

Forbes

Social Justice And Pope Francis: Choosing Freedom Over Serfdom

By: Alejandro Chafuen – March 20, 2013

Having spent most of his life in Buenos Aires, Pope Francis has given proof that he can rise above his environment. As his compatriot Bishop Alberto Bochaty remarked, “he is a man of few words.” I lived half of my life in Buenos Aires. Few things are more difficult there than finding leaders with his humble demeanor and his preference for teaching by example. Most in his native Argentina have been captured by a political and economic environment ruled by a government dominated “social justice” mentality. Hopefully, Pope Francis will also rise above his culture and help recover a different type of social justice, which was nurtured and developed by members of his religious order.

From the moment that the term “social justice” became a mandatory term in the lingo of Argentine politicians, the country went down the hill. This was during the mid-1940s, when Col. Juan Domingo Perón created the “Justicialista” or the “Justice” party. Perón, an admirer of Benito Mussolini, was following his recommendation: in each country where it would be adopted, fascism will need a new name. The Latin word “*fasces*,” came from one of the symbols used by Romans to refer to justice. Perón made social “justice” a key pillar of his policies.

The term, however, was not created then. Nobel Laureate F.A. Hayek was correct in pointing out that the term became widely used after a noted Jesuit, Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio (1793-1862), used it in what was the most important Natural Law treatise during the 19th century in the Latin language world.

Taparelli’s book was translated into Spanish and French, but never into English. Perhaps that explains why Hayek made a mistake by implying that Taparelli used the term in the same corrupted, but popular, interpretation that sees social justice as “taking from the rich and giving to the poor.” As Thomas Patrick Burke has noted in a recent article and book, Taparelli belonged to a rich tradition where social justice has little or nothing to do with redistribution by government. It has more to do with order in society and with the justice that goes beyond courtroom justice.

Even his opposing intellectual giants, like Father Antonio Rosmini Serbati (1797-1855), had similar views on this topic. Rosmini’s daring views were condemned for some time.

His cause for beatification was started by John Paul II, and he was the first person beatified by Pope Benedict. Rosmini wrote “The Constitution Under Social Justice.” Published recently by the Acton Institute, it carries an outstanding introduction by the translator Alberto Mingardi. Mingardi, founder of the Bruno Leoni Institute, wrote that “Rosmini openly criticized redistributive policies, which limit and seize private property in the name of compulsory benevolence.”

During the period that goes from Aristotle to Adam Smith, there is an abundance of moral philosophers and jurists who have focused on distributive justice. It is almost impossible to find one who equates it with “Peronist social justice.” Wages, profits, and rents were always parts of commutative justice, or contract law. Distributive justice dealt with taxation, rewards, and honors.

Even those who had a warm heart for the poor, such as the Jesuit Juan de Mariana (1536-1624), argued that equality before the law required some inequality, as it was just that the most productive should earn more. Mariana was a scholar and his copious writings made him into a one-man think tank. His works were known to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. A small but effective think tank analyzing and promoting free enterprise, now carries his name in Spain, the Instituto Juan de Mariana.

Unfortunately it is not only Hayek, but even current outstanding intellectuals, and even Jesuits, who seldom mention this tradition. The approach to social justice of other noted Jesuit intellectuals who had great influence on Church doctrine are also different from today’s redistributive interpretation. Mateo Liberatore (1810-’92), a great champion of private property, played an important role in the drafting of the first great Social Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), he reminded readers that: “in this topic of rights we must diligently guard against giving too much authority (*potestà*) to the state.”

Another Jesuit, Oswald Nell-Breuning (1890-1991), who played a role similar to Liberatore in the drafting of *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), is sometimes accused of sharing a corporatist view of society. Nevertheless, he wrote that it is *against* social justice to fix salaries that are above the level that make business viable. When was the last time a reader of this column heard a priest or pastor from the pulpit arguing that high workers’ salaries can go against social justice?

I do not know if Pope Francis has studied or pondered the work of the above and other outstanding Jesuit intellectuals. Jesuits writing in recent decades have also presented economic views which have little to do with a Peronist interpretation of social justice. The recently departed James Sadowsky, SJ, of Fordham University, made important contributions to economics and opened the eyes of many libertarian thinkers to Natural Law.

Chief among those influenced was the late Murray Rothbard, a co-founder of the Cato Institute and later of the Mises Institute. The recently retired James V. Schall, SJ, of Georgetown University, has also made major contributions. His, “Religion, Wealth, and Poverty,” published several decades ago by The Fraser Institute in Canada, is a classic among those who are inspired by religion and economic liberties.

Social justice is and will continue to be part of Catholic doctrine. The issue is addressed, among other places, in points 410-414 of the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Society ensures social justice when it respects the dignity and the rights of the person as the proper end of society itself. The role of government and civil society is to provide the “conditions that allow associations and individuals what is their due.” It recognizes that some inequalities are not unjust and “enter into the plan of God, but there are also inequalities that result from sin, and structures and institutions which increase perverse

incentives.” According to the doctrine, solidarity is manifested in first place by a just distribution of goods, fair remuneration for work, and a zeal for a more just social order. Solidarity does not rule out opposition to government policies. Karol Wojtyla, before becoming Pope John Paul II, wrote that opposing public education can be an act of solidarity.

Given the popularity of the term, and its dangerous appearance in U.S. economic and academic debates, champions of freedom, intellectual entrepreneurs, and scholars should focus more on social justice. The Philadelphia Society, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, will devote its annual meeting in early April to study this topic. This society has tried to stay above the many divisions in the conservative libertarian movement. It was a place where libertarian economist Milton Friedman, conservative icon Russell Kirk, and in-between “fusionist” Frank Meyer, could share a panel and influence the program. It still is.

Followers and new scholars from those same conservative libertarian traditions will be part of the discussions. A good example is Professor John Tomasi, the founding director of Brown University Political Theory Project. Tomasi devoted a chapter of his book “Free Market Fairness” to social justice, with the provocative title: “*Social Justicitis*.”

The late William H. Hutt, an economist with impeccable free-market credentials, wrote that “however woolly the notion is in the mind of the majority who use it, [social justice] can have meaning when one considers the world as it is ... in fact, Hayek himself enunciates, very briefly, what we regard and describe as “the true principle of social justice,” a concept which if it were understood could be universally accepted as such.” Pope Francis has a chance to renew the old tradition of social justice and, in this way, move the focus from redistribution to the building of an orderly framework of society that is effective in lifting the poor.

Respecting private property, promoting sound money, combating corruption, weeding out crony capitalism, protectionism, and other causes of unjust inequalities, which especially affect the poor, is a path to a truly liberated and more just society.