

## Memórias

29/08/2002

### FROM JUSTICE TO DEMOCRACY BY WAY OF THE BELLS

I will begin by telling you very briefly about a notable episode in peasant life that took place in a village near Florence more than four hundred years ago. Allow me to draw your full attention to this important historical event because, unlike the normal practice, the moral lesson to be drawn from this episode need not wait until the end of the story; it will soon be staring you in the face.

People were in their houses or working in the fields, each one busy with his or her affairs, when suddenly the church bell was heard to ring. Those were more pious times (we are talking about something that took place in the 16th Century) and the bells would ring several times a day, so there should be nothing to wonder at there, but this bell was ringing mournfully for the dead, and that was surprising, because no-one from the village was known to be on their deathbed. So the women went out into the street and rounded up the children, the men left their work in the fields and elsewhere, and soon all were gathered in front of the church, waiting to be told whom they should grieve. The bell went on ringing for a few minutes and finally fell silent. Moments later the door opened and a peasant appeared on the threshold. Now, as this was not the man normally responsible for ringing the bell, understandably his neighbors asked him where the bell-ringer was and who had died. "The bell-ringers not here and it was me that rang the bell", the peasant answered. "Then no ones died?", his neighbors pressed, to which the peasant responded: "No one with the name or semblance of a person. I rang the death toll for Justice because Justice is dead."

What had happened? What had happened was that for some time the greedy lord of that place (some unscrupulous count or earl) had been moving the boundary stones of his lands outwards, encroaching further and further on the peasants small holding, which shrank with each advance. The injured party first protested and complained, then begged for mercy, and finally decided to complain to the authorities and seek the protection of justice. All in vain; the pillage continued. Then, in desperation, he resolved to announce urbi et orbi (a village is exactly the same size as the world to those who have always lived in it) that Justice was dead. Perhaps he thought that this gesture of supreme indignation would stir all the bells in the universe and set them ringing, with no distinction of race, creed or custom, that all of them without exception would join in the death knoll of Justice, and that they would not be silenced until it was revived. Such a clamor, flying from house to house, village to village, city to city, leaping borders, laying bridges of sound across rivers and oceans, surely would awaken the sleeping world... I do not know what happened next, whether the townspeople went to help the peasant shift back the boundary markers on his land or whether his neighbors, now that Justice had been declared extinct, hung their heads in resignation, their souls cowering in despair, and went back to their sad daily existence. It is certainly true that History never tells us everything...

I reckon that this was the only time, anywhere in the world, that a bell, an inert dome of bronze, after so often tolling the death of human beings, sadly pealed the demise of Justice. The funeral dirge of the village near Florence was never heard again, but Justice continued - and continues - to die every day. Right now, at this moment as I speak to you, both far away and nearby, on our doorsteps, someone is killing it. Each time it dies, it is as if it had never existed for those that trusted in it, for those that that expected from Justice what we all have the right to expect: justice, simply justice. Not the kind that wraps itself in theatrical tunics and confuses us with flowery, empty legalistic rhetoric, nor the kind that let itself be blindfolded and the balance rigged, not the kind where the sword always cuts more one way than the other. We have the right to a modest justice, a

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justice that is a companion in our daily doings, a justice for which "just" is most exactly and strictly synonymous with "ethical", a justice as indispensable to happiness of the spirit as food for the body is indispensable to life. Undoubtedly, it should be a justice practiced in the courts whenever so required by law, but first and foremost a justice emanating spontaneously from society itself in action, a justice that manifests itself as an inescapable moral imperative, the respect for the right to be attendant on every human person.

Fortunately, bells tolled not only to mourn those who die. They also rang to mark the hours of day and night, to sound the call to festivities and to worship, and there was a time, not so long ago, when bells would sound the alarm to summon people to help during catastrophes, floods, fires, disasters, any danger that threatened the community. Today, the social role of bells has been limited to performing ritual obligations, and the enlightened gesture of the peasant from Florence would be seen as the senseless act of a madman or, worse still, simply a matter for the police. Today it is other bells of a different kind that uphold and proclaim the possibility bringing to the world that comradeship justice, the justice that is a pre-condition for happiness of spirit and even - surprising though it may seem - a pre-condition even for food for the body. If such justice did exist, not one more human being would ever die of hunger or from so many diseases that are curable for some, but not for others. If there were such justice, life would not be the terrible damnation that it has been objectively for more than half of humanity. These new bells, which are ringing out louder and louder all over the world, are the multiple movements for resistance and social action that are fighting to establish a new, distributive and commutative justice that all people can come to recognize as intrinsically theirs, a justice that protects freedom and rights, and not any denial of them. I have said that we already have a readily understandable code of practical application for this justice, a code embodied for the past fifty years in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, those thirty essential, basic rights that these days are mentioned only vaguely, if not systematically disregarded. They are more scorned and defiled today than the Florentine peasants property and freedom were four hundred years ago. I have also said that, in terms of the integrity of its principles and the clarity of its objectives, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, just as it is now worded and without changing a single comma, could replace to advantage the platforms of every political party on Earth, specifically on the so-called left, petrified in its outdated formulas, too far removed or impotent to face the brutal realities of today's world, shutting its eyes to the evident and fearful threats that the future is preparing against that rational, sensitive dignity we once assumed to be the supreme aspiration of mankind. Let me add that the same reasons that lead me to refer to political parties in general in this way also apply to local unions, and consequently to the international trade union movement as a whole. Consciously or unconsciously, the docile, bureaucratized trade unionism we are left with today is largely responsible for the social lethargy brought about by the ongoing process of economic globalization. I am sorry to say it, but I cannot remain silent. Furthermore, if you will allow me to add my own twist to the fables of La Fontaine, I will say that unless we act swiftly, the mouse of human rights will implacably be eaten by the cat of economic globalization.

And what of democracy, this age-old invention of a few ingenuous Athenians for whom, in the specific social and political circumstances of the time and according to the standard expression, meant government of the people, by the people and for the people? I often hear it argued by sincere people of proven good faith, along with others with an interest in feigning an appearance of goodness, that although the state of catastrophe most of the planet is in constitutes irrefutable proof, it is precisely within the framework of an overall democratic system that we will be most likely to attain human rights fully or at least satisfactorily. Nothing can be more certain, as long as the system for governing and managing society that we currently call democracy actually is democratic. Except that it is not. It is true that we can vote, and it is true that by delegating the grain of sovereignty that is afforded us as voting citizens, usually through the party system, we can choose our parliamentary representatives, and lastly, it is true that that a government will always emerge out of the numerical strength of such representatives and political arrangements that the need for a majority imposes. All of this is true, but it is equally true that that is where the possibility of democratic action begins and ends. Voters can

remove a government from power if it displeases them and install another one in its place; however, their vote has never had, does not have, nor will ever have any visible effect on the single, real force that governs the world, and therefore their country and person: I am obviously referring to economic power, in particular that ceaselessly growing part managed by multinational corporations in line with strategies for domination that have nothing to do with the common good to which, by definition, democracy aspires. We all know this is true, yet, owing to some sort of verbal and mental automatism that keeps us from seeing the raw, naked facts, we continue to speak of democracy as if it were something alive and dynamic, when little more remains to us of it than a set of ritualized forms, the harmless passes and gesturing of a kind of lay mass. What we fail to see - as if were not right before our eyes - is that our governments, which (for better or worse) we elect and therefore are primarily responsible for, are increasingly becoming mere "political commissars" of economic power, with the key mission of producing laws to suit that power so that, sugarcoated with self-serving official and individual publicity, they can subsequently be introduced into the social market without stirring up too many protests, other than by certain well-known and eternally discontented minorities...

What can be done? Everything in this world is discussed, from literature to ecology, from expanding galaxies to the greenhouse effect, from waste treatment to traffic congestion. Yet the democratic system goes undiscussed, as if it were a given, definitively acquired and untouchable by nature until the end of time. Well, unless I am mistaken, unless I am unable to add two plus two, then - before it becomes too late for us - among so many other necessary or indispensable discussions, there is an urgent need to foster worldwide debate on democracy and the causes of its decline, on the part citizens play in political and social life, on the relations between States and international economic and financial power, on what affirms and what negates democracy, on the right to happiness and a worthwhile existence, on the misery and the hopes of humanity or, to cut down the rhetoric, the hopes of the simple human beings that make up Mankind, one by one and all together. There is no worse deception than self-deceit. And that is how we are living.

I have nothing more to say. Well, yes, just one thing: to ask for a moment of silence. The Florentine peasant has just climbed the church tower once more, the bell is about to ring. Please, lets listen to it.

José Saramago

English text by volunteer translators Robert Finnegan and Charles Johnson  
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