

Chasing the Flame in a Networked World

On a typical English rainy day last November a learned Brazilian voice charmed a large Oxford University crowd gathered at St Antony's College to watch the annual Sergio Vieira de Mello lecture. Former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the illustrious speaker, was no stranger to England or to Oxford. He had taught in Cambridge during the 70s. In 2002, Oxford's "admiration of his scholarship, wisdom and culture" earned him an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law. His contribution was also fundamental for the establishment of the, now sadly closed, Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies. Ex-President Cardoso's international notoriety, acclaim and the unerring eloquence and elegance of his remarks make him an easy figure to appreciate.

And yet, there was something else of magical to at the same time pride and sadden ourselves with on that rainy November day. A highly noteworthy Brazilian was speaking in Oxford to remind us of the unyielding courage, determination and compassion of another Brazilian who had suffered a tragic death whilst in selfless service to mankind: Sergio Vieira de Mello. The magic in the lecture was in the remembrance of Ambassador Vieira de Mello's fight for the protection and fulfilment of human rights, but it was also in the unconveyed but implicit reminder of the need that we Brazilians, like those two men, recognize and take up the challenges of an irreversibly globalized world. Ex-President Cardoso's lecture was a compelling alert for the problems that an information-intensive networked society poses to human rights in a world which becomes increasingly smaller but ever more complex. And it was also a call for action.

The challenges he mentioned are all very intimately related. They are all prompted by the different ways in which contemporary societies are revisiting their notions of time and space and facing the dissolution of boundaries long since established – boundaries between the state and society; the local and the global; between peoples and their different normative realities. First, ex-President Cardoso noted the ever more hesitant path between universalism and cultural relativism – the increasing difficulty in agreeing on minimum sets of standards for human rights (though the emerging consensus on some very fundamental issues such as crimes against humanity, violence against civilians, amongst others). Such difficulty, we may note, finds its most natural setting in a world in which values are dragged around through the network of networks; either clashing with or modifying other values they may meet along the way. Janus-like, as others, this challenge also unveils an opportunity. In an increasingly plural world, more voices come to compose the public sphere and shape deliberation, feeding the very process by which we may hope to reach agreement on overarching matters.

Second, we notice the growing role of non-state actors, which at the same time present us the threat of organized crime and the wonders of an informational commons. Some authors had spoken of a semiotic democracy. Ex-President Cardoso mentioned the transformations on models of authority that take place as power shifts “from states to societies and from vertical organizations to flexible networks”. Third,

the outreach and flexibility of these networks also enable the swift manufacture and diffusion of economic crises, and invite us to question “the real foundations of our societies”; to ponder, while we see poor countries suffering for something they did not cause, on the “conditions for the establishment of a new social contract” – one which would have human rights, and not money, at its core.

Fourth, as all this whirlwind revolves our social values and confronts our value-laden institutions with absolute forms of will, with terror, from distant reigns or within our own borders, the very framework that defines our rights and freedoms rests under peril. The *rule of law* succumbs – and with it our protections against supreme evils such as torture and authoritarianism, which may tempt us with easy answers for fearful times. Fifth, and lastly, those countries which managed to get through the villainies of authoritarian regimes need now to find a delicate equilibrium in the public will between peace and justice, future and past, reconciliation and truth in dealing with practices carried out during the years of authoritarianism. To which extent must reparation be sought for; how to implement it when archives have been destroyed; how to pursue it without renewing previous periods of social upheaval?

Ex-President Cardoso believes all those challenges must ultimately be met by the very voices that set the contours of public reason in contemporary societies. Our best safeguard, he says, “is the sentiment of a global culture of participation and responsibility”. Such culture is expected to emerge as new actors are called upon to take part in public processes of deliberation, and as they come to understand, with Professor Cardoso, that “human rights, as democracy, are a human invention. They are not a given, but a construction, rooted in the history and culture of each society. They are never defined once and for all. As an expression of human needs and a result of human action their framing is a work in progress; an unfinished journey”. And it is this journey of empowerment and duties, of possibilities and responsibilities the one on which we must embark if we are to meet the challenges for human rights in the 21st Century. Social discourse is the way by which dissolving boundaries will be recast, and a human rights-based social contract will unravel the most fundamental perplexities of our network society. But this will happen only insofar as the public sphere is faithful to its responsibilities – in a new, perfectionist culture of responsibility to which the recently elected US President Barack Obama, in choir, has called the world upon. Only then will we be in the right path, chasing the flame.

Moving my thoughts back from Ex-President Cardoso’s formidable speech – from his evocation of a “global culture” – towards the reality that surrounds me here in Oxford, little in it made me think that we Brazilians are living up to the calls made in Ex-President Cardoso’s speech. How to speak of taking part in a global culture when so few are the learned Brazilians that even dare to face reality abroad? An article published last year by Valor Economico, a Brazilian newspaper, explains that while only 10% of Brazilians abroad seem to have a university degree, 41% of Chinese emigrants (and 53% of Indian emigrants!) do have one. Illustrious as Ex-President Cardoso or not, it is not exactly common to see Brazilian faces at the University of

Oxford. With only 23 students and 8 members of academic staff, Brazil is easily outshined by China, whose 695 students and 119 members of academic staff (excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) provide the university with an increasingly oriental semblance. Demographic factors alone do not offer a satisfactory explanation; China's population is less than 7 times larger than the population of Brazil. Are our universities infinitely superior to Chinese ones? Do people generally want to stay in Brazil while Chinese people prefer to leave their country? This sounds like very simplistic reasoning; and it is. On the one hand, China has several universities that fare amongst the very best in the world. On the other hand, migration of Brazilians to Europe is easily verifiable; Portuguese resounds in the streets and shops in town. Brazilians are here. They just are not here to study.

Not that the greatest challenges facing human rights are taking place in leading universities around the world. The point here is the far more limited and yet very important one that to understand and address those challenges we need institutions that prepare us for so. Organisms such as the British Council have been of paramount importance for ensuring that a number of educated Brazilians are exposed to foreign educational, professional and otherwise cultural settings. But such flux needs to be enhanced by migration policies that encourage international mobility while at the same time making easier the development of links and interchange between those who leave and those who stay. Educators and learners need to treasure the global village; to appreciate and master every possibility of engagement in the collective processes of deliberation referred to by Ex-President Cardoso. Cultural and academic isolation does not enable us to do so. We need to be connected to the international stage beyond economic losses prompted by financial automatons; beyond the possibilities of illiterate kids with subsidized computers. We must travel across the globe and carry with us the felicitous lessons we have learned in these twenty something years of our young democracy. These are lessons we have the duty, the responsibility to teach. If a new, human rights-based social contract is to be formed, we are certainly a relevant voice to be heard beyond occasional visits of illustrious personalities and tragic deaths of selfless heroes.

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