

Globethics Repository



Leadership, Moral Values, and Democracy

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Hansen, Guillermo
Publisher	Globethics.net / WCC Publications
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-22 14:59:17
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173456

36

LEADERSHIP, MORAL VALUES, AND DEMOCRACY. A GLIMPSE FROM LATIN AMERICA

Guillermo Hansen, Argentina

1. Convictions, Responsibility and Ideology. Max Weber Revisited

Some ethical analysis of the contemporary U.S. political scenario bring into the fore Max Weber's categories. The ethicist Heidi Hadsell, for example, has underscored how political rhetoric – both liberal and conservative – is mostly framed within the paradigm of an *ethics of conviction* that short-circuits the necessary and responsible consideration of means and ends. Voluntarism, or just acting on the basis of one's moral convictions in the midst of the complexity and plurality of today's globalised world, leads to political and moral consequences which are dangerous and simplistic. The solution is to encourage an *ethics of responsibility* implemented through a careful explanation, education and debate which will allow citizens to perceive the fundamental differences between (public) responsible ethics and a (private) ethic of conviction. The underlying belief is that in a democratic and electoral regime, a change in the citizens' perception would have the leaders following suit.¹

Is this use of Weber's categories fair? Can they be applied to understand a radically different scenario? It should be remembered that Weber's arguments were forged during the tumultuous years of the post-war Weimar Republic. It was a time of deep polarisations where right-wing forces were savvy enough to master the necessary *means* to abort democratic, liberal and popular programmes. For him the ineffective response by left-wing parties, populists, pacifists and trade unions were examples of inspired ethics applied in wrong circumstances. Often their convictions reflected an 'idealistic ethics' derived from the Sermon of the Mount, unsuitable for instrumentalising the necessary means in the pursuit of rightful and just ends. In Weber's view, conservatives seem well aware of the mechanisms of a *Verantwortungsethik*, while progressives (and Christians) seemed bogged down in the moral maze of a *Gesinnungsethik*. Weber's main point, however, is not moral, but *anthropological*: those who act according to an ethics of responsibility take into account the '*normal flaws of people*,' and therefore do not assume that

316 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

human beings are of a good and perfect nature.² Politics, which always presents the best case for its own ends, requires often dubious means – including violence.

What does happen, *mutatis mutandis*, when Weber's categories are applied to U.S. electoral politics dominated not by the idealism of the Sermon of the Mount, but by a *neo-conservative cultural élan*? Are these voters and their leaders simply moved by an ethics of conviction in Weber's sense? Perhaps it would not surprise him to see how neo-conservative shrewd confinement of Christian maxims into a 'moral agenda' effectively establishes a new hierarchical political order that disciplines 'deviants' at home while calling for military intervention against 'rogues' abroad. But Weber would certainly be dismayed if we were to call this a *Gesinnungsethik*! For *neocons* – and their voters – seem to be quite aware of the *means* required in order to achieve a particular *world moral order*. As stated in the (in)famous ideological blueprint of Bush's administration, *Project for the New American Century* (1997), military strength and even territorial control are key in the larger project of spreading appropriate codes of conduct upon the rest of the world.³ Violence in the pursuit of 'security' combines ends and means which are typical of conservative visions.⁴

Therefore while we could certainly agree with statements such as 'everyone votes his or her values in one way or another',⁵ this can hardly be what defines an ethics of conviction. For neo-conservative hearts – churchly or otherwise – ends and means seem to be obvious terms in the political equation. All too aware of the 'perils and evils' of the world, the 'normal flaws of people', they thereby legitimise the needed disciplinary (violent) means to spread accumulation by dispossession through *imperial order and hierarchy*. Acting 'responsibly', or giving thought to 'the consequences or the complexities of the political world', is precisely what right-wing politics is all about. *If the notions of responsibility and complexity are not thoroughly deconstructed, any political argument will just circle around the cogs of the neo-conservative ideological machine.*

In brief, that people vote on the basis of convictions and values is a *truism*. The fact that people *feel* strongly about certain moral issues (where 'moral' is usually associated with sexuality and 'cardinal' virtues, never with economics and politics!) is not enough for calling it an ethics of conviction. Even voting on more pragmatic reasons such as security and one's own wellbeing involve certain types of moral convictions and values, both conscious and unconscious. A critical vision, however, *should address the type of (explicit) values and (implicit) interests which guide those decisions.* Just seeking to explain the victory of *neo-conservative values* from the purview of Weber's ethics of conviction acquits the U.S. electorate from political accountability. We thus end up focusing the problem on the fact that the

(Christian) electorate has not been *taught* correctly the difference between a *Gesinnungs* and a *Verantwortungsethik*!⁶

The problem thus framed betrays the assumption of an idealistic anthropology: people are good, subject to reform, reasonable and well disposed once facts and information are distributed and made public. This being the case, blame must lay upon the *leaders* – religious and political – who deceive people into believing that there is a straight line stemming from convictions to policy, from the private to the public. But what about the *core values* and *interests* which people themselves embrace? Values cannot be equated with ‘neutral’ convictions; they are *ideological nodes* which undergird the power configuration of a society. The dominant neo-conservative outlook that holds sway within vast segments of the U.S. population and churches is not just a naïve crystallisation of a sound moral core, but a purposeful embrace of values perceived to be effective in tackling today’s ‘evils’ through the appropriate ‘strong’ means. Violence, war, territorial occupation, undercutting of social programs, healthcare for the fittest, restrictions in education, increasing power distances, patriarchalisation of the family, are not political and social fallouts of sound moral values, but the enactment of conservative *myths and metaphors* constellating discipline, authority, order, boundaries, homogeneity and power.

Weber’s categories certainly illuminate some of the problems of moral and political deliberation within Christian communities. How ethics become politics is also an acute dilemma in many countries of Latin America where ‘popular’ political leadership stemming from Christian circles had to face thorny issues – from *revolutionary violence* in the time of the Sandinistas to the debates in Brazil around allegations of *corruption* in Lula’s government. But a straightforward application of Weber’s distinction misreads a political scenario criss-crossed by *more serious contradictions* – even when limited to the Christian community. One cannot transplant Weber’s analysis in order to understand political motivation affecting electoral politics, for he is mostly talking about those who are actively involved in the power struggle of (democratic) politics – not about those who delegate power through electoral mechanisms. For this reason his ethic of conviction could easily be misunderstood as a signifier of any electoral exercise that involves ‘moral’ convictions. Do we have, then, other categories for better understanding what goes on at the complex level of moral formation? Perhaps the notion of pre-cognitive constructions of societal models around *root metaphors* – as suggested by George Lakoff – may be of greater help. The *strict father* or *nurturing parent* family paradigms, for example, seems to be much more useful for grasping the complex basis of political motivations, as well as the values and interests that guide these constructions.

318 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

Any ethical-political debate is not merely a matter of being aware of the required means for implementing moral goals, or streamlining our values through a better grasp of ethical models. It is a matter of a *larger vision* able to go beyond the possible relations between *ends and means* by pondering the horizon that gives direction to a political program. In this vision an important role is played by the *theoretical tool* employed in the analytical appraisal of our present socio-historical trajectories. The *intellectual gauging* of the situation, making a *choice* as to where we want the world to go, and seeking and negotiating the *means* in order to approach these goals *is simultaneously an intellectual, moral and political task*.⁷ We cannot discuss ethics, or *responsible* political leadership, without a consideration of larger political goals. This implies a full appraisal of the perverse logic of Empire, neoliberal globalisation, and the problem of power distance in social and political formations.

2. A Case of Cultural and Social Shift. Power Distance and Democracy in Post-2001 Argentina

Get rid of them all! (*¡Qué se vayan todos!*). This was the slogan chanted by thousands, if not millions of Argentineans during the political and economic collapse of December 2001. While enraged middle class citizens smashed bank windows and doors attempting to rescue their frozen life savings, the jobless and excluded gathered on roads, thoroughfares, highways and bridges demanding jobs and the end of neo-liberal policies. *Cacerolazos*, the banging of pots and pans symbolising hunger and destitution, took place within neighbourhood assemblies and the smoke of burning tyres of the *piqueteros* barricades. Despite their class differences they had something in common: *a rejection of politics as usual*. 'Get rid of them all' was a slogan aimed mostly at the political leadership of the country. While the chorus gathered momentum several presidents were tumbled, the economy plummeted, popular mobilisations were quelled with bloodshed, and the whole country seemed to slip through the uncaring and oblivious meshes of the Empire.

Nothing will be the same in Argentina after December 2001. For some it was another case of the recurrent fits of an unstable Latin-American republic. But for others it signified a bold stand against the current neo-liberal regime and its enforcing global network. Social analysts such as Naomi Klein, Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri saw in these events the spearhead of a *cycle of protest* spreading across the very web spawn by the Empire itself, perhaps heralding a bifurcation toward a new social order. What caught their eye was the mushrooming of autonomous organisations and

popular assemblies that instead of calling for *law and order* (a euphemism for 'military coup') sought to deepen an invaluable political and cultural tool: *democracy*. Hardt and Negri put it thus:

The response of the Argentinean population was immediate and creative: industrial workers refused to let their factories close and took over managing the factories themselves, networks of neighbourhood and city assemblies were formed to manage political debates and decisions, new forms of money were invented to allow for autonomous exchange, and the *piqueteros*, the movement of the unemployed... experimented with new forms of protest in their conflicts with police and other authorities.⁸

What happened in this country so used to authoritarian outcomes, relationships of subordination rooted in *clientelage* and political leadership based upon charisma rather than law? Has an alleged cynical anti-political mood taken the country's imagination captive, as some observers fathom?⁹ There is no doubt that something radical has happened; but this mood has nothing to do with a cynical hang-over. The situation has to be appraised from a cultural-anthropological angle capable of identifying and underscoring an ongoing *cultural and social shift*. Not only have people learnt to impose social sanctions on political leaders and financial institutions, but they have moved into something deeper, namely, a radical challenge of the *power distance* separating citizens and the political and economic establishment. Here we are facing a remarkable cultural shift. As Geert Hofstede has shown, power distance – a negotiation of equality and inequality – is a key dimension structuring any society and culture. Its patterns, however, do not fall from above but are *constructed* through dynamics learnt in family, school and workplace.¹⁰ Therefore when an economic and political crisis catalyses new forms of association and affection, it indicates that something important is happening 'below' at the level of the 'microphysics of power' (Foucault). Deprivation and poverty may breed anger, indignation and antagonism, but revolt arises only on the basis of 'wealth' – a *surplus* of intelligence, vision, experience, knowledge and desire that is generated by a shift in social practices and cultural patterns.¹¹

Among the different expressions of power distancing, that of *political representation* has been identified as one of the main causes leading to the revolts sweeping Argentina and other Latin American countries. The sociologist Guillermo O'Donnell has coined the notion of 'delegating democracy' to indicate an institutionalised mechanism which widens the power distance between citizens and political leadership.¹² Sooner or later this form of political arrangement erupts in extra-parliamentary strategies of political action and deliberation. However, as in any form of representation, two sides are always involved; electoral rituals which confirm the concentration of power

320 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

upon a person or political cadre can only function through the *connivance* of the citizenry. *Uncertainty avoidance* is traded by formal democratic power through delegating it to a 'strong leadership.' While Latin American countries experienced important political shifts during the 19th and 20th centuries, a basic *patriarchal, caudillista and cliental* mode has prevailed since the time of Spanish colonisation. It goes without saying that this *caudillo* relationship was perceived as bringing long lasting 'benefits' – real or imagined – to the population. We are speaking, therefore, of a *shared political culture* which tolerated power distance in exchange for some benefits.

The gauge of power distance is what Max Weber employed as a criterion for his typology of political representation.¹³ He defined the strongest separation as *appropriated representation*, where political representatives are neither elected, nor appointed or controlled by the represented; they just interpret their will. This mostly patriarchal form of representation is not a mere feudal remnant, but the way in which dictatorships and many supranational institutions still operate today. The *free representation* form stands in the middle – analogous to O'Donnell's 'delegating democracy'. Typical of presidential and parliamentary systems, the represented have some connection with the political leadership, but their control is severely constrained or limited between electoral cycles. Finally when the represented constantly control the representatives we are facing a third form, *binding representation*. Frequent elections, shorter terms, revocability of delegates, and specific ways to control mandates tend to shorten power distances between the citizenry and political leadership.

One could say that in Argentina the crisis of free representation or 'delegating democracy', the expansion of the horizontal voice, and the strengthening of the social capital, are signalling together the *passage* from the second to a third form of political representation, discarding once and for all the *appropriated*-dictatorial form. Of course, reality is always messy and hybrid, shunning ideal types. It would also be wishful thinking to go along all the way with Hardt and Negri's view that true and radical democracy abolishes any and every form of representation in favour of 'the rule of everyone by everyone.'¹⁴ For anthropological, psychological and sociological reasons I believe this to be impossible. But I do believe that a *binding form* of representation set in tension with a *free* or delegating form of representation can hybridise and catalyse democratic policies.

For example in Argentina many popular organisations of *piqueteros*, neighbourhood assemblies and autonomous local parties are now key players in the centre-left national-popular government presently in power. A traditional cliental and *caudillista* party as the *Peronist*, through a 'strong' and free representational type of leadership as President Néstor Kirchner's, has built power by waving *simi-*

lar claims and banners as those of the popular movements. Thanks to these radical experiences of democratic demand and participation the neo-liberal model was debilitated, allowing in turn for populist parties such as the Peronist to take power. But as it builds power to legitimate the new *neo-keynesian* role of the State, it also co-opts and divides the movements along with their most capable leaders.¹⁵ The political equation is simple: active and mobilised movements, added to the constant demand for a more binding and democratic representation, relentlessly *erodes and undermines* a 'delegating' regime's capacity to govern. The political conundrum is that refraining from doing so may allow stronger powers like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, foreign governments and multinational corporations – jointly with their local kingpins – to regain clout and power. To use a Lutheran metaphor, the government acts as a dike against the extreme forms of evil and injustice, but does not bring in the 'kingdom'. On the other hand, the only guarantee for a more radical form of democracy is precisely the independence of popular movements from traditional political organisations. Until the whole system definitely bifurcates – something impossible to predict – a radical democratic political leadership may have to learn to live within the shadow cone cast by the old form of politics, paradoxically nourished by the anti-systemic thrust of grass-roots movements.

Conclusion. Towards an Ethics of Democratic Conviction and Responsibility

In sum, what underlines the upheaval that took over Argentina goes beyond a mere disgust for political representatives or for the moral virtues of business and political leaders. Rather it was and still is a galvanisation of anti-neoliberal *doléances* which simultaneously challenges an impaired form of representation, undermines the erstwhile political leadership, and expresses a political culture seeking to reduce power distance at all levels in society – family, work places, schools, etc. The multiplication of the 'horizontal voice' and a new self-esteem through the exercise of the power of citizenship materialise within the contradictory web or circuits that the Empire itself has generated, propitiating *decentralised democratic action* as an effective means in a very asymmetrical confrontation.

In a way perhaps unthinkable to Weber himself the distinction between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility can now be applied constructively in today's multi-faceted political scenario. A radical democracy, a *binding* representational form of political organisation, requires the constant *utopia* of grass roots groups and associations which, as it confronts the State and the economic

322 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

power of the Empire, negotiates a *teletopia*, namely, measurable goals advancing quality of life in different spheres. In this type of democracy 'politics' is not tied to the State, its power, or its mechanisms, but is built upon the autonomous free play of convictions and proposals seeking to subvert the lame and miserly handouts given by a system based on accumulation through dispossession. As the Zapatista revolt exemplifies, the goal of these new movements is not to take control of the mechanisms of State but to relentlessly proclaim their 'gospel': another world is possible. For this a staunch *ethic of democratic conviction* is needed, a constant critique of arms, power and violence analogous to the '*usus politicus evangelii*' whose weapon is love. This conforms the binding of those singularities (neighbourhood organisations, churches, *piqueteros*, popular assemblies, NGOs, etc.) who discover their common *doléance*, their common desire to live rather than fear death. To the extent that this is done, an *ethics of democratic responsibility* is exacted from state and supranational organisations that must heed to the differentiated demands of a multitude of desires for life. This ethic of responsibility is therefore something *gained* through the sheer *creative struggle* by means of the weapons of peace and affection. It is the result of what Hardt and Negri call *biopolitics*.¹⁶

What is the meaning of responsible political leadership in this context? For one, the acknowledgment that we are indeed citizens of 'two kingdoms', belonging to both/and rather than either/or dimensions. Democracy is the only political system where both conviction and responsibility can find expression. As Niebuhr once asserted, human capability for justice makes of democracy something possible – *conviction*. But its inclination to injustice makes of democracy something necessary – *responsibility*. Therefore responsible leadership will be measured both by the capability to voice grievances pertaining to a singular group as well as by the ability to *connect* different forms of grievance: representation, poverty, human rights, education, ecology and health. These grievances give countenance to a multitude through whom the future of democracy is at stake. It is not a mere transformational type of leadership, but a biopolitical one which bridges ideas, hopes and affections allowing a moving yet rational identification with a network of differentiated democratic power. Here a capacity to separate oneself from the immediate situation and tirelessly construct mediations, envisioning different tactical games in the continuity of a strategy, inviting us to live an ethics of conviction that always needs the dimension of self-critique proper to the ethics of responsibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auyero, Javier, 'Fuego y barricadas: retrato de la beligerancia popular en la Argentina democrática', in: *Nueva Sociedad* 179, 2002, pp. 144-162.
- Burbach, Roger, 'Throw Them All Out. Argentina's Grassroots Rebellion', in: *NACLA. Report on the Americas*, July-August 2002, pp. 38-40.
- Gaudin, Andrés, 'Thirteen Days that Shook Argentina. And Now What?', in: *NACLA. Report on the Americas*, March-April 2002, pp. 6-9.
- Hardt, Michael/Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Lakoff, George, *Moral Politics. How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Oliveres, Toni Comín, '¿Cuáles son las condiciones ético-políticas para un liderazgo planetario legítimo?', in: *Sal Terrae* 92/5, 2004, pp. 401-412.

NOTES

- ¹ Hadsell, Heidi, 'Politics of Responsibility and Responsibility of Politics. A Perspective of Political Ethics on Presidential Election in the USA', in: Stückelberger, C./Mugambi, J.N.K.(eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, p. 109. See also Chapter 31 in this volume.
- ² Weber, Max, *Política y ciencia*, Buenos Aires: Leviatán, 1989, pp. 83 ff.
- ³ Harvey, David, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 184 ff.
- ⁴ 'Statement of Principles', 3 June 1997, www.newamericancentury.org.
- ⁵ Hadsell, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- ⁶ 'These voters who follow or advocate for an ethic of conviction do so not spontaneously or accidentally, but because they have learned to do so.' *Ibidem*, p. 107
- ⁷ Wallerstein, Immanuel, *Un mundo incierto*, Buenos Aires: Libros del Zorzal, 2002, p. 83.
- ⁸ Hardt, Michael/Negri, Antonio, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004, p. 216.
- ⁹ Dirmoser, Dietmar, 'Democracia sin demócratas' in: *Nueva Sociedad* 197, 2005, pp. 28-40, here p. 38.
- ¹⁰ Hofstede, Geert, *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997, p. 23 ff.
- ¹¹ Hardt/Negri, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- ¹² Echegaray, Fabián, 'Razones para un optimismo politológico' in: *Nueva Sociedad* 179, 2002, pp. 130-143, here p. 136.
- ¹³ Weber, Max, *Economía y Sociedad*, vol. 1, Mexico: FCE, 1944, 307 f.
- ¹⁴ Hardt/Negri, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- ¹⁵ Zibechi, Raúl, 'New Challenges for Radical Social Movements' in: *NACLA. Report on the Americas*, March-April 2005, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ Hardt/Negri, *op. cit.*, p. 249.