


On anti-egalitarian disputes and public policies: more arguments for the debate

Keila Deslandes^(a)

<keiladeslandes@icloud.com> 

^(a) Departamento de Educação,
Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto.
Rua do Seminário, s/no, Mariana.
Ouro Preto, MG, Brasil. 35400-000.

Miskolci and Pereira's article discusses the centrality that the theme of sexual and reproductive rights has taken on in public policy debates in the healthcare field, through attacks on the basic principles of Brasil's public healthcare system (SUS), and in the field of education, where it is represented through the combat of something that has been called "gender ideology." In both of these cases, the focus is on the advance of an anti-egalitarian agenda sustained by movements opposed to the social and juridical victories of historically subalternized groups, the effects of which also deepen inequalities based on class- and ethnic-racial divisions.

In terms of the field of education, previous works by a variety of authors, including Miskolci himself, lead us to seek to understand the construction of this common moral platform that serves as a foundation in combating "gender ideology." We are faced with the formation of a "discursive field of transnational conservative action"¹ (p. 730), constituted through this agglutinating term – "gender ideology" – which is capable of mobilizing and linking agents from different religious and secular backgrounds, and from both civil society

and government, albeit in a circumstantial and non-cohesive manner. Within this context, the configuration of a moral grammar that manages to reduce the fears and desperations of common people into a tyranny of the obvious: “boys are born boys; girls are born girls;” “in defense of children;” “families should be heard in the education of their children.”

Now, who would argue with these sentences? It is clear that, observed merely from an anatomical perspective, feminine or masculine sex is determined from birth. But is this all that should be said in terms of human sexuality? Likewise, it is obvious that families play a fundamental role in the educational process, and that children must be defended. But what family is being talked about here? Are all family configurations being recognized? Is the perspective of school-based education, which aims to recognize and amplify familial perspectives in service of advancing the scientific and intellectual bases of new generations – as well as their citizenship – being observed?

In other words, these phrases make as much sense as saying, “circles are round and squares are squares;” “beds are made for sleeping and chairs are made for sitting;” or “the ground is below the roof.” They are banal phrases, emptied of critical content, and they cannot contain our understanding of the world. At most, they can be taken to serve as premises for an inconclusive syllogism. However, they are being repeated cunningly as though they form answers that might be easily assimilated by the masses when faced with complicated political and social problems. And, as the Nobel laureate economist Daniel Kahneman notes, “when people believe that a conclusion is true, they are also very likely to believe in the arguments that appear to uphold it, even if these arguments are not believable”² (p. 60).

Miskolci¹ and Pereira’s article therefore aims to move from the slippery terrain of the false certainties of morals and customs – filled with dogmas that abdicate from logical arguments that might sustain them – so as to insert themselves within a discussion of anti-egalitarian movements. Through this perspective of critical amplification of the debate, they aim to abstract the discussion of moral panics that are subjacent to the combat of a supposed “gender ideology,” moving instead toward the theme of the enhancement of a political and economic agenda.

Yet despite the importance of this type of intellectual and discursive strategy, it is important for us to perceive that anti-egalitarian movements also emerge from psycho-social climates that are not very logical, and that they may express the channeling of feelings such as a profound anger relating to public policies that, by analogy, we will call pro-egalitarian.

The election of Donald Trump, which is considered to be an outlier in the curve of consolidated US democracy for having brought to the White House “the first anti-democratic president in the history of the United States”³, may be related to this type of reactive sentiment. According to the analysis of Levitsky and Ziblatt, both political scientists at Harvard, much recent work in political science has been based on evaluating individual or familial levels of poverty; in the name of equity, certain benefits have been distributed only to those below a certain level of citizenship, considered to be minimum. Contradictorily, these social programs of “testing means” in the US may have reinforced anti-egalitarian perspectives on the part of the middle class by inciting the idea that only poor people benefit from public policies. This, in



turn, may stoke the anger at “people who are being treated better than they deserve, while I don’t get what’s owed to me”⁴ which, in turn, may mobilize votes for Trump.

This type of anti-egalitarian sentiment and/or anger in relation to pro-egalitarian policies was also present in Brazil’s 2018 presidential election. Jessé de Souza⁵ aims to discuss some aspects related to this recent phenomenon through an examination of anger among the middle classes. According to de Souza, the composition of Brazilian society is based on the “abandonment, over the course of centuries, of stigmatized, humiliated, and persecuted classes.” Since slavery, and its continuation through the “production of a rabble inapt for the modern world,” excluded people inherited the cowardly disdain of more fragile people with less capacity to defend themselves. As such, within Brazilian society, the perspective of maintaining “sub-people” was consolidated; such people, according to this perspective, might eventually benefit from the piety of wealthier people and the dominant classes, but they would never ascend to the level of enjoying full citizenship rights.

A society built on these foundations will suffer from inferior self-perception, which, owing to the projection of low self-esteem, will make the formation of an empathetic vision toward alterity impossible. As such, feelings of solidarity and compassion, which are necessary for contemporary democratic coexistence, become unviable. This sort of social perspective may illustrate the hatred that different sectors of society feel toward public policies that aim to diminish social gaps between white and non-white people, such as affirmative action programs based on ethnic-racial guidelines, which have been widely adopted in Brazil’s public university system.

Anti-egalitarian sentiment, in its various manifestations of fear, disdain, rejection or hatred of alterity, is in the center of the processes of sickness, agony, and death faced by modern democracies, regardless of the regular election cycles in these countries. The social contract of a democratic society presupposes recognition between opponents, who ideally should alternate in holding power. But when opponents are intimidated, silenced, delegitimized, or have their contributions to the necessary contradictions of public policies negated, democratic principles gradually enter into collapse. At the limit, when governments utilize different kinds of force to steamroll the rights of their opponents, fascism arises, feeding on social and economic dissatisfaction.

The contemporary educational field in Brazil has experienced various practices related to suffering in democratic experiments. The perspective of implementing a curriculum “without ideology” is one example of this, as it recalls a sort of double-blind pragmatic paradox. In other words, it is a type of contradictory instruction that must be disobeyed in order to be obeyed, which implies that any response may be considered to be wrong. In psychology, this type of communication is configured as a necessarily traumatic experience, a source of intense anxiety, and – at its outermost limit – related to the development of schizophrenia.

Who can doubt the intimidation that this kind of political discourse exercises against Brazil’s teachers, or the worsening psychic sickening it causes among them? From the perspective of silencing, it once again uses strategies of a double bind of discursive makeup: “schools are made to teach, not to indoctrinate.” (The verbs are synonyms!)

As Daniel Kahneman² notes, most people constantly draw premature conclusions about their problems, based on intuitions that confer a comfortable sense of cognitive

coherence and balance. On the other hand, it is only when they are confronted with situations that destroy this sense of comfort that people deepen their rational thinking, in search of responses that are capable of being logically convincing.

In addition, political philosophy and psychoanalysis have already taught us how painful it is for subjects to renounce their desires and passions so as to serve an Oedipal pact and a social contract. Only in the name of the law or in favor of the state are subjects predisposed to give up their natural state.

By reducing discourse to obvious points, by making up premises to pass for conclusions, and by imposing double bind strategies that make it impossible to draw pertinent conclusions, anti-egalitarian groups seem to be corroborating with the cognitive comfort, so to speak, of their followers. Furthermore, they seem to be giving motives to people who – already discontented with the renunciations that society demands of them while offering seemingly little in return – might savor, however briefly, the sweet taste of revenge.

And the educational field, with its critical mission of contradicting premises and proposing new, more egalitarian social arrangements is, in all certainty, an opponent to be delegitimized and silenced.

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