

# UNIVERSITY AND SOCIAL PRIORITIES

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FOOD, EMPLOYMENT and EDUCATION – this was always professor Darcy Ribeiro's incisive answer when asked about Brazil's great problems. He was surely correct in his raw synthesis, but underlying it is a huge web of factors that require much more than the undertakings of circumstantial governments. This challenge, unceasing by its own nature, is a challenge for society as a whole. However great the topical successes we may have achieved, much will still remain to be done – even if only to improve the solutions that have been found.

If we wish to establish a concept for a more sweeping reflection, we might say that nowadays the dilemma of Brazil – and of the whole world, for that matter – is how to harmonize competitiveness and social justice. The demands of globalization in regard to technological innovations have reached a point in which no reversion is possible, inasmuch as they contribute to reduce the labor force, especially in industries. While the profile of the labor market is reconfigured with the expansion of the service sector, millions of families will be left without any income whatsoever – a truly frightening perspective. In face of this, there is an increased urgency to implement policies to support those that are vertically indigent, namely, the unemployed, the sick, and the ignorant, preferential victims of violence or of non-sustainable development.

Over the last one hundred years, demographic evolution in Brazil has been

steeper than in any other country of the Americas or the world<sup>1</sup>. We started off the century with a population of 17 million; in 1925, we were already 30 million; in 1950, 53 million; and in 1975, 108 million. We entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a population of approximately 170 million inhabitants – the result of a still high, albeit declining, birth rate, of a visibly diminishing mortality and of an ever-generous immigration policy. Brazil is the only country in the world that has undergone so impressive population growth over the last one hundred years. This requires a prompt improvement of the country’s social infrastructure.

The University of São Paulo, having set eyes on this picture, is mobilizing its internal community to reflect and propound solutions<sup>2</sup>. Let us initially consider the health issue, because the involvement of a university in this matter finds in health-related research its most strongly significant referential<sup>3</sup>.

## Health

In every country, progress in the health sciences has been responsible for increases in life expectancy. According to the World Health Organization, mortality rates have been declining significantly, even in developing countries, where average life expectancy was 62 years in 1990 and will reach almost 70 years by 2020. It is also foreseen that by 2020 Brazil will be among the ten countries with the largest ratio of elderly people. There is, furthermore, an ethical question implicit in the delicate context of public health. We cannot analyze it merely with data and statistical projections. While some people live to reach and reap a healthy old age, there are others who still starve to death or die from easily controllable diseases. In the United States,

1. Dupâquier, Jacques. *La population mondiale au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999.
2. A recent example was the series of seminars “The University of São Paulo Talks about...” that discussed issues such as health, violence, employment and labor relations, education, and the environment.
3. The seminar “The University of São Paulo Talks about Health” generated approximately 50 written contributions, comprising the most varied fields of investigation in the area. The texts, together with the lectures and the interventions, were published as a dossier by this journal.

for instance, the richest country in the world, approximately 40 million people have no health care plan. A morally unacceptable situation is thus established.

The university deals with the health issue on differentiated terms. It's unwise to view the health problem by resorting only to partial aspects of statistics. The university is critical. It has the obligation to see the other side, to go beyond appearances. And, health-wise at least, it is on this underside that lie our misfortunes.

The imperious need for new public policies in Brazil will not cease while Brazilians remain without shelter, food, jobs and mainly without health – the lack of the latter being more often than not associated with the lack of all the others.

Where health is concerned, the university must be a partner not only of governments, but rather of every social group that has a stake in the matter. In this sense, it is worth noting one of the arguments proposed by professor José Carvalheiro in an essay for another important dossier published by *Estudos Avançados*. Attempting to characterize the ideal milieu in which to conceive and implement public health policies, he rightly sought in the realm of political sociology the concept of *epistemic community*. For him, an epistemic community is not comprised of scientists only. It is a kind of *collection of thoughts*, aligning politicians, government officials, businesspeople and all those who share values regarding a specific topic of public interest<sup>4</sup>.

## Environment

The concept of epistemic community also applies to the protection of the environment, involving both the community that thinks and the community that acts. An ongoing articulation between them is necessary. In Brazil, environmental militancy arose in the mid-1970s. Some organizations immediately joined the scientific community, facing very powerful obstacles created by the political regime of the time. One has only to remember the awkward position of Brazil at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, when general Costa Cavalcanti, our government's representative, declared literally, to the astonishment of the civilized world: "A country that

4. Carvalheiro, José R. "Os desafios para a saúde". *Estudos Avançados*, vol. 13, no. 35, Jan/Apr 1999.

has not attained a minimally satisfactory level in providing the essential is in no conditions to veer considerable resources to the protection of the environment”.

That was a time when Brazil saw itself as a *great power-to-be* and launched successive *impact projects*, often hostile to nature. Alongside with massive deforestation and megahighways built as a propaganda effort, the repressive State was thus reinforced, limiting citizenship to such an extent as to practically nullify it.

That outlandish Brazilian declaration in Stockholm would be unthinkable in our present democratic regime. But we should always bear it in mind to illustrate how trailblazing was the role of environmental militancy in those days. It is important that today, in this *locus* of scientific activity that is the university, we reverently remember the effort of those pioneers in our good struggle. We know that the excesses of militant action often impair the best causes, but its paramount, in this case, to consider that they were useful to consolidate the environmental cause in Brazil.

The University of São Paulo has always been at the vanguard of this struggle – a struggle that has now become strategic and essential in the framework of the great national interests. Countless studies, dissertations, publications and seminars have been promoted by the various research groups dedicated to the issue of sustainable development.

Unlike modernization, which craves for progress at any cost, modernity conciliates economic advancement and social interests. The foremost result of modernization is the accumulation of advantages by a select few. Brazil, as Raymundo Faoro observed, has not always sought modernity and has often suffered the effects of modernization<sup>5</sup>. In this process of advancement in spurts, whereby each previous gush is undone by the next one from the same source, there are no social gains but only reinforcement of privileges and concentration of wealth. We should seek modernity, not its perverted version, modernization. And the path to attain this goal includes promoting ecological awareness at all levels: among government officials, among common citizens, among entrepreneurs.

5. Faoro, Raymundo. “A Questão Nacional: A Modernização”. *Estudos Avançados*, nº 14, Jan.-Apr. 1992.

## Security

Enhancing collective awareness of the phenomenon of violence, on the other hand, is a more ambitious and more complex goal. The perception of this phenomenon is not homogeneous in the various segments of society. To achieve a balanced view of the entire gamut of reactions is one of the obligations of the academy. Violence is not, as some mistakenly suppose, simply a matter for the police. It is a multifaceted question, which can and must also be dealt with by the university, and not merely by security agencies. The university should not attempt to develop action plans that magically eliminate criminality, but rather to provide governments with a comprehensive interpretation of the problem so as to help them tackle it. This should be made clear, because demands are frequently made with this sort of distorted and rash bias. The university should supposedly have plans for everything: public health, industrial policy, technological development, environment, unemployment, security. This is a misguided expectation. What a university can and must provide are the elements required to configure public policies, not the fully finished and definitive formats of such policies.

When the University of São Paulo was asked to help develop an emergency public security program, its Nucleus of Studies on Violence rose to the occasion and produced several studies with far-reaching recommendations. Initiatives such as this demonstrate that the university goes way beyond theoretical studies. However, its role is evidently not to conceive detailed operational plans to deal with violence. To conceive the university as a factory of proposals is to misunderstand its mission, which is to form minds and renew concepts.

Curbing violence is another cause that mobilizes societies all over the world<sup>6</sup>. It is undeniable that criminality – murder, larceny, kidnapping, rape and a host of hideous crimes – has reached an unbearable level in São Paulo. In coming to grips with this picture, there are segments that, although filled with the best of intentions, end up by performing their role in a distorted manner. Such is the case of certain campaigns against violence. In some of them, the irate overtone is remind-

6. Elliott, Delbert S., Beatrix A. Hamburg and Kirk R. Williams. *Violence in American Schools*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

ful of the rhetoric of extremist politicians. In others, the efforts to combat violence are used merely as an instrument of corporate marketing to enhance a brand image. One of these campaigns even sought the testimonial of a popular television host who resorts to violence between couples as a grotesque artifice to increase his program's ratings. There are serious risks in these well-meaning but wholly non-instructive initiatives<sup>7</sup>. Ideally, a campaign's sole interest should be the curbing of violence and, for this very reason, should be broadcast simultaneously in all the media – containing truly educational messages with no ulterior ideological or marketing objectives.

But it is not only the media that errs when approaching this matter. Communicators are not alone in their errors. Scholars also perpetrate unacceptable blunders. I must mention here a disastrous interview in the Brazilian press by Steven Levitt, professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, who was oddly quoted as an *expert on studies about violence*.

Professor Levitt, after spending no more than one week in Brazil, prescribes a series of guidelines that he deems are the definitive answer to eliminate violence in our country. Urged to make a comparative analysis of drug usage in Brazil and Colombia, he stated verbatim that “[...] Colombia is the drug exporter and Brazil is the pusher”<sup>8</sup>. Such simplification is as preposterous as saying that the United States are a country of president killers because Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy were both violently assassinated there. But for professor Steven Levitt even such nonsense was not enough; responding to a question, he stated that if he had \$100,000 to invest in a community, he would not invest in the education of the young but only in police apparatus. However, even while demanding more police in the streets, he contradictorily admits that “[...] I was at the Jacarezinho shantytown and had no problems. The only moment I felt fear was when two policemen accosted me”. The interview was an offense to legitimate academic reflection on such a delicate and complex manner as urban violence. Contrary to what our young visitor sought to do, violence is not an issue that can be dealt with by mechanically applying the cold logic of economic theory.

7. Ramonet, Ignacio. *La tyrannie de la communication*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1999.

8. *Época*, n° 62, July 26, 1999.

Another professor (ironically also from the same University of Chicago) scandalized his country's academic community by allying himself with those that advocate the indiscriminate use of firearms. Indifferent to the recent and terrible episodes in which teenagers shot to death many of their fellow students in an American high school, professor John R. Lott, Jr. published a book called *More Guns, Less Crime*<sup>9</sup>. In this work, by cleverly manipulating statistical relationships and dissecting social behavior as if examining a financial statement, professor Lott opposed the rightful efforts of president Clinton, who has requested from Congress more rigid rules limiting access to firearms. Until we understand better which segments of the population resort to this dangerous expedient to defend themselves when threatened in their security by the impunity and the ever-more daring actions of bandits, we must not allow such a desperate thesis to prosper in the Academy, where reason and equipoise should prevail.

In the United States, the firearm culture has a long tradition: approximately 86 million people own up to 240 million firearms. If even the American government is attempting to curb this dangerous habit, all the more should Brazilian authorities follow suit, in spite of the strong resistance they are facing. The time is ripe for the Brazilian university to join the debate and enlighten the hearts and minds of people with better reflections.

The idea of arresting, punishing and disseminating the use of weapons naturally flows into the thesis that poverty rates bear no direct relationship to violence. The challenge of the university is to show the full extent of this relationship and the importance of preventive measures, although this does not imply abandoning police repression to assure the safety of the community – parts of which, it must be said, have been refuting public policies identified with the protection of human rights.

It is the duty of any plural institution, such as the university, to show society that the democratic regime in no way minimizes strict repression of crime. The idea that only coercive regimes inhibit banditry has no historical underpinning. Even here in Brazil, during totalitarian periods, there was no reduction of criminality.

9. Lott Jr., John R. *Mais Armas, Menos Crimes*, São Paulo, Makron Books, 1999.

True democracy does not tolerate violence – practiced either by the State or by individuals outside the law. Democracy must assure public peace, respect for property, and the security of families. Families from all classes, including those who can't count on private security and those who have no other assets other than their own bereft lives.

## Work

There is no greater bereavement than being out of work. The university must evolve and expound very clearly its view of the problem, inasmuch as it reflects the most important social issue of our time. Work is the thread that sews together all human history. Unemployment, which today afflicts millions of Brazilians, is the greatest want of consideration by State for its citizens. Unemployment also leads the individual to its most painful crises, that of self-inconsiderateness<sup>10</sup>.

We know that an irreversible revolution is taking place in the world of work: the concept of labor has undergone radical changes in every country. Evidently, the particularities of these changes vary between poor and rich nations, men and women, and the various regions of each country. But the fact is that today employability precedes employment in the list of concerns. Standing between the increasingly rare job and the worker that wishes to fill it is an unheard-of volume of requirements. These requirements are no longer restricted to the practical realm of the work to be done and also involve a worker's intellectual ability to adapt to technological innovations – innovations that may arise on the very next day he or she is hired. It is no longer enough for employees to mechanically perform their tasks; they must also perform a nurturing role. They must not only follow orders, but also propound new ideas and solutions.

This new reality implies an overall redefinition of the attitudes of various sectors, especially in education, in business and in labor unions<sup>11</sup>. One cannot ignore

10. Centro de Psicologia Aplicada ao Trabalho. *Cadernos de Psicologia Social do Trabalho*, São Paulo, Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de Psicologia, 1998, vol. 1, nº 1.

11. International Labour Office. *Employing Youth: Promoting Employment-intensive Growth*, Geneve, 1999.



the facts. New economic scenarios suggest that jobs, as currently conceived, will tend to disappear and be increasingly replaced by autonomous work. Nevertheless, society will still have the obligation to provide the means by which individuals can assure not only their survival, but their full material and spiritual well-being.

The university has an important role to perform in this context. Being vocationally critical, it must diligently embrace the new and delicate universe of analyzing work. Even concepts that attempt to modernize labor relations must undergo continuous scrutiny and refinement. For instance, it might be useful to limit the flexibility of labor contracts. Even companies are asking for this precaution, because they believe that excessively flexible and short-term contracts are a stimulus for low employee loyalty<sup>12</sup>.

No item in the national agenda could be more relevant. In seeking appropriate policies to further this element, it is also important for the university to encompass the dimension of solidarity, one of the dearest academic values. It is not merely a matter of compassion toward the destitute, but of taking on a proactive stance. If the new age determines that having skills is the only access to work, what will become of the elderly who did not have time to recycle themselves? What will become of the young who have no economic means to respond to the demands of the market? How to definitely eradicate child labor? How to improve our country's economic model in order to provide greater support for production and to enhance professional opportunities?

## Education

If many questions remain without answer with regard to jobs, many others also persist when we talk about education in Brazil. Questions pertaining not only to the education we provide in our academic benches, nor only to formal education at all levels, but also to education as an exercise of citizenship conveyed through broad and diffuse means: at school, by socializing, in the family, at work. For today's university, education is no longer simply an internal routine. It has become a per-

12. Reichheld Frederick F. and Thomas Teal. *The Loyalty Effect. The Hidden Force behind Growth, Profits and Lasting Value*, Boston, HBSP, 1996.

manent goal that must be contemplated in the national spectrum of public policies – and continuously receive the fruits of our specific studies and our reflection.

We now arrive at another social priority. Education is the only value that is simultaneously present in both the rights and the duties of each individual. Everyone deserves the benefits of instruction and, once instructed, everyone should adhere to the pivotal rules of citizenship: solidarity, mutual respect, obligation to be useful<sup>13</sup>.

Having established this general principle, let us contemplate the concrete reality of education in the present day. Here education has a double face. On one hand, it centers on material variables and has to do with available resources: salaries of teachers, school equipment, income distribution. On the other, it focuses on theoretical matrices wherein discussion thrives, without any foreseeable agreement, as to the most adequate pedagogical method.

There is a consensus on the precariousness of budgets, although the federal government has recently made considerable efforts to attenuate this situation, at least with regard to the so-called fundamental education (elementary + middle school). But at this level the actions of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) are merely normative. In practical terms, state and municipal governments, with rather broad latitude, are wholly responsible. To demand effective solutions exclusively from the MEC is to rely excessively on bureaucratic norms and underestimate the question of rationalizing expenses. In this perspective, the Fundef, jointly managed by states and municipalities, with eventual aid from the federal government, is a feasible solution – one that naturally calls for improvements, but one that deserves to be discussed and not dismissed. Fundamental education, however, is an issue that cannot be reduced to a mere dispute between municipal *versus* state control. At the core of everything is the serious social problem of a bad income distribution. While the tremendous social unevenness and the overall situation of misery that affects broad segments of the population persist, access to school, even if free of charge, will be impaired.

With regard to higher education, the MEC's sole responsibility is to ascertain the proper equation of federal universities, clearly still a matter of discord. The

13. Morin, Edgar. *La tête bien faite: repenser la réforme, repenser la pensée*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1999.

autonomy of the institutions, which depends on the State transferring the funds that assure their maintenance, must be associated with performance factors – these factors would determine who would get which funds. In brief, this is the position of the country’s major research universities. The problem, however, does exhaust itself with a mere settling of accounts – even if this topic, more than any other one, necessarily attracts the attention of all stakeholders<sup>14</sup>.

The expansion of the so-called “medium education”, i.e., high schools, and how to improve their performance, are challenges for state governments, although the federal government has recently taken the initiative of implementing the Enem – still a controversial program, but one that may at least result in mapping out our deficiencies. To use figures often invoked by professor José Goldemberg, private high schools account for only 30% of enrollments; the other 70% of students are enrolled in public, schools, most of them run by state governments – with a very low participation of municipal governments (4%) and an even lower participation of the federal government (3%). But this ratio of 70% should not be seen as an indicator of good performance. In Brazil, for instance, only 17% of the 15- to 19-year-old population are enrolled in high schools, compared to 55% in Mexico, just to establish a comparison in Latin America. Among the wholly-developed countries, the highest rate of enrollment for this age bracket is Japan’s, 96%. Brazil’s deficiency is rooted on the extremely low number of poor students who finish their fundamental education<sup>15</sup>. Once again, we are faced here with a basic problem, the country’s wretched income distribution.

Every Brazilian priority being discussed in the academy has, either as cause or as effect, the social issue – summarized by Darcy Ribeiro in the triad food/education/employment. That is why the university has insistently urged the government to give this issue the same kind of forceful attention it gave to the policies that stabilized the country’s currency. The importance of adjusting public accounts and permanently

14. Instituto de Estudos Avançados. *A Presença da Universidade Pública*, São Paulo, Universidade de São Paulo, 2000.

15. Goldemberg, José. “O Repensar da Educação no Brasil”. *Estudos Avançados*, vol. 7, nº 18, May.-Aug. 1993.

controlling inflation is undeniable. Monetary stability has made even clearer the socioeconomic gaps that exist between the various segments that comprise our society. Over the last five years, society has paid a very high price for this increasing and threatening fragmentation. It is now time for its counterpart, at the risk of compromising social cohesion – a decisive factor in the governance we all desire.

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