

The pathology of hate

Social phobias are diseases that must be overcome. To turn the idea of equal dignity into a belief is the ethical way of overcoming conflicts between the discourse of intolerance and respect for freedom of expression

ADELA CORTINA - 28th MAR 2017 - 00:00 CET

Around 1944 the autobiographical book of Stefan Zweig *The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European* came to light. In the book he recalled the beginning of the 20th century from the peculiar observatory in which he had lived as an Austrian, a Jew, a writer, a humanist and a pacifist. And he considered it a moral duty to tell this story like a warning to seafarers, because nothing could lead to think, at the thresholds of the new century, that in its first half two savage wars were going to take place on European soil. Young people educated in imperial Austria, in a safe and stable environment, believed that any episode of barbarism was finished and saw in the future nothing but signs of progress. They could not suspect that the snake's egg was already incubating.

This story is familiar to those who have lived the experience of the Spanish transition to democracy. In the seventies of the last century we believed to have entered the path of social and political progress, the war conflicts were left behind us, propitiated by opposing ideologies, inequality in opportunities and wealth, and a path of change for the better was opened. Today, however, it is urgent to learn from Europeans like Zweig, in order to become aware that the seeds of retreat can be set and it is necessary to stop their destructive growth. As Federico Mayor Zaragoza says, the European Union should be the catalyst for world union. One of those destructive seeds, as in the time of Hitler and Stalin, is the triumph of hate speech.

Hate speech is understood as any form of expression whose purpose is to propagate, incite, promote or justify hatred, contempt or aversion towards certain social groups, from a position of intolerance. Those who resort to this type of speech try to stigmatize certain groups and to open the ban so that they can be treated with hostility, dissolve the people in the group which is attacked and throw against the whole their destructive message.

We have to become aware that the seeds of retreat can be set

Perhaps the label "hatred" is not the most appropriate to refer to the emotions that are expressed in such discourses, such as aversion, contempt and rejection, but in any case it's about this broad world of social phobias, which are to a large extent social pathologies that must be overcome. These include racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, aversion to members of certain religious denominations, or the most common form of all: aporophobia, rejection of the poor. And it is that the emotions, to which so little attention has been paid in public life, nevertheless impregnate it and are especially manipulated by the henchmen of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. This was the case in the first half of the last century, and it is now when phobic discourses proliferate in shared life.

From a legal point of view, the main problem lies in the conflict between freedom of expression, which is a precious asset in any open society, and the defense of the rights of groups, object of hatred, both to their survival and to the respect for their identity, to their self-esteem. The problem is extremely serious, because neither side can be eliminated.

In principle, so to speak with Amartya Sen, freedom is the only way to freedom, and to extirpate it is the dream of every totalitarianism, whether they wear the robes of populism or any other. The experience of countries such as China, North Korea or Venezuela can not be more negative.

It is about defending the rights of those who are socially more vulnerable

But equally, the right to the recognition of one's own dignity is a non-negotiable good in any society which is intelligent enough to realize that the core of social life is not formed by isolated individuals, but people in relation, in a bond of mutual recognition. People who collect their self-esteem from the respect that others show them. And, from this perspective, the intolerant speeches that proliferate in countries of Europe and the United States are causing irreparable damage. Because of their consequences, because they incite abuse of despised groups, and by themselves, because they open an abyss between the "us" of those who are mistakenly convinced of their stupid superiority, and the "they" of those who, with the same stupidity, consider inferior.

Of course, law has been addressing these issues for a long time, by asking itself about the criteria for distinguishing between procrastinating and annoying speech, but protected by freedom of expression, and discourses that attempt against constitutional goods. The same way, law asks itself about the policies of recognition from the framework of the institutions.

However, the law, even though is essential, it is not enough. Because the conflict between freedom of expression and hate speech is not overcome only by trying to find out to what extent it is possible to harm others without committing a crime, to what extent it is possible to humiliate their image without deserving criminal or administrative sanctions. In fact, personal freedoms, and also freedom of expression, are constructed dialogically; the reciprocal recognition of equal dignity is the true pillar of a democratic society. Taking from José Ortega y Gasset [*] the distinction between ideas and beliefs, which consists in recognizing that the ideas, we have them, and in beliefs we are, we could say that turning the idea of equal dignity into a belief is the ethical way of overcoming conflicts between hate speeches and freedom of expression, because who actively respects the dignity of the other person will hardly be allowed to harm him/her.

In his book *The Discourse of Hate (Le Discours de la Haine)* (2004), Glucksmann wondered if hatred deserved hatred, and he responded that in order to fight it, it is enough to smile at its ridicule. However, and coming back to the beginning of this article, I do not think we have to smile at hate, not even with contempt. Because it is destructive and corrosive, it breaks the human bond and causes a setback of centuries.

Cultivating a democratic *êthos* is the way to overcome conflicts between freedom of expression and the rights of the most vulnerable. Because that is what is involved in each case: to defend the rights of those who are socially more vulnerable and therefore are at the mercy of the socially more powerful.

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[*] José Ortega y Gasset (Madrid, 1883-1955), is the most prestigious international philosopher and essayist from Spain. Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Madrid (1904), between 1905 and 1907 he studied in Leipzig, Nuremberg, Cologne, Berlin and Marburg. A fundamental exponent of the theories that mark the evolution of his thinking and his immense creation from neo-Kantian objectivism (1902-1914), to perspectivism (1914-1923) and to rational-vitalism (1924-1955), replacing the pure Cartesian reason of Philosophical tradition, which he expounds in his essay "*Ideas and beliefs*". The basic ideas, which Ortega calls "beliefs", constitute the continent of our life; they are not ideas that we have, since we do not produce them, but ideas that we are. And we produce, sustain, discuss and propagate the ideas-occurrences. The idea is imagination. In beliefs, we are. They are the ones that hold us and sustain us, and constitute the basis of our life; in them "we live, we move and we are", as the deepest stratum of our life, that holds and carries everything else. When we really believe in a thing, we do not have the "idea" of that thing, but we simply "count on it". Ideas act wherever a belief has been broken or weakened.

[Extract-summary of the first chapter of "*Ideas and beliefs*", Library of ideas of XX century (Translation team).]

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