

END OF YEAR REFLECTION OF CJ

New Crossroads, New Signs of Hope

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In previous reflections we spoke of the current crisis as an opportunity to “reform capitalism,” although we also warned about the disastrous consequences that could be unleashed by cuts in public services, which were then only beginning. However, the reality of the crisis and the information we receive daily have surpassed our expectations.

All the winds (or hurricanes, if you will) that swept through the year 2011 place us at a historical crossroads with varied dimensions (social, economic, political, European, and international). We find ourselves faced with questions and dilemmas which demand of us comprehension, discernment, and resolution. This is difficult, however, because the mass media and the diverse political forces present us with a single “common sense” response, one which denies the existence of alternative solutions for the difficult moment we face. Meanwhile, an ever larger part of our society is unjustly paying a high price for this crisis, as its living conditions decline toward greater poverty and social inequality.

The present reflections seek to describe some of the crossroads before us and also to highlight the signs of hope that we have seen in recent months. Those hopeful signs merge in a powerful idea which keeps spreading: it is necessary for us to seek forms of social, political, and economic organization that are more democratic, more participative, more just, and more environmentally sustainable.

1. A historical moment?

In these years of crisis, and especially during 2011, five crossroads have become apparent, and each one presents us with particular questions and dilemmas.

1.1. The social crossroads

Frequent reports and statistics warn of a significant increase in the number of persons living below the poverty line (now about one in four). Or they tell us about the number of families where no one can get work,

or about the victims of evictions (300,000 houses foreclosed in recent years), or about the people who are finally forced to live on the streets, barely surviving.

If we add to this reality the data offered by Eurostat and other agencies, which reveal that disparity of income in Spain has reached scandalous levels, then we realize that the present situation is totally unacceptable. In former times public services guaranteed people a certain level of social cohesion, but the recent cutbacks, which will surely increase in 2012, are making the already existing social drama more acute. The last report of the OECD warns that “the social contract could begin to come apart” in countries like Spain.¹

We understand governments are being pressured to reduce the budget deficit and the national debt, but that raises serious questions: what do the institutions propose to do as our social reality continues to deteriorate? Is there enough sensitivity and empathy regarding this reality, or is the reaction rather to criminalize those sectors which are most impoverished? Are we obliged to accept a Darwinian social model which excludes a major part of the population because it is unable to keep up with the pace dictated by the economic powers?

1.2. The economic crossroads

The welfare state is in the midst of a profound transformation. There are two debates going on. Both are legitimate, but they are not being argued honestly.

The first is the debate which questions the competence of the public realm. The current crisis certainly provides a good opportunity for us to examine the problems of inefficiency, overlapping, and bureaucracy that exist in the system. All the same, it should be possible to solve those problems without reducing the quality of services through indiscriminate cutbacks.

The second debate involves a fervent defense of the idea of “austerity.” For some time now those involved in social movements and those inspired by the Church’s Social Doctrine have been insisting on the need for a more modest lifestyle; there is a real need to restrain excessive consumerism and to attend to the environmental problems caused by it. But it is one thing to defend a different lifestyle based on such necessary values as simplicity, sobriety, and respect for the planet (values ignored by the capitalist system), and something quite different to cut back, in the name of austerity, public services which are essential for guaranteeing definite social rights. Zygmunt Bauman argues that the welfare state is moving toward becoming a «benefit and assistance state» and so is passing «from a culture of citizens’ rights (characteristic of modernity) to a culture of charity, humiliation, and stigma».² If this happens, what will be the social consequences?

1.3. The political crossroads

The year 2011 has made plain the great crisis in politics and in the working of our representative bodies. Phenomena such as the “*Indignados*” movement have shown how great is the distance between traditional institutions (political parties and unions) and large sectors of society. Representative democracy has been called into question because people increasingly believe that it is unable to defend the interests of the majority.

Moreover, we have seen clearly how political power is subject to the power of finance and business. In recent decades, even though financial power has become globalized, the national states have been unable to develop international institutions capable of controlling it: there is almost no international regulation and control of financial markets and capital investment. We thus find

ourselves in a distressing situation, where some of those most responsible for the crisis are being helped rather than hindered. They are able to write the rules of the game themselves and impose them on others. Meanwhile political forces show themselves to be ever more vulnerable and ever more subject to the dictates of investment banks and certifying agencies.

1.4. The European crossroads

The debt crisis has shaken the foundations of the European Union. The prospects of building a project that goes beyond simple monetary or economic union are more distant than ever. Instead of seeking solutions together and strengthening the European project, each government seems more concerned with pursuing a solution which benefits its own national interests. We need to ask: can we move beyond the present moment and advance toward greater political integration and better fiscal coordination?

1.5. The international crossroads

While Europe and the West in general are contemplating their navels, the rest of the world is changing rapidly. The emerging countries (the so-called BRIC: Brazil, Russia, India, and China) continue to grow economically, and they are developing a new international framework where the USA and the EU will no longer be the only actors capable of establishing the rules of the game.

This multi-polar world is in itself good news, but it also presents us with three major challenges:

- A democratic challenge, since groups like the G-20 seem to have become forums for decision-making which are detrimental to other spheres, like the United Nations, which was created to represent the totality of the planet.

- An environmental challenge, since the growth of countries like China, Russia, and India (along with the USA) makes clear the non-sustainability of the capitalist system and its great paradoxes.

- A redistributive challenge. Even though recent years have seen a reduction in the numbers of those living in extreme poverty (thanks basically to China's growth), the inequality between countries and within countries continues to increase, according to the figures of the OECD.

Finally, in this year 2011 we have witnessed the terrible famine suffered by millions of persons in the Horn of Africa, even though it has been totally eclipsed by the international economic crisis.

With the world in such distress, how will we be able to achieve progress toward greater democratization of the international system? How will we be able to create instruments which put an end to the present "ecocide" and which guarantee a more just distribution of wealth?

2. Our hopes

Alongside these five crossroads we wish to point out four events that took place in 2011 and that seem to us both novel and hope-inspiring.

- First, we stress the end of violence by the Basque National Liberation Movement (ETA) as news of historical moment. After decades of suffering, a new scenario of hope has opened up in Basque society and in the whole Spanish nation. That does not mean that the process from now on will be easy or straightforward, but the announcement is wonderful news and opens the way to reconciliation and mutual understanding.

– Second, the Arab peoples have decided to take things into their own hands. They have unseated dictatorships which were in some cases governing with the support or at least the consent of the West. The year 2011 will be remembered as the year of the “Arab Spring.” The triumph of the Islamists in various elections shows that the full acceptance of human rights will take some time, but now there can be no retreat.

– Third, we believe that the movement of the “*Indignados*” reveals that citizens are waking up to the gravity of the present political and economic situation. The debates being held in the plazas and in the social networks have contributed to the search for alternatives to the present situation. They have also helped us to examine the ethical and moral limits of the dominant system and to forge links between the already active social movement and the newly emerging forms of political participation and popular mobilization. The challenge before us is to take the indignation and the protests and transform them into effective proposals, instead of letting them become just another short-lived, fruitless complaint.

– Finally, it is worth noting that in recent times there has been an unprecedented growth in forms of economic organization that are much more democratic, sustainable, and just. A significant increase can be seen in ethical banking systems, cooperative endeavors, responsible consumerism, and fair trade. These new ventures most definitely help to humanize and democratize the economy, as well as to instill human dignity in the participants.

3. Desires for 2012

This past year, 2011, has shown us many dark sides, but also some bright ones. It seems clear that our societies are experiencing profound changes which can help to bring about an epoch of change. In this year when we celebrated the 30th anniversary of *Cristianisme i Justícia*, we wish to share with you three wishes and hopes:

First, we hope that our political reflection will always take into consideration the most vulnerable sectors of society, and that decisions will be made in their favor, not against them. The crisis is making evident the unjust relations that exist between winners and losers, and this could carry us all toward a situation of social fragmentation.

Second, we hope that our society will be able to move beyond the “simple solution,” which apparently consists in cutting back public services. It is morally unacceptable to make only the disadvantaged pay for the craziness of the financial and banking sectors; the citizenry as a whole must share the responsibility for the economic muddle in which we find ourselves.

Finally, we hope that 2012 becomes an opportunity for all social forces (institutions, political parties, trade unions, businesses, associations, NGOs, social movements, etc.) to build together a more fraternal, just, and equitable society, one that takes a broad view of our world and shows special sensitivity to those who have least voice. Those of us who believe that God has revealed himself as “good news for the poor” cannot shrink from these challenges.

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1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2011. *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*. <<http://www.oecd.org>>

2. BAUMAN, *El tiempo apremia. Conversaciones con Citlali Rovirosa-Madrazo*, Barcelona: Arcadia, 2010
