

LA REVOLUCIÓ ÈTICA
FRANCESC TORRALBA
ARA LLIBRES (BARCELONA, 2014)

The last book written by Professor Francesc Torralba is a sharp criticism of the current political and economic order in Western liberal democracies. His work cannot be understood without taking into account the economic crisis suffered by Catalonia and Spain over recent years and its dire socio-political effects. Despite clear advice in the prologue claiming that what follows is neither a pamphlet nor a philosophical essay, the thesis of the book is categorical and directed towards what the author considers the basis of the crisis and its solution: ethics.

In ten easy-going chapters Professor Torralba claims that ethics are (and should be) at the centre of a political change, as the lack of it or a poor understanding of good ethical values has led to the current ignominious situation. Moreover, although mentioned in the prologue, the notion of salvation seems to be the underlying morality of the book. This is why, it is far from being an apocalyptic approach. The theory is not only based on the hope on the human capacity for deploying ethical judgements through day-to-day acts but also through institutional practices. According to the author, current indignation, which is a just and legitimate feeling because of the lack of distributive justice, could ultimately be turned into goodness. The economic and political crisis is at the same time an opportunity to change a model which is not witnessing conjuncture problems but its own limitations for providing well-being and dignity to human beings on the planet.

The book offers an interesting number of arguments linked to the vindication of an ethical approach to current challenges, which as I said, is the central tenet of the book. The starting point is the feeling of indignation since this was the name (*Indignats* in the Catalan language) chosen by the protest movement initiated in 2011 in Madrid and Barcelona as a popular response on the streets to the consequences of the economic crisis. Nonetheless, this indignation has to be turned into commitment in order to be productive and profitable for society and we cannot let it slide into despair. The author's balance of social movements that have emerged from the Spanish and Catalan economic crisis is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, those movements have inspired a conscious reflection on the rights and dignity that each of us should have. On the other hand, there is a risk of descending into violent and tumultuous

behaviours that could be negative and promote even more problems. Engagement, not only in its political but also its very personal sense, is the clue here for turning indignation into a real transformation of the political order. The author reminds us that commitment is “an expression of individual freedom, the manifestation of the self that chooses to be engaged with History” (p.39). In what the author calls a “post-communist manifesto 3.0”, in Chapter VI, he defends this idea of “conscience” as the core of an “invisible revolution” which should not be violent but ethical and based on the commitment of a citizen that rejects the vices that, according to him, are the source of the crisis: greed, envy and pride. This ethical claim goes even beyond the popular Weberian distinction between ethics by conviction and by responsibility. Professor Torralba’s ethics are “by necessity” since “there is no future without ethics in this world” (p.58); that is, an ethical debate is unavoidable in building the confidence that allows the social fabric to flourish. The author not only links this ethical necessity to conscience but also to transparency, veracity and goodness. Goodness, or good actions, is the most elevated objective of ethics because they “design possible horizons and ideals” (p.61).

The thesis of the book is not new and not only rejects Nietzsche’s nihilism but also strictly liberal approaches to citizenship and politics. It is not a surprise that professor Torralba subscribes to Alisdair MacIntyre’s tenets in his masterpiece *After Virtue* that is quoted in several chapters and the last paragraph of MacIntyre’s book is presented as a synthesis of what the ethical revolution means: a neo-Aristotelian vindication of moral communities against relativism and postmodern approaches of dubious or liquid morality in Bauman’s terms. As with any communitarian critique, the result is a combination of a sharp criticism of consumerism and capitalism together with politics as a conflict of interests. Politics without ethics is labelled Machiavellian and considered the worst possible scenario based on opacity, fraud, betrayal, simulation and hypocrisy (p.88). The counterpart of this conception is an Aristotelian view of politics which is aware of the servitudes of political life, such as image, electoralism, lack of critical conscience, obedience to the party or loss of social prestige. In order to overcome those servitudes, the author proposes four values together with the ethical code proposed by the Catalan body politic in 2011 (that is included in the book): veracity, honesty, justice and ductility. This ethical code is extended in the book with more general claims linked to globalization, which is removed from its political context and is barely connected to the book structure. In Chapters III,

V, and VIII, the author proposes global measures related to global governance and the need of supranational institutions, in addition to the ethics of globalization. Two complementary approaches are suggested against material and spiritual poverty – an ecumenical humanism to counter neoliberal capitalism (p.73) and eco-humanism as an approach against the ecological crisis (p.167).

The thread of the book is, as I have already said, the key role of ethics in both the causes of and the solutions to the political and economic crisis, which actually turns out to be an ethical crisis. However, Professor Torralba's approach includes certain arguments which could be contradictory or at least incomplete. First of all, a solely ethical approach to politics and economics seems to be unable to provide both explanations and normative accurate accounts of the crisis and its consequences. In explaining the crisis, the professor highlights certain values as its cause and consequence (such as greed or arrogance); nonetheless those "vices" already existed in the past and we are aware of the cyclical behaviour of market economies. Therefore, to emphasize those values as the source of this concrete crisis seems at least an incomplete explanation. Moreover, the author characterises both political and economic corruption as caused by those vices which are present among all of us. In doing so, he is not considering the necessity of a "power relationship" for the possibility of corruption – in other words, "the abuse of power" as the ultimate source of corrupted societies. If we take this into account as well, then corruption cannot be just a matter of individual arrogance but of undemocratic rule and tyranny. His argument could be made stronger by providing a more accurate distinction between what the author calls "big and small" corruption (p.47) and distinguishing theft from political corruption.

Secondly, when proposing a new ethical behaviour, the role of institutions seems to be downplayed in constraining individual incentives. In my opinion, being part of a moral community might even be contradictory with some universalistic duties that can be protected by correct institutional settings as research on political corruption has shown (i.e. avoiding overlapping positions).

Thirdly, even if the ethical ideal based on goodness and good actions were achieved, one could still be sceptical on the political outcome. It is no wonder that goodness should be part of a better society, but politics are also about contradictory interests even in a context of mutual trust and good faith, and might imply decisions. This "tragic approach" seems to be necessary in addition to the ethical one and, moreover, when the

author is looking for achievable horizons and realistic ideals, it is probably necessary to reconcile what he rejects as a Machiavellian account of politics.

Finally, in a more general sense, Professor Torralba explicitly rejects any general law explaining human History, such as Hegelian dialectics or Marxist materialism (p.41). Nevertheless, the ethical revolution proposed in the book has an important metaphysical weight when defending goodness as an intrinsic value – it seems to be that this final objective of salvation through good actions is what we need to overcome political and economic challenges.

Beyond these criticisms, Francesc Torralba has written a bold work at a moment when our societies are in search of responses to the economic and political model crisis. An “ethical revolution” might be a fresh start for renewing commitment with politics and a source for restoring confidence in human values. As the author suggests, it is not an easy task since day-to-day goodness is never attractive or visible because it is not an epic enterprise. Statements like that are already revolutionary in democracies that legitimise themselves as “the least harmful political system”, as Aristotle put it.

Marc Sanjame-Calvet
Université du Québec À
Montréal (UQÀM)