

Visions of two Nations: The taxes on knowledge in the year of the Great Exhibition

À Memória do Professor Hélio Alves

Hélio Osvaldo Alves

O texto que aqui se faz publicar foi apresentado pelo Prof. Hélio Alves em 2001, no âmbito do "Colóquio Comemorativo dos 150 anos da Great Exhibition" que o Departamento de Estudos Anglo-Americanos organizou na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. Nessa ocasião, como em tantas outras, o Prof. Hélio Alves, apesar das inúmeras solicitações congêneres e da multiplicidade de actividades em que se encontrava envolvido, aceitou ao nosso convite para participar no Colóquio e conseguiu encontrar tempo para redigir uma comunicação que se inscrevesse no domínio temático sugerido. Nessa medida este texto é testemunha da generosidade científica do Prof. Hélio Alves, cuja ligação ao grupo de docentes do Departamento de Estudos Anglo-Americanos da nossa Faculdade se acentuou sobremaneira nos últimos anos da sua vida, nomeadamente através da participação num considerável conjunto de actividades promovidas no âmbito do estudo da Cultura Inglesa. Uma leitura atenta do texto desvendará uma outra faceta do Prof. Hélio Alves que lhe valeu a dedicação de uma amizade sincera por parte dos seus colegas: a sua generosidade humana. A voz que, no parágrafo conclusivo do texto, se indigna com a existência, ainda nos nossos dias, de "duas nações" que vivem de costas voltadas, é a voz da sensibilidade e do humanismo que sempre reconhecemos ao Prof. Hélio Alves. A publicação deste texto no primeiro número da revista do nosso Departamento foi a maneira sincera que encontrámos para, enquanto colegas e amigos, prestarmos homenagem ao Homem e ao Professor.

Maria de Fátima Vieira

The life of an Indian is a continual holiday compared with the poor of Europe; and, on the other hand it appears to be abject when compared to the rich. Civilization, therefore, or that which is so called, has operated two ways: to make one part of society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state.

Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, 1797.

Whether that state that is proudly, perhaps erroneously, called civilization, has most promoted or most injured the general happiness of man, is a question that may be strongly contested. On one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which it has erected. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized.

Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, 1797.

When Egremont met the young stranger in the ruins of the monastery, this episode took on a meaning which became much larger than the purpose of Disraeli's novel *Sybil*, published in 1845. In fact, the whole scene coined a portrait for Victorian society, in spite of the author and of his New England movement, which was going to become a paradigm for many years to come. The young stranger in the ruins, after disclosing that in his opinion Queen Victoria reigned over two nations, made his thoughts better understood:

Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. [...] THE RICH AND THE POOR.

Even if Disraeli's intentions were somewhat dubious as to who was responsible for this state of affairs, this was an acceptable image of a society the wealthier part of which could not be woken up to the dreadful reality of the situation of the

lower orders. The echo of this image lingers on throughout the nineteenth century in the midst of the glamour and splendour of the Victorian Age and is again revived across the Atlantic in the 1930's in one of the most outstanding texts ever produced on the subject — John dos Passos' *The Big Money*, the last part of the trilogy *U.S.A.*:

they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they
are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors
the old judges the small men with reputations the collegepresidents
the wardheelers (listen businessmen collegepresidents judges
America will not forget her betrayers) they hire the men with guns
the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons [...]

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have
turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our
fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul

their hired men sit on the judge's bench they sit back with
their feet on the tables under the dome of the State House they are
ignorant of our beliefs they have the dollars the guns the armed
forces the powerplants

they have built the electricchair and hired the executioner to
throw the switch

all right we are two nations

[...] the city is quiet the men of the conquering nation are
not to be seen on the streets

they have won why are they scared to be seen on the streets?
on the streets you see only the downcast faces of the beaten the
streets belong to the beaten nation all the way to the cemetery
where the bodies of the immigrants are to be burned we line the
curbs in the drizzling rain we crowd the wet sidewalks elbow to
elbow silent pale looking with scared eyes at the coffins

we stand defeated America

John dos Passos, *U. S. A., The Big Money*, New York, The Modern Library,
pp. 461-4

But we do not need to go out of our period to find examples of the two nations. Shortly before the opening of the Great Exhibition, in May 1851, Henry Mayhew began publishing his revealing series of studies in *The Morning Chronicle* concerning London labour and the London poor. The shocking revelation of the London underworld of casual workers and the destitute, the large majority of whom surviving in appalling conditions, brought the two nations face to face down to the meanest worker in the

sewers. Mayhew was at least saying that there was now no one who could appeal to ignorance in order to feel his or her social responsibility a little lighter. An attitude which tended to disturb the comfort of many people's lives.

Therefore, on one side we have the splendour and magnificence of industry and empire as exhibited inside the glass pavillions of the Great Exhibition. On the other side of the fence we have the most squalid scenes of poverty and misery. George Julian Harney, one of the last Chartists to continue the hopeless struggle begun in 1838, was very much aware of this in this same year in one of his blunt articles of opinion published in *The Friend of the People*, the newspaper he had named after his hero Marat's famous periodical. This is how he viewed the "pageant" of the opening of the Great Exhibition and its possible counterpart, his socialist dream of a Great Britain for everybody:

[...] The "pageant", such as it was, was essentially aristocratic. Confined to the interior of the Exhibition, performed by the Queen, her courtiers, chief priests, and soldiers, and witnessed only by the representatives of "the golden million", it wanted all that was needed to make it really national. The works of art and industry exhibited in the building may be looked upon as so much plunder, wrung from the people of all lands, by their conquerors, the men of blood, privilege, and capital. The ceremony of opening the Exhibition has been called the "Festival of Labour". It was, in truth, the festival of a horde of usurpers, idlers, and sybarites, met to exult over the continued prostration of Labour, and the conservation and extension of their own unholy supremacy.

I can imagine a *fête* worthy of an Industrial Exhibition, in which the people at large should participate. I can imagine artists and artisans, workers from the field, and the factory, the mine and the ship, summoned to take their part in a Federation of Labour, — combining Industry, Art, and Science. I can imagine Hyde Park our Champ de Mars, and see the trades of London marching in their thousands, with their banners and emblems, from all parts of the metropolis, accompanied by deputations from the agricultural producers, the miners, and all trades and crafts throughout the island. I can imagine the Exhibition opened, not in the presence of the richest, but of the worthiest of the nation, selected by popular election, to represent not a class, but *all*. I can imagine a rich array of material wealth, which would testify to the enjoyment, as well as to the skill and industry of the workers; and of which the profit and the glory would be theirs, untouched by useless distributors and *exploiting* capitalists. Lastly, I can imagine that such a *fête* —

such an Exhibition — will be only when the working classes shall first have renounced flunkeyism, and substituted for the rule of masters, and the royalty of a degenerated monarchy, — “the Supremacy of Labour, and the Sovereignty of the Nation”.”

The Friend of the People, n 22, May 10, 1851.

While this dream could not, as yet, be accomplished, one of Harney’s greatest concerns in 1851, as it had been the concern of a lifetime for a large number of other Chartists in the years before, was the problem of the so-called taxes on knowledge which was still pestering the freedom of the press after almost a century and a half, if not more.

For a quick survey of the problem, we have to go as far back as 1640, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was then the nation’s chief Censor, was impeached and sent to the Tower of London. The next move was for Parliament to take the regulation of the Press into its own hands, but in March 1643, it was Parliament itself that could not resist the allurements of power and became, alas, the Censor.

This is probably the time when the character of the citizen John Milton (1608-1674) is best shown. When the famous author of *Paradise Lost* was thirty years old he had visited France and Italy and it was here he had met the famous Galileo Galilei who was then under house arrest following sentence of the Inquisition. Aware of the humiliating situation of the great scientist and thinker who had been forbidden to utter his thoughts in public, and fearing the acts of censorship of his own Parliament at home, Milton wrote a pamphlet in November 1644 which he entitled *Areopagitica. A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England*.

In *Areopagitica*, this foundation document of the freedom of the press, Milton underlined among other important matters that the rulers of Greece and Rome had never found it necessary or desirable to silence any writer, but had profited by the comparison of the bad with the good. Personally, he demanded: “Above all liberties, give me the liberty to know, to speak, and to argue freely according to my conscience”. It is only fair to say that Honoré-Gabriel Mirabeau, the voice of the people in Parliament at the beginning of the French Revolution, adopted the arguments of *Areopagitica*, an attitude which helped pave the way for the

first steps of the French Revolution itself in 1789. Perhaps one of the most meaningful passages of Milton's essay is the following:

I deny not but that it is of greatest concernment in the church and commonwealth to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves, as well as men, and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof, perhaps, there is no great loss; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse. We should be wary, therefore, what persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of man preserved and stored up in books; since we see a kind of homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdom; and if extended to the whole impression, a kind of massacre, whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elemental life, but strikes at that ethereal and fifth essence, the breath of reason itself, slays an immortality rather than a life.

"The breath of reason itself" was going to undergo its first serious blow not very long afterwards. On the tenth year of Queen Anne's reign, on August 1st, 1712, a law received the Royal assent providing the existence of a new tax, on printed papers, pamphlets and advertisements, as well as of a stamp to be placed on every newspaper. The taxes on knowledge had been born. Richard Steele, the proprietor and editor of the celebrated *The Spectator*, feared for the continuity at least of journalism as it had been known up to that time:

This is the day on which many eminent authors will probably publish their last words. I am afraid that few of our weekly historians, who are men that above all others delight in war, will

be able to subsist under the weight of a stamp, and an approaching peace. A sheet of blank paper that must have this new imprimatur clapt upon it, before it is qualified to communicate any thing to the public, will make its way into the world but very heavily. In short, the necessity of carrying a stamp, and the improbability of notifying a bloody battle, will, I am afraid, both concur to the sinking of those thin folios, which have every other day retailed to us the history of Europe for several years last past. A facetious friend of mine, who loves a pun, calls this present mortality among authors, "The fall of the leaf."

Sir Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, n 445, July 31, 1712.

Obviously, it was during times of agitation and repression that the taxes on knowledge were the most useful to smother the advancements of knowledge among the lower classes. During the 1790's, and under the influence of the French Revolution, a crucial turning point was slowly brought about in the self-determination of the working and destitute classes. An unprecedented diffusion of political knowledge by means of cheap pamphlets and handbills, sometimes given away free, flooded British society especially aimed at labourers, artisans and mechanics. The pamphlet war gained such proportions that by the middle of the decade (1794-5) the government of William Pitt, the Younger, had to resort to what some authors call "white terror" aimed at associations and publications with a radical tendency. Thomas Paine, certainly the greatest pamphleteer of the age, was adamant in his defence of the right to publish and to read freely:

Mankind are not now to be told they shall not think, or they shall not read; and publications that go no further than to investigate principles of government, to invite men to reason and to reflect, and to show the errors and excellences of different systems, have a right to appear. If they do not excite attention, they are not worth the trouble of prosecution; and if they do, the prosecution will amount to nothing, since it cannot amount to a prohibition of reading. This would be a sentence on the public, instead of the author, and would also be the most effectual mode of making or hastening revolutions.

Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man (Part II)*, 1792.

The fear of revolution, especially in Ireland, which could easily spread to Britain, and of a French invasion which would bring along the end of civilization with the world turned upside

down contributed to a more diligent vigilance, to say the least, on the part of the authorities to see that no unauthorised meetings took place and that no subversive literature reached the general public.

However, the interesting fact is that overt repression against the press appears more clearly in the years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, between 1816 and 1819. In fact, it is in this short period that names like William Cobbett, Jonathan Wooler, William Hone, William Sherwin and Richard Carlile, to mention but a few, become the unavoidable builders of a strong public opinion based on bold interpretations of the political moment by means of a popular press accessible to the general public at extremely low prices. Realizing that various methods of repression did not work to their full satisfaction, Government issued the Six Acts in 1819, one of them specifically aimed at the popular press, thus reinforcing the persuasive effect of the long standing taxes on knowledge. This attitude would be prevalent until 1836 when Chartism became the driving force of the working classes and men like Henry Hetherington, and his *The Poor Man's Guardian* caused the government to take a defensive attitude in this field.

George Julian Harney, taking up the lessons given by Hetherington and a few others, found himself still struggling away against the taxes on knowledge in the very year of the Great Exhibition. Just a month before he was again demanding their repeal:

"THE TAXES ON KNOWLEDGE

That "the most thinking people in Europe" should, year after year, generation after generation, submit to such fiscal enormities as taxes on cleanliness, light, and the means of intellectual development, proves that the egotistic words above quoted are as inapplicable to the people of this country, as they are unjust and offensive to those nations who share with us the common name of Europeans. The window-tax and soap-duty are subjects I have not space to discuss in this letter. I propose to comment on the Paper Duty, the Advertisement Duty, and the Penny Stamp Tax on newspapers, which, combined, make up that trinity in unity of fiscal iniquity, — the abominable TAXES ON KNOWLEDGE. [...]

I reiterate the appeal to my readers to give their zealous aid to the movement for THE REPEAL OF THE TAXES ON KNOWLEDGE.

Because they prevent the expansion of trade and the extension of employment:

Because they perpetuate ignorance and give encouragement to vice:

Because they are an obstacle to the general education; and especially to the political instruction of the great body of the people:

Because they conserve a monopoly in Journalism, advantageous only to the wealthy and privileged, and injurious to the poor and oppressed:

Because they are a bulwark to Despotism, and a barrier to the progress of Democracy:

Because the Public Good, — the Supreme Welfare of the People — demands their abolition:

Therefore —

AWAY WITH THE TAXES ON KNOWLEDGE.”
The Friend of the People, n 17, 5 April, 1851.

The taxes on knowledge were finally abolished in 1855. Following the thoughts of another author from the period of the French Revolution, you can neither *unknow* your knowledge nor *unthink* your thoughts (T. Paine). If this is so, it will come as no surprise then, that in order to know what any country really is, what any person or any subject really are, you must look for your own information from different kinds of sources. If not, your views will necessarily be narrow and you will easily become a bigot — I mean, someone who is obstinate and intolerant. And if you, the young people to whom I am now speaking, become obstinate and intolerant, then there is really no hope for our future as a nation.

After the great official splendour of 1851, there was still no hope for many hundreds of thousands as there is still no hope today for many millions more. This reminds me of a painting by George Frederic Watts, dated from 1886, which he entitled "Hope". If you look well at this painting, there is no hope in "Hope" under these circumstances in our world and the metaphorical blindness of this metaphor, of this "Hope" that should fill our hearts with the will to live, adds on to our own hopelessness. Why should anybody suffer on this planet as I now speak, just for wanting to be a dignified human being? When shall we finish off with the 'Two Nations' in this so-called civilized world of ours?

