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### **Less than a human condition?**

Menos que a condição humana?

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The article written by Dr. Fátima Cavalcante and Dr. Edward Goldson brings a rich and unique discussion, I believe not yet encountered academically in terms of an objective analysis considering the complex level the authors presented. Reading the text and knowing the authors I am convinced that it was not just academic interest that led them to the understanding of the relationship between poverty, disability and violence. Certainly, this Herculean and successful effort is based on their professional experience and passionate views. Aside from their search for new knowledge they are sensitive for the problems and seek solutions to benefit people with disabilities.

Since the text is very dense and profound I do not intend to repeat it and to comment it entirely. I will discuss only two points, which I feel are important to highlight.

First, let me start with the word *compassion* that, in my opinion, dictated the tone of the article. With-

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out this tone the text would be just one more “paper” on poverty and inequality in the world, stating that disabled people are the poorest among the poor, and providing prescriptive warnings of what needs to be done. This is one of the criticisms in the review written by Goldson<sup>1</sup>. We make prescriptions but do not put them into practice. This is why I use the term compassion. According to the Dalai Lama<sup>2</sup> this virtue – compassion – can be defined as a sense of concern about others and as a clear notion that all beings have the same rights to achieve happiness. Compassion can also be understood in the meaning adopted by the philosopher Hume<sup>3</sup> by which he refused to ignore the force of feelings in the moral life of humanity. According to Hume, it is the feeling that distinguishes the human capacity to live morally. Hume insists that human actions cannot be attributed to cold and deliberated reason, as compared to what is many times defended by positivist science. In this text, therefore, I call the attention of the readers to the fact that the authors’ feelings of compassion do not diminish the academic excellence in the analyses of the problem. On the contrary, it gives the analysis beauty and makes their discussion full of meat, bone and soul, which reflect the day-to-day realities.

Secondly, I will discuss the three articulated issues – poverty, disability and violence – seeking to show the logic in their connection.

The term “poverty” is a secular subject. It is mentioned in the Bible (The New Testament), speaking of it when exalting the poor as the favorites in God’s kingdom. Although this theme is seen as a “social issue to be overcome” it is a construction of modern times.

Arendt states: “The social issue only started to have a revolutionary role when, in the Modern Age, and not before that, man started to doubt that poverty was inherent to the human condition, to doubt the distinction among few that for circumstances, force or fraud, had achieved the freedom that poverty gives, and that the miserable working crowd were inevitable and eternal”<sup>4</sup>.

Bodstein<sup>5</sup> addresses the same meaning defined by Arendt, considering that in modern times there is a union of political and social equality. We should remember however, that there were moments in recent history in which poverty and social inequality were treated passively because, in the economic point of view, it was believed that their existence was fundamental to the capitalist process and profit<sup>6</sup>. Nowadays, the same economists propose that there is no possible development without the reduction of poverty and inequality<sup>7,8</sup>. I want to say in this short discussion that since the beginning of the

modern period, the issue of poverty has needed a place in the public agenda and has a reflective status and now a consolidated practical action. This does not mean that poverty and inequality are being reduced to the same proportion we acquire knowledge concerning this topic. On the contrary, as this article demonstrates, its slow reduction is unequal and especially distressing for the poorest among the poor, namely the people with disabilities.

The issue of violence, as treated nowadays, is also a theme of modern times that was incorporated into the moment for the institutionalization of human and social rights among specific advocacy groups. Violence has always existed in human societies. Even in the biblical story describing the fratricidal fight between Cain and Abel and the death of the latter. This history in a certain way reminds us that human society, since its beginning, is not an easy and friendly place to live: on the contrary, we need to civilize ourselves as stated by Freud<sup>9</sup> through the exercise of companionship, the acceptance of others and the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and words and not through weapons and aggressions. Nowadays, the issue of violence has gained unexpected fame. It has turned into being a public issue, including in the health arena<sup>10</sup>.

The issue of disability is also an old one. In the New Testament we are reminded of Christ’s healing the blind, the deaf and the crippled. In modern societies the issue of disability is still taboo, having almost the same status as in the time of Jesus; an object of charity or one demanding miracles; like a flag at half mast, which only few have the courage to raise and make tremble. So the issue of persons with disabilities is a weak subject in the Latin America society, hidden in our fears of the differences between the disabled and the able-bodied. The authors of this article comment that for a society as economically advantaged as ours, but advanced also in terms of its social consciousness, people with disabilities are seen as “being *less than human*.”

Since it is time to finish and let the authors be the protagonists of their reflections, I conclude reaffirming what Cavalcante & Goldson have said of the Latin American scenario: people with disabilities are the poorest among the poor. I say it not only in the material and educational sense but also in terms of access to health care as the authors have already pointed out. I say it in the political meaning as referred to by C. Wright Mills<sup>11</sup>, because the need to address this poverty still has not really been transformed into a strong public cause. Until the problems of the disabled are seen as being only embedded in the family’s sphere, and relating to health, rehabilitation and social assistance ser-

vices, they will not come to be recognized in the streets and in the public arenas, and so they will be fated to a type of obscurity that makes humanity less human and society cramp in relation to its process of democratization.

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