

Notes on: Justice, equality and emancipation as starting points not destinations

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1. Economic justice: what exactly does it mean? Is it possible to distinguish it from other forms - gender, social, political, judicial, environmental, etc etc? Is justice a goal to be reached? Or is it the point of departure?

2. What I would like to do today is to look at how and why we got where we are, and perhaps to suggest, in that context, what it means to see justice, equality and emancipation not so much as destinies or goals, but as suggested by Rancière, starting points.

... equality is not a goal to be reached. It is not a common level, an equivalent amount of riches or an identity of living conditions that must be reached as the consequence of historic evolution and strategic action. Instead it is a point of departure. This first principle immediately ties up with a second one: equality is not a common measure between individuals, it is a capacity through which individuals act as the holders of a common power, a power belonging to anyone. ... Emancipation first means the endorsement of the presupposition: I am able, we are able to think and act without masters. But we are able to the extent that we think that all other human beings are endowed with the same capacity. Second, emancipation means the process through which we verify this presupposition. Equality is not given, it is processual. And it is not quantitative, it is qualitative.¹

3. I am not going to attempt a description of the symptoms of injustices or inequalities: I know that you all have a profound knowledge of those aspects. What I would like to do is an attempt at making a diagnosis based on a brief history that might help explain what I mean about justice, equality and emancipation should be considered as the starting points. History, I like to say, is as much about the future as about the past.

4. When people discuss the idea of justice and equality, reference is often made to the values that emerged during the European Enlightenment and which gave rise to Liberalism and the establishment of Western democracy. What is frequently forgotten (or omitted) from that story is the fact that the Enlightenment was only possible as a result of acts of dispossession, mass killings, genocide, enslavement and slavery. In other words, liberalism was already born from the loins of an Enlightenment soaked in blood. It was the wealth accumulated in Europe, and in particular in England, that allowed the emergence of Liberalism and democracy. It was the wealth accumulated from terror and conquest that provided the material basis for the birth of western democracy. But that 'democracy' was, and remains today, a *exclusivist project*: the establishment of democracy in the USA was based on only white male slave-owners having the right to vote and the right to participate

¹ Jacques Rancière (2017) "Democracy, Equality, Emancipation in a Changing World"
<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3395-democracy-equality-emancipation-in-a-changing-world>

in politics and be considered 'equal'. Much the same holds for the emergence of democracy in England that entitled only those who possessed land (almost always by dispossession). More importantly, western forms of democracy have always presupposed slavery and/or colonialism/neocolonialism.

5. The essential feature of Liberalism was the creation of two zones: a sacred zone and a sacrifice zone. The sacred zone 'belongs' to those considered to be human, while the sacrifice zone are for those considered by the rulers as non-human (such as indigenous peoples, slaves, Africans, colonial 'subjects'). These 'zones' are not necessarily physical zones: for example, with the birth of democracy, women were not considered to be fully human, for that was the premise upon which patriarchy was built) and therefore were not enfranchised at that time. The papacy declared that the Americas and the Caribbean were *terra nullius* — that is, lands without human populations. Although the process in Canada differed in detail from what went on in the US, Canada too built itself on the genocide of its indigenous populations and the establishment of sacred and sacrifice zones. The papacy also declared Africa to be *terra nullius*, and its people considered non-human, and therefore made into chattel slaves - treated like cattle — with the widescale mass killings and genocide of its populations. Non-Europeans, together with (initially) the Irish and Slavs, were to be considered non-human. Those in the sacred zone construct it on the basis of equality amongst the capitalist class, it is their starting point.

6. So, the ideology of liberalism was about creating sacred zones for the emerging capitalist classes who relied on the labour and dispossession of land, territory and resources of those condemned to the sacrifice zones, those considered the less-than-human or non-human. Those in the sacrifice zones could be annihilated, enslaved, condemned to chattel slavery, sent for slaughter in wars to protect the interests of the sacred - millions were so sacrificed in the first and second world wars.

7. But the 'borderland' between those zones never remained fixed. As those in the sacrifice zones fought back against exploitation as being less than human, as they organized to proclaim not only their humanity but also to invent what it means to be human, so the pressure mounted to offer concessions, allowing some of those in the sacrifice zones to enjoy the privileges of the sacred zone.

8. I am sure I don't need to account here the history of the struggles of those considered less than human throughout history. Let me mention just a few examples. The successful revolution by slaves in Haiti that declared all people are human. The black power movement and the civil rights movement in the USA proclaimed that Black people are human. The struggle of the women's movement internationally led to profound changes in the meaning of what it means to be human. The rise of the independence movements in the post 2WW period were motivated by the assertion of their humanity against colonial terror and domination.

The South African apartheid state creation of a sacred zone for whites, condemning the Black populations to the sacrifice zones of the townships and Bantustans. The uprisings that occurred in the 1960s and 1980s eventually led to the formal fall of the apartheid system. Black people were not aspiring to become white.

And the Zionist state of Israel created a sacred zone for those considered Jewish while Palestinians are condemned to exile, repression, killings and bombing. Yes despite this, we see the constant assertion of the humanity of the Palestinian people. They are asserting their own meaning of humanity, not aspiring to become Zionists

With the rise of the Hindutva in India we see the growing terror launched against Muslim communities with a growing movement to expel, if not eliminate, Muslims from India.

9. In each of these cases, if people wanted to become like their oppressors or exploiters, we would not consider that as the achievement of justice. The struggle of the women's movement has not been about becoming like men, but rather to invent what it means to be human, to organise, debate, love, express emotion etc in ways that is so different to the norms of patriarchy.

10. What I have outlined here is that Liberalism is a political ideology that has at its foundations the creation of the sacred and sacrifice zones. Indeed, Western 'democracy' depends on the existence of slavery / colonization. Without a sacrifice zone, there is no possibility for the accumulation of capital on which Western democracy depends.

11. Nowadays we all talk about neoliberalism. Through its domination of the Bretton Woods institutions, including the World Bank and IMF, the US sought to find justifications for the reversal of the gains made over many years by the people of the sacrifice zones. With the dollar no longer linked to gold since the 1970s, and the resulting devaluation of other currencies, the countries of the global south have been faced with a greater proportion of their GDP used for debt repayment in USD; lower returns on commodity exports; the resulting accusation that healthcare, education, social welfare, subsidy to farmers, support for cooperatives were an inefficient use of state resources. I don't need to recount every policy about neoliberalism that you all know too well.

12. under liberalism the boundaries between the sacred and sacrificial zones have never been fixed: they evolve and change depending on the balance of forces between the ruling elites and their need for ever-increasing rates of profit and the struggle of those in the sacrifice zones to assert their humanity. The same is true under new liberalism, under neoliberalism: nothing is fixed — so much depends on the balance of forces between the sacred and sacrifice zones.

13. In effect, what was implemented was the privatization of the public domain: that is to say, they created the conditions for a two-tier system to emerge — one for the 'rich' and one for the 'poor'. Privatization is a euphemism for the re-establishment of the sacred and sacrificial zones, but under new conditions. And the attacks on abortion rights in USA and elsewhere, we see the manifestation of the desire to expel the majority of women into the sacrificial zones.

14, The point here is that we are living in a period in which capital is seeking to revert to the basic tenets of Liberalism under new conditions. For that is what neoliberalism is about. What were the new conditions? In order not to provoke organized opposition against these policies that would require the use of violence, the implementation of the policies required local allies. So the space was

created for the local elites and their middle classes to become part of the new sacred zone while expelling everyone else into the sacrifice zones. Where previously the sacred zone was restricted to white people, in the new era, elites of the global south were permitted to become members of the sacred space, to benefit from its privileges, to use the state to enhance their accumulation of capital — capital that was to be banked in Europe or USA or offshore. They became in effect part of the international bourgeoisie. These elites were strongly motivated to support the implementation of the new form of liberalism — neoliberalism being old wine in new bottles.

15. There is a mythology that the implementation of neoliberal policies was imposed on the global south. In a few cases when governments tried to oppose US policies, violence, coups d'état, and assassinations were required. But in the majority of cases, our so-called 'leaders' realized that they had a vested interest in the emergence of the new form of liberalism: an ideology that created vast zones of impoverishment and concentrated zones of accumulation and dispossession. Our elites benefited from the implementation of neoliberal economic and political policies. And they have no hesitation in protecting their place in the sacred zone. With the impending devastation arising from climate chaos and rising sea waters, we see the establishment of floating cities — such as in Lagos — where the elite can live in safety and exclude people from the sacrifice zones, except as servants.

16. The point I want to make here is that it is no longer feasible to speak about economic justice from the point of view of the North and the South, or developed and developing countries. The leaders of the former colonies are deeply embedded in the sacred space. Their role is not only the maintenance of the division between the sacred and the sacrificial zones, but also in expanding the breadth of the sacrifice zones. If we look, for example, at how COVID-19 has been dealt with, it is really illustrative. In the North, people refer to the inequity of vaccines available in the North as compared with the South. But when you look internally, there is a greater inequality. In Kenya, for example, the elites and their middle-class supporters are pierced with a needle, while those in the ghettos and informal settlements are pierced with a bullet.

17. To return to my main argument: those who experience the worst forms oppression and exploitation and forced dehumanization are those who have the most profound understanding of what it means to be human. In struggles to assert their humanity, they collectively invent what it means to be human, and in the best of these struggles, they seek not an exclusivist definition but one of a universalist humanity — examples, Haiti revolution, Abahlali baseMjondolo etc For them, economic justice is not about becoming like those of the sacred zone, or to play by their rules - wealth that depends on exploitation and oppression. It is not about redistribution of wealth, but of redefining what wealth means for the common good, not monetary, but the capacity to realize ones full potential. Indigenous people goal is not to become settlers; the colonized don't want to become colonizers; Black Lives Matter is not about becoming white; and the Zapatista / Chiapas are not about becoming Mexican.

18. The formation of collective action presupposes that there is justice amongst each other is the equalizer, the starting point not the destination. But to become fully human requires collective actions for human emancipation, a political project that extends beyond cash and spending power. Every time the oppressed and exploited organise, they give birth to new ways of thinking, new ways

of becoming, new ways of expressing their humanity and new ways of inventing what it means to be human. Their starting point is the acceptance of equality of all; equality of justice; a common aspiration for a humanism that is embracive not exclusivist, in effect and expression of universalism.

19. But to see that requires us to accept that the peoples of the sacrifice zones *can think*. It is a recognition that when people organize to proclaim their humanity, they have the capacity to think emancipation, to think freedom. In doing so, equality is the starting point, we are all equally capable of thinking freedom, we are all equally capable of thinking justice, of recognizing our collective power to bring about change. Thinking justice is premised on a recognition of a common humanity, that collectively we can create what it means to be human. Justice is the starting point, and enables people to be propositional rather than merely oppositional.

20. Our challenge is therefore, to reflect on: What is our role as people who are part of the sacred zone? What can we do to support how people of the sacrifice zones organize? What can we do to create space that allows the people of the sacrifice zones to create the conditions for their own liberation? What can we be doing to undermine our own ruling elites capacity to exploit and oppress the peoples of the sacrifice zones? What can we be doing to hinder their attempts to eject the vast majority of humans into the sacrifice zones? Those are the questions that I hope you will struggle to respond to in your sessions.

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