

The concept of equity in the design of social policies: initial notes on the political and ideological assumptions of CEPAL's development proposal^I

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Abstract

This paper analyzes some of the philosophical fundamentals of the concept of equity, incorporated by multilateral agencies, including CEPAL, as the intellectual platform for State intervention and the design of social policies. In 1990, CEPAL published a report with a diagnosis and a set of proposals designed to guide governments in the region to establish a new development pattern in Latin America. This text formed the basis for the preparation of documents for social sectors like health and education. In all of them the concept of equity is widely mentioned as a principle for State action in the context of social policies and for reducing inequalities in the region. This resulted in a pattern of public policies in which equity is a central category, hence the interest in studying its principles.

Key-words: Equity; CEPAL; Theory of justice; Social policies

INTRODUCTION

The study of equity is important as it is a category that has been guiding State intervention in the social field and in the design of public policies in Latin America in the last decades. The change, at least in relation to discourse, which has started to assign to the State responsibility for reducing the huge social inequalities, results from the empirical verification of the consequences of at least two decades of economic crises that have debilitated the national economies, and also of solution strategies that have destroyed the National States' capacity to intervene in the social sectors. At the same time, they have increased exponentially the poverty level of huge population contingents.

The poverty index in the region has grown due to unemployment, reduction in wages, transfer of wealth to the central countries in the form of interest payment of the foreign debt, and also because of the unequal appropriation of production results within each country, where, with the State's

benevolence, some have become rich at the expense of the impoverishment of many.

If the blame for the capitalism crises in the 1970s and 1980s was attributed to the State, which had undergone an enormous growth and assumed responsibilities that were not its, but the market's, and therefore its size and functions had to be reduced, paradoxically, at the end of the 1990s, this same State is called to help solve the sequels left by the economic reforms that had been put into practice in the period of neoliberal hegemony.

The most scandalous result of this period and, due to this, the most criticized one, was and continues to be the social inequality that exists in countries of the region, that is, the form of distribution of wealth and income across social strata in each country, which has given Latin America the status of the most unequal region in the world. Therefore, the problem would not be only in the need to increase the produced wealth in order to improve people's living conditions, but in the instituted mechanisms that ensure the division of this wealth in an extremely unequal way, independently of the parameter that is employed to measure it.

Such reality, unacceptable under any point of view that one might use to analyze it, has started to be combated with State action proposals in the field of social policies, supported in part by the concept of equity, which takes us to the idea of justice linked to a variant of the liberal thought. It is an alternative, still in the liberal field, that is complemented by the also liberal idea of minimal state, and the questionings that the followers of the neoliberal thought have made to the social policies that were put into practice in the scope of the so-called welfare states from the end of the Second World War onwards.

In the economic field, the alternative presented to the countries of the Latin American region regarded the increase in the productivity of the different sectors of the economy to improve competitiveness, so that they could have a better insertion in the globalized world market. It is in this context that, from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, the idea of social equity becomes relevant, in documents of international agencies and in the discourse of rulers, directors and businessmen, as the main idea for the design of social policies and for State intervention in these sectors of the society.

By means of social policies, the State should meet the challenge of correcting the existing inequalities, without disrupting classic liberal principles such as property guarantee. Equity, in this perspective, would contribute to the amplified reproduction of the new order of capitalism, since the concept is based on a conception of justice whose principle refers to access to the "social minimum", so as to ensure survival and the reproduction of workforce in the new conditions of flexibilization, precarization and deregulation.

The way in which each government interpreted and incorporated equity, as a principle for the design and implementation of social policies, suffered variations across time and also intensity variations, since the assumptions, like the policies themselves, result from the projects of each government and from the correlation of forces in each context.

In the Brazilian case, it is possible to state that the social policies, during the entire decade of 1990 and the beginning of the following one, were based on the liberal idea of equity. They assumed focused, residual and compensatory characteristics, and were derived, to a great extent, from the conception of State that the governments of the period assumed, from the reforms they carried out in the structure of this State and from the adopted economic policies, which limited the capacity and the possibilities of State intervention in the social field. These policies derive from the assimilation of the guidelines issued by the Washington Consensus and from the adjustment agreements made between governments, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

With Lula's government, which started in 2002, there was a certain recomposition of the State and increased investments in public policies, focusing on some areas, especially education and income transfer policies. The actions in the social field assimilated the assumption that the State should promote social justice, intervening so as to "mitigate" the inequalities that exist in society by means of public policies, based in general lines on the same conception of equity. At the same time, the government resumes, as the State's responsibility, the planning of the economy aiming at the promotion of economic and social development.

It is possible to state, also, that Lula's government incorporates elements of CEPAL's¹ proposal as it adopts guidelines proposed by this organ to the institution of a new development pattern, which were originally expressed in the report: *Transformación Productiva con Equidad: a tarea prioritaria del desarrollo de América Latina y el Caribe en los años noventa* (Productive Transformation with Equity: the main task of the development of Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990s), published in 1990, and in other sectorial documents that were elaborated subsequently.

This way of understanding the State and the social policies is not a privilege of the Brazilian governments, but a widely disseminated tendency, as it is a theoretical principle that supports a view of the world and of society. Let's try to understand, therefore, the political, ideological and philosophical assumptions that were the bases for the action of the State and for the design of the social policies in the last decades in the majority of the Latin American countries. What is the origin of this thought in which the concept of equity is articulated with that of social justice? In other words, what is the relationship between the notion of equity, incorporated in CEPAL's development proposal, to a certain liberal theory of justice, whose reflective center is to examine principles of justice that should regulate a "well-ordered society", normalizing it so that it is minimally fair, that is, so that everybody has indispensable assets to avoid a Hobbesian war among all?

The origin of part of the normative values that have supported in a higher or lower degree the action of the State and the design of social policies in the last decades can be found in "A Theory of Justice", by John Rawls, a North American thinker from the field of the political and moral philosophies who

¹ *Comissão Econômica para a América Latina e Caribe* (Economic Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean - CEPAL).

lived between 1921 and 2002. The first version of the work with this title was published in 1971. Afterwards, Rawls reviewed some aspects of his “theory of justice as fairness”, particularly regarding the universalist pretension and the philosophical character, arguing that the basic ideas he presented and defended combine to form a political conception of justice, valid in a constitutional democracy, without the ambition of being a universal truth, nor of being valid for any and every form of government, something he initially defended.

Considering his connection with the field of political philosophy, it is worth highlighting the role that the author attributes to this field of knowledge. To Rawls (1997, p.02), one of the functions of political philosophy, as part of the political culture of a society, is the practical function of “focusing on deeply controversial issues and verifying if, despite the appearances, it is possible to discover some underlying basis of philosophical or moral agreement”² or, if there is no basis for an agreement, at least to reduce the irreconcilable differences “so as to maintain social cooperation based on mutual respect between citizens”.

Besides this function, the author attributed three more: (1) to contribute to the way a people think about the set of their political and social institutions, as well as their basic goals and aspirations; (2) a guiding function, in the sense of elaborating a conception that helps the members of the society understand themselves as participants in the political status and how this status affects their relationship with the social world; (3) a reconciliation function, “soothing” the wrath against society and its history, helping the members accept and restate, in a positive way, the social world. In addition to these, a fourth function would be to examine the practical limits of politics, and in this sense, political philosophy would be “realistically utopian” (Rawls, 1997).

At the moment that Rawls’ theory of justice emerges, in the 1970s, the world was undergoing a period of intense transformations in the political, ideological, economic and cultural field, such as the cold war, the expansion of the socialist experiences, the Vietnam war, the economic ascension of countries like Japan – which was starting to jeopardize the hegemony of the United States – and the emergence of cultural and counter-cultural movements like that of May ‘68, the feminist movement, the hippie movement and Rock and Roll.

This context explains, to some extent, the emergence of Rawls’ theory of justice, which recovers the consensualist view that is present in Locke, Rousseau and Kant, in light of the need to establish a new social consensus – a function that belongs to the political field – that would prevent the fragmentation and the disrapture of society and favor the continuity of cooperation in an order that would ensure the basic liberal principles of liberty and property.

About the ideas of the above-mentioned author, Casanova (2007, p.102) states that:

² All the quotations have been translated into English for the purposes of this paper.

Keeping us within liberal philosophy concerning a fair society, Rawls faces the impasse of historical liberalism – Hobbesian and Lockean – of the argument about the relations between liberty and equality, proposing that we should escape from the theoretical trap of the selfish subject that is typical of the nature state. And, certainly, he deals with social equality beyond the natural right to property, including the substantiation of the role of the State and the purpose of politics.

To Rawls (1997, p.10), when the subjects associate with each other in a position of equality, they give their individual interests up and, collectively, institute the society's general principles, which are established from a social consensus. It is from this consensus that, according to the author, the theory of justice as fairness emerges. A justice conception should consider “a standard against which distributive aspects of the society's basic structure should be evaluated”.

In this perspective, justice is not related only to formal justice, that is, the institutions of laws and juridical norms, but to the rights and duties of all citizens of a given society and to the guarantee of a minimum of wellbeing to all persons in the point-of-departure, which depends substantially on a cooperation system, without which nobody can reach a satisfactory life.

Rawls' consensualist view opposes the utilitarian theory, which is also liberal, which understands that society is correctly ordered and is fair when its most important institutions guarantee the highest net balance of satisfaction, obtained from the sum of the individual participations of all its members.

Moreover, it is possible to state that the author is affiliated to humanist liberalism, defending the need of institutions, in this case the State, that are able to correct the social inequalities that originate from differences in property and economic wealth. It is worth mentioning that, in the world of the civil society of proprietors and non-proprietors, or, which is the same, of the market, as there is no problem that the individuals are born in unequal situations, the problem would lie in the basic institutions of society being able or not to correct or mitigate these inequalities.

These elements help to understand how this theory ended up, in part, ideologically supporting the construction of the development proposal of CEPAL, which also originated from the Washington Consensus and which we will discuss in another section of this text.

In 1990, CEPAL launches the report *Transformación Productiva con Equidad: a tarea prioritaria del desarrollo de América Latina y el Caribe en los años noventa* (Productive Transformation with Equity: the main task of the development of Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990s), where it presents the principles for a new regional development cycle, which substitutes the development pattern based on import-substitution, which

would have drained away. This report guided, in the following decades, the elaboration of documents and specific policies for different social areas.

RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE

Let's take a look at the main elements that constitute the **theory of justice** proposed by John Rawls, which is part of the theoretical substratum of the social policies that are in force in a large part of the Latin American countries, which aim to perfect or "adjust" the democracies to the logics that reorganize capital, production and labor in this stage of globalized financial capitalism. To the author of the above-mentioned theory, one of the goals of justice as fairness is "to provide an acceptable philosophical and moral basis for the democratic institutions, thus answering the question of how to understand the demands of liberty and equality". He highlights that the central ideas of the conception of justice are: the idea of "society as an equitable system of social cooperation that is perpetuated from one generation to the other", of citizens as free and equal people, and of a **well-ordered society**, regulated by a public conception of justice. They are considered equal because it is assumed that everybody has, at least, the necessary moral faculties to live in society and get involved in social cooperation throughout life, as equal citizens (RAWLS, 1997, p.6/7).

Therefore, to the author, a **society is well-ordered** when, besides being planned to promote the wellbeing of its members, it is regulated by a public conception of justice, that is, (1) everybody accepts and know that the others accept the same principles of justice, (2) the political and social institutions respect these principles and (3) the citizens have a sense of justice that is normally effective, and behave according to these principles and to what their position in society demands (RAWLS, 1997). Therefore, in a well-ordered society, regulated by a public and shared conception of social justice, everybody would have a common understanding of what is fair and unfair.

In addition, the notion of **well-ordered society**, regulated by a shared conception of justice, should give clues concerning how to view "the difficult cases in which it is necessary to deal with the existing injustices. It should also help to clarify objectives of reforms and identify the most ominous inequities whose rectification is, therefore, more urgent" (Rawls, 2003, p.18).

Rawls considers **society** as an association of people who recognize rules of conduct and, in general, follow them. These rules specify a cooperation system that aims to promote the wellbeing of all its members, who understand that life in society is better than if each one depended on their own efforts to achieve their objectives. However, he recognizes that there are divergent interests among the society members about the distribution of the greatest benefits produced by collaboration, and this brings the need to define consensual criteria, which, we repeat, is the task of politics, that is, principles that determine the most adequate form of division of the results of this production.

The set of these principles, as well as their utilization as a parameter of institutional and personal conduct, is called **social justice**. Thus, **justice** in

this conception would be a general framework for the organization of the social system, in such a way that the always unequal distribution of the cooperation results is considered fair by all members, with no importance being given to the final sharing. It would be accepted and considered fair if people, when the justice criteria were defined, had been in **equitable conditions**.

In this case, equitable conditions are achieved “when the parts are symmetrically situated in the original position”, with a “veil of ignorance”, that is, the representatives who elaborate the agreement/pact do not know the social positions, the encompassing doctrines, the origin, race and talents of the people they represent. In this way, the “original position” would place the representatives far away from the particular circumstances of society’s basic structure, which might distort the agreement. The author recognizes that this situation is not found in the real world, but it should be supposed at the moment of the definition of the social justice criteria (Rawls, 1997).

The conception of **Justice as fairness** “transmits the idea that the principles of justice are agreed in an initial situation that is equitable”. It is based on principles of justice established in an original hypothetical situation of equality by free and rational people (equitable liberty) who are concerned about promoting their own interests and, to achieve this, they define the fundamental terms of their association, that is, they define the **basic principles of justice**, attributing rights, duties and criteria for the division of social benefits (Rawls, 1997, p.14). Therefore, it is an original consensus or an equitable adjustment about the basic principles of social justice that should organize society and, consequently, regulate all subsequent agreements.

Casanova (2007), analyzing the notion of Justice in Rawls, emphasizes that it refers to a form of social organization based on cooperation among individuals, on economic reciprocity and on freedom of moral conceptions that regulate people’s lives, which converge on the institutions, the main regulators of individual actions. According to this author, Rawls emphasizes the importance of the well-regulated liberal society which, in post-modern patterns, denies and annuls class conflicts, as well as outlines a liberal ethical conception that supposes the possibility of a social cooperation that is capable of mitigating the disaggregating competitive effects of the capitalist world.

To Rawls, the primary object of justice would be the **basic structure of society**, that is, the political and social institutions and the way in which these institutions interact as a cooperation system or, more specifically, the way in which the most important **social institutions** distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages deriving from social cooperation throughout time. According to **the author, institution** is a public system of rules that defines offices, positions, rights, duties and powers. The **most important institutions** would be: the political constitution and the main economic and social agreements. Examples: the legal protection of freedom of thought and conscience, competitive markets, the private property of the means of production, and the family (Rawls, 1997).

As mentioned above, Rawls understands that the **basic structure** should be the primary object of political justice, because in it the effects are deeper and are present in everybody's life since birth. The author "perceives" that:

This structure contains several social positions and that men born in different conditions have different expectations, determined, in part, by the political system and by economic and social circumstances. Thus, society's institutions favor certain points-of-departure more than others. These are especially deep inequalities (...). It is to these inequalities, supposedly inevitable in the basic structure of any society, that the **principles of social justice** should be applied in the first place. (Rawls, 1997, p.08) (our emphasis).

When Rawls admits that class differences are natural, he transfers to the political institutions the responsibility for solving the existing inequalities. In this way, he reinforces and feeds the current mode of life production, since he disregards the society's need of transformation to overcome structural differences, emphasizing that it is possible to solve, in capitalism, the inequality problems based on consensuses for the establishment of increasingly rational contracts.

The notion of equity, disseminated by CEPAL and by other multilateral agencies, as well as the character of the social policies that have been put into practice in the last decades by several Latin American governments, are partly founded on this theory, which attributes to the State and to the social policies the function of correcting and compensating for inequalities.

Regarding Rawls' theory of justice, Silva (2003, p.40) argues that the social policies,

[...] when they correct the basic structure, they do not let only the market decide what each one will receive. Thus, one might use the expression pure procedural justice to characterize the form in which the basic structure of society distributes the social cooperation benefits. But it is only with the interference of the social policies that the economic and social process can be considered a system whose distribution is always fair, whatever its result.

Let's see, then, the **two basic principles** proposed by Rawls (2003) in his theory of justice, which should serve as a parameter for a well-ordered society and for the institutions of society's basic structure: (1) each person has equal right to a fully adequate system of basic liberties and rights which is compatible with a similar system of liberties for all, and (2) social and economic inequalities should fulfill two conditions: first, they should be

linked to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; second, they should provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged society members. The basic principles of the theory of justice aim to regulate the attribution of rights and duties and clarify the existence of differences and inequalities inside society.

Rawls presupposes that inequalities in society are inevitable, and it would be exactly to such inequalities that the principles of social justice should be applied in the first place, aiming to evaluate and interpret the distributive aspects of society's basic structure and the division of social advantages. To him, a conception of justice "is an interpretation of the action of its principles in the attribution of rights and duties and in the definition of the appropriate division of social advantages". It is only part of a social ideal, because an ideal society, in addition to a distributive pattern of society's basic structure, would also involve the virtues of this structure, a conception of society and a view of the way in which the objectives and purposes of cooperation should be understood (Rawls, 1997, p.11). However, to the author, the function of a **political conception of justice** is not dictating norms or saying how to solve specific problems, but formulating a theoretical framework based on which the problems can be approached.

Rawls (1997, p.100) also says that in every society there are fair inequalities, that is, cases in which the unequal distribution of social primary goods like rights, liberty and opportunity (defined by the most important institutions), as well as income and wealth (regulated by the most important institutions) is advantageous for all, characterizing the principle of difference; injustice would exist when inequality, the unequal appropriation of social primary goods, does not benefit all and, mainly, does not benefit the least advantaged members of society. "Men share primary goods according to the principle that some can have more if these goods are acquired through modalities that improve the situation of those who have less". According to the author, the good is the satisfaction of a rational desire and primary goods should be accessible to all, mainly to the least advantaged, who need to have a minimum of fulfilled social satisfaction, so as to guarantee wellbeing and survival.

This idea unfolds the principle of the existential minimum, which should precede even the principles of justice, as the satisfaction of the citizen's basic needs is necessary so that he has conditions to exercise his own rights and liberties, covered by the principles of justice. About this issue, we highlight the comment made by Casanova (2007, p.102).

Accepting that *a social minimum of equity* is indispensable: with social primary goods, he believes that the issue is guaranteeing adequate conditions to protect the least advantaged, provided they restrict neither the innate liberties nor the rights, especially the right to property. From this last argument, which maintains the formulation of historical liberalism untouched, comes his refusal to think beyond the *minimum*, the inequalities

that derive from the control of these rights, according to the concrete forms that the distribution of material wealth in the groups determines.

This brief presentation of Rawls' thought aims to clarify some of the ideological and political principles that have sustained a conception of State and, consequently, the design of social policies in many countries of Latin America in the last two decades. It is a theory that aims to "refunctionalize" the idea of democracy and present elements to better organize the capitalist society, which has become increasingly complex and unequal.

Equity in CEPAL's proposal for Productive Transformation

One of the forms with which CEPAL has incorporated the notion of equity is expressed as follows in the text that presents the proposal for a new development pattern for Latin America: "and the following definition of equity was adopted: the relation between the income of the 40% of the lowest income population and the 10% of the highest income population", and this relationship varies from one country to another (Cepal, 1990, p.63). Thus, to CEPAL, among other meanings (this is of an economic nature), equity is a relationship between the growth observed in a given country and the income distribution that occurs in it, that is, it results from a comparison between the extreme social strata that compose a given society in terms of income appropriation, based on what this society understands as "reasonable" in terms of division of the produced wealth. It is possible to deduce from this that the analyses that aim to identify the social differences of a given reality vary according to the differences that exist in each society. This understanding is found in the text by Fernando Fajnzylber, called *Industrialização na América Latina: da "caixa-preta" ao "conjunto vazio"* (Industrialization in Latin America: from the "black box" to the "empty set"), published in 1988 and which served as the basis for CEPAL's subsequent elaboration of the document *Transformación Productiva con Equidad: la tarea prioritaria del desarrollo de América Latina y el Caribe en los años noventa* (Productive Transformation with Equity: the main task of the development of Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990s), mentioned above. Fajnzylber shows that calculations made by the World Bank to the central countries, considered equitable, revealed that the 40% of the lowest income population had revenue that was equivalent to 80% of the one obtained by the 10% of the highest income population, which would produce a relation of 0.8. When the Latin American countries are analyzed, reducing the expectation by half, that is, 0.4, even so it was identified that no country had been able to achieve what was expected up to the 1980s. In other regions of the world, countries with the same level of growth and development had performed a better income distribution. This shows that the empirical observation of lack of equity is given by the inequalities that exist in each society.

Such economic parameter led CEPAL to admit that the decade of 1980 was the period of lowest equity in the region, with substantial

impoverishment of the population, decrease in the Gross Domestic Product per inhabitant, debilitation of the economic sector, high unemployment rates, growth of informality, a drop in wages, intensification of the impoverishment of the low socioeconomic strata and precarization of their living conditions.

CEPAL defends that it is possible to identify an improvement in a country's equity when there are advances in at least one of the three objectives below:

The first is to minimize the proportion of people and homes whose living conditions are below what the society considers acceptable.

The second is to promote the development of the potential talents existing in all groups of society, progressively eliminating the juridically established privileges and discriminations, as well as inequality of opportunities of any kind, including those related to social, ethnic or geographical origin, or even to sex. **The third** is to aim that neither power, nor wealth, not even the fruit of progress, concentrate in such a way that the liberty scope for the future and present generations is restricted. (CEPAL, 1996, p.02) (our emphases).

Then, it concluded that the tragic regional reality derived from the insufficient economic dynamism and from the inadequate Latin American development pattern, whose main feature was the insufficient incorporation of technical progress. Therefore, it was fundamental to institute here a new development pattern that not only promoted economic growth, but did it with equity, that is, in a fairer way (Fajnzylber, 1988).

As a strategy to overcome this stagnant development model and the increasing social inequality, CEPAL started to propose changes in the productive structure of the countries in the region, whose primary export model should be replaced by the industrialization of manufactures, with added value to products, assimilation of technical progress and technological innovation in order to improve productivity and competitiveness in the international level. The dynamics of competition and concurrence in the markets would stimulate more and more the renewal both of human resources and machines and equipment, a necessary condition for the maintenance of any economy in the international market (Cepal, 1990).

The process of productive transformation is considered, in this proposal, an important aspect to change the economic and social reality of the Latin American countries. When they resume the economic growth, these countries would incorporate population strata into the productive process, with a progressive increase in wages, elevation in the level of life of these strata and a better distributive policy.

First, as productive transformation contributes to growth, undoubtedly the adoption of a distributive policy will be facilitated, even when this is not a sufficient condition to achieve it. Second, if growth is achieved based on ascending levels of application of a distributive policy, when the possibility of linking the evolution of wages to that of productivity [...] (Cepal, 1990, p.81).

However, the transformation of the productive process based on equity “neither occurs automatically, nor solves the situation of those who are marginalized from the activities that are the object of technical innovation”. This requires programs developed by the State, mainly to the people who have informal jobs (Cepal, 1990, p.81). To these sectors, the activities they already perform should be used, so that they can participate in the national economies in better conditions. For the formulation of these programs, the governments should diagnose the needs of the poor sectors in order to interfere in the problem where it really exists, satisfying the basic needs related to: nutrition, housing, sanitary care and basic education. These programs are compensatory actions of the State, which should adapt the social services to the needs of the poor sectors of the population. Thus, the State, as a basic institution, is summoned to participate in order to solve or compensate for the inequalities.

The arguments for the proposition of this kind of intervention are found in Rawls’ thought, as identified by Casanova (2007, p.103).

Seen from the point of view of the political function, in a society of this kind, the State should correct extreme inequality with public policies based on the criterion that differentiated allocation of resources is admissible only to the groups in worst living conditions, provided this does not affect negatively the situation of the collective, according to the “natural” hierarchic distribution of talents and wealth. To guarantee this scenario, the material rights – liberties – to acquire them should not be violated; rather, criteria of equal opportunity and equitable distribution for the least advantaged should be introduced, so that they have the minimum in order to support themselves.

To the author, the difference of this thought in relation to classical liberalism is in the indispensable role attributed to the State to maintain and organize the society, which is structured like this. The frailty of Rawls’

thought would be that “he places production outside the theoretical construction of the historical society in the material organization of resources and wealth: the social way of appropriation and division of goods, removing from reflection the societies that do not adjust to the model”. (Casanova 2007, p. 103).

FINAL REMARKS

As it was possible to observe in the text, the notion of equity that is present in CEPAL’s development proposal for Latin America from the 1990s onwards, called “productive transformation with equity”, is based to some extent on the ideas of authors like John Rawls, who are affiliated with the humanist liberal line and are distant, in some aspects, from conservative liberalism. While the latter defends the Minimal State and the non-intervention of the State in the different sectors of society, except to guarantee the right to property and liberty, the former, despite admitting social inequalities as natural and “obviating” the structural consequences of the private property of the means of production, attributes a certain protagonism to the State, in the sense that it should guarantee a social minimum to all citizens, so that they can exercise the right to liberty.

Based on the assumptions presented in the text, it is possible to better understand the type of State intervention and the design of the implemented social policies (with less or more coherence in relation to these theoretical principles) in many Latin American countries in the last decades.

It is important to notice that the concept of equity, incorporated and disseminated by CEPAL and by other multilateral agencies, in accordance with the theory that supports it, does not disrupt the idea of equality of opportunity; it is generically linked with the concept of redistributive social justice in the marks of the capitalist society, trying to solve, with a theoretically and not historically legitimizing argument, the problems and contradictions inherent in this mode of production. Thus, equity refers to a State action targeted at the needy and at juridical equality, but never at material equality; hence, it is far from the Marxist utopia of an equalitarian society among men, where individual needs and capacities are respected.

It is also possible to state that these ideas will become stronger and more precise in the “second generation of reforms”, which deal specifically with the new institutionality of the State. Such reforms, predicted in the Washington Consensus, will be precisely in charge of gearing the public apparatuses, “reinventing” a management State, transferring social areas to the market (privatization) and decentralizing management. A decisive text that will complement what we have analyzed and will express this direction is *Educación y conocimiento: eje de La transformación productiva con equidad* (Education and knowledge: the axis of productive transformation with equity), a text that has been broadly discussed by education scholars in Brazil.

In addition, we highlight the almost non-critical incorporation of the concept of equity and social justice by authors of different ideological shades and in different social areas, as has been the case of the replacement of the equality

principle by the equity one in the Brazilian National Health System. Although in the daily routine of health work the professionals' practice is based, to a great extent, on the presupposition that it is necessary to dedicate more time and more resources to those who need them most, which translates a certain notion of equity, this cannot be "transported" to the field of macro politics, a space where disputes occur and questions like the division and use of public funds are decided. The centrality assumed by the concepts of equity and social justice in the discourse of progressionist sectors in the field of health is worrisome, as it ends up placing in second position rights that are constitutionally consecrated, like the right to integral and equalitarian health to all, in view of the State's impossibility to meet all the demands in this field. The argument is that the demands are infinite (in many situations, inadequate) and the resources are scarce. Thus, in view of the scarcity, of the lack of personnel and of the limitations of the healthcare services, they defend that the State should establish priorities based on the principles of equity and social justice, treating historical categories as if they were universal.

Finally, we highlight that today, in many Latin American countries, through progressionist governments, the neoliberal reforms are being reviewed, and the radical egalitarian lines of the 19th century are being updated. The objective is to build a new meaning to the concept of equity, better still, of equality, based on the perception of inequalities as being structural, that is, produced as a consequence of the way in which the society is organized, and not as natural. Hence, the character of the social policies changes, as well as the form of State intervention.

COLLABORATORS

The authors worked together in all the production stages of the manuscript.

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