2008

A Better World is Possible

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/1

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/1
The struggle for human rights and social justice is universal and as old as civilization itself. Equally long and difficult have been, and continue to be, the struggles for social justice, and to create a better, more equitable, and humane world. I cannot think of any nation in the planet that has not engaged in violations of human rights of its own citizens and/or acted aggressively and violently toward its neighbors. The European colonization of Africa, Asia and the Americas provide numerous examples of bloody colonial conquests in the name of “civilization,” and their uncivil consequences.

Sadly, as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the struggle seems to be as intense as ever, even in countries that have for centuries proclaimed themselves nations of laws that defend democracy and justice. A good example of this is the United States of America, “land of the free and home of the brave.”

Since its revolutionary origins in the 18th century, and after defeating the mightiest world empire of that era in the name of freedom and democracy, the United States began projecting a public image of a rightfulness, equalitarianism, and justice; a true champion of human rights and social justice. These images were disseminated and advertised widely with grandiose rhetoric and slogans like “all men are created equal,” “Manifest Destiny,” “an empire of liberty,” “to make the world safe for democracy,” “the leader of the free world,” and “to make the world safe from communism.” Slogans and phrases that usually become doctrines, unilaterally announced by U.S. presidents either during electoral campaigns or inauguration speeches. These images and rhetoric, however, were often in contradiction with the way the United States Government behaved and acted toward its allies, enemies -real or imagined- and its own citizens.

The contradictions have always been painfully clear. After declaring that “all men are created equal,” the United States continued allowing slavery for more than one hundred years, and after the abolition of that despicable and inhumane “peculiar institution,” African-Americans had to wait another fifty years to claim their full civil rights. In Latin America, the region the United States calls its “backyard,” -not because of its geographical proximity, but because of U.S. imperial designs- the idea of Manifest Destiny resulted in Mexico losing more than half of its national territory to U.S. aggression. Making the world “safe for democracy” meant gunboat diplomacy and military occupations that resulted in the establishment of U.S.-backed military dictatorships that made that part of the world safe for U.S. investments, not democracy.

During the Cold War, the United States proclaimed itself the “leader of the free world” and embarked on a mission to “make the world safe from communism,” by preventing the spread of that ideology at any cost. For Latin America, that strategy resulted in the violent overthrow of democratically elected governments and popular movements like Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile, both replaced by U.S.-supported military dictators who executed thousands.” Under the same strategy, the U.S. happily supported defeated dictatorships in almost every Latin American country: Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Uruguay and Paraguay, to name only the most notorious and despicable. For decades, these dictators violated the human rights of its citizens, murdered tens of thousands, and bankrupted their nations’ treasuries. Despite its self-proclaimed title as “the leader of the free world,” the U.S. showed little or no concern for democracy and human rights then.

The struggle for human rights and social justice affects every country in the world, and in Latin America, despite the disappearance of all military dictatorships and the return of democracy to most countries in the region, the struggles are far from over. They rage quietly, but furiously throughout the Americas. For example, Haitian migrant workers are inhumanly exploited in the Dominican Republic; the Mexican army treats Central American migrants with as much harshness, violence and prejudice as the U.S. Border Patrol treats Mexicans trying to enter the U.S. without the proper documentation; for more than four decades, Colombia has been embroiled in a civil war, now characterized more by its crude violence and terrorist acts, than the prospects of building a better nation; and Bolivia is in the midst of a secessionist challenge with the potential of erupting into social violence or civil war.

For centuries, Latin Americans fought against colonialism and foreign domination, and for independence, self determination, human rights and social justice at home. Today, 44 million Latinos living permanently in the United States continue fighting against different, but equally powerful forces: xenophobia, discrimination, exploitation and inequality, and for immigrants’ rights, affordable health care, fair wages, citizenship, and equal protection under the law. Under the international banner and slogan: “A better world is possible,” the struggle for human rights and social justice continues on both sides of the U.S. border.

Félix Masud-Piloto