when society splits into two identity-based blocs that are morally opposed and mutually dehumanizing, seeing the adversary not as mistaken but as evil or threatening. This form of polarization erodes democratic norms, paralyzes institutions, and is highly predictive of autocratization processes.

42 Shanto Iyengar, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States". *Annual Review of Political Science,* 2019, 22, 129-146, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-0

43 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities". *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, 62(1), 16-42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576

Similarly, it can be observed that the diagnosis that moral relativism leads citizens to "close themselves off from one another," thereby obstructing the openness necessary for civic friendship, corresponds closely with the phenomena of **political disengagement and the weakening of social capital**. Studies on political culture[44] show that in societies where shared values erode and convictions are privatized to the point of becoming irrelevant in the public sphere, there is a significant correlation with declining voter participation, reduced civil associationalism, and the fragmentation of networks of interpersonal trust —factors directly linked to the threats facing, and the vulnerability of, the democratic system.

Moreover, it is evident that reducing politics to the mere administration of rules and the appointment of arbitrators —resulting from the loss of shared horizons of meaning caused by relativism— finds a clear parallel in the literature on the **erosion of institutional trust**. Empirical studies[45] show that when institutions no longer embody shared values and are perceived merely as technical or bureaucratic mechanisms, citizens' trust in them erodes profoundly. This erosion not only generates apathy but also creates favorable conditions for the rise of authoritarian

---

44 Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
Disaffected democracies: What's troubling the trilateral countries?, Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam editores, Princeton University Press, 2000.
Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,*Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2000.

45 Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
Margaret Levi, Laura Stoker, "Political trust and trustworthiness", *Annual Review of Political Science,* 2000, 3(1), 475–507, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475

leaders who promise to restore meaning, identity, and political efficacy.

Similarly, the social fragmentation and the vacuum of "shared truths" created by relativism generate favorable conditions for the **rise of populist leaders** who offer simple certainties and unifying narratives. The literature on populism[46] confirms that these movements thrive precisely in contexts of cultural disorientation, where the loss of common reference frameworks creates a deep nostalgia for the cohesion that has been lost. Populist leaders capitalize on this nostalgia, not to restore rational debate about the common good, but to construct Manichean divisions between a "pure people" and "corrupt elites," presenting themselves as the only ones capable of restoring a sense of unity and truth.

Finally, the weakening of shared normative foundations —fostered by relativism— **facilitates processes of autocratization from within the democratic system**. By denying any objective truth accessible to reason, the will of circumstantial majorities becomes the ultimate legitimate source of legality. Presented as "truly democratic," this logic undermines the very foundations of democracy: without principles that constrain the majority—human rights, the dignity of the person, the rule of law—no institution, law, or minority is truly secure.

Studies on democratic backsliding[47] align with this diagnosis. When basic consensuses on the "rules of the game" and the "unwritten democratic norms" (mutual tolerance and institutio-

46 Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction,* Oxford University Press, 2017.
Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash...*

47 Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, *How democracies die*, Crown, 2018.
Nancy Bermeo, "On democratic backsliding", *Journal of Democracy,* 27(1),5-19, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

nal self-restraint) erode, elected leaders gradually subvert liberal checks and balances from within the system. They do not abolish constitutions —they reinterpret them to suit their interests; they do not repeal rights— they subordinate them to the "popular will"; they do not storm parliaments —they "co-opt" them, bringing them under the executive's control. In this way, democracies slowly wither away.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated the significant convergence between the erosive effects of relativism on democracy —analyzed from a philosophical-political perspective— and several factors identified by political science as causes of the current global wave of autocratization.Unlike the more visible drivers of democratic backsliding, relativism operates in a quieter and deeper manner: it erodes the shared normative foundations that make democratic coexistence possible. By denying the existence of truths accessible to reason and reducing values to mere contingent cultural constructs, relativism empties the public sphere of common criteria for discerning the common good. In this way, it transforms genuine tolerance —a virtue that entails enduring what one considers wrong for the sake of a higher good— into moral indifference, which gradually evolves into civic enmity. This underlying dynamic is not merely another factor in democratic decline; it constitutes its cultural breeding ground, the condition that allows other autocratizing forces to intensify.

The importance of identifying these convergences lies in the fact that it opens the possibility of articulating a deeper political response to the current global process of autocratization. Predominant approaches tend to focus on combating the symptoms —through institutional reforms, measures against disinformation, or depolarization strategies— all of which are

necessary but insufficient. What remains unaddressed is the anthropological and cultural root of the problem: relativism, which, at its core, is the true illness.

If the public sphere does not recover the idea that there are truths about human nature —dignity, responsible freedom, the common good, civic friendship— accessible to reason and valid for all, it will be impossible to reconstruct genuine tolerance within pluralistic democracies to sustain civilized disagreement, build rational consensus around the common good, or restore mutual trust and the willingness to live together.