



UNIVERSIDAD DISTRITAL
FRANCISCO JOSÉ DE CALDAS

Visión Electrónica

<https://doi.org/10.14483/issn.2248-4728>



VISIÓN ELECTRÓNICA

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL VISION

Amartya Sen: A Home in the World. Memories. Bogotá: Taurus. Penguin Randon House Grupo Editorial, S.A.U. 2021, 515 pages.

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When questioned about the prosperity of a nation, but above all about the quality of life of its inhabitants, José Arcadio Buendía's utopian idea of social justice emerges; integrity that constitutes the most appropriate moral basis for building a democratic society. Consequently, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez affirms:

José Arcadio Buendía, who was the most enterprising man you would ever see in the village, had arranged the position of the houses in such a way that from all of them you could reach the river and get

water with equal effort, and he laid out the streets with such good sense that no house received more sun than another in the heat of the day.

Amartya Sen, in his Memoirs, anchored in the Buddhist tradition, approaches José Arcadio Buendía's approach to social justice when he states: "Buddha holds that doing good should not be a transactional act, that a person has the duty to do what he considers good unilaterally, even when others do not fulfill their corresponding obligations" (p. 123).

This leads us to think that the Rousseauian utopia of social justice, set forth in *The Social Contract-an idea* that implies a pact, i.e.: each party does good things for the others, on condition that the others also fulfill their commitments to the others-is out of step with the approach of José Arcadio Buendía and Amartya Sen.

Further on, on the same page cited above, Sen links Buddhist thinking on social justice with the practice of Jesus of Nazareth in the *Gospel of Luke*, specifically with the parable of the Good Samaritan:

When the Samaritan comes to help the wounded man, he is not driven by any kind of social contract, either implicit or explicit. He sees that the person on the other side of the road needs help and, since he can provide it, he offers it (p.123).

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Cite this article as: R. López-González, A. Ramírez Valencia, "Amartya Sen: A Home in the World. Memories. Bogotá: Taurus. Penguin Randon House Grupo Editorial, S.A.U. 2021, 515 pages", *Visión Electrónica*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 174-176, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.14483/22484728.20206>

All of the above, in order to highlight the origins and nature of Sen's idea of social justice, which is a cross-cutting theme in his *Memoirs*. Without forgetting Amartya's emblematic text on political philosophy, entitled *The Idea of Justice*, where the foundations of social justice are developed in greater detail.

A Home in the World, is divided into five (5) parts: in the first part, Amartya describes his childhood memories; born in India in 1933; at the age of nine (9), living with his grandparents in Santiniketan, he witnessed something that made him realize the need to seek justice in his environment. He observed the so-called famine in the homes of Bengal in 1943, where three million people died. In the second part of the book, entitled *The Last Famine*, this situation is narrated. But let Amartya himself describe it:

There were starving people, homeless people in every street, and for the first time in my life I saw people dying of starvation. There were a few feeding centers in different parts of the city, organized by private charities that provided food for a limited number of people. All these centers opened their doors at the same time, so that no one could go to more than one center. The hungry fought to get a place in the queues before the maximum number was reached (p.150).

The experience of observing how human bodies crumble from starvation left indelible marks on Sen's life and, surely, these observations led him to propose a renewed idea of social justice, in the sense of seeking parameters other than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in order to measure people's prosperity and quality of life. As opposed to GDP, he proposed the idea of Human Development Indexes (HDI).

Sen cleverly links poverty with freedom. He does so when he describes the clashes between Muslims and Hindus very often in the 1940s in India, especially in Dhaka. Clashes that led to the partition of the Indian state in two; in 1947, so-called British India was divided into two states: India and Pakistan. Indeed, the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and his party the Muslim League, had first demanded autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas, and only later requested a separate state. Jinnah believed that Hindus and Muslims could not live together and that they were different nations. But where is the relationship between poverty and freedom? Sen recounts an encounter between a Muslim and a Hindu who were wary of sitting down to share. Then, the one said to the other: "My

friend, there is really no difference between us. You make your living by exploiting the vulnerabilities of ignorant Hindus, and I make my living by exploiting the vulnerabilities of ignorant Muslims. We are in just the same business" (p. 166).

Impossible to overlook the different family intricacies of the Sen family in the anti-colonial process of the Indians; the British built a repressive network, where neither Amartya Sen's family nor Mahatma Gandhi escaped. According to the explanation of the British authorities, any suspect could be preventively detained. Sen states: "... writing and making non-violent speeches in favor of independence, especially if they were along the lines of Mahatma Gandhi, was sufficient to qualify for preventive detention" (p. 170).

It is worth noting the finesse and elegance, as Sen relates the years of colonial rule by the British in India. Sometimes taking as primary sources the beautiful literature of two Indian Nobel Prize winners: Rabindranath Tagore and Rudyard Kipling. It is important to note, in this last aspect, a pleasant coincidence: Sen's primary studies were in the experimental school located in Santiniketan founded by the Nobel Prize winner Tagore. Having said that, it is worth noting that the *Memoirs*, while emphasizing the role of the personalities in Sen's life, seeks to underline very strongly the ideas of these characters as well. In the long run, the *Memoirs* could be considered as a book of histories of the democratic ideas that influenced Amartya Sen. Here the inspiration of the poet Martí, in *Our America*, fits in: "An energetic idea, flamed in time before the world, for, like the mystical flag of the final judgment, a squadron of battleships".

Although I was already familiar with the joint writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on quality of life, I came to *A Home in the World. Memoirs*, for a section entitled: *What to do with Marx* (pp. 248- 264). Sen makes a big claim, as a student, why Marx was not studied in the content of the teaching at College Street in Calcutta. However, what interests Sen most about Marx are the human implications of all his theoretical formulations and his renewed look at man as a poly-dimensional being, beyond the activity of labor.

Sen notes the Marxist slogan "from each according to his needs" as part of the Marxist ethic, but goes further and links the idea of the Welfare State, initially developed in the Nordic countries, based on loyalty to Marx's principle of necessity, in the sense that it

cannot be called a legitimately civilized society if it denies medical care to a person because of his lack of economic means.

Indeed, to read Amartya Sen's memoirs is to fill with spirituality and democratic ideas the lives of students and teachers today, undermined by global technocracies where the humanistic spirit has been discarded. Perhaps what is most striking about Sen's ideas, thoughts and feelings is when he states that poverty inexorably leads to a breakdown of human talent. Bearing in mind that poverty is not only the lack of money, but the inability of people, due to economic conditions, to develop

their full potential as human beings. It is most likely that a poor girl or boy from Alta Guajira (Wayuu), in Colombia-if he or she survives-can develop all his or her capabilities and talents as a human being. For all these reasons I recommend *A Home in the World. Memoirs*.

This review comes to an end. And we end by recalling Gabriel García Márquez's sentence in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "The condemned races in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* did not have a second chance on earth". Amartya Sen, makes a peremptory call to retake with more force the idea of social justice, of José Arcadio Buendía, so that human beings can develop all their spiritual and material capacities as persons.

Historical Vision

Carlos Eduardo Vasco Uribe or the careful mathematician teacher and learner carer: End or beginning!



Carlos Eduardo Vasco Uribe was born in Medellín, on October 12, 1937; and he passed away in Bogotá on September 27, 2022. He has a degree in Philosophy and Letters from the Javeriana University of Bogotá; from MSc. in Physics and Mathematics and Ph.D in Mathematics from Saint Louis University, Missouri; Bachelor of Theology at the Hochschule Sankt-

Georgen, Frankfurt am Main; and ordained a Jesuit priest in that same city.

Professor Emeritus of the National University of Colombia; from the Pontifical Javeriana University; the Agreement CINDE-Pedagogical University of Bogotá-New University of Fort Lauderdale; and special professor at the Francisco José de Caldas District University; from the Universidad del Valle in the Institute of Education and Pedagogy IEP; from the University of Manizales in the Doctorate Program in Social Sciences with an emphasis on Children and Youth, in agreement with the International Center for Human Development (CINDE); professor at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; and special guest and visiting professor at universities in Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Washington, California, Paris, Helsinki and in several Latin American countries.

Adviser to the Ministry of National Education for the elaboration of the curricular programs of mathematics for Basic Primary and Secondary Education, and of ASCOFADE for the elaboration of the basic standards of competences and the introduction to the standards of mathematics; Coordinator of the Mission of Science, Education and Development, culminated in the report Colombia, on the edge of opportunity; Designer of the Second Ten-Year Education Plan 2006-2015.

He received the National Education Award from the Francisca Radke Foundation-National Pedagogical University-Universidad de Antioquia-CNTV National Television Commission; the Simón Bolívar Award, in the Grand Master Order category of the Colombian Ministry of National Education, and the City of Bucaramanga Order for Educational and Cultural Merit; the Guggenheim Fellowship; the Schumann Grant; the School Bell Scholarship; three-time Visiting Scholar at the

Harvard School of Education. Corresponding Member and Number -Chair No. 32- of the Colombian Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences; Honorary Member of the Colombian Academy of Pedagogy and Education.

He wrote or edited, between 1972 and 2014, thirty books - highlighting the one on Renaissance Algebra, a classic as Professor Iván Castro Chadid indicates - and more than 130 articles on topics related to mathematics, logic, the history of mathematics, philosophy and epistemology, pedagogy and didactics of mathematics. He was also co-editor and referee of Springer Verlag's Educational Studies in Mathematics, among other national and international journals.

Perhaps, in addition to being a polyglot, authorized broadcaster by Deutsche Welle in Germany, and seasoned lecturer integrating economics, sociology, psychology; *his different approach to the different* when understanding the difficulties of exclusion for children with cognitive disabilities or with economic and cultural limitations; or his direct commitment for nearly a decade -since the mid-seventies with the homeless in Bogotá- or with the Peace process in Havana when he remarked that *what the State, the government, the school, the university, the family... is educating for peace*; His critical attitude is really the exemplary legacy that he bequeaths to generations of national intellectuals and academics: at the inaugural conference of the V Ibero-American Congress on the History of Mathematics Education organized by the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas at the end of 2019 I would say energetic... *In a country where the Vice President of the Republic and Director of the New Mission of Wise Men publicly maintains that pure theory is just a vanity of those who believe they are very wise; It is opportune to show the close relationship between the most abstract philosophical theories, both the ontological, anthropological, epistemological and general semiological as well as the particular epistemological ones of the different factual sciences and of the formal or mathematical sciences, with the daily praxis of the people who consider ourselves also assiduous practitioners, lifelong learners, curious historians, and careful mathematical educators, trainers or pedagogues and caretakers of our learners.*

Harold Vacca González

Editor