IGNACIO CANO: RACE & DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaisms leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we will have a conversation with Dr. Ignacio Cano. Dr. Ignacio Cano has studied Public Security and Violence from 1991 to 1993. He worked on refugees and war-stricken populations in El Salvador with The United Nations High Commission on Refugees, and he served on the United Nations Truth Commission in El Salvador as well. He joined the faculty of the State University of Rio de Janeiro in 2000, where he founded the Laboratory for the Analysis of Violence of the same university. Over the last 20 years, he has been a leading researcher in different issues related to public security, violence, human rights, and education. Dr. Ignacio Cano, my friend, thank you for joining us.

Ignacio Cano: It's a pleasure, Josh.

JH: I'd like to begin where our relationship began as friends in Rio de Janeiro and I'd like to ask you to introduce our audience primarily, although not exclusively, from the United States on the nature of inequality in Brazil, beyond the stereotypes of the famous or infamous favelas or slums.

IC: Brazil is a country marked by insecurity in all realms of life. It was the last country in the continent to abolish slavery in 1988. And this had a huge impact in the social structure of the country. So the Gini coefficient, or all the inequality coefficients, single out Brazil as one of the most unequal countries in the world. And in the early 2000, there was a small step forward in reducing inequality, but this has been unfortunately reversed by the recent trend. So inequality affects all aspects of life. For example, one thing people don't know is that if you have a college degree in Brazil, you have the right to a special prison, you don't go to prison with the poor people. You are legally are entitled to a special prison. This is a very clear indication that the Brazilian state was created to protect the elite and to keep the poor people down.

IC: And so this affects the legislation, this affects the income, of course. There is a strong racial inequality and the black middle class is smaller than the US. Every aspect that you can think of, you will see a strong social hierarchy. For example, recently with the pandemic, there was a very famous case in which a judge was walking down the street without a mask, which was compulsory. And so this municipal agent went to him and said, "Sir, you have to wear a mask. I'm going to give you a fine because you're not wearing the mask." And the judge said, "Do you know who you're talking to, you illiterate? I'm a judge and I do as I damn please with your stupid fines." And this was all filmed and became a national uproar.

IC: So it is a very unequal country, this is very hard to change. For example, we've been proposing for a long time that this right to a special prison for people who have a degree... Which is, by the way, a great publicity for the university, isn't it? That if you get a degree, you get special prison. But even leftist parties do not incorporate this into their proposal. It is a very, very unequal country and the favelas are the geographical or physical manifestation of the inequality, that inequality goes far beyond the favelas. And in fact, favelas in rich areas sometimes have an average income, which is higher than normal housing in very poor areas. So the difference between poor and rich is not only or exclusively between the favelas and the rest of the city, it goes beyond that.

JH: You made brief reference to the racial dimension of inequality in Brazil, both historically and today. Every country understands its ethnic and racial makeup in constitution differently, on different criteria and different axes of relationship. Can you describe the prevailing attitude and understanding about race and ethnicity in Brazil for the benefit of an American audience?

IC: Yeah, I think the greatest difference between the US and Brazil is that in the US, and in some other countries like South Africa for example, there is a strong segregation, geographical segregation. Whereas in Brazil, the segregation is not so visible. So obviously black people are over-represented among the poor, there's no question about that, and the gap is I think higher than in the US. However, even if you go into the favelas for example, you'll see black and white people. Although there are more black people, you'll see white people there.

IC: So Brazil for a long time, because it's such a unequal and a class-oriented society, Brazil for many years, I would say over a century, thought of itself as a racial democracy. That was the term that people use. Brazil was supposed to be a racial democracy, but because of the class structure and the fact that black people had been slaves to start with, then there was a differential. But the differential was blamed on class issues, not on race issues. Now, this started to change over the last 20 years, and the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy has been severely questioned. There are many studies that show, for example, that black people with the same qualifications will earn lower income than white people. We carried out studies to show that if you face the police in a shoot-out the, likelihood of you surviving the shoot-out and being wounded

rather than killed is 8% higher if you're white than if you're black. And this holds both inside and outside the favelas. So that means there are many pieces of research that confirm that there is racial bias and discrimination. And over the last 20 years, there has been an increase in positive discrimination measures, quotas in the universities and in other places for public servants, too, and a growing acceptance that Brazil had structural racism and therefore positive discrimination measures were needed to address the issue.

IC: Now, of course, we are in a very peculiar moment with an extremely right-wing government that would make Donald Trump look as a moderate, and there is a backlash against quotas and positive discrimination. But I think the general trend, it's fair to say, has been that Brazil, over the last 20 years has started to recognize itself as a structurally racist country. And in fact, the surveys, when you ask, "Is there racism in Brazil?" The overwhelming majority of the population says, "Yes, there is racism in Brazil." Of course when you ask the person, "Are you racist?" Everybody says, "No, I'm not." But there is a recognition that there is racism in the country.

JH: Anecdotally, that's been my experience. I've been as you know, frequent in Brazil for a quarter century now. And in that time, as an American, I have indeed noticed the difference. I used to be confronted in routine conversations when people would discover I was American, they would immediately go to the racism in the United States from a posture of non-racism in Brazil, just socially in conversation, and that's really changed. I think it's compelling that anecdotally and on a social level, this consciousness is also palpable, which may be a promising sign. I'd like to build on this question of racial consciousness in Brazil and ask you about the United States in contrast or in comparison. As you know, we in the United States are going through our first major racial reckoning in a generation. And I wanna ask what some lessons might be for the United States, that we can learn from either South America or South Africa to inform our experience, or alternatively, do you think that they're so different that they really can't teach us applicable lessons?

IC: Well, teaching is different. It's difficult in this realm. But I think there are some lessons that could be at least addressed or listened to. I think the South African case is very different because you had a racist regime which was finally toppled by a revolution and also by international pressure. And now you have a strong level of segregation and also in politics. For example, in Cape Town, in the Western Cape where I lived, the majority of the population are not black, they're colored, and white, and English and Afrikaners. And so the government goes to the opposition party, but in the rest of the country, the majority are black and they vote on the ANC despite all the allegations of corruption. So there is a lot of racial loyalty in electoral terms in South Africa.

IC: But I think in the Brazilian case, there are some lessons in this, what we have called this, reckoning of the racial discrimination in the country, that has been happening in Brazil over the last two decades, and that it's growing in the US right now, especially

after the George Floyd case. But I think this social recognition in this, for example, a certain significant part of the Brazilian elite defended this idea of a racial democracy. And there was even a book whose title was, "Brazil Is Not Racist." This rejection of the very idea of the possibility of racism was firmly ingrained in a good part of the elite, and this has been declining. And I think the US seems to be in that position now, whereof it's become mainstream.

IC: I remember five, 10 years ago, Black Lives Matter was a peripheral movement. And I know people who were part of it and it was just a fringe movement. And now you have the President of the United States saying, "There is structural racism in our society. We have to address this." So I think there has been a significant shift in the US, too. And it's a very important one because once you abolish the legislation that's behind the discrimination, it's typical for many people to assume that the problem has been solved. There's no segregational legislation, therefore there is no discrimination. And of course, attitudes linger on for a long time, and we need to do a lot more things to try to promote equality. And it's not just enough to undo or to eliminate the legal underpinnings of these inequalities.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu, for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called, Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: Our audience should know that you are one of the leading researchers in Brazil, in particular about police violence and the relationship between the police and the community. And in the United States, there is a policy perspective that argues that community policing is more effective when the demographic makeup of the police, racially and ethnically reflects the demographic makeup of the population. It's policing. Do you think that that applies to Brazil as well? Is it something that they should aim for in Brazil? Or are racial politics and racial identities too complicated or different in other ways that make it not really relevant?

IC: I think that's a very interesting point because in the US, in the UK, and in some other countries that have had a colonial past, the issue has been, as you indicated, to try to incorporate minorities into the police. Because police officers tended to be white, and they sometimes are often worked in black or Latino communities with no identification. So this has been going on for many decades in the US and in other countries, the attempt to make the police force representative of relation. However, I would say that

this is a necessary but not sufficient condition to improve the relationship between the police and the community. And I can give both examples, South Africa and Brazil. In South Africa, the police force was a white police force, a racist police force, whose main target was the defense of the apartheid regime against subversion. When democracy arrived in 1994, this was turned upside down. And now most police officers are black because it's not a very highly paid force, and therefore it's for people who get into the force. And still, there are many cases of police violence in South Africa committed by black officers against black citizens. And still, we see instances of the police entering the townships with extreme violence and unnecessary violence. The same applies to Brazil.

IC: In Rio, for example, and it's not the only case in Brazil, the military police, is a channel for upward mobility for their middle, low classes. So there are a lot of black officers in the police. You cannot say, "We've done research on that, too." You cannot say at all that it's a white police force. It's not. Again, it's not a very well-paid job, specially for the lower echelons of the force. And therefore it tends to be a job chosen by middle, low class people. And you have a lot of black officers in... When we presented the data on the racial bias and the use of lethal force, police officers were flabbergasted and they said, "That's not possible. We have so many black officers." So the fact that you have black officers to police a black community, I think it's very important that the police force resembles somewhat the population where it's going to serve. And it's not enough. And when you have ingrained bias, the officers will reflect these bias unconsciously and you will see the same results even with black police officers. So I think that's a very important point. We have to have a representative police force but it's certainly not enough. And you can reproduce the mechanisms that you had in the past, even when you have a police force that represents the population.

JH: I'd like to ask you to zoom out a little bit. As a long-time observer of burgeoning democracies, you have lived in El Salvador, you've lived in Brazil, which really only emerged from dictatorship in the early and mid-80s, and you've now lived in South Africa, as you said, with a living memory of their equivalent of slavery past, their apartheid past. These are relatively young democracies. And so I wanna ask you about the culture of democracy, the rhetoric of democracy, the lived experience of democracy as opposed to the institutions of democracy. I wanna ask you how you feel about these soft cultural issues in ensuring the benefits of democracy in the case of these countries' young democracies, but perhaps also for the United States and other more well established democracies.

IC: Well, Josh, I think that we are in a very special moment of history, in the planet as a whole. And democracy has been tested and is being tested in many parts of the world, and is under threat. And democracy is a very sensitive plant. I think the regimes in Poland, in Hungary, in other countries show that it's not enough to have, again, the legislation, the law. You need a lot of mechanisms and you need people behind it. And you need... Lots of things. And I think we are now in a very sensitive moment. I think

Donald Trump has represented a clear threat to democracy in the US, and we are seeing the same here in Brazil with Bolsonaro, and in other countries in the world. So Latin America has an issue which goes beyond democracy, which is the mistrust towards the state, and the idea that the rule of law is something that you can bend. This is also a Latin thing because Southern Europe is also different from Northern Europe in this respect. Laws are not so inflexible.

JH: If I may interrupt, it's even stronger in South America. In my opinion, there's a Hebrew word which some of my listeners will know, it's called, "Fryer," like a fryer. And it means a chump, a fool. And I think in Latin America, it's not just that there's a lack of trust of the state, it's actually worse. It's that if you actually trust the state, you're kind of a fryer, you're kind of a chump and you're a little bit pollyannaish.

IC: I moved house. And my new neighbor said, "Are we gonna do the cable TV together?" And when I found out, he wanted me to get my TV, my cable TV, as if it were a room of his house. So he would pay less, I would pay less and the people who installed the TV for the company would get some money. So I said, "No, I'm not gonna do that. We are always complaining about corruption, and then we're gonna do this at the small level? I'm not gonna do it. I'm gonna do it normally." And then he was very mad at me. He said I had exposed him and the people who worked for the company, and the people who worked for the company wouldn't come to me to install their regular TV service that I had requested. So I had to fight with the TV company for a while to get the service legally, that they... Everybody else wanted me to get illegally. This is a very powerful thing. That the people don't trust the state, and they think that... I think this roots into how we were colonized, compared to the US or Australia. Anglo-Saxon colonies in general, where colonies where... People migrated to build a new life over there, running from persecution or whatever it was, but they migrated there to Australia, to New Zealand, to the US, to build a new life for themselves.

IC: Whereas in the Latin world, and in Ibero-America to say, people went from the metropolis to become rich so they could come back to their original countries with a lot of money. So this mentality that we're gonna take as much as we can from the state and we're gonna enrich ourselves, I think has had a huge impact in how these countries have developed. This idea that if you don't take advantage of the situation, you're a fool. There's another anecdote, which is that in the Latin world, when you cross a car in the highway and there is... You've seen the police behind you, you flash your lights to say, "Look, there's police behind us, so be careful." Why? Because we think the state is our enemy, and we are friends against this common enemy. If you do that in Germany you'll get a fine, because [chuckle] you're not supposed to do that, and the state is not supposed to be our enemy.

JH: I just have to interject. In this regard, the United States is actually in a rare case on the Latin side. In the United States, if you're on a highway, at least in my generation, you do flash your lights if you pass a speed trap, which the same spirit. But the

American suspicion of government has been enfranchised in the American political ideology of democracy, that's part of the Second Amendment in gun rights, which is a legitimate American suspicion of government as an expression of democratic values for the building of a society that protects individual rights, as opposed to Latin America where it's what you described. So it's a subtle difference, and then perhaps mid-way between Europe and... Or Northern Europe and Latin America, but it's a nuance.

IC: Yes. I also think, however, that the US up to 9/11 lost some of this original spirit of preserving individual rights. For example, you can be introduced into this No Fly List in the US. You can't fly, which is a terrible blow if you live in the US, of course. And you're not even told who put you in that list, you can't defend yourself. So I think that 9/11 had a huge impact in the US into lowering this idea that individual rights were more important than the protection of the state. But yes, I agree that individual rights are very important in the US, and in Latin America it's not just about individual rights, it's like the State is always suspicious, and we don't trust the state.

JH: I'd like to ask about the power of the pandemic to impinge on some of the questions we've discussed. You mentioned the case of the judge who was disrespectful of the Rule of Law. In what ways have you seen the pandemic shaping our sense of security, violence, inequality?

IC: I think the pandemic has overhauled the idea of security, because for example, now in many countries if you are outside your house, you have to justify why you're outside your house, why you're going somewhere. So in some ways it's going back to feudal times where public space was not really free, and you had to justify why you were there. And this has given a lot of tools and mechanisms to police forces all over the world. And then new legislation rules that have to be enforced, and there's a lot of anomie in that nobody knows very well how far the rule goes. The police themselves often don't know... In South Africa we had a lot of cases of police abuse due to enforcing COVID-19 regulations.

IC: So I think it throws us all in a state of uncertainty. And so when the relationship between the police and the community is good, then you can handle it; but when the relationship between the community and the police was already damaged, and then you throw this level of uncertainty onto it, then you have abuse, then you have complaints, then you have people rioting against the police that are enforcing the regulations. I think it has complicated the issue of public security in general.

JH: So I'd like to end with a question looking forward and hopefully looking up by asking you, what you see in your long experience in three continents as some of the most promising and successful social, legislative, or economic strategies that help promote equality, democracy and diminish violence?

IC: Positive discrimination measures that have been introduced in many countries are important. But I think that they have to have a timeframe, they have to have a target. I think that just introducing positive discrimination measures...

JH: You mean for example...

IC: Without...

JH: Quotas in universities to help promote either ethnic minorities or economically disadvantaged people?

IC: Exactly.

JH: What we call affirmative action in the United States?

IC: Yes, affirmative action. These measures have to be temporary, they have to have targets and a timeframe, because if you leave them on forever, my impression in several countries is that they raise up a lot of backlash. And then people of course start... Because there is an irony, a paradox, into it of course. In order to promote equality, you're acting unequally. And that's alright if you explain it well and if you have a target. But if you just leave it on forever, then I think it becomes problematic in the end, which is part of what has happened in Brazil. So, we should be aiming at a society in which affirmative action is no longer necessary. So if it's always necessary, there's something wrong with it, and we have to address that. I think that measures that have to be... Have to do with schools, grants, and the ability for poor kids to study in good schools, I would say, makes a huge difference. And there's a lot of research that shows that even if you're a poor kid with a limited cultural capital in your family, if you go to a good school, you'll be a good professional, you'll be able to get there. So I think that we should think a lot about education, and how to get people with disadvantaged backgrounds into non-disadvantaged learning opportunities.

JH: Ignacio, thank you so much for taking the time. This has been a fascinating conversation and it's really wonderful to reconnect with you. Thank you so much.

IC: Thanks for having me, Josh. Take care.

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