

Tribute to Ignacy Sachs (1927-2023)

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The death of the Polish economist comes just as the world watches in bewilderment – but well warned by him – the effects of the ecological catastrophe heralded for decades

The news of the death of Ignacy Sachs in Paris at the age of 96 comes to us with the force of an extreme event on the terrestrial environment. Coincidence or not, his disappearance occurs just as the world watches in bewilderment – but well warned by him – the effects of the ecological catastrophe announced for decades. Not only this theme is present at the moment. Other subjects to which Ignacy Sachs devoted his long life are marked by the decadence of diplomacy and science in the face of the fascist rise driven by a capitalism of deconstruction revived since the late 1970s. Peace, development, hunger, work, inclusion, civilization were the perennial hashtags in the work of this Polish citizen of the world.

In his *The Third Shore, In Search of Development*, Ignacy Sachs recounts the encounter with another author who insists on remaining current in the twenty-first century to the unhappiness of those adherents of the fantasy that it is possible for the world to go by itself. This is Josué de Castro. Perhaps it is more than pertinent

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to remember one for the other in this phase of Brazil and the planet. Ignacy Sachs recalls a meeting in Geneva in 1963, at the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology at the Service of Development, when Josué de Castro, then president of the Brazilian delegation, asked him to help organize an appeal by the scientists present at the event in favor of peace. Josué de Castro wanted to take the text to the conference on disarmament that was simultaneously taking place nearby, at the *Palais des Nations*.

The two then met with Michal Kalecki, chairman of the Polish delegation, Abba Eban, a former Israeli foreign minister, and Gabriel Ardant, a Soviet academic. It was in this episode that Josué de Castro became a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. It didn't, as we know. But in 1973, Josué de Castro was already in love with the concept of ecodevelopment, elaborated by Ignacy Sachs. In short, a concept that denies the possibility of solving socio-environmental problems by the thesis of degrowth, but, rather, offers greater emphasis on the quality of development. This theoretical elaboration of Ignacy Sachs, according to himself, is a reunion with what is most innovative in Josué de Castro, that is, the combination of the social and the ecological in his *Geografia da Fome* (Geography of Hunger). In fact, until its publication in 1946, no literature had dared to lend such complexity, in the area of social sciences, when analyzing an object. And what an object! Hunger.

Ignacy Sachs himself wrote in *Caminhos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável* (Paths of Sustainable Development) that the concept of ecodevelopment, that is, the attempt to define development strategies that are socially useful, ecologically sustainable and economically viable, was in the direct line of Josué de Castro's concern. This fruitful intellectual dialogue originates in the conception of science and its perception for both. It is Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira who, in summarizing the work of Ignacy Sachs in an article published in the *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, immediately highlights this quality by stressing that the Polish economist "never allowed himself to be carried away by the beautiful corner of science" and allowed himself to be escaped from moral values. "Nothing to stop growth as long as there are poor and glaring social inequalities, but it is imperative that this growth changes with regard to its modalities and, above all, to the division of its fruits. We need another growth for another development," says Bresser-Pereira of *The Third Margin*.

For Ignacy Sachs, says Bresser-Pereira, economics is theory and is also a way of thinking associated with practice. "When we set aside models of pure theory and turn to the more 'realistic' mechanisms of action of a particular economic system in a given framework of circumstance, the use of models becomes effective, and, in our opinion, advisable," Ignacy Sachs points out. But he argues that economics can never detach itself from the social sciences, because these "essentially have a heuristic value of helping us think. They help to ask the right questions, the pertinence and articulation of which are not at all evident and which would not come to the mind of an inexperienced observer. But the answers to these questions can only come from praxis."

It is legitimate to say that the economics of Ignacy Sachs – aligned with that of Josué de Castro – reverberates in economists of today when they offer research based on methodologies of the Social Sciences, such as ethnography, direct or participant observation, that is, much more an economist who is in the place where the phenomenon occurs than the economist stuck to computer screens elaborating graphs, mathematical models or exaggeratedly retested by theoretical ramblings. Josué de Castro would have been this precursor with *Geografia da Fome* and Ignacy Sachs followed him in his travels and professional experiences in India, Brazil, above all, France, in short, around the world. One could cite here as successful contemporary followers of this school the Nobel laureates Esther Duflo and Abhijit V. Banerjee, for example, among others.

In 2009, on the occasion of the Copenhagen Climate Conference, I spoke at length with Ignacy Sachs about his economics of biocivilization. At the time, I was part of the chair that bears his name instituted at PUC-SP. He believed that future generations, by mastering a greater knowledge, due to the breadth of circulation of information provided by the web, would be better and should never be perceived as a setback. Ignacy Sachs had little intellectual experience of the rise of the new fascism. He, however, bet that the productive system, instead of incorporating the thesis of degrowth, could incorporate the production of small rural landowners in the sustainable pattern and in the processing of biomass, this would imply resorting to intensive work in knowledge, research & development and optimize natural resources. He evidently was far from naïve about the challenges of financial interests on this perspective. However, turning the threatening food and energy crises into opportunities to move toward biocivilization would, for him, be inexorable.

As Bresser-Pereira recalls, Sachs thought of the world as a spaceship, in which, following the concept of the Anthropocene, very much in vogue today, five tasks would be required: planning (quite different from planning), the energy revolution, the green revolution, the blue revolution (maritime production) and international cooperation. Two preconditions for performing these tasks, for Ignacy Sachs, would be the improvement of the “social control of the social economy” and a resignification of the place of work in everyday life, to the options related to productivity. “It is necessary to introduce into this discussion the issue of the equitable distribution of the workload among all those who wish to work.” He added: “‘Leisure’, for the one who works, and ‘forced idleness’, for the one who does not find work, are nowhere near synonymous.” In short, he advocated a flexible reorganization of the times of life.

In macroeconomic terms, these tasks would only be possible if the world, which emerged from the Second World War with the agenda of full employment as a central social objective, planning and “protective state as a complement” promoted a certain return “corrected” or “improved” to the excesses of statism or voluntarism that would depend on curbing technocratic solutions, often, or almost hegemonically, approved by the ballot box, compromising a democratic environment – in the really collective and egalitarian sense. Sachs’ great anguish, however, was that the Earth ship had little time to wait for all this: “The politics of small steps will not save us.”

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