

PANEL 6

Education or indoctrination: Does civic education foster obedience to regime norms at the expense of critical engagement?

It is clear that we are facing a conceptual problem as well as a real problem.

On one side we know very clearly that the essence of civic education in Mexico is precisely the diffusion and creation among the people of the consciousness that citizenship consists essentially of abandoning and rejecting the complex feeling of being subjects--even subjects in rebellion--and arriving to the third stage: the stage of the full citizens, who assume the responsibility of deciding collectively the bounds and course of the nation and of establishing and building together the rules and norms that will rule our social life, and then accomplishing them. In other words: to assume the rights and the correspondent duties.

This is especially valid and important in Latin American countries, which drag a congenital malformation, a product of the

colonial structure that forever marked our societies with a terrible social inequality. This inequality has changed very little in the almost 200 years since the independence and creation of our “republics”.

In the case of México, the so-called Three-Guarantee Independence (“la Independencia Trigarante”), has been until now the most complete treason to the ideals of insurgents. Instead of going on to the process of “disconquest” knocking down the ancient regime and creating the real republic, the independent country preserved the social structure of colonial times. The Spanish left, but the horse of Troy remained, so that 100 years later, in 1910, Mexico continued to be a Republic without citizens.

During the 19th century, the bullets, not the ballots, decided the Presidency and all places of political power; even if the electoral laws established the indirect vote in third grade, and subject to a certain personal income. As such, it was necessary to wait until 1917 for the universal direct masculine vote (and women in 1953).

Land--the only means of production--remained in the hands of several thousand families, and the “citizens” were actually land

servants, like in Middle Age Europe. This accounted for more than 80 percent of all Mexicans.

They were illiterate because their parents didn't make the laws, and they didn't have the right to make laws because they were illiterate.

It was--actually it is--necessary to break the vicious cycle wherever possible: in the economy, in social structure, in education, in healthcare; but it is necessary to do it especially in civic education, in civic culture, in citizen consciousness, in order to assume the essential citizenship with all the rights and responsibilities.

On the other hand, we know that indoctrination is a perverse reality spread over all latitudes of the planet. It is a big temptation to pervert citizenship. We continue to see--labeled from economic and political power--"enemies of democracy". Foreign enemies, of course: communism, terrorism, "caudillismo", "the struggle of civilizations", populism, and so on. Our system, which is THE democracy, of course, is threatened by all of these foreign agents, aliens, that put at severe risk our peaceful coexistence.

In Mexico we have recently suffered a clearly-orchestrated campaign against “too many parties”, against the list legislators, who are called “non-elected”, and against the public financing of political parties, because “democracy is too expensive”. Of course, the whole campaign continues to repeat without any argument, mainly in television and radio, and passing by in some newspapers, trying to reduce political options to only two parties, like a two-headed eagle, and trying to convince--with more feelings than reasons--to vote for persons rather than programs.

It is a paradox that now, when we carefully count the votes--all the votes and only the votes--these new threats arrive, with the freedom of speech, twisting and perverting the essence of democracy.

In our opinion, the rich social plurality of a big nation cannot be democratically represented and governed by a two-party system with an indirect vote. For us, this is an archaic and inadequate system. A campaign to introduce such a system in our country would only lead to regression and perversion of our weak

democracy and lead to the concentration of political power in the hands of economic power.

This is why it is so important to have civic education, which is a constitutional responsibility of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). There is still a long way to go. As a national society we don't come from a strong democratic culture nor a democratic tradition. During the last third of the 18th century, while France, the United States, and Great Britain confirmed the power of the people, Mexican Viceroy Francisco Lacroix reminded the subjects of the King of Spain "that [they] were born to shut up and obey, and not to have any opinion about the high matters of government". Such is our long democratic tradition.

This is why I insist on overcoming the phase of subjects in rebellion and arriving to the stage of full citizenship.

When in 1917 the Constituent was ready to decide universal and direct (masculine) vote, there were those who considered the concession of the vote to illiterates to be a terrible mistake. However, history teaches us that these illiterate new citizens succeeded in getting their children in schools and in free public

universities and institutes. If in 1910 only 12 percent knew how to read and write, today it is exactly the inverse.

I insist: in 1910 Mexico was a republic without citizens; more than 80 percent of the adults of the country were illiterate, malnourished, full of sicknesses, without any medical care, and could not decide about their own lives, much less about the Presidency of the so-called Republic. Some historians have praised the impressive amount of railroads built at the end of 19th century during Porfirio Díaz' regime. They have not said that for most Mexicans the only way to ride a train was to be deported and forced to work to death in Valle Nacional.

It will not be easy to overcome this historical reality and this authoritarian cultural tradition.

Our Constitution wisely defines democracy "not only as a legal system and a political regime, but as a way of life based on the permanent economic, social and cultural improvement of people". As you can see, there is still a long way to go.

The so-called revolutionary regime did not pay special attention to electoral legitimacy, although the electoral formality was covered in periodical and regular processes. Legitimacy of the revolutionary governments during the 20th century worked as long as there was social capillarity, free schools and books, social security, employment and economic growth. By the seventies, it was clear that the growing plurality no longer fit within the big-government party.

Because of the alternation of 2000, for the election of 2003 almost 60 percent of citizens did not vote. It is already clear that there is general disappointment about the social results of electoral democracy, and it is simply because there is a collective, generally-spread mental link between democracy and social progress, which has not happened in Mexico.

The international environment is not very favorable for the growth and improvement of civic democratic education. Once the Cold War ended, foreign risks no longer created international democracy and personal freedom. Collective fear and panic, deliberately created, is not the best atmosphere in which to breathe freedom.

It is my personal conviction that it is not with weapons and an efficient police force that we are going to defeat terrorism, nor will it be defeated by removing pop stars from planes.

History says that, in most cases, it is not the Axis of Evil, but rather the desperation of ethnic and national aspirations and the closing of democratic ways to get them, that pushes people--human beings--to terrorism.

American and European scholars are not wrong when they warn about indoctrination and the perverse use of the general idea of democracy and national security to make the restrictions of civil rights and freedom of expression acceptable. They remind us of McCarthyism as a lesson of history.

Something is not right when there is a strong resistance to the rise of any possible third political formation. Civic education, based on a foreign enemy and on the appeal to national solidarity is not the best way to foster the existence of real citizens, sovereign citizens.

Esteban Garaiz