

FIERCE INDIVIDUALISM

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The difficulty president Barack Obama is facing to approve the legislation universalizing healthcare is both surprising and predictable. It is surprising because one cannot imagine that a country with the worlds highest per capita income is unable to guarantee free healthcare to all its inhabitants, while countries with a smaller per capita income, including Brazil, do it. With respect to other public goods such as college education, social prestige, number of friends, and even in divine grace, it is reasonable that individuals manifesting greater competence or greater interest should have a greater participation. There is, however, no theory of justice justifying that the richest people should have access to better healthcare than the poor. Countries that have universal healthcare systems are far from this ideal of justice, but they made a major step in that direction. Surprisingly, this is not the case with the United States.

This is something predictable, however, when we take into account that the existence of a universal healthcare system ensured by the State presupposes a certain degree of brotherhood - a virtue that is incompatible with the fierce individualism prevailing in that country. Favorable historical conditions, particularly the colonization of New England by Puritans, who were able to reproduce the English society without its serious social inequalities, allowed the United States to develop extraordinarily until World War II. But that was a crowning moment it was probably the limit that a society based on such a strong individualism may reach. From then on, while European countries and some of the developing ones reorganized their societies in the name of both economic development and solidarity,

and built a social State or a welfare State, the United States gradually lost power and influence. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant a new beginning for the United States, but, since it was based on an ideology, the neoliberalism, that took individualism to extremes, it was a short-time recovery.

The American president and many of its fellow citizens recognize the injustice involved in the absence of a universal healthcare system, and they want to solve the problem. The resistance they face, however, reflects an elite that does not want to pay more taxes and tries to replace the brotherhood established by law with charity. It also reflects the democratic backwardness of a country that accepts as "natural" that insurance companies and health maintenance organizations (HMOs), which defend their private interests, are viewed by the press as being as legitimate as the citizens that argue in the name of the public interest.

This inability to identify the nature of the debaters is the outcome of a neoliberal individualism which rejects the idea of public interest or common good and states that there are only private interests. Private interests would compete for public policies in much the same way as companies compete for profit in the market. Society thus becomes the market, with a difference: for the market to work well, it is enough that the price should be defined by competition, whereas for the society to work well, the competition for power is not enough: solidarity is also necessary. The difficulties president Obama is facing to approve the universalization of healthcare indicate how strong fierce individualism still is in his country.