

Independence Day and Forgotten Equality

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Short Communication

The history of the United States provides perhaps the most telling evidence of how its sociocultural model has produced a society that has progressively drifted away from the principles of its founding fathers. The article below summarizing this proposition was published in Italy's Bocconi University in-house newspaper on 3 July 2012, immediately before Independence Day.

'On 4 July the United States celebrates the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. On this day in 1776 thirteen American colonies announced that they no longer recognized the authority of the British crown, a move that paved the way for a process of democratization. The first step towards independence occurred when the colonies awoke to the fact that Great Britain's domination had significantly diminished the principles of freedom and equality. Later, war with Great Britain sanctioned the colonies' independence.

The text created by the founding fathers, which served as a guideline for the Constitution of the United States, included certain basic principles that were intended to be the foundations of the new model of society. In particular it emphasized the natural right of values of equality – "E pluribus unum" (out of many, one) – inspired by a metaphysical view of man – "In God We Trust" – and the unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Concepts that the founding fathers derived from the writings of a Neapolitan jurist, Gaetano Filangieri [1].

A few years later, in 1789, the French Revolution marked the end of an era and the document Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen] confirmed the need for a society that should be founded on values stated some years earlier in the United States Declaration of Independence. Then in 1795 Kant [2] wrote Zum ewigen Frieden [Perpetual Peace] in which he stated that peace needed to be based on those principles found in the two previously mentioned declarations.

But as the saying goes, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' So in the following centuries the good intentions were soon forgotten and a systematic use was made of weapons to resolve disputes.

At the end of the 1800s violent clashes broke out between different countries in both Europe and the USA. In the United States a bloody Civil War was fought between the Union and Confederate states during which more than 80,000 soldiers died in one horrendous three-day battle at Gettysburg. When consecrating the cemetery created to bury the dead, President Abraham Lincoln made a famous speech considered to be a cornerstone of American democracy. Lincoln said that the sacrifice of those young soldiers was a warning for future generations that would have the task and responsibility to show that those deaths were not in vain. Words written in blood that were intended to stand as a reminder for future generations [3,4].

'It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the

people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' We certainly seem to have forgotten these noble principles!

The 20th century was no better as regards gory conflicts. But then the conscience of the world was shaken after World War II and this led in 1948 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that called for the equality [5], freedom and dignity of every single person in the world.

Today we have to admit that those basic principles of "perpetual peace" in the world have been abandoned, starting with the United States, the country that championed those values. The USA finds itself facing sociocultural default, with a society that has a level of inequality similar to that found in Bolivia and Colombia. Its national debt exceeds 140% of GDP, a debt accumulated by a build-up of armaments and not by the cost of welfare systems. There is an unprecedented level of family indebtedness, while much needed jobs have been delocalized in order to "create value for shareholders". Metropolitan Detroit and Chicago have been ranked by Forbes magazine as, respectively, America's number 1 and 4th most miserable cities. So the USA, flag bearer for the basic principles of democracy, equality and the right to happiness is today by no means the expression of what its founding fathers intended. With a society heavily weighted towards the domination of its topmost social class, it would certainly seem to have thrown the principle of equality out of the window.

Looking at the USA today, what the world is asking is if Independence Day might not be the right time to question a social and cultural model that has led its society to a form of narrow-minded oligarchy, far removed from its much vaunted democracy. And more to the point, will President Obama manage to overcome the many difficulties posed by this model and pave the way for a new road ahead for humanity?

These considerations are made today in what is an extremely delicate situation.

References

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