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A NEOLIBERAL READING OF “THE FABLE OF THE BEES”

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Abstract: This work is about the book “The Fable of the Bees” and its author, Bernard Mandeville. The proposed research problem is to identify whether and how “The Fable of the Bees” and Mandeville’s thought may have served as a basis for the development of neoliberalism. The method used is bibliographic and documentary research. And the methodological path consists of, initially, understanding who the author Mandeville was and the literary work in question. Therefore, we seek to find in texts by Hayek himself and other authors, marks of the influence that Mandeville had on the Austrian theorist and, consequently, on the development of neoliberal ideas from its origins to the present. In conclusion, it is understood that the author and the work mentioned are the basis for the formation of neoliberal thought and its remnants remain and are deepened today.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Mandeville, Hayek, Addictions, Moral.

INTRODUCTION

The current time is, among other adjectives, neoliberal. And to better understand it, it is necessary to seek and understand its bases. Therefore, the present work has as its objects the book “The Fable of Bees” and its author, Bernard Mandeville. The proposed research problem is whether and how “The Fable of the Bees” and Mandeville’s thought may have served as a basis for the development of neoliberalism.

The method used is bibliographic and documentary research. And the methodological path consists of, initially, understanding who the author Mandeville was and the literary work in question. Therefore, we seek to find in texts by Hayek himself and other authors, marks of the influence

1. The first version of the story, in poem format, dates back to 1705. In 1714, the author expanded it, publishing it as a fable. (SPECK, 1978).

2. In the 1724 edition, Mandeville reproduces in full the indictment made by the Middlesex Grand Jury as well as the letter he wrote in his defense.

that Mandeville had on the Austrian theorist and, consequently, on the development of neoliberal ideas from its origins to the present.

DEVELOPMENT

Bernard de Mandeville or simply Bernard Mandeville was a philosopher, physician, political economist and satirist. Born in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, in 1670 (-1733), he spent a large part of his life in England and wrote almost all of his works in English (MANDEVILLE, 2017). “The Fable of the Bees or Private vices, public benefits”, from 1723,¹ it was the publication that made the author – scandalously – known, having, at the time, been labeled as insidious and provoked the wrath of the Middlesex Grand Jury.²

However, many contemporary and later thinkers not only read him but were inspired, although without directly mentioning, by Mandeville’s lessons, such as Adam Smith, David Hume, Bentham (SUSATO, 2020) and Friedrich August von Hayek.

It is on the latter that our greatest attention falls, as Hayek is considered one of the precursors of neoliberal ideas. Thus, we seek to identify in *The Fable of the Bees* convergent or basic points of neoliberal thought. Therefore, we seek to make a brief “neoliberal reading” of the *Mandevillian* fable.

This book is an expansion and explanation of the fable: *The grumpy hive or from scoundrels to honest*, published in 1704. In it, the author tells the story of:

A spacious hive filled with bees

Who lived in luxury and comfort;

As famous, however, for its laws and weapons,

And by their numerous early swarms; It was

considered the great birthplace of science and industry.

There were no bees with better government,
Neither fickle nor less satisfied:

They were not slaves to tyranny,

Nor governed by savage democracy;

However, the kings could not be deceived,
for

His power was circumscribed by laws.
(MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 17).

This great hive is an analogy to a large and rich nation. In the fable, the bees in the hive lived like people, carrying out their actions in miniature. This includes saying that there was corruption, lightness, cheating, lust, vanity, greed, laziness, in short, all the vices that make up humanity. "So, every part was full of vice, / The whole, however, was a paradise; [...]" (MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 27).

On the other hand, there was also, in society in general, a clamor for honesty and disapproval of all these vices. To the point that, after so much calling to the gods, Jupiter, "overcome with indignation / Finally swore, in anger, that he would rid / The buzzing hive of fraud; and he did so" (MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 33).

From the moment the hive becomes an entirely virtuous place, full of honesty and contentment, many of its gears no longer have a reason for being; such as prisons, courts, security apparatus, etc. This resulted in the obsolescence of a series of activities and professions in the bee community, such as judges, lawyers, and all civil servants; soldiers, jailers, guards, clergy, blacksmiths who made bars and padlocks for prisons, etc. The hive stopped being opulent and generating wealth and jobs as it once did; the profits that were obtained through advantages, most of which were dishonest, were no longer measured.

The remaining bees - many abandoned the hive and others died fighting for the peace that now triumphs - settled inside a hollow tree, "graced by contentment and honesty" (MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 47).

"To show the impossibility of enjoying all the finest amenities of life found in any industrious, rich, and powerful nation, and at the same time being blessed with all the virtue and innocence to which one can aspire in a Golden Age." was the purpose of the fable. In other words, the thesis defended by the author was that the vices, defects and corruptions of individuals, driven by their desires, end up guaranteeing greatness, wealth and "worldly happiness for all" (MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 9).

In order to avoid doubts, we transcribe part of the "Moral" of the story:

Then cease to lament: only fools strive to
make a great hive honest. To enjoy the
comforts of the world,

To become famous in war and live in
comfort, without major vices, it is a vain
Utopia, inculcated in the brain.

Fraud, luxury and pride must live,

While we enjoy the benefits [...]
(MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 47).

The Fables of the Bees is, therefore, the joking way that Mandeville found to support his theory that it is vices and the search for the fulfillment of the most individualistic and selfish desires that, unreasonably, from individual profits and successes, generate the wealth of nations and the common good.

It is as if vice – understood as "everything that, without any consideration for the public, man commits in order to satisfy any of his appetites" – were to wealth and power like virtue – defined by the author as "every achievement whereby man, contrary to the impulses of nature, strives for the benefit of others, or for the conquest of his own passions

through a rational ambition to become good” – is bound to poverty and weakness (MANDEVILLE, 2017, p. 57).

This lesson was certainly learned by Friedrich von Hayek, considered one of the founding fathers of neoliberalism. On March 23, 1966, Hayek gave a lecture entitled “A Lecture on a Master Mind: Dr. Bernard Mandeville” [A Lecture on a Master Mind: ³ Dr. Bernard Mandeville], in order to exalt the thought of the Dutch author (HAYEK, 1966). Hayek alludes to the scandalous character and bad reputation attributed to the honoree, aware that even at the time of the speech, more than two hundred and fifty years later, Mandeville – *Man Devil*, as he was nicknamed by some at the time – still caused discomfort (DUFOR, 2010).

From the beginning of his speech, Hayek makes it latent that Mandeville’s influence on him is not (only) in the field of economic theory or ethics, but rather in the psychological: “I must be much more inclined to praise him as a great psychologist [...]. He clearly took pride in this understanding of human nature more than anything else” (HAYEK, 1966, p. 126, our translation).⁴

In his medical profession, Mandeville

cared for patients with nervous diseases and used the speech technique in treatment, which made him a great expert on the human psyche, before Freud. Mandeville’s doctrine, according to Hayek (1966, p. 129, our translation),⁵ was a determining factor in the development of modern thought:

His main claim became simply that in the complex order of society the results of men’s actions were very different from what they intended, and that individuals, in pursuing their own ends, whether selfish or altruistic, produced results useful to the others, which they had not anticipated or perhaps even known about; and, finally, that the entire order of society, and even everything we call culture, was the result of individual efforts that had no such end in view, but which were channeled to serve such ends by institutions, practices, and rules that They were also never deliberately invented, but were created by the survival of what proved to be successful.

That Mandeville had a great influence on Hayek’s thinking⁶ there is no doubt. However, there are those who claim⁷⁸ which is in the author of *The Fable of the Bees* the very origin of neoliberal thought. This is the moral – “very immoral” – described by Mandeville in the Age of Enlightenment, and repudiated

3. We chose to make a literal translation, considering the separate spelling of the terms: “master” and “Mind”. Nowadays, mastermind or master-mind is written in a single term, designating a person of remarkable intellect, a mentor.

4. Originally: *I must be much more inclined to praise him as a really great psychologist [...]. He clearly prided himself on this understanding of human nature more than on anything else*”.

5. Originally: *“His main contention became simply that in the complex order of society the results of men’s actions were very different from what they had intended, and that the individuals, in pursuing their own ends, whether selfish or altruistic, produced useful results for others which they did not anticipate or perhaps even know; and, finally, that the whole order of society, and even all that we call culture, was the result of individual strivings which had no such end in view, but which were channeled to serve such ends by institutions, practices, and rules which also had never been deliberately invented but had grown up by the survival of what proved successful”*. (HAYEK, 1966, p. 126).

6. Based on the content of the aforementioned lecture, it is possible to learn about another great name that Hayek held in high regard, David Hume, whom he calls “the greatest among all modern scholars of the mind and society”. In fact, it was due to his great admiration for Hume that Hayek began to consider Mandeville so important. Here is the original excerpt: *“It is indeed my estimate of Hume as perhaps the greatest of all modern students of mind and society which makes Mandeville appear to me so important”* (HAYEK, 1966, p.).

7. Verbal information from Robert-Dany Dufour, collected at the virtual International Colloquium “Philosophy thinks about Neoliberalism: economy, politics and epistemology”, organized by Felipe Castelo Branco, André Yazbek and Rubens Casara, through the Department of Philosophy at UFF, held in November 23-25,

8. Available at the link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnBLzmxwE-cFwMEupEXh-3Q?fbclid=IwAR3ABgKnsXCBBgrIa_MXT_M_oN8f9fblWVOPASal7ASIUMrAsOSpvtthtGA1c.

there, that reigns today. “It even became the core of a new liberal religion that set out to conquer the world” (DUFOUR, 2010, p. 60). Adam Smith himself would have used Mandeville’s teachings, redesigning them free of the, let’s say, diabolical burden. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith replaced the word “vice” with less controversial words like “selfishness” and “ambition”.

And this is how liberal thought developed, which today, at the height of neoliberalism, takes on the appearance of an unprecedented liberation of passions, reaching the level of a new religion “which promises, like every religion, that we will be saved, through the infinite growth of wealth, as long as we can accept and incorporate new commandments, based on the liberation of passions and not on their repression”. It is the market economy reaching the psychic economy (DUFOUR, 2010, p. 61). In this sense, Dufour (2010, p. 57) believes that the “changes that we observe today in being-In-itself and in being-together find their origin in an inversion of Western metaphysics, verified in the 18th century, at the time of the Enlightenment. when the modern world was created.”

There was no shortage of criticism of the *Fable*, as was seen in the attacks made by moral defenders on the author who brought his work to trial by the Grand Jury of Middlesex in 1723. This issue is a little more complex than just an honest desire of the Grand Jury of simply freeing society from an attack on religion and virtue. The issue is political and religious. It turns out that the jury was massively Tory (Country), while Mandeville followed the Whig (Court) manual and was opposed to the reformist movement. Furthermore, the Tories were interested in proving their support for King George I, refuting any alliance with Jacobitism.⁹

9. To better understand the English political and religious scenario of the period, check out SPECK, W. A. *Bernard Mandeville and the Middle Sex Grand Jury*. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, v. 11, no. 3, p. 362-374, Spring 1978; and POCOCC, J.G.A.. *The Machiavellian Moment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

However, the criticism that truly interests this writing is another, it is the one that attributes to Mandeville the origin, the basis of neoliberal thought, of the “new political economy” (POLANYI, 2021, p. 177). In this sense, Karl Polanyi is surgical:

The extravagant doctor had indulged in a shallow moral paradox, but the pamphleteer had gotten the basic elements of the new political economy right.

His essay was soon forgotten, outside the circles of “lower politics”, as the problems of policing in the 18th century were called, while Mandeville’s cheap brilliance disturbed different minds, such as those of Berkeley, Hume and Smith (POLANYI, 2021, pages: 177-178).

This new political economy mentioned by Polanyi has as one of its premises that pauperism and progress are inseparable. Therefore, pauperism could be profitable, and for a nation to become great and prosperous, the existence of a cheap workforce would be necessary. “Besides, if it weren’t for the poor, who would man the ships and go to war?” (POLANYI, 2021, p. 178). This is the need and usefulness of the lower layer of the social pyramid.

In Mandeville’s own words (2021, p. 200), “[...] everything that is obtained in abundance makes work cheaper, where the poor are well managed; who, just as they must be prevented from going hungry, must not receive as much as allows them to save”, as it is in the interests of rich nations that the poor spend everything they have so that, consequently, they continue working, but that with their income can simply survive. Mandeville does not rule out the possibility and legitimacy of those who, through abnormal effort, manage to ascend to a better economic-social condition than the one in which they were raised.

It is for economic reasons, therefore, that Mandeville condemns charity schools, given that, “his main objection to them was that they would educate the children of the poor above their station and thus reduce the pool of available labor at a time when the economy [...] required an abundance of manual and menial workers”¹⁰ (SPECK, 1978, p. 373). In addition to poverty, or combined with it, there must be a certain dose of ignorance in society, also understood as useful for the wealth project of nations. As can be understood from this excerpt:

I established as maxims, which must never be abandoned, that the poor must be kept strictly linked to work and that it would be prudent to alleviate their needs, but that it would be madness to cure them of them [...]. I defined ignorance as a necessary ingredient in the makeup of society; from which it becomes evident that I would never imagine that luxury would become widespread in all parts of the kingdom (MANDEVILLE, 2021, p. 249).

And regarding luxury, which must not be repelled, but must be restricted to the upper layers, Mandeville (2021, p. 256) argues:

[...] no foreign luxury can destroy a country. The apex of this is only found in very populous nations, and only in the upper strata; and the more numerous, the lower part will be, proportionately, the greater, the base that supports everything, the multitude of poor workers.

The foundation that supports everything. There is no way not to make a historical leap of a few centuries and arrive today, in the 21st century, linking this argument to neoliberal thinking, when we come across speeches by the current minister of economy, a legitimate Chicago boy, about the financing system FIES (Educational Financing Fund for Higher Education Students) be a “disaster”, having even taken “a janitor’s son” to university

10. Original excerpt: “his main objection to them was that they would educate children of the poor above their station, and thus reduce the available pool of labor at a time when economy [...] required an abundance of hewers of wood and drawers of water”.

(GUEDES..., 2021). On another occasion, Paulo Guedes again expresses his Mandevillian opinion about the “place of the poor”, when he said that the dollar being high was good, since when it was lower everyone went to Disneyland, “maids went to Disneyland, a party damn” and, in a tone of indignation, continues: “But, wait a minute, wait a minute, [...] go for a walk there in Foz do Iguaçu...” (VENTURA, 2020).

Another trait that makes up the neoliberal primer and that is permeated in Mandeville’s work is individualism, to the point of blaming the individual exclusively for their failure, for their misery: “Those who would very much like to imitate those with superior fortune must only blame themselves. themselves are ruined” (MANDEVILLE, 2021, p. 257). Now, one cannot but say that it is an incongruous, incoherent, fallacious speech. Since the author himself states that very rarely some people can escape poverty if they manage to make an enormous effort that circumvents the logic of remuneration established for the poor, to which they are subjected. If this is so, if the base of society, for economic reasons, must not receive so that they can save (profit), how can someone’s failure be attributed solely and exclusively to him, when we know that the gears that support market society are adjusted by a certain portion that has no interest in ending poverty, ignorance and inequality?

Because, nowadays, leaving the Mandevillian fable and coming to the reality of neoliberal times - the myth of meritocracy, which camouflages privileges and deepens inequalities, which turns society into a company model, guided by the impetus for full-time competition, which divides it between winners and losers -, if you are your own entrepreneur, you are entirely responsible for your “failure”.

One cannot fail to contemplate another

essential point for the neoliberal logic of current times, hyper consumerism. Mandeville believed that the consumption of things considered superfluous, such as luxury, brought the common good, as they instigated internal and external trade, the search for goods in other countries - which guaranteed overseas merchant expeditions -, such as silk, to making the most beautiful dresses, which, in turn, guaranteed the work of the artisans. Therefore, the fulfillment of an individual's most futile desires and the satisfaction of their most luxurious desires had the common good as a consequence and must be encouraged. Currently, this is what is identified elevated to the highest power, as today we live in the era of hyper consumerism.

People have become infinite desire machines and are constantly bombarded, on all their electronic devices, by algorithms programmed to identify their consumption patterns and preferences, in order to keep them in the loop of satisfying inexhaustible desires, behold, those They are programmed to create a feeling of incompleteness and a constant need for acquisition. Read, therefore, that desire is understood as everything that can be an object of purchase, which enters into the logic of the market. Because the "common good" that Mandeville saw simply cannot be conceived as such contemporaneously, taking into consideration, for example, the environmental issue, in which the demand for non-renewable natural resources is leading to the exhaustion of the capacity to maintain life. in the land.

Mandeville's very immoral morality, which credits the wealth and prosperity of nations to vices, is identified at the heart of neoliberal reason, but it is necessary to emphasize that it is not intended to say that everything in the Fable is replicated in neoliberalism, whether in its creation, with Hayek, whether in the most current context, as this would make the mistake of stating that the reality described in the 18th century is the same as today, and everything would be explained. What was intended with this work was to follow Dufour's argument, that Mandeville would have been one of the original minds of what we today understand as neoliberalism, so much so that Friedrich von Hayek, notably considered one of its founders, was inspired, declaredly, in Mandevillian precepts.

CONCLUSION

The intention of finding these convergences between Mandevillian and neoliberal thought served as justification for this article, which briefly concludes that Mandeville would then have laid the foundations for a (very immoral) morality that preaches a new religion (that of the market), considering acting for one's own benefit, even or especially at the expense of others, the greatest of virtues. Thus, contemporary neoliberalism takes the moral of *The Fable of the Bees* to its extreme, when its characteristics are, for example: hyperindividualism, the spirit of competition and hyper consumerism.

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