

Liberal democracy or republican democracy?

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Fernando Schöler is a brilliant liberal intellectual. He recently wrote a beautiful article on this *Folha* in honor of John Rawls - the great progressive liberal political philosopher who renewed political philosophy when he published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 in the United States. Rawls was not a neoliberal, he defended neither radical economic liberalism nor an exacerbated individualism that define neoliberalism.

In the mid-nineteenth century liberals became conservative, and since the beginning of the twentieth century, defenders of the democracy they were previously opposed to. But of an adjective democracy that they call "liberal democracy". They thus express their Panglossian conservatism, their belief that rich countries live "in the best of all possible worlds".

I respect political liberalism, because it was within its framework that, in the 18th century, civil rights were defined and began to be guaranteed, but I know the harm that its individualist turn has caused to American democracy. That is why I prefer to call the best democracies in the world today, such as the Danish or Swiss, "republican democracies", which reject exacerbated individualism and defend the priority of the public interest over individual interests.

Schöler recalls that Rawls defined two principles of justice. The first, that of equal opportunity; the second, the "difference principle" – the claim we could admit inequality as long as its causes benefit everyone, and there are no alternatives that would benefit the least favored.

The two principles were presented by Rawls as the Kantian result of the use of moral reason, but I cannot help but see in them their historical conditioning - the fact that his book was written in the United States in the postwar period.

Equal opportunity are "the American dream" that never came true. It is a meritocratic principle that needs to be critically evaluated.

The principle of difference reflects the success of American capitalism at that time, when productivity continued to increase. Inequality was huge, but taxes were progressive, and everyone was experiencing an improvement in their standard of living.

Although Rawls does not say this, his assumption was that the United States of his time was not far from the ideal of justice. I knew this capitalism and I understand that optimism, because I studied there eighteen months between 1960 and 1961. It was impressive the

cohesion of American society at that time, the pride of being an American that we saw in people, and his conviction that American democracy was the model for the rest of the world.

Sixty years later, the picture is different. Taxes have become regressive, inequality has increased, the rate of growth has decreased, the standard of living of half the American population has stagnated, social cohesion has disappeared, and today American democracy is approaching a plutocracy.

The new historical facts that explain this decay were the neoliberal turn of 1980 and the abandonment of republicanism. It was the plunge of American society into economic liberalism and a radically individualistic political liberalism. Turned from a country that had always been developmental (it kept its tariffs on imports of manufactured goods high until 1939) and started to become social with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.

The neoliberal turn has led rich capitalism to abandon social democratic principles, and, in the case of the United States, republican principles that have been influential since the American Revolution.

Today, liberal democracy is the political regime of polarized societies in which political opponents are turned into enemies. It is the democracy of “a world on barricades”, as Schüler points out.

Barricades that would not need to exist if democracy was a republican democracy; if it was not based on individualism, but on civism; if it was not only about the rights, but also about the obligations that each citizen has for his nation.

Schüler says that we live in open societies, not communities. In fact, to think that mass societies can be communities is utopian. But we can move in that direction, instead of moving away from it, we do not reinforce liberal individualism, if we define republicanism as a greater value, and we aim at a republican democracy.