

**THE OBSCURANTIST NEOLIBERAL COMMON SENSE AND ITS IMPACTS
ON BRAZILIAN EDUCATION**

***O SENSO COMUM NEOLIBERAL OBSCURANTISTA E SEUS IMPACTOS NA
EDUCAÇÃO BRASILEIRA***

***EL SENTIDO COMÚN NEOLIBERAL OBSCURANTISTA Y SUS IMPACTOS EN LA
EDUCACIÓN BRASILEÑA***

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ABSTRACT: Based on Antonio Gramsci's ideas about common sense, this article presents an analysis of obscurantist neoliberal common sense and its impacts on Brazilian contemporary society and education. Contrary to some interpretations that separate political-cultural obscurantism from neoliberalism, it is argued in this article that they are two sides of the same coin. The neoliberal worldview, connecting the idea of freedom to the assumption that social evolution should be ruled by the free market's logic, contains a kind of rationality that leads to the most irrational forms of thought and sociability, becoming a fertile ground for the spread of belligerent obscurantism.

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism. Obscurantism. Common sense.

RESUMO: Tomando como referência as ideias de Antonio Gramsci sobre o que seria o senso comum, este artigo apresenta uma análise do senso comum neoliberal obscurantista e seus impactos na sociedade brasileira contemporânea e na educação. Ao contrário de algumas interpretações que separam o obscurantismo político-cultural do neoliberalismo, argumenta-se neste artigo que são duas faces da mesma moeda. A visão de mundo neoliberal, com sua vinculação da ideia de liberdade ao princípio de que a evolução social deva ser regida pela lógica do livre mercado, contém um tipo de racionalidade que conduz às mais irracionais formas de pensamento e de sociabilidade, tornando-se um terreno fértil para a difusão do obscurantismo beligerante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Neoliberalismo. Obscurantismo. Senso comum.

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RESUMEN: Tomando como referencia las ideas de Antonio Gramsci sobre lo que sería el sentido común, este artículo presenta un análisis del sentido común neoliberal oscurantista y sus impactos en la sociedad brasileña contemporánea y en la educación. Contrariamente a algunas interpretaciones que separan el oscurantismo político-cultural del neoliberalismo, se argumenta en este artículo que son las dos caras de la misma moneda. La cosmovisión neoliberal, al vincular la idea de libertad con el principio de que la evolución social debe regirse por la lógica del libre mercado, contiene un tipo de racionalidad que conduce a las formas más irracionales de pensamiento y sociabilidad, convirtiéndose en un terreno fértil para la propagación del oscurantismo beligerante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Neoliberalismo. Oscurantismo. Sentido comum.

Introduction

Delfim Neto, in an interview granted on 25/11/2019 to a Brazilian newspaper, stated that the government of President Jair Bolsonaro would have a dark side and an illuminated side:

The economic area has very good ideas. (Minister Paulo) Guedes' proposals are very good and so is the guidance. Unfortunately, he has had a great deal of difficulty, because the government has two sides: it has a dark side and another that is enlightened. The dark side has made a lot of gimmicks, but has not been able to efficiently hinder the light side. But the enlightened side needs this understanding that we need to mobilize resources to produce Brazil's development.⁴

The dark side to which Delfim Neto refers is, in fact, the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, as well as advisers and ministers, as was the case of Abraham Weintraub, Minister of Education from April 2019 to June 2020, whose actions during this period mainly focused on the ideological war against public universities. It is still curious that Delfim Neto makes reference to an enlightened side, which would be that of the ultra-neoliberal ideas of the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, who participates in a dark government. After all, Delfim Neto was Minister of Finance, Agriculture and Planning during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985, one of the darkest periods in Brazilian history in the 20th century (NETTO, 2014). Was he, then, part of the enlightened side of the dictatorial regime? More important, however, are the questions: Can

⁴ A área econômica tem ideias muito boas. As propostas do (ministro Paulo) Guedes são muito boas e a orientação também. Infelizmente, ele tem tido uma grande dificuldade, porque o governo tem dois lados: tem um lado sombrio e tem um outro que é iluminado. O lado sombrio tem feito muita estripulia, mas não tem conseguido atrapalhar de forma eficiente o lado iluminado. Mas o lado iluminado precisa dessa compreensão de que precisamos mobilizar os recursos para produzir o desenvolvimento do Brasil.

neoliberalism be considered the enlightened side of a government? Is the alliance between the so-called “free market” and belligerent obscurantism merely circumstantial? Is it just a matter of how much this obscurantism succeeds or does not hinder economic policy?

This article defends the thesis that neoliberalism and obscurantism are two sides of the same coin and that, therefore, the dualistic view of an illuminated face and a dark face cannot be sustained. Neoliberal ideology is not, however, just a government policy, it has been permeating Brazilian society since the late 1980s, with the election of Fernando Collor de Melo as president of the republic and, in the 1990s, with the implementation of the Real Plan signed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The Lula (2003-2010) and Dilma Rouseff (2011-2016) governments continued to adopt economic policies that, in essence, followed neoliberal guidelines, even though they sometimes came with measures of some social-democratic inspiration in the field of so-called social policies. The defense of differences in the cultural field in the form of the politics of identities did not constitute a barrier to the spread of the neoliberal mentality, on the contrary, it allied itself through the ideology of entrepreneurship that transformed the rescue of local cultures into niche markets. Insidiously, neoliberalism assumed the function of ideological infrastructure, and *modus operandi* of Brazilian subjectivity. It is necessary, therefore, to analyze what constitutes this neoliberal vision of society and life and the ways in which it led Brazil to belligerent obscurantism, with visible negative consequences for sociability, culture and education in our country.

To clarify this point, the Gramscian concept of common sense is used in this text as an analytical tool. The first methodological care should be to not limit the meaning of the concept to common sense itself, even if it is academic common sense. The first item of this article will therefore be focused on the philosophical reflection on common sense formulated in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks (GRAMSCI, 2000). In the second item, some of the main characteristics of the neoliberal worldview will be analyzed and in the third item, the belligerent obscurantism will be analyzed, seeking to show that it is far from being an embarrassing ally for neoliberalism, supposedly indifferent to ideological issues and focused in cold market numbers. The anti-humanistic irrationality of belligerent obscurantism is an absolutely logical consequence of neoliberal economic rationality.

Common sense and worldviews according to Antonio Gramsci

Firstly, it is necessary to explain that, due to the size limits of the article, it will not be possible in this item to dialogue with the extensive bibliography on Gramscian thought and specifically on its common sense conception. Only an interpretation of how Gramsci related common sense and the hegemonic struggle between antagonistic worldviews will be presented. As explained in the introduction to the article, the purpose of this brief incursion into Gramscian reflection on common sense is to support the analysis, in the following items, of neoliberal obscurantist common sense.

The authors of this article, however, do not disregard the possibility of questioning the approach presented here from other interpretations defended by Brazilian and foreign scholars of the work of the Sardinian thinker.

For Antonio Gramsci, all people form in their daily life a “spontaneous philosophy”, that is, a worldview that, most of the time, lacks self-awareness. According to Gramsci this philosophy would be contained:

1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content;
2. 'common sense' and 'good sense';
3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore'. (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 325, quotes in the original)

Because all people form this spontaneous philosophy in their daily lives, we would all be, according to Gramsci, philosophers, understanding this, however, in a very broad sense, that is, that we all have ideas about the world and life. The spontaneity of this "philosophy" formed in everyday life is not seen by Gramsci as an expression of the intellectual and moral autonomy of individuals, but as a result of a passive relationship with the world that needs to be overcome if there is a prospect of achieving this autonomy:

Having first shown that everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in “language”, there is contained a specific conception of the world, one then moves on to the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism. That is to say, one proceeds to the question—is it better to “think”, without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (...)? Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one’s own brain, choose one’s sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one’s own guide,

refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality? (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 325, quotes in the original)

The Gramscian approach of common sense is situated in a perspective of a overcoming process that starts from spontaneous thinking, from the conception of the world assimilated without self-awareness, in order to make criticism and move towards the elaboration, by the individuals, of their own world view, of self-directed activity, of conscious participation in human history and the transformation of their own personality. This process is, at the same time, subjective and objective, individual and collective, being part, in Gramsci's view, of a set of actions aimed at the generalized elevation of the cultural level of the "subaltern classes" (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 197) and overcoming the subordination of common sense to the ideology of the ruling class.

The philosophy of praxis, that is, Marxism, cannot adopt either an elitist attitude, which would be contrary to the very essence of a socialist worldview, nor a populist perspective in which the people are maintained at the cultural level of common sense:

The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the "simple" in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life. If it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 333, quotes in the original).

However, what does overcoming common sense towards a higher world conception consist of? Gramsci does not answer this question from a priori value judgments, but from human history and the achievements of thought throughout that history:

In acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs? When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. To criticize one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. It therefore also means criticism of all previous philosophy, in so far as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting-point of critical

elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 325-326, quotes in the original).

As mentioned, this conception of the world that is formed in each person in a spontaneous, heterogeneous, incoherent and unstructured way, suffers the influences of language, common sense and popular religion. It turns out that there is a mutual influence between these three elements. For example, common sense is, according to Gramsci, strongly influenced by popular religion, which is different from religious doctrines in its more systematic and institutionalized forms, being characterized, like common sense, as an overlap of ideas of all kinds that do not maintain coherent relations between themselves and do not constitute a unitary and logical thought. In fact, it is also important to point out that common sense, from the point of view of logic of thought, does not reach the level of the most evolved logical-formal thinking, much less the level of dialectical thinking. For this reason, Gramsci wonders about the need to teach formal logical thinking, by analogy to the fact that teaching reading and writing to children is necessary. In an item on the “technique of thinking”, Gramsci discusses the meaning of a statement made by Engels in his book *Anti-Dühring*, that "the art of working with concepts is not something inborn or given with ordinary consciousness; it is, rather, a technical labor of thought that has a long history, not more and not less than the empirical research of the natural sciences" (ENGELS, *apud* GRAMSCI, 1996, p. 159) quoted in a book by Benedetto Croce. Gramsci notes that the quote must be checked in the original to verify its more general context. The broadest passage in which this quote is inserted is in the preface written by Engels in 1885 to the second edition of his book:

In any case natural science has now advanced so far that it can no longer escape dialectical generalisation. However it will make this process easier for itself if it does not lose sight of the fact that the results in which its experiences are summarised are concepts, that the art of working with concepts is not inborn and also is not given with ordinary everyday consciousness, but requires real thought, and that this thought similarly has a long empirical history, not more and not less than empirical natural science (ENGELS, 1885).

Gramsci comments that Croce would have been surprised by a possible rehabilitation of the formal logic that would be implicit in Engels' statement. It happens that without the mastery of formal logic there can be no mastery of dialectical logic, since the relations between the second and the first are of overcoming by incorporation and not of mere

abandonment. In this sense, raising the cultural level of the population in general cannot fail to face the problem that thought imprisoned to the level of the most elementary common sense does not come to dominate formal logic as a basic grammar of thought:

It must be seen in Engels' statement, although expressed in non-rigorous terms, this methodological requirement that is all the more vivid the more the implied reference is made not for intellectuals and so-called cultured classes, but for the uneducated masses, for which it is still necessary to conquer formal logic, the most elementary grammar of thought and language (GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 181).⁵

Therefore, in this process of overcoming conventional wisdom, there is a dialectic between content and forms of thought, synthesizing concerns of a political, ethical, logical, epistemological, psychological and pedagogical order. That is why Gramsci did not separate the production of new knowledge from the socialization of existing knowledge:

Creating a new culture does not only mean one's own individual 'original' discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their 'socialization' as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order. For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 327, quotes in the original).

But this socialization of the truths already discovered and their transformation into the basis of vital actions clashes with the essentially privatist and competitive dynamics of capitalist society, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the first two decades of this twenty-first century in which the reconfigurations of the system productive and neoliberal political-social reorders have accentuated the anti-collective, elitist, inhuman, immediate and inconsequential character of capitalist sociability. It is no accident that the obscurantist neoliberal ideology makes every possible effort towards the socialization of irrationalism, which, as Marx explained, is the most appropriate way of thinking to the *modus operandi* of the capitalist economy.

However, the reconciliation of irrational forms in which certain economic relations appear and assert themselves in practice does not concern the

⁵ Deve-se ver na afirmação de Engels, ainda que expressa em termos não rigorosos, esta exigência metodológica que é tão mais viva quanto mais a referência subentendida é feita não para os intelectuais e para as chamadas classes cultas, mas para as massas populares incultas, para as quais é ainda necessária a conquista da lógica formal, da mais elementar gramática do pensamento e da língua (GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 181).

active agents of these relations in their everyday life. And since they are accustomed to move about in such relations, they find nothing strange therein. A complete contradiction offers not the least mystery to them. They feel as much at home as a fish in water among manifestations which are separated from their internal connections and absurd when isolated by themselves (MARX, 1999, p. 568).

This passage is quoted by Lukács in his book *The Destruction of Reason* (LUKÁCS, 1981) when analyzing, in the epilogue, the irrationalism of capitalist society after the Second World War. It is also mentioned by Karel Kosik in his book *Dialectics of the Concrete*, in the chapter where what the Czech philosopher calls the world of pseudoconcrete is analyzed (KOSIK, 1976). These "irrational forms" to which Marx refers have characteristics common to the various historical phases of capitalist social relations and specific characteristics to each of these phases. In the next item of this article, we will analyze some ways in which this irrationality has been reproducing and expanding in the neoliberal phase of capitalism.

The “irrational rationality” (obscurantist) of neoliberalism

The influence of neoliberalism in the formation of Brazilian common sense in recent decades can be identified in various aspects of people’s thinking and actions in their daily lives. One of them is the idea that the market is the best mechanism for satisfying the needs of individuals, which translates into the widespread a priori negative judgment in relation to the services provided by public institutions and the also widespread (though never proven) belief that the private companies are more efficient and provide better quality services. Another element of neoliberalism embedded in common sense is the absolute naturalization and perpetuation of capitalism in its current form. People refuse to think about alternatives and are hostile to any initiative to propose projects for other forms of organization of society and life. Being creative has become imperative since, however, creativity is restricted to the logic of the market, never exceeding this limit as this will be considered transgression, pathology, and criminality. Competition adopted as a principle of life and as a moral value is also part of this neoliberal common sense, since the world is divided into “winners and losers, the former being considered worthy of success and taken as models of individuality and way of conducting life. Of course, in this worldview, the measure of success is money, the human being model is the successful entrepreneur and the individual who can boast a standard of living infinitely distant from the material conditions of existence of the vast majority of people. Finally, an element of neoliberal common sense that is directly related to school education is that only the kind of knowledge that has immediate practical

application and, more important, it is useful for making money, can be considered valuable. This utilitarianism, however, is not necessarily realistic, even in a strictly pragmatic perspective. Often the knowledge that is considered useful for making money is pure illusion, as is the case with self-help literatures, entrepreneurship coaches and the like. This amalgamation of ideas is not without ethical consequences, on the contrary, it has a strong impact on the values that actually guide people's actions, which may be in conflict with other values that people say they adopt and even believe that they adopt. When Gramsci says that common sense does not require coherence, this applies both to the elementary grammar of thought as well as to the ethical question. The multiplication and intensification of prejudices, the apologia for violence as a way of solving social problems, the celebration of gigantic social inequalities as a deserved reward for the “winners”, the indifference to the suffering of others, the lack of concern with the world that will be left to future generations, they are just a few examples of value judgments contained in actions and attitudes fueled by neoliberal common sense. This ethics of the chosen people can reach, in the limit, the cultivation of hatred towards the "enemy" and the defense of their extermination, finding its aesthetic manifestation in panels built with cartridges of firearms bullets⁶.

Would this common sense be in line with the elaborations of neoliberal theorists or would they be distortions of the worldview they advocate? In the sequence, it will be argued that there is a strong harmony between the main ideas spread by neoliberal thinkers and contemporary common sense, which demonstrates that the strategies of indoctrination of the population adopted by the organic intellectuals of the ruling class have shown a high level of effectiveness. A brief historical exploration of the origins of neoliberalism is necessary before the presentation of what its intellectuals postulate.

Throughout the history of the rise of the bourgeoisie to the power and consolidation of capitalism, liberal thought has been modified to adapt to the needs of this social class, initially in the fight against the old regime and later in the clash with the working class, generating strands of thought with different denominations, such as: neoliberalism, post-liberalism, conservative liberalism, social liberalism, new right, among others. As Saviani (1991, p. 78-79) explains, the term “neoliberalism” originally referred to Keynesian approaches, which sought to respond to the economic and social crisis brought about by the crash of the New York stock exchange and the subsequent great depression recognizing the

⁶ Here there is a reference to a "work of art" made in celebration of the announcement of the proposal for a new political party led by Jair Bolsonaro. A picture of that “work of art” is available in: <https://conteudo.imguol.com.br/blogs/278/files/2019/11/balasalianca.jpg>. Access: 27 August, 2020.

role of the State and public investment as mitigating the social effects of this crisis and driving economic recovery. This approach, although located in the liberal field, embraced ideas and theses of social democracy and the “welfare state”, also configuring a response to the advance of socialism in the post-second war. With the fall of the Soviet model, the term “neoliberal” starts to designate the movement to retake and even radicalize some of the classic theses of liberalism, giving theoretical and ideological support to policies of privatization, deregulation, attack on unions, etc., which will be the hallmark of governments like Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) in the USA, Margareth Thatcher (1979-1990) in the United Kingdom and, as an emblematic case in Latin America, the bloody dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) in Chile.

Several authors (DERISSO; DUARTE, 2017; GENTILI, 1996; HARVEY, 2007) have pointed out the negative impacts and deleterious effects of economic and educational policies and “reforms” inspired by neoliberal principles, their link to the agenda of institutions like the World Bank (BASTOS; ROCHA, 2017, SILVA; SOARES, 2018), the growing influence of foundations and entities linked to the business world in the design and application of these policies (COSTOLA; BORGHI, 2018), the neoliberal educational programs implemented in the Latin-American context (CARVALHO; RAMALHO; SANTOS, 2019) among other aspects of great relevance.

However, these studies have, in a way, highlighted more the “luminous” side of neoliberalism, albeit from a critical perspective, pointing to the neoliberal “logic” and “rationality” that underlie certain discourses disseminated in Brazil and in Latin America (KLAUS; LEANDRO, 2020), as well as the influence of this rationality in the context of the school (TREVISOL; ALMEIDA, 2019) and teacher education (SILVA; SOARES, 2018).

In fact, generally speaking, neoliberalism appears in the educational debate as a great defender of “rationalization”, of better use of resources, of the search for higher quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the school. These proclaimed praise for rationality, actions based on scientific evidence, the valorization of technicians and specialists, etc., end up hiding the links between movements towards the privatization of schools (or even their replacement by home education), the transfer of business management models to school, the dissemination of distance learning and the use of “new technologies” as substitutes for face-to-face classes, among other actions and the belligerent obscurantism that presents itself through initiatives such as the movement called “*escola sem partido*” (“non-partisan school”), attempts to censor content in teaching materials, contempt for scientific knowledge and even the defense of torture and the murder of opponents as a government

policy. In order to try to expose these links, it is necessary to explain some elements of the neoliberal conception of human beings and the world and their connection with the processes of alienation from work and daily activity in which common sense is formed and serves as a guide for individual choices.

It is beyond the scope of this text to synthesize neoliberal thinking in its various aspects and nuances. In order to indicate paths for the discussion of the theme of this article, some ideas from economist Milton Friedman, one of the main representatives of the so-called “Chicago school”, will be focused, whose thinking provided theoretical support to the economic and educational model implemented in a more accentuated way in Chile and is one of the references of the Economy Minister of the Jair Bolsonaro government, Paulo Guedes.

In his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (FRIEDMAN, 2002) the author begins by rejecting John Kennedy's famous statement in his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country”. For Friedman the two questions are wrong because,

To the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above them. He is proud of a common heritage and loyal to common traditions. But he regards government as a means, an instrumentality, neither a grantor of favors and gifts, nor a master or god to be blindly worshipped and served. He recognizes no national goal except as it is the consensus of the goals that the citizens severally serve. He recognizes no national purpose except as it is the consensus of the purposes for which the citizens severally strive (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 1-2).

This conception of country and its penetration in the common sense help to understand the apparent incoherence of groups that preach patriotism, make intense use of national symbols and slogans such as “Beloved Homeland”, “Brazil above all”, while supporting the sale of public companies, the delivery of natural resources such as oil and forests to private interests, including foreigners, accept explicit subservience to other countries, etc. Such actions are shown to be justified by the alleged advantages that they may bring to these individuals, such as: new jobs, increased income or any other more immediate personal advantages or benefits. Possible negative consequences of these decisions for the future of the country are not considered, as there is no long-term project to be implemented and objectives such as: reducing inequalities, improving education, health and safety are referred to the sphere of individual responsibility and effort.

In this logic, what is the government for? For Friedman

Government is necessary to preserve our freedom, it is an instrument through which we can exercise our freedom; yet by concentrating power in political hands, it is also a threat to freedom. [...] Its major function must be to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 2).

Issues such as: the preservation of life, health and human rights, guarantee of access to quality education and others are not, therefore, part of the functions of the State in the neoliberal logic. In the field of educational policies, this creates an apparent paradox: even though they propose a series of initiatives to adjust the school and the education systems to business interests and market demands, under the pretext of improving their efficiency, these initiatives end up in practice, by inhibiting, disorganizing and rendering ineffective the action of the public power, in order to reinforce with the workers the idea, already widely disseminated in common sense, that the State is inefficient and corrupt and it is up to individuals and families to seek on their own and in the private sector the solution to their problems.

Like the government, education would have a limited function in the neoliberal conception, although essential, since

A stable and democratic society is impossible without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens and without widespread acceptance of some common set of values. Education can contribute to both (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 86).

However, anything that exceeds this minimum of knowledge and escapes the “widely accepted” values can be characterized as indoctrination and a threat to the freedom of thought and belief of students and their families:

Drawing a line between providing for the common social values required for a stable society, on the one hand, and indoctrination inhibiting freedom of thought and belief, on the other is another of those vague boundaries that is easier to mention than to define. (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 90)

It is possible to see the convergence of these assumptions with the precepts of belligerent obscurantism that tries to attribute to families and students as individuals the prerogative to denounce teachers' content and comments that contradict their religious beliefs and political conceptions. The relation between these assumptions and the intention to make school content rarefied is also evident in order to keep students, especially from the

popular strata, limited to conventional wisdom, religious beliefs instilled by the family and the dominant values in capitalist society.

How should school education work from Friedman's perspective? The author presents his well-known proposal for *vouchers*:

Governments could require a minimum level of schooling financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on "approved" educational services. Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum they themselves provided on purchasing educational services from an "approved" institution of their own choice (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 89).

In this model, the decision on curricular content and forms of teaching would be under the total control of families, since:

If present public expenditures on schooling were made available to parents regardless of where they send their children, a wide variety of schools would spring up to meet the demand. Parents could express their views about schools directly by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 91).

For the author, letting families use public subsidies to pay for educational “services” would have an additional advantage of inducing the poor to have fewer children given the prospect of having to bear part of the cost of their education (p. 45). What emerges from these theses is the idea that workers who live in situations of misery or poverty are the real responsible for their own condition. Corroborating this idea, Minister Paulo Guedes stated in an interview that “a boy, from an early age, knows that he is a responsible person when he has to save. The rich capitalize on their resources. The poor consume everything”⁷ (FSP, 3/11/2019).⁸

Although Friedman admits that the first stages of teaching should have public funding (albeit through vouchers and a “healthy” competition between public and private schools for resources), in the later stages and especially in higher education the author argues that the investment must come only from families, since it is a question of obtaining a return later through better wages. In exposing his arguments, he reveals important aspects of his conception of the human being and the place of the worker in capitalist society.

⁷ “um menino, desde cedo, sabe que ele é um ser de responsabilidade quando tem que poupar. Os ricos capitalizam seus recursos. Os pobres consomem tudo”

⁸ Available: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2019/11/da-para-esperar-4-anos-de-um-liberal-democrata-apos-30-de-centro-esquerda-diz-guedes.shtml>. Access: 12 May 2020.

It is a form of investment in human capital precisely analogous to investment in machinery, buildings, or other forms of nonhuman capital. Its function is to raise the economic productivity of the human being. If it does so, the individual is rewarded in a free enterprise society by receiving a higher return for his services than he would otherwise be able to command. This difference in return is the economic incentive to invest capital whether in the form of a machine or a human being (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 100-101).

The author's considerations indicate that, for him, the relationship between the worker and the machine, from the point of view of capital, is more than a mere analogy, the financing system based on current fixed-value contracts that have high interest due to the fact that the capitalist finds it more difficult to take back the investment, as opposed to a physical asset, which is pledged as collateral.

If he makes a comparable loan to increase the earning power of a human being, he clearly cannot get any comparable security. In a non-slave state, the individual embodying the investment cannot be bought and sold. Even if he could, the security would not be comparable (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 102).

The author's proposal is a contract in which the university student sells a part of his future earnings, and Friedman believes that this would be advantageous for both parties, although such contracts can be considered “partial slavery” (p. 103). It is possible to perceive again an apparent paradox of neoliberalism: in the name of the absolute defense of individual freedom to trade in the market, even slavery or semi-slavery becomes acceptable, provided that it is contracted on a “voluntary” basis by the parties.

This apparent paradox is most clearly exposed when Friedman discusses the relation between economic freedom and political freedom:

History suggests only that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom. Clearly it is not a sufficient condition. Fascist Italy and Fascist Spain, Germany at various times in the last seventy years, Japan before World Wars I and II, tsarist Russia in the decades before World War I - are all societies that cannot conceivably be described as politically free. Yet, in each, private enterprise was the dominant form of economic organization. It is therefore clearly possible to have economic arrangements that are fundamentally capitalist and political arrangements that are not free. Even in those societies, the citizenry had a good deal more freedom than citizens of a modern totalitarian state like Russia or Nazi Germany, in which economic totalitarianism is combined with political totalitarianism. Even in Russia under the Tzars, it was possible for some citizens, under some circumstances, to change their jobs without getting permission from political authority because capitalism and the existence of private property provided some check to the centralized power of the state (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 10).

In this logic, dictatorial and fascist regimes that arrested, tortured and murdered thousands of innocent people had at least the "merit" of keeping the company private and economic freedom. It is not surprising, therefore, that Friedman and his "Chicago boys" have advised the implementation of neoliberal economic policies by the bloody dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. It is also no accident that Hayek, another important ideologue of neoliberalism, expressed his positive assessment of this historical experiment in an interview with Colombian economics professor Diego Pizano Salazar:

- Diego Pizano: In Latin America, Friedman's ideas are particularly associated with the economic policy of the Chilean government. - Hayek: Correct. I was in Chile for a while and found out that the country is being run by members of Friedman's seminar! - Diego Pizano: What impression did you have of the Chilean situation? Do you think Friedman's ideas are working well at the practice level? - Hayek: The economic system is working very well and the recovery is extraordinary. I did not have the opportunity to know the political control system in detail to have a serious opinion on it. However, from an economic point of view, the system is now much freer than it was for many years. I also believe that the treatment that the international press has given Chile is scandalous (SALAZAR, 1980, p. 38-39).⁹

This is the same logic that leads sectors of Brazilian society, including part of the working class, to support defenders of the military dictatorship: the illusory perception of having improved financial and consumption conditions in this period, despite the many restrictions on freedom, torture and deaths¹⁰. The assumptions of neoliberalism, by reducing human freedom to the act of selling the labor force to buy goods or buying that labor force to increase capital, lead individuals to accept dehumanization processes that can even naturalize the death of thousands of people as a need to "keep walking the economy", as has been the public attitude of Jair Bolsonaro during the COVID-19 pandemic. The immersion in this "world of the pseudoconcrete" characterized by those inversions creates the fertile

⁹ - Diego Pizano: En Latinoamérica, las ideas de Friedman se asocian particularmente con la política económica del gobierno del Chile. – Hayek: Eso es cierto. Estuve hace tiempo in Chile y descubrí que ¡el país está siendo manejado por miembros del seminario de Friedman! -Diego Pizano: ¿Qué impresión obtuve usted de la situación chilena? ¿Considera usted que las ideas de Friedman están operando bien al nivel de la práctica? Hayek: - El sistema económico está funcionando muy bien y la recuperación es extraordinaria. No tuve oportunidad de conocer en detalle el sistema de control político para tener una opinión seria sobre él. Pero desde el punto de vista económico, el sistema es ahora mucho más libre en comparación a lo que había sido por muchos años. También creo que el tratamiento que la prensa internacional le ha dado a Chile es escandaloso. (SALAZAR, 1980, p. 38-39).

¹⁰ This illusory perception was created by the intense propaganda of the so-called "Brazilian miracle" that consisted of a process of momentary economic development, at the expense of a high level of country's indebtedness and an intense impoverishment of the working class made possible, of course, by the brutal repression of the unions. A critical analysis of the "Brazilian miracle" is presented in NETTO (2014).

ground so that neoliberalism, with its celebration of selfishness and meanness, can penetrate common sense and make it difficult to overcome the objective conditions that challenge humanity in the face of increasingly acute and threatening financial, ecological and health crises.

There is one more element of neoliberal theory that needs to be addressed here because it is directly connected to the phenomenon of irrationalism. It is the neoliberal conception of the human capacity to understand reality. Hayek clearly expressed his thesis that human intelligence is not capable of consciously directing the development of society and of human nature itself and that, therefore, the best thing to do is to trust the spontaneous evolution process, which would consequently justify confidence in the development produced by the market and by economic competition. To want to deliberately build a better society than the one we live in would be, in this sense, an error resulting from the misunderstanding of the limits of knowledge:

I am aware that the world in which we live is the result of a process of evolution that we cannot control. We can try to interfere with it (tinker with it, to use Popper's expression); that is, we can try to improve it here and there, but global development is beyond our means. The Germans have a good word to describe it, *Machbarkeit*¹¹, which expresses the notion that you can build the world according to a project. This notion is essentially wrong and it is very clear if we understand how the human mind and the whole of civilization developed. The world in which we live was not planned by any particular intelligence and the human being does not have the capacity to have it planned in an intelligent way (HAYEK, *apud* SALAZAR, 1980, p. 43, author' highlights).¹²

For Hayek, therefore, the human capacity for knowledge and understanding of reality is limited to actions aimed at the environment immediately around individuals. Social reality as a whole is not accessible to our intelligence, which makes any attempt to consciously direct the direction of society unfeasible and therefore irresponsible. All that remains is to create ways to prevent any restriction on market freedom and the spontaneous evolution of

¹¹ In the Spanish publication it says *machtbarkeit* is probably wrong in two ways. The first is that, being a noun, it should be written with the first capital letter. The second is that, according to the German Duden online dictionary, it is a feminine noun whose correct spelling is *Machbarkeit*. According to the Langenscheidt online dictionary the English translation of this word would be feasibility.

¹² Estoy consciente de que el mundo en el cual vivimos es el resultado de un proceso de evolución que no podemos controlar. Podemos tratar de interferir en él (*tinker with it*, para usar la expresión de Popper); esto es, podemos tratar de mejorarlo aquí y allá, pero el desarrollo global escapa a nuestras posibilidades. Los alemanes tienen una buena palabra para describir esto, *machtbarkeit*, que expresa la noción de que uno puede construir el mundo de acuerdo con su propio diseño. Esta noción está esencialmente equivocada y se vuelve muy clara si uno entiende cómo la mente humana y la totalidad de la civilización se han desarrollado. El mundo en que vivimos no fue diseñado por ninguna inteligencia en particular, y el hombre no tiene la capacidad para haberlo diseñado en forma inteligente (HAYEK, *apud* SALAZAR, 1980, p. 43, *italics no original*).

society. It is what could be called a rationality that goes just beyond the tip of each individual's nose.

The belligerent obscurantism

In this context of profound entrenchment of the neoliberal worldview in the conventional wisdom of a good part of the Brazilian population, the manifestations of obscurantism have been intensifying in recent years with an ostensible warlike intonation, which is shown not only in the apology for the use of firearms by ordinary people, as well as by physical and verbal aggression against people who become enemies of certain social groups only because they express their positions in relation to controversial issues or the attitudes of certain political leaders. For this reason, this obscurantism can be called belligerent.

Although this type of obscurantism has its own characteristics today, such as the use of social networks and “*fake news*”, it is a phenomenon that is already old in the history of societies. The “classic” case of obscurantism was the courts of the Inquisition that sentenced Giordano Bruno to death at the stake (SILVEIRA, 2018) and forced Galileu Galilei to present a humiliating abjuration (BAIARDI; SANTOS; RODRIGUES, 2012). The 20th century was so lavish on obscurantisms of the right and left that it would be impossible to present all its manifestations here. However, some brief considerations about the meanings of the term “obscurantism” will be inevitable.

According to the Brazilian online dictionary Aulete, the meanings of obscurantism are: “1) the state of those who are in darkness; 2) lack or refusal of instruction; ignorance; 3) political tendency to hinder intellectual progress or people's access to both science and the arts, in order to explore their beliefs and superstitions”¹³.

The lack of education does not necessarily characterize obscurantism except in a broader social sense, related to the inequality of social conditions for the education of people. In this case, it could be said that a society that does not strive to allow a good schooling of all people generates obscurantism. Refusal to receive instruction may be the result of obscurantist attitudes or previous unsuccessful and frustrating educational experiences. Although it is common to consider ignorance as a synonym for obscurantism, this does not

¹³ “1) estado de quem se acha na escuridão; 2) falta ou recusa de instrução; ignorância; 3) tendência política a dificultar o progresso intelectual ou o acesso do povo tanto à ciência como às artes, com o fim de explorar suas crendices e superstições”. Available: <http://www.aulete.com.br/obscurantismo>. Access: 11 May 2020.

correspond to the historical process of advancing knowledge, which is driven precisely by the awareness that there are aspects of reality that are not yet known, that are in the field of our ignorance and that we desire and we need to move on to the field of the known. In this case, ignorance does not become an obstacle to the advancement of knowledge, nor even to the diffusion of existing knowledge. When, however, there is a deliberate effort so that knowledge does not advance or that people do not have access to existing knowledge, that is, an effort to maintain ignorance, we have the phenomenon of obscurantism, as in the third definition presented in the quoted dictionary. However, it is worth adding to this definition that obscurantism does not only fight against science and art, but against any idea, activity, attitude, worldview that can encourage people to question whether society and life could be different from they are today. Obscurantism wants to perpetuate power relations that are favorable to certain sectors of society and, for that, it needs to spread prejudices about any person, group or line of thought that can question these power relations. The struggle of obscurantism against knowledge is always a political and socially reactionary struggle, it is a reaction to the possibility of profound changes in the structures and dynamics of a society.

There is also another possible meaning for the term obscurantism which refers to language. The aforementioned Aulete online dictionary presents as one of the meanings for the adjective “obscure” as the following: “difficult to understand, confused, unintelligible”¹⁴. In this case, obscurantism would be a sociocultural phenomenon in which certain discourses are designed to be understood by few people and to produce the impression that they are more complex and profound than they really are and that only people with a high level of knowledge and intelligence can dominate them. The two phenomena can be connected in certain contexts, as is the case with economic technocracy in current financial capitalism. Economists have become a caste that speaks a language dominated only by them, which prevents society from democratically debating economic policies.

But Defim Neto, Paulo Guedes and other neoliberal intellectuals could argue that the intrinsic connection between neoliberalism and obscurantism does not proceed. And they could quote in their support (if such a quote was not inconvenient for their political interests at any given time) a postscript entitled *Why I'm not conservative* that is part of the book *The Constitution of Liberty* (HAYEK, 2011). In this article, the author criticizes precisely the

¹⁴ “de difícil compreensão, confuso, ininteligível”. Available: <http://www.aulete.com.br/obscuro>. Access: 11 Mar. 2020.

obscurantist attitude of a priori rejection of new knowledge that seems to threaten people's beliefs:

Personally, I find that the most objectionable feature of the conservative attitude is its propensity to reject well- substantiated new knowledge because it dislikes some of the consequences which seem to follow from it—or, to put it bluntly, its obscurantism. I will not deny that scientists as much as others are given to fads and fashions and that we have much reason to be cautious in accepting the conclusions that they draw from their latest theories. But the reasons for our reluctance must themselves be rational and must be kept separate from our regret that the new theories upset our cherished beliefs. I can have little patience with those who oppose, for instance, the theory of evolution or what are called “mechanistic” explanations of the phenomena of life simply because of certain moral consequences which at first seem to follow from these theories, and still less with those who regard it as irreverent or impious to ask certain questions at all. By refusing to face the facts, the conservative only weakens his own position (HAYEK, 2011, p. 526).

It is necessary, however, to understand that when Hayek refers in this passage to new knowledge, he has in mind the aforementioned restriction of the human capacity to know. In no way can the new knowledge address social totality or support a project for the reorganization of society. On the social plane, according to Hayek, what people can know is what they learn from successful individual actions that constitute institutions and culture, which were not born out of conscious plans. This is quite clear in the fourth chapter of this book, entitled *Freedom, Reason and Tradition* (HAYEK, 2011, p. 107-132). For the author, society evolves by imitating successful actions that are also constituting rules of conduct that take the form of cultural traditions that need to be followed under pain of losing the spontaneously accumulated advances in society. Since our knowledge and intelligence are unable to understand the functioning of society as a whole, not following the rules that have been formed from successful actions is putting evolution at risk. It is also worth not forgetting what a successful action within the capitalist worldview means: it is an action that results in economic gains. And when Hayek refers to the good institutions that have spontaneously emerged in human history, the great model is the market. More than that, the “free market” is, for Hayek, the civilizing force par excellence, which generates the progress of humanity even against the will of human beings themselves (HAYEK, 2011, p. 104).

The very idea of freedom, which neoliberals so much claim to defend, turns into self-denial, since human beings must put the destiny of humankind in the hands of an organism, the market, which presents itself to them as a mysterious being, possessing its own life and subject of the civilizing process. There we find another form of obscurantism: the claim that

we always act in the dark and, for that reason, we must trust the market that, in the end, will cause humanity to evolve even against its own will and despite limited human capacity understanding what results from our own actions. It is still an attitude of almost mystical faith in something that would go beyond the limits of human reason.

Final considerations

This conception of human history, knowledge and mechanisms that produce development cannot result from another vision of education other than that of preparing people for permanent adaptation to the changes imposed by the market to the daily lives of individuals. It is not by chance that, with regard to school curricula, in the last decades there has been a strong shift from the focus on theoretical knowledge to the focus on building skills and knowledge derived from practices (WHEELAHAN, 2010).

What are the possibilities for Brazilian school education to engage in the effort to overcome neoliberal obscurantist common sense? The authors of this article understand that the perspective that presents the most effective possibilities of success is the organization of collective actions to value teachers work as an indispensable activity for the socialization of knowledge in its most elaborated and richest forms, in the sciences of society and nature, in art and philosophy. Teachers have been stigmatized as suspicious of the intention of indoctrinating Brazilian children and young people. It is time to show that we have all been indoctrinated by the obscurantist neoliberal ideology and that school education, contrary to what the obscurantists claim, is essential for the diffusion of a view of the world and of life based on the principle that the full humanization of all people is an essential condition for building a sustainable future for humanity.

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