

RECLAIMING POLITICS

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No alternative but to think politics in republican terms of civic virtue and pursuit of the common good

I always say that politics is the most noble and the most important of professions. It is the most noble because only men and women endowed with the ability to take decisions and with moral quality are able to exercise it well. It is the most important because politics influences our lives for better or for worse, since we are governed through it. This statement on the nobility of politics always surprises people who listen to me, because every day they read reports about corrupt politicians. Politics would thus not be associated with the virtue of nobility, but with the vice of corruption.

It was, therefore, with joy that I have read in the March 14th. issue of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* an interview of José Serra to Dora Kramer in which he defends “a transforming practice in Brazilian politics, by rejecting the fatalist and reactionary saying that dishonesty is inherent to public life, that power necessarily corrupts men.”

Is the governor of São Paulo right to reject the reactionary view of politics? Am I right to defend politics despite politicians' constant missteps? To answer these questions we must take into account two basic concepts. The State is the constitutional and legal system, and the public structure that guarantees it; it is the nation's quintessential instrument of collective action; it is the law and the public administration; it is the greatest expression of our collective rationality. Politics, in turn, is the practice of arguing and making mutual concessions in order to achieve political power, and it is the art of governing the modern State, that was first liberal and later became democratic. It is through politics that we permanently reform the society and the State so that the State will be able to fulfill its role by effectively contributing to the major political goals of modern societies: security, national autonomy, economic development, freedom, social

justice, and the protection of environment. We may achieve some success in our individual pursuit of happiness and economic security. However, the other political goals, and even those two that I have just mentioned could only be achieved through the political construction of the State.

We cannot forget that, as Max Weber taught, ethics in politics is different from personal ethics: it is the ethics of responsibility, not the ethics of conviction. In order to rule and to promote the public good the politician must pursue the majority, and, therefore, he is forced to reach agreements or compromises that an individual does not need to reach. Yet we should not mistake as corruption this ethics based on the politician's responsibility in achieving good results for the society he governs.

Therefore, the assumption of the intrinsically corrupt nature of politics cannot be justified. Politics is the great instrument available to society to reform its State. It is only through the law and the public administration that guarantees it that we will be able to advance in the pursuit of security, freedom, and justice. To identify politics with the exclusive pursuit of personal power and wealth is a neoliberal and authoritarian thesis, that demoralizes politics in order to thus legitimate the rule of the elites. We must show no mercy to corruption, but it is not through a negativistic moralism that we will reach our major political goals. There is no alternative but to think politics in republican terms of civic virtue and pursuit of the common good. That is the only way to strengthen our major instrument of collective action, the State.