

Social justice as an ethical imperative*

Justiça social como um imperativo ético

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ABSTRACT In this article the authors discuss the pertinence of considering social justice as a secular ethical imperative, and not as an option legitimized only by left-wing ideologies, a necessary understanding for the preservation of Western democracies. It draws on the delimitation of a problem presented by some researchers, such as Fukuyama and Huntington, denouncing the failure of attempts to associate the development of science with the appropriation of its outcomes by humanity. They defend that social justice is the axis around which the social fabric can be articulated. The text invites the reader to a reflection on the conditions of citizenship affirmation, which presupposes an idea of justice and respect, present in various philosophical or religious conceptions. In the face of a worldwide reality of intolerance intensification, education can play a crucial role in building active citizenship, anchored on the search of social justice capable of resisting the growing tendency to expand the state of exception.

KEYWORDS Citizenship. Human rights. Public policy. Social justice. Ethics.

RESUMO No presente artigo, os autores discutem a pertinência de considerar a justiça social como um imperativo ético laico, e não como uma opção legitimada apenas por ideologias do campo da esquerda, compreensão essa necessária para preservação das democracias ocidentais. Parte-se da delimitação de um problema apresentado por alguns pesquisadores, como Fukuyama e Huntington, denunciando o fracasso das tentativas de articulação entre o desenvolvimento da ciência e a apropriação de seus frutos pela humanidade. Defende-se a ideia de que justiça social é o eixo em torno do qual se pode articular o tecido social. O texto convida o leitor para uma reflexão acerca das condições de afirmação da cidadania, o que pressupõe uma ideia de justiça e respeito, presente em variadas concepções filosóficas ou religiosas. Diante de uma realidade mundial de recrudescimento da intolerância, a educação pode desempenhar um papel importante na construção de uma cidadania ativa ancorada na busca de justiça social que possa oferecer resistência à tendência crescente de ampliação do estado de exceção.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Cidadania. Direitos humanos. Política pública. Justiça social. Ética.

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Introduction

It is a current saying that we are living one more worldwide crisis, as if this was undesirable or unexpected. It is not. As we have stated in another opportunity¹, the social world is not static, it is constantly changing, and this is good. The dynamic of societies implies permanent repositioning regarding new issues arising both from the development of science and techniques, and from the dynamic of economy (global or local), always in transformation. Thus, it did cause some surprise when Francis Fukuyama² supposed that he could declare the end of humanity's sociocultural evolution in his book 'The End of History and the Last Man'. In his view, liberal democracy had achieved success as a political system, and the world would advance towards the consolidation both of this system of government and capitalism, with the resulting benefits from scientific development. However, in his global analysis, he envisaged a future with broad enjoyment of socioeconomic benefits only for populations of countries that had achieved a consolidated industrialization process, i.e., economically developed countries. The rest of the world population, poor or delayed in its development, would have to live in regimes that are totalitarian and/or highly dependent on developed countries. Foreseeing the possible and probable conflicts between these two blocks, Fukuyama suggested in 1989 that the developed countries sought to ensure the access to oil reserves (previously threatened by the 1970's oil crisis with Opec – Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), immigration control of miserable people, and the control over the access to advanced technologies, namely nuclear armaments in non-developed countries.

Later on, Samuel Huntington³ sought to develop this proposal, in the same direction, in his book 'The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order', in which he argued that future wars would not be fought between countries but between cultures, and

that Islamic extremism would become the greatest threat to global peace. The author offers a graphic image of this world division, in which stands out the so-called 'Western civilization' comprised of Europe, United States, Canada, Australia and other former British colonies, except for India and other small former colonies. Latin America, though, is excluded from the 'Western civilization', where are its colonizer metropolises, and is defined as a 'Latin-American civilization'. Africa is divided between 'Islamic', corresponding to its Northern region, and 'sub-Saharan'. Other divisions confirm that the criteria used by Huntington were not only 'cultural', but also economic and political. Anyhow, the identification of what would be the main enemy of Western civilization, the 'Islamic civilization', is seated on the world's major oil reserves, and this is related to one of the safeguards pointed out by Fukuyama.

However, Caroline Fourest and Fiammetta Venner⁴, on their turn, have published a book with the title 'Crossfire: secularism defied by Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism' [free translation] that refutes Huntington's ideas. Considering the three great monotheist religions – Islamism, Christianity and Judaism – the two authors concluded that the radicals are conquering space while defending the same type of society: one in which women play the role of procreators, inferior to men, and where life is ruled by the literal interpretation of the sacred books, above democratic laws. In other words, the authors defend the idea that the conflict is neither between civilizations nor between religions, but rather between democracy and theocracy. They seek to oppose the idea that Islamic religion would be the enemy, but maintaining the debate on the field of religions and cultures, they emphasize that it is necessary to recognize the alliance between patriarchy and the understanding that defends the end of the secular state and moral pluralism, and that this alliance must be properly confronted.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to discuss

the pertinence of considering social justice as a secular ethical imperative and not as an option legitimated only by left-wing ideologies.

The social context and the construction of citizenship

According to Bauman⁵, we live currently a liquid modernity, as he named it, opposing what he defined as solid modernity with supposedly more stable values and ways of life. In liquid modernity, we have become a consumerist society in which security has been exchanged for freedoms and uncertainties, generating increasingly more diffuse fears. Individualism and hedonism prevail. Relationships become fluid; and despite many diagnoses on the present situation, few solutions have been actually indicated. As Pilger and Smith⁶⁽⁵⁶⁾ have pointed

Indifferent to public life or the signification of politics, the individuals, subjected to the totalitarian pattern of consumption and to an emphasis on the private sphere, are constantly appealed to enjoy life at any cost, even if in detriment of the other's humanity. The degradation of the human condition in an increasingly more technological and instantaneous society originates from the manifestation of a sort of social fear in the face of uncertainties regarding the future.

Jurandir Freire Costa⁷, on the other hand, in an article published in 1989 under the title 'Narcissism in somber times' [free translation], brings an expression used by Žižek – 'cynical vision of the world' – to analyze contemporaneity. In this analysis, Costa shows great syntony with what Bauman⁵ developed in his book 'Liquid Modernity', published in 2000. According to Costa⁷,

[...] certain social behavior patterns in present-day Brazil are sufficiently stable and recurrent to allow us to affirm the existence

of a particular form of fear and reaction to panic, which is the narcissist culture of violence. This culture feeds itself and is fed by social decadence and discredit in justice and law. [...] In the culture of violence, the future is denied [...] in such a way that the answer is the immediate fruition of the present; the submission to the status quo and the systematic and methodic opposition to any project of changes that implies social cooperation and non-violent negotiation of private interests.

As we have stated in a previous paper,

[...] the disqualification of common life and the repeated attacks against the sense of collectivity contribute to the disqualification of politics as legitimate path and space in search of the necessary consensus, even when temporary, for a common life¹⁽⁶⁹⁾.

Our country lacks a democratic tradition and the population's political awareness is repeatedly deconstructed by the action of the owners of power. Our population, accustomed to a perverse paternalism of the State, has its hopes easily manipulated because these are founded as being gifts from the State or the ruling classes, rather than the conquest of a people. It is clear that the most vulnerable segment, which suffers the most these consequences, is the poor population. Here we make a remark to explain the following issue: although we use the expression 'The Owners of Power' [free translation], which is the title of an important book by Raymundo Faoro⁸, we do not recognize as the 'owners of power' the state bureaucracy, as does this author. We understand that the real owners of power are in the economic and cultural elites that appropriate and use the State for their own private interests, always in detriment of the population's well-being. Also noteworthy, in this sense, is the notion of patrimonialism, which does not place the use of the State in the benefit of politicians or bureaucracy, but rather in the benefit of the real 'owners of power',

which traditionally elect politicians as their agents or even some of their own members among the agrarian or entrepreneurial elites that still dominate the country.

In this context, the perception of the other as a legitimate other, deserving, as suggested by Humberto Maturana⁹, the concern of each one or everyone, with the consequences of each one's or everyone's actions, for everyone, is increasingly a less common fact. Recognizing this other as a 'legitimate other' should not be so extraordinary. We are made of the same flesh and the same bones and with almost the same genes. The idea of the existence of equality among humans is present in various religions in which the creationist myth is central in their doctrine. In the same way as those religions, Kant¹⁰ also asserts the importance of all human beings, but for a practical reason. For him, we have a dignity that is inherent to our human condition. This dignity is "a quality inherent to human beings, as moral beings: in the sense that they use their practical reason in an autonomous way". However, it was also Kant who stated that human dignity derives not only from the ability of men and women to be autonomous, but also from the precept of always considering the other human being as an end in itself, and never as mere means¹¹.

We live in political communities. Each one of us belongs to at least one political community. It is reasonable to affirm that in Latin America we are all at the same frame of the so-called liberal democracy. A fundamental concept of liberal democracy is that of citizenship, which in the Brazilian Constitution is expressed in the first article, as the second principle of the Republic, immediately followed by 'human dignity'. We will not dwell on this specific topic, but only affirm that our main laws express the idea that "Everyone is equal before the law, without distinction of any kind", as expressed in the fifth article of the Brazilian Constitution¹². This assertion leaves no doubt to its interpretation. If we are citizens, if we share a political community, we must accept that a person is nothing unless

there is the existence of the other. We conform as humans and citizens in the relationship with the other, in the other's recognition of us. In this globalized, liquid world, as described by Bauman⁵, human actions do not occur in a vacuum, but it is in this shared world that actions and their consequences are situated, always interdependently.

If we must be considered as politically equal, how can we not be considered as economically equal, or in the differences perceived according to gender, race, in the access to culture, health, education? Is it possible to justify inequalities? And as inequalities are due to privileges possessed already at birth by segments of society, is this acceptable? How can we accept that citizens can be politically recognized as equals, if they are not equal in several other aspects?

Thus, if we recognize ourselves as humans in dignity, sharing the same territory, interacting with a community, then the idea of justice is mandatory. Dewey¹³⁽¹⁰⁾ cites Protagoras (5th century BC), who states that "the gods gave humans the sense of justice and respect with the purpose of enabling them to unite for their mutual preservation". It does not seem reasonable to imagine that a political community may survive without a sense of justice, since few would not answer negatively the question: 'Is unfairness admissible?'.

But what is fairness? Which justice?

However, what is fairness? It seems there is no doubt that the answer is a moral one, an answer that is morally based. Considering that absolute equality seems, nowadays, a hypothesis restricted to the best utopias or the most earnest religious dreams, what is sought is a fairer society, closer to the idea of common good. We should remember that utopias serve us to follow our path, as defended by Eduardo Galeano¹⁵, citing Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Birri.

The pursuit of a fairer society has been a concern of human communities since ancient times, e.g. the Platonic proposal to understand justice as equality, until modern times, with John Rawls in his book 'The sense of Justice' understanding justice as equity. Thinkers who strongly influenced the modern liberal ideal, as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, defended a proposal of justice that aimed at ensuring the greatest good to the higher number of people. In this sense, also to be highlighted is the proposal made by Nobel prize winner, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen¹⁶⁽¹³³⁾, in his book 'Development as Freedom'. In the introduction he defends that development

[...] requires the removal of the main sources of freedom privation: poverty and tyranny, lack of economic opportunities and systematic social destitution, neglect of public services, and excessive intolerance of repressive States.

In this book, Sen¹⁶ uses a metaphor to explain the different conceptions of justice. The main character needs to hire a gardener to take care of her garden. In any of the options she will have a similar result, but she wishes to be fair. There are three poor candidates:

- The first one is the poorest, everyone agrees. It would be important to give him the job because nothing is fairer than helping those in need. In this perspective, one seeks to privilege the one who has less so that he becomes closer to the others;

- Although they are all poor, the second character has become poor not long ago, so he is not used to poverty. If he would get the job, he would certainly be the one to achieve the greatest happiness, since the others are more accommodated in their own situation. This is the perspective that valorizes the higher quantity of 'good' produced and the elimination of unhappiness fits into this case;

- Now, the third character is a chronically ill person, less poor and is not the most unhappy. If he would be hired, he would have

the money for the health treatment. In Sen's vision, this is the fairest solution because this option "makes the greatest difference for the [person's] quality of life and freedom from illness"¹⁶⁽¹⁰⁸²⁾. In other words, it interferes in his abilities, which were hampered by the illness. It is interesting to note that even thinkers related to political liberalism cannot avoid proposing a moral fundament for their ideas of justice. And these and other fundaments must and should be discussed.

It is a fact the world has never had so many material goods, supplies and food resources that can enable humanity to achieve the highest standard of living ever reached before, but global inequalities have also never been so extreme. There is a large number of indicators for this. The website of Oxfam-Brazil informs, for example, that "the wealthiest 1% of the world population owns the same wealth as that of all the other 99%"¹⁷; whereas the 2019 report shows that extreme poverty (income lower than US\$ 1.90 per day) is the reality of 736 million people, in 2015¹⁸. Brazil is recognized as one of the most unequal countries in the world and there is no reasonable justification for this situation, i.e., that does not recognize this inequality as the result of public policies that do not seek to reduce it.

However, this picture is even worse, since we see in various countries, also in Brazil, the denial of the human condition of social groups as a strategy to control the undesirables by a perverse economic elite. Here it is about structural racism, a heritage from colonialism and its enslavement of peoples¹⁹. What is the crisis of migrants in Europe if not, also, a sort of late response to colonialism and the insensibility associated with the economic and political exploratory model? What is the migratory crisis in Central America if not the consequence of economic policies often imposed by agents that would supposedly be of international cooperation, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but in reality privilege an economic segment that produces nothing, but controls the financial market? How is it

possible that, reform after reform conducted in innumerable countries, the payment of crises is always put on the account of the poorer sectors, including segments of the middle classes? The bill is paid by those who are beyond what Souza Santos²⁰ named abyssal line. In his view, modern Western thinking establishes a system of visible and invisible distinctions of social reality with two sides: ‘this side’ and ‘the other side’. In its turn, ‘the other side’ is produced as irrelevant anyhow and, therefore, it effectively disappears because it lacks value. This exclusion of the undesirables occurs in classificatory and hierarchic schemes constructed since colonization and remaining in the forms provided by coloniality. The classificatory hierarchy that makes us think of ourselves as mestizos must be breached in all of its dimensions, since internally we, ourselves, continue to reproduce these classificatory hierarchies, a direct heritage of the colonial exploratory relationships and slavery, regarding segments that are economically and culturally deprived.

This hierarchization can also assume less symbolic dimensions due to policies that deny to these individuals not only the recognition of their rights as citizens of political communities, but even the very natural rights they should enjoy as human beings. It is the reduction of these humans to the condition of things or non-human animals, or to take the Aristotelian expression used by Agamben, mere *zōē*, bare life, merely biological life²¹.

The globalized present times have been deplorably generous in making us aware of the abuses perpetrated by the insensitivity and disregard for human life, either in the name of the war against drugs, against religious believers (and these also vary according to the geographical region), against political opponents, or simply against undesirables in general or more specifically poor. The selective indignation offered by the media is always in conformity with the interests of the global economic powers and their national allies and accomplices. What Albert Bandura²² named

as mechanisms of moral disengagement has in the social media the ideal field to flourish, associated to what has been agreed to be named as post-truth, “where the appeals to emotion are dominant and the factual refutations or verifications are ignored on the basis that they are mere affirmations”²³⁽²⁵⁾. We need, on the contrary, more moral engagement, more sensitivity regarding the others²².

The Brazilian situation

Today, in Brazil, we live a social frame of great complexity. We left behind a period of high social investments with better opportunities for the social development of the poorest strata, providing access to the benefits that a State can offer, with public policies such as the housing program *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, the cash transfer program *Bolsa Família*, the incentive for high education access, incentives to small agricultural producers etc.^{24,25}. We entered a period in 2017 in which we see a dangerous path, being designed as a possible trail by many of our concitizens, which has been successful in the outcomes of electoral processes. What is being neglected is not little; it is the valorization of what, at some point, appeared as being similar to a possible idea of common moral, at least in the Western world: human rights, expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. The human rights are classified in ‘generations’ and they comprise: civil and political rights, that express freedom and are those of the first generation; social, political and cultural rights are those of the second generation; and those of the third generation are related to the environment and to peace. The rights of the fourth and fifth generations are related to the future generations and to the development of information science, respectively. The fundamental characteristics of these rights are imprescriptibility, inalienability, irrenounceability, inviolability, and universalizability. There is a cultural criticism

to the idea of human rights as universal rights under the allegation that there are deep cultural differences between the so-called West and Asia, which would make this proposal seem little credible. We do not intend to dwell on this interesting debate, but we would like to point out that there is an intensification of the questioning of, or even the combat to, the idea of universal human rights, with the strengthening of the fascist thinking in the Western world²⁶⁻²⁸.

Chico Buarque²⁹ has recently recorded a song that expresses the context in which these human rights are firmly refuted when they are applicable to the other, especially if this other is poor, black and dweller of the most deprived communities in Rio de Janeiro (or in any other city with a reasonable level of economic development). His song ‘Caravanas’ pictures the horror with which a significant part of the high middle class, residing in *zona sul*, the area that comprises the corresponding neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, sees these periphery dwellers who insist in going to the beaches of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon: “*You must beat, you must kill, raise the shouting*”. This verse expresses the sentiment that has been spreading, for years, in the hegemonic mediatic discourse, which is discriminatory and authoritarian, reinforcing the proslavery vestiges of our cultural formation³⁰. It emphasizes the perception of a society divided between we and they – ‘we’ being invariably associated to the segments with higher capital (financial, cultural, social etc.), the ‘good people’; and ‘they’ being identified as people at least potentially wicked and, as denounced in the lyrics, ‘by chance’ being black or mulattos. The sentiment generated by this discriminatory classification that throws aside the idea of humanity and dignity is fear. As Chico Buarque²⁹ sings, “daughter of fear, rage is the mother of cowardice”.

The idea that ‘a good bandit is a dead bandit’, which seems to be increasingly supported by sectors of Brazilian middle classes, is present in the national news bulletins as

having apparently been applied in roughly explained cases of death of ‘suspects’ or even ‘bandits’, with no actual armed confrontation. It is also known that there is a multiplication of cases in which Brazilian citizens, human beings as anyone else, are eliminated for carrying a drilling machine, or an umbrella, or a mobile phone, that have been mistaken for a weapon; and in which ‘lost bullets’ usually find bodies of black, mulattos and other persons, as Caetano Velloso once sang, who are also “*almost black from being so poor*”³¹.

As stated by Jessé de Souza³⁰⁽⁸⁹⁾,

our proslavery heritage, [which] is now used to oppress all popular classes regardless of the color of the skin, even though the color of the back skin implies additional wickedness.

By way of conclusion

Will it be that we are witnessing a historic moment in which the ‘age of rights’, that Norberto Bobbio³² had announced, will suffer a ‘plot twist’ with liquid modernity, and will not fulfil the expectation of being not only a statement for all, but being really effective for all? Will it be that before being, in fact, universal, it will carry on not ensuring rights to the non-whites and/or non-Westerns, in Huntington’s classification? Or, in the cold popular perception, protecting only the richest in the rich countries and the richest in the not so rich countries. Maeda³³ has demonstrated how, in the field of labor law, this process has already been globally deflagrated with the ‘flexibilization’ of labor rights, from which she named her study ‘The Age of Zero Rights’ [free translation]. A recent news published on ‘The Guardian’³⁴ cited the ‘Civicus Monitor’ report, which alerts that civil rights are being seriously threatened globally. The threat to the right of free expression of thought and privacy, even in countries that present themselves as defenders of these basic rights, like the USA

(‘Patriotic Act’) and France (where some of the norms temporarily established after the 2015 terrorist attack were made permanent), has been spreading also to other countries in which the democratic fundamentals were supposedly consolidated. The 2018 report of the Civicus Monitor³⁵, ‘People Power Under Attack: A global analysis of threats to fundamental freedoms’, shows that the situation in the Americas is very severe. It informs that in 2017, 312 human rights defenders were murdered globally; of the total, 212 murders (over two thirds) occurred in the Americas. In 2018, the death of human rights defenders increased in ten countries in the region, including Brazil.

History shows us examples of the consequence of these policies of neglect of, and disregard for, the human condition of populational segments. The memories are not good. The mutual recognition of citizens, of humans, and the combat against inequalities and their social consequences cannot be seen as a mere ideological issue of the currents usually named ‘left-wing’, as neoconservative ideologists try to characterize, but rather as an ethical imperative. The maintenance and raise of large corporations’ interests, especially those linked to the armaments industry, cannot mean the death and despair of large populational contingents. The global population must make a stand; not only the impoverished people, but all the people who share this planet and interact with other humans must reflect on what is fair. It cannot be the option of only one political current. It is in this perspective that we defend an active citizenship that has democracy, dialogue, and the respect for cultural, religious, gender and other differences as its fundamentals, as guidance for action in all spaces and situations; and the end of racism, which marks our history and constitution as society. Thus, laic bioethics is inserted as a reflective practice of social life regarding issues of health, environment, morality of the use of animals, humanity’s future concerning researches that use humans and animals, which have reflections on the future generations,

affects the possibilities of future life, and the very defense of moral plurality.

There is no lack of scientific evidence to state that social inequities are harmful to health, as discussed by Rita Barata³⁶ in a clarifying study on this theme. Maintaining inequalities and even enlarging them, as it is currently verified, means throwing a larger contingent of human beings in the direction of becoming ill and facing premature death. Resistance to the increase of inequality is still very small; it is not yet capable of reducing its growing rhythm. Social justice occurs by means of the recognition of all humans, independently from gender, race, sexual orientation or insertion in the labor market, with diseases or deficiencies, as beings with immanent dignity. A human being does not lose his human condition for having committed a crime. The penal legislation, agreed upon by society, guided by the Constitution, establishes the rules for punishment; and none of them takes the human condition away from the transgressors. Whether it is for fear, greed, or lack of critical awareness, it seems that we will need additional efforts in the educational processes so that we are able to form solidary and critical citizens. Unfortunately, also in this regard, nowadays the winds in the continent do not seem quite favorable.

Perhaps, to conclude this reflection, we have no alternative but to recognize that the political discourse and practices presently appearing as winners of how to deal with the contemporary distress show that, once again, Agamben³⁷ is right when announcing that the ‘State of Exception’ has increasingly become the norm, and is more widespread. Possibly, this is also a sign of a new age.

Collaborators

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