

# Ethics and democracy in times of crisis

## *Ética e democracia em tempos de crise*

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**ABSTRACT** The authors discuss the idea of crisis as something regular and systematic in the capitalist system, situating moments of acute crisis as an inherent part of the political struggle. With a historical perspective, they seek to demonstrate that the transformations and the advances achieved in the culture of rights are still very recent and unconsolidated. They argue that the strengthening of individualism in the consumer society is inherent in it and that the projects of collective life need to value the policy and the search for a minimum ethics, which enables coexistence.

**KEYWORDS** Ethics. Politics. Civil rights. Human rights. Democracy.

**RESUMO** Os autores discutem a ideia de crise como algo regular e sistemático no sistema capitalista, situando os momentos de crise aguda como parte inerente à luta política. Com uma perspectiva histórica, procuram demonstrar que as transformações e os avanços obtidos na cultura dos direitos ainda são muito recentes e não consolidados. Argumentam que o fortalecimento do individualismo na sociedade de consumo é inerente a este e que os projetos de vida coletiva precisam valorizar a política e a busca de uma ética mínima, que possibilite a convivência.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Ética. Políticas. Direitos civis. Direitos humanos. Democracia.

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The objectives of this essay are to reflect about some of the different faces that the current crisis in Brazil presents and to analyze them in search of an understanding that contributes, as much as possible, to think of political alternatives for the future. We will not address here the economic crisis, nor the political crisis, nor the one of representativeness, trying to restrict ourselves to those of the moral field.

There is a common idea that we are living an ethical crisis, or a moral crisis, or, yet, a crisis of values in our Country. In fact, one of the reasons for the uncertainty about the 'crisis' is possibly in the confusion that many people do between ethics and morality and in its relation with values in general. In order to clarify this issue, we state that we understand morality as the norms imposed on us by the social environment in which we live in, norms that are external to us. We have, therefore, different moral norms, that may be religious or professional, for example. On its turn, ethics is understood as a second-round discourse about moral problems. That is, ethics is a critical reflection on morality. So, it would not be correct to speak of a code of professional ethics, but a code of professional morality. However, this distinction is more reserved for academic discussions themselves, since the distinction is not commonly used in society in general. Let us retain, therefore, the distinction.

Many associate this moral crisis with a specific political party; others, to democracy as a whole; others, however, prefer to blame human nature, narcissism, which is increasingly establishing itself as a characteristic of Post-Modernity. Anyway, is there a crisis? Is this crisis brazilian? Is a crisis of humanity, of Post-Modernity?

Let us talk initially about the crisis. Its meaning, *sensu lato*, refers to any significant change in the *status quo* of something. Thus, we can talk about the growth crisis, in general, referring to the changes that occur in an individual as a result of their growth

(be it physiological or not); 'nervous breakdown', when the emotional stability of an individual is shaken, either because of what it is; middle age crisis, marriage crisis and other situations involving individuals in isolation. But, we also have social crises, that affect communities, such as the economic crisis, when the regular parameters of the functioning and assessment of the economy are significantly affected; political crisis, when the political stability of a community is significantly altered, and so forth. But we can, also, refer to the ethical crisis, moral crisis and even crisis of values. But is it pertinent and appropriate to focus our reflection on the idea of crisis as something destabilizing and with the inherent conception of threat that it often brings?

Strictly speaking, crisis is inherent to life, both individual and social. We comprehend that nothing is static, but, rather, in permanent transformation. The physical world changes, even without the intervention of man, only by the action of elements of nature, such as air, water, fire and physical particles. A stone is molded either by the action of the wind, be it water or even fire. A biological organism grows and develops and is being transformed permanently, even after the so-called life is extinguished.

In the same way, the social world is also in permanent transformation. Societies change, the ways humans relate to each other change, how they organize, how they work, how they have fun. Yes, and these changes are often related to the development of technique and knowledge, as a result of the human development itself. Does this mean that all crises will bring positive results? Are changes always good or, at least, desirable? Let's keep this question for later on.

Previously, we must introduce the value assessment perspective. And what is value? We can generically say that we value what is considered important, that is, that on which we make an affective investment. Thus, what we value is what we understand to be

relevant and meaningful, in whatever area. The situations in which the processes of transformation, inherent to the individual/social being, intensify and the possibility of changes becomes more evident will be more or less valued according to the expectations we have, with our assessment of the possible results of the process, albeit partial.

And how are values determined? Are they fixed and immutable? Of course not. They vary in the individual according both to their age, maturity, experiences, as well as their culture and social environment. How come? Thus, the smaller the social group, the greater the chance that the values of the members of these subsets will be similar. That is, more closed communities, such as orthodox religious communities, political communities, ethnic communities, are more likely to share their values, or, at least, those fundamental ones. Durkheim (2013), in his classic study about suicide, has demonstrated one of the possible effects of this phenomenon. In military communities, where the most valued is the fulfillment of orders, the submission of the will and life itself to the common good, which is expressed by its leaders, suicide is more frequent, since self-attachment is not the value that is stimulated and defended. On the other side, in the world jewish community, despite the diaspora, which has a large support network in which individual well-being and the very survival of the community members are some of its main objectives, the suicide rate is very low (the religion itself that many share, with their inherent values, reinforces this valuation).

That way, we can comprehend that, although we are able to autonomously make decisions about what is most appropriate, fair, right, our choices are rarely independent of the social environment in which we are inserted or in an individualistic perspective. Turiel (2002) emphasizes this issue in conceptualizing moral autonomy, remembering Piaget, when emphasizing that individuals construct their personality and their

values in interactions with others, in interdependent perspectives. However, these relationships would not cause individualities to be nullified, since people do not combine as gases, but require that they maintain their individualities.

A few years ago, the developmental psychology group of ABRAPP (Brazilian Association of Post-graduation in Psychology) proposed that its members research and write articles and reflections on the question: 'Values are in crisis or is there a crisis of values?'. Among the various works produced and published in a book, which had as its title a variant of the original question, we would like to highlight one, from Tognetta and Vinha (2009), from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp). In this study, they investigated, in a group of high school students in Campinas, what made them indignant. The purpose was to identify the perception of justice they had and in which scopes and situations they perceived injustices and manifested indignation at it. The observed results were highly worrying, as most of these young people expressed outrage especially in situations where their individual interests were threatened. The perception of injustice toward the other was far short of what one would want or expect. Is this another indication of how individualistic our society has become? That the perception of others and solidarity with them are no longer valued by our youth?

The values of our society have changed and change over time, and not just those of our society. If we pull away our view of the recent facts and try to consider the changes that have occurred in the last hundred, two hundred or three hundred years, we will verify that the changes are very profound. Luc Ferry (2009), in his book 'Facing the Crisis', makes a brief analysis of the transformations in western societies since the industrial revolution, in order to demonstrate that the traditional values of western families have been deconstructed. And it is good that this have occurred and that it occurs.

However, the changes are not so old and are not so settled like that. As an example, he mentions facts related to the feminine condition: until 1975, in France, the wife needed to ask her husband's authorization to open a bank account; only in April 1991, the last canton of Switzerland granted women the right to vote! In our Country, despite having been approved, in 2002, a new Civil Code, replacing that which have entered into force in 1916, several anachronisms related to, moreover, the female condition (DIAS, 2016) still persist. There are several social actors in permanent clash with the purpose of trying to consolidate achievements, while others resist the new times. These conflicts, however, are part of the process of social change, they promote advances and retreats, follow the transformations in social relations in general. What is important in this process is that the principles of democratic coexistence are preserved, that the policy space is neither undermined nor minimized.

At this point of the reflection, we can recall the thinking of Richard Sennet (1999), in his already classic study published with the title 'The fall of the public man: the tyrannies of intimacy'. In it, the author defends the idea that the emptying of public life and the excessive valuation of personal life was a process that began with the fall of the 'Old Regime' and the formation of an urban and capitalist culture. For Sennet, this hypertrophy of the personal life also influenced the public life, making individual characteristics more relevant than the perspective of the social class itself. In this sense, Ferry seems to agree with Sennet, in that he perceives that there has been a real deconstruction of the traditional values related to the Old Regime, which culminated, at least until now, in this overvaluation of consumption, as the ultimate end of the economic process. The idea that the economy must provide the development of the common good has been subverted in favor of consumerism and individualism.

Max Weber (2004) identified that capitalism was founded on its beginnings by the calvinist influence, which advocated that its followers would have been called by the divine, who would have been 'chosen' and, therefore, would need to be good not only at specific ritualistic tasks, but, also, in their personal lives and at work. Because they have been 'chosen', sin would be condemned and not forgiven with a visit to the parish priest. Weber himself comes to the concept of disenchantment of the world by referring both to the demystification or desacralization of life (in the religious sense) and to the rationalization of the social world that the capitalist development promoted. When capitalism operates on the basis of competition (understood both at the level of individuals, firms and even States), the need for innovation and transformation is striking, and competition is effectively the spring that drives society. Whether they are the holders of the means of production that compete for the consumer markets and the benefits of the State, or the workers who compete for better conditions of survival. This context is very serious and worrying in countries such as ours, where social inequality reaches alarming proportions and the State, historically connives with the overvaluation of profits and the with exploitation of workers. Not forgetting its patrimonialistic, that is, what promotes a certain blurring in the lines that separate public and private interests for the benefit of the private interests of the rulers and their allies.

In a period of major social distress in Brazil, which preceded the so-called Revolution of 1930, the then president of Minas Gerais, Antônio Carlos de Andrada, dissatisfied with the political movements of the people from São Paulo, began to articulate the candidacy of Getúlio Vargas and pronounced the celebrated phrase that marked this historical moment: "Let us make the revolution before the people do it!" (FGV, 2016). Thus, even if ruling elites eventually disagree

with their specific interests, in general, they do what is necessary to prevent or control an eventual prevalence of workers' interests. This is a somewhat stereotyped vision, but only seeks to glimpse a perspective in which power is not easily ceded or divided by those who hold it.

In order to get closer to present times, we will appeal to the analysis that has been developed by Jurandir Freire Costa and that was presented in 1988, in the article 'Narcissism in dark times'. In it, Costa uses what Slavoj Žižek called the cynical view of the world. This, on the other hand, took the concept borrowed from Peter Sloterdijk, in his classic 'Critique of Cynical Reason'. For Costa,

Certain patterns of social behavior in Brazil today are sufficiently stable and recurrent, so that we can affirm the existence of a particular form of fear and reaction to panic, which is the 'narcissistic culture of violence'. This culture is nourished and nurtured by social decadence and the discrediting of justice and law. [...] In the culture of violence, the future is denied or represented as a threat of annihilation or destruction. In a manner that the output presented is the immediate fruition of the present; Submission to the status quo and systematic and methodical opposition to any project of change that involves social cooperation and non-violent negotiation of particular interests. (COSTA, 1988, S.P.).

We are, thereby, identifying some of the bases that permeate our time and the crisis we are experiencing: it is not only a Brazilian crisis, it is not a crisis that is simply economic, it is not a crisis of isolated values alone, but a crisis inherent in the capitalist development and the systematic transformations that occur in societies in general. But we have some peculiarities or specificities when we look at Brazil. It is a crisis in a peripheral country, with a political and cultural development marked by poverty and the struggle

for survival (compatible, probably, with the development of our capitalism), with an authoritarian, undemocratic and patrimonialistic tradition. The efficiency with which the Brazilian elite, with its traditional allies in the mass media, controlled and controls the access to information and the possibilities of developing the critical (and why not political?) consciousness of the population is undeniable. The creativity with which they formulate and reformulate their strategies for controlling society through the educational system is extraordinary, as expressed in the current proposals of the No-Party School and the Reform of Secondary Education, that may result in a significant increase of inequalities.

Thus, in the current Brazilian crisis, it is more reasonable to understand it as a reaction to a small attempt to modernize the Brazilian capitalism, expressed by the understanding that the expansion of the consumer market and the expansion of foreign commercial partnerships in a South-South perspective could sustain the economic development, improve the living conditions of the population and maintain the interests of the dominant elite preserved. It seems to us to be a fact that the Workers' Party (PT) made a choice in the 2002 electoral contest, and that was already defended by several sectors of the Brazilian left wing since the fight against dictatorship: the formation of a wider democratic front to conquer the federal power and govern seeking to reconcile and negotiate the different interests. In this perspective, the PT forged an alliance with the Liberal Party, which ensured the candidate for vice president, and the rest is history, with the attraction of the one who always tried to present himself as the core in Brazilian politics, namely, the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB). But this same elite seems to prefer oligarchic practices to liberal practices, not realizing that deep social inequality is not good for today's capitalism.

We know, today, that many of the practices adopted by segments of the PT for some, or by its main leaders, for others, have repeated the corrupt practices that have always characterized much of the national political practice. In the name of the 'wide societal arc', it gave way to points and questions that would not be ethically acceptable. Previous governments have always behaved like that, but punishments, effectively, only emerged when one tried to ignore the wider political game that was being played, as in the case of the Collor government.

But we must also ask ourselves: have the ethically questionable behaviors of important segments of the PT been in fact the determinants of their downfall and true demoralization? It is still early to have a broader understanding of the issue, but it seems to us that objective international geopolitical issues may also be playing a central role in this dispute: the discovery of oil in the Brazilian pre-salt layers (in a conjecture when wars are systematically declared for energy disputes, as occurs, for example, in Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Crimea and Ukraine, among many others); the search for really independence in foreign policy, as well as in economic actions; alliance with the other Brics countries (Russia, India, China and South Africa) in building an alternative to the World Bank, just to name a few. After all, if the interests of the national elites were in fact not being significantly affected by the PT governments, why did they abandon those who treated them so well for almost ten years?

Perhaps the understanding of the concept of coloniality will help us to better understand this situation. Coloniality was first described by Quijano (1998) and can be understood as something that transcends colonialism itself (that is, the end of colonial relations) and is configured to maintain subordination relations in the interstate capitalist system (FIORI, 2007). The model of colonization meant not only economic

domination, but, also, cultural domination. As Assis (2014) pointed out:

The construction of hierarchies of race, gender and modes of appropriation of natural resources, can be seen as contemporary for the establishment of an international division of labor and territories, marked by asymmetric relations between central and peripheral economies. From the perspective of coloniality, the old colonial hierarchies, which were grouped as European versus non-European, remained entrenched and trapped in the international division of labor. (ASSIS, 2014, P. 614).

In this perspective, national economic elites do not antagonize international interests, since their dependence articulates them. In Brazil, we can understand the idea of the 'inferiority complex' as an expression of the perpetuation of colonial ideology, which expresses as something 'natural' the disqualification of miscegenation.

Costa, in the mentioned work, seeks to explain how the cynic reason manifests in a society such as the Brazilian one. For him, if the cultural device of a people is systematically attacked, the mechanisms of protection of this society are finally withdrawn to face the disorder itself. The repeated discourse that society is not capable of repressing crime, that the traffickers are loose, that the corrupt are loose, that the corrupters are loosed along with the thieves, as the so-called 'dog-world programs' promote daily in the televisions of our Country. This culture of violence is also present in the selectivity of the action of Justice, in the trivialization of the infractions committed by the socially and politically powerful who can remain protected despite the laws that they violate. Even now, when whistle-blowing has earned prizes, those who confess their crimes are condemned to continue living in the enjoyment of their lives.

For José Castelo (1988), although it is necessary to distinguish in terms of proportions

between the individual who parks in triple lane to expect the child in front of the college, the student who cheats on the test or the teacher who plagiarizes, the assailant who kills his victim and the man who believes he has the right to rape whom he imagines provokes him by being dressed sexily, all act with the illusion that they will not be punished by their actions. This disqualification of the law also presents an attack on politics. A stimulus so that the citizen no longer relies on the idea of a common good. Christopher Lasch, in 1986, presented what he called the 'The Minimal Self', which would be a strategy or solution not to succumb emotionally to the threats whose controls are outside the governance of individuals.

In an age charged with problems, daily life becomes an exercise in survival. You live one day at a time. You rarely look back, for fear of succumbing to a debilitating nostalgia; and when you look ahead, it is to see how to ensure against the disasters that everyone is waiting for. Under such conditions, individuality becomes a kind of luxury item, out of place in an era of impending austerity. Individuality supposes a personal story, friends, family, a sense of situation. Under harassment, the self contracts in a defensive core, on guard against adversity. Emotional balance requires a minimum self, not the sovereign self of the past. [...] the concern with the individual, so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with psychic survival. Confidence in the future was lost. [...] The risk of individual disintegration stimulates a sense of individuality that is not 'sovereign' or 'narcissistic' but simply besieged. (LASCH, 1986, P. 9).

The disqualification of life in common and the repeated attacks on the sense of collectivity contribute to the disqualification of politics as a path and legitimate space for the search for the necessary consensuses, even that temporary, for common life. Our Country, which has no democratic tradition

and whose political consciousness is repeatedly undermined and destroyed by those in power, easily succumbs to the destruction of its hopes, which are, generally, perceived as gifts of the ruling classes and not as the conquests of the people. This action was not only undertaken by those who are effectively opposed to any achievements of the workers, but, also, by those who, avid for power itself, use government machines to win supporters and win support for the daily life of politics through the granting of subsidies and/or other benefits through government structures.

Are we doomed to failure, as a collective political project? Will the successive meetings of the World Social Forum be wrong when they proclaim that 'Another world is possible'? On September 11, 2011, the XLVI International Education Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), was held in Switzerland, which generated a synthesis publication with the intriguing question: 'Learning to live together: have we failed?'

For us, the answers are unequivocally 'no'. There is a lot to do, and changes are possible and are constantly being performed. Perhaps not at the speed we want, but they do. We cannot lose the historical dimension and think only of the here and now, of immediate answers and results. But we must think or rethink the paths and strategies of action. From the point of view of the political organization, it is needed to reinforce and expand the discussions in civil organizations. The new social media, Facebook, and similar included, although they seem to be privileged spaces for the manifestation of this narcissistic culture and, especially, of cynical reason, have also managed the communication between people to levels never dreamed before. Still, they also cannot be the depositary of all hopes, as some militants of popular causes seem to think. This does not mean that they should be totally abandoned because of these characteristics and because

they are used to monitor social movements themselves (ACLU, 2016). It takes some patience on the understanding that we do not have to throw the child away along with the dirty bath water. It is necessary to invest time, intelligence, warmth and creativity in the proposals that stimulate and promote the critical awareness of society, in all possible ways. Not with the granting of benefits or other blessings only, but with the understanding that one must work for the recognition of rights, both individual, collective and of the future generations.

The depoliticization of public actions only contributes to the political and social alienation of the segments of our population that most need to develop their critical political consciousness. It is necessary to combat everything that constrains the development of critical thinking and to seek alternatives for this debate to be expanded, reinforcing grassroots organizing strategies and educational actions. The political dispute is permanent and must be maintained, because nothing is resolved at this time. The concept of emancipation, central in Paulo Freire (2005), seems to be the key. Emancipation brings within itself the idea of freedom and autonomy as government of the self, that is, the power to give oneself the law itself. Emancipating means understanding the individual in the center and direction of one's own life. And, since life is to be lived together, emancipating means liberating the human from all injustices, favoring, that way, one's flowering, the development of one's potentialities, collectively, in interaction with others, through education. As in Marx, human emancipation is the reverse of alienation imposed by industrial society (MARX, 2010). To put this into the context of our days, emancipation means resisting all kinds of alienation that our current societies produce, either by selling the idea of an easy and immediate happiness, at the same time submissive to a work explored in exchange for individual and competitive consumption,

or narcissistically affirming the empire of self (and mine) against all others.

As stated earlier, it's needed to learn how to live together daily. No untimely action or 'superficial' reform will be able to transform our society, emancipating our people. But the daily exercise of fighting injustice, violence, cynical reason, promoting the debate, the dialogue in the consolidation of a minimum ethics as a set of values that can be shared by all members of our society, as Adela Cortina (2009). Our society is diverse, it is plural, we have a constitution that affirms that our State is laic, free from the influences of religions, but at the same time intends to guarantee freedom of belief to all citizens, what must empower us to fight against all kinds of religious discrimination, wherever it arises. Our society is diverse from the cultural point of view, sexual orientations, ethnicities. We cannot tolerate violence and discrimination. Dialogue needs to be reestablished, since it is the only way we can reach agreements, to reverse the logic of win-lose and to establish that of negotiation, of coexistence between different ones that respect each other. Hannah Arendt (1985) already stated that violence arises where conflicts cannot be resolved through dialogue. Two recent examples draw attention and are illustrative of what we are highlighting: the defeat of a proposal in agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), after a broad process of negotiation, in a plebiscite in Colombia, can illustrate the logic of the win-lose, overcoming the logic of negotiation; and the other example is the daily violence itself, from the police pages: 'man shoots at another man in a dispute for a table in a shopping center in Rio de Janeiro', assault on health professionals in emergencies etc.

So that we can closure with a further interrogation, we would like to bring some of the reflections from neuroethics. Neurosciences have developed very intensely in the last decades and have provoked a new range of



questions, not only in neuromarketing (including politics).

Dawkins (2007), for example, defends the idea that survival is determined by a 'competition' between genes, that determine the best possibilities of survival. Thus, we would be biologically programmed to survive, as genes that did not favor this better possibility would not be doomed to survive. On the other hand, as Cortina recalls, we are, as well, capable of performing altruistic acts. As an explanation for this phenomenon, she presents two alternatives: the first one, that a strand of this selfish gene would provide an action in favor of those who share genes with us, that is, our relatives. Thus, the altruism so common in the care, for example, of a mother with her children would be only an expression of this selfish and nepotistic genetic aspect; the other explanation is based on the idea that humans are capable, as well, of altruistic actions beyond family boundaries as they have the expectation or perspective of some reciprocity. From this point of view, there will be no pure altruistic action for those who are not related, but only actions that keep implicit perspectives of some type of retribution, direct or indirect, immediate or delayed, integral or fractional. By using, as well, an evolutionary and naturalist perspective, Paul Rée advocates that there are altruistic impulses in humans and bases them on the parental instinct, which is maintained through the natural selection. Nietzsche,

on the other hand, refutes the possibility of the existence of the altruistic decision as far as all decisions would ultimately be a decision that would bring some usefulness to the one who took it (ARALDI, 2016). So, we must ask ourselves: is there a possibility of us being effectively good by our own will, or the only possibility of this happening will be in our genetic, therefore, natural, biological characteristics? If individual freedom is an illusion, if we are only the result of what is determined by generations in our genes, will political and educational actions also have to accompany this comprehension, by provoking, consequently, a new copernican revolution, where the sun would be seen like the genetic code we have and around which our supposed liberty would circulate? Be that as it may, respect, dialogue and freedom are fundamental ingredients for political democracy, the only way, albeit imperfect, of ensuring coexistence in plural societies (DEWEY, 1964; CORTINA, 2009). Out of politics, what exists is barbarism. And politics cannot be disassociated with social movements and streets.

## Contributors

Both authors took part in all phases of the preparation of the article, from topic definition, scope, writing, to the final review. ■

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