



# THE RIGHT TO DEMOCRACY

Sociologist fosters the creation of the field of education in human rights in Brazil

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**AGE** 79

**FIELD OF EXPERTISE**

Political Sociology and Sociology of Education

**INSTITUTION**

Faculty of Education at the University of São Paulo

**EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND**

Bachelor's degree (1971) in social sciences, master's (1975) and PhD (1980) in Sociology from the School of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Humanities at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP)

**PUBLISHED WORKS**

30 scientific articles and 13 books

**W**ith a specialization in political science, sociologist Maria Victoria de Mesquita Benevides is the granddaughter of baroness Maria José Villas Boas Antunes de Siqueira de Mesquita (1862–1953), but she never benefitted much from this familial connection. Her mother, who was widowed at 43 years of age at the end of her tenth pregnancy, encouraged her six daughters to pursue a career and be independent. Benevides followed her advice. Born in Niterói, she pursued a career in teaching and research, and today she is a retired tenured professor from the Faculty of Education at the University of São Paulo (FE-USP).

In an interview that lasted an afternoon in her own living room in São Paulo, Benevides spoke about her research involving the government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1902–1976), which she undertook during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985), and about her study of political parties, arguing how inequality prevents the advancement of democracy in Brazil. Her most recent work is focused on the sociology of education, specifically education for democracy. During her 27 years at FE-USP, she was able to take concepts developed in political science to the fields of education and human rights. Following this trajectory, she worked with the concept of active citizenship, developing ideas to defend political participation through institutional measures beyond elections, including plebiscites and referendums. Regarding her teaching, she speaks about how the work with the Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns Human Rights Commission, founded in 2019, motivated her to keep going during the pandemic. Four years ago, she became widowed after losing her husband, astronomer and USP professor Paulo Benevides Soares (1939–2017), with whom she has three daughters and five grandchildren.

### ***Shall we talk about your childhood?***

I am a mixture of the Niterói and Rio de Janeiro cultures. I was born in Niterói, but I grew up in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Until I got married, I lived with my brothers and sisters, my mother, and my maternal grandmother in a house in the Rio Comprido neighborhood. My mother's family was from Niterói, and my father's family was from the state of Minas Gerais. I had nine siblings. I am the eighth child, or the ninth, because I have a twin sister. My childhood was marked by losses and death. At 20 years of age, my eldest brother, José Jeronymo, enlisted as a volunteer in the Brazilian Expeditionary Force. In November 1944, at the end of World War II [1939–1945], he died in a battle in Italy. At that time, I was 2 years old, and my mother was at the end of her tenth pregnancy. When we received the news, my father had a heart attack and died. Besides the death of my eldest brother, another brother also died in a household accident. One of my strongest memories of this time was how much we admired my mother, who dreamt of being a doctor. She was a courageous woman. Her grandfather was a doctor as was her first daughter. This sister was the only woman in her class at the School of Medicine at the former National University of Rio de Janeiro.

### ***How was life in a family with so many women?***

We had a strict upbringing. Our mother always said, "Marriage is not a profession." She motivated us to be independent, to study, and to build a career. Today, I have three siblings left, one brother and two sisters. Another notable characteristic of my mother was her political beliefs. She was discreetly liberal, living in a family that was very traditional, monarchist, and religious. My mother's three sisters were nuns. My maternal grandmother was from Germany and a Lutheran. On my father's side, my grandmother was a baroness, and I did not see her much. My father's family was very wealthy, but he had already been disowned by the time he got married. My father was sent to study in London at nine years of age. He studied engineering in London, philosophy in France, and architecture in Florence. He lived a life of luxury in Europe until he was 32 but remained close to his "*gauche*," who helped him financially. By the time he returned

to Brazil, he had spent a fortune, and his mother, who was already widowed, thought it outrageous for him to inherit anything more. To be able to marry my mother, my maternal grandfather made him get a job with the government, which was not difficult with his engineering diploma. Growing up, we all worked and got scholarships. I remember a friend saying the following, which sums up this time well: "Your family eats with china plates and silverware, but it's rice and beans, eggs, and ground beef." We lived in a house with libraries in every bedroom and even a chapel. We studied French and English. We all have children, and we spent a lot of time together, which only changed with the pandemic.

### ***How did you get into sociology?***

I got married in February 1964, just before the military coup. My husband, Paulo Benevides, was an engineer with a degree from the Aeronautical Institute of Technology, where he also studied astronomy. He was invited by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [French National Centre for Scientific Research] [CNRS] in France to work at

the Besançon Astronomical Observatory. We moved in March and stayed there for four and a half years. At the beginning, we did not hear much from Brazil. Phoning was expensive. We followed the news in Brazil through the newspaper *Le Monde*. Besançon is a small city that dates back to medieval times and has a population of 100,000, but it has a university, theaters, museums, and even a symphony orchestra. Our first child was born there. We returned to Brazil in 1968, soon after the AI-5. We came to São Paulo because Paulo was hired by the Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics at USP. I had begun my bachelor's in sociology and political science at PUC-RJ in 1963. When we arrived here, I requested a transfer to social sciences at USP. I had always earned scholarships, including at PUC. During my master's and PhD, I received a FAPESP scholarship. I pursued my postdoctoral research and my work as an adjunct professor with funding from the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development [CNPq] and from the Social Sciences Research Center.

### ***You were already a mother when you started at USP. What do you remember of your undergraduate studies?***

My life at USP was good, but it was not a typical university experience. I did not participate in political groups or student social activities. When I began my master's in sociology, I had three young children: Daniel, André, and Marina. I did not have help from my family as they lived in Rio. I was an old-fashioned housewife; that is, I knew how to cook and sew. While it was difficult, for me it was imperative to have children. I could not imagine my life without being a mother.

### ***With your master's, where did the idea come from to research the Kubitschek administration?***

I truly liked research and was very interested in learning everything about Brazilian politics due to the situation at the time. I was captivated by the thesis of political scientist Braz José de Araújo [1941–2004], about the external politics of Jânio Quadros [1917–1992], which he defended in 1970. When I spoke with my husband, who was from the hard sciences but who was very open culturally, he suggested that I do a master's on Juscelino, calling



Democracy  
requires effort.  
It demands the  
effort of those  
who govern  
and those who  
are governed.  
We must  
participate and  
inform ourselves





At left, with Juscelino Kubitschek, at the launch of her book in 1976. Below, with literary critic Antonio Candido



attention to the fact that his government arose during a tense period—between the suicide of Getúlio Vargas [1882–1954] and the resignation of Jânio Quadros—but had a strong impact on the history of industrialization and democracy in Brazil, which, as we know, is limited. I presented a project to political scientist Francisco Weffort [1937–2021], who liked the idea. I wanted to understand what guaranteed the stability of the JK government during such a turbulent period. I interviewed 15 members of parties, such as the Social Democratic Party [PSD] and the Brazilian Workers Party [PTB], in addition to Kubitschek himself who said to me: “I was the only civilian president after the New State [1937–1945] who governed according to the Constitution.” This first interview took place on April 1, 1974, on the very day when the 10-year suspension of his political rights came to an end. During our conversation, he received a call and became very angry. I got chills and was afraid he would have a heart attack. When he hung up, he told me that, while he could now vote, he could not run for election.

***Your master’s attracted the attention of academics and politicians alike, and the book that resulted was considered an essential analysis of the JK government. How do you feel about the outcome of your work?***

I defended my dissertation in November 1975, soon after the assassination of jour-

nalist Vladimir Herzog [1937–1975]. The classroom was packed and included the likes of Florestan Fernandes [1920–1995], literary critic Antonio Candido [1918–2017], and historian Caio Prado Junior [1907–1990]. The topic of my master’s, which focused on the relationship between democracy and development and the period in which it was developed, contributed to attracting attention. The *Jornal do Brasil*, for example, dedicated an entire page to presenting the research with the title: “Professor uses thesis to demonstrate why the JK government did not fall.” Modesty aside, my dissertation appeared to be a PhD thesis due to the originality of the topic, the academic references, and the interviews. I identified that the relative political stability of the Kubitschek government could be attributed to three factors: the co-opting of military personnel, who were committed to national development; the partnership between the PSD and the PTB, which grouped together the interests of the bourgeoisie farmers and urban workers; and the Goals Program, which advanced the industrialization process and created jobs.

***How did you research the Kubitschek government while it was a full dictatorship?***

I was welcomed warmly in all my interviews. I was not connected with political groups, and I was mistaken for having wealth—which I never had. This pre-

vented mistrust of my motives. I was not a “rebel.” My research led to the book *Governo Kubitschek – Desenvolvimento econômico e estabilidade política: 1956–1961* [Kubitschek Government – Economic development and political stability: 1956–1961], published by Paz e Terra in 1976. At the beginning, I did not realize the impact it would have. Kubitschek participated in the launch, which took place at Casa de Rui Barbosa in Rio. He died one month later. In a way, the success of it weighed heavily on me. There is a lot of competition in the academic arena, and I am not a competitive person.

***How did that happen?***

I thought that my path would be a university career. In 1982, they opened positions with the Department of Social Sciences at FFLCH. I heard opinions that it would be better not to apply, as I supposedly did not have the right profile. At that point, I had already published two books, and I had a good CV. My credentials were strong because of my master’s. However, they told me that the department preferred someone younger, at the beginning of their career, and with a stronger connection to sociology, rather than political science. I was 40 years old. I ended up not applying. Elisabeth Lobo [1943–1991] and Régis Stephan de Castro Andrade [1939–2002] were selected. I always had an excellent relationship with both of them.

***And your PhD?***

While writing my thesis, I studied at UDN [National Democratic Union] from the time it was established, in 1945, until the State coup in 1964—an event in which this party was the protagonist. I finished my thesis confirming that the UDN was born out of the involvement of well-known liberal names, such as Virgílio de Melo Franco [1897–1948], members of the democratic and socialist left, but ended “with sadness rather than success.” This statement earned commentary from sociologist and political scientist Bolívar Lamounier, one of the PhD jurists that I never forgot: “You might be a good researcher, but you’ve ended up bringing UDN to an end.” Out of my research on political parties came books such as *A UDN e o udenismo – Ambiguidades do liberalismo brasileiro* [The UDN and udenismo – Ambiguities of Brazilian liberalism] [Paz e Terra, 1981] and *O PTB e o trabalhismo – Partido, sindicato e*

*governo em São Paulo* [The PTB and the work – Party, syndicate, and government in São Paulo] [CEDEC/Brasiliense 1989].

***Did your work with the Center for Study of Contemporary Culture change your research journey?***

In 1977, I participated in the founding of CEDEC, and I remained there until 1985. I only left because I was chosen in a public competition by the School of Education. My years with CEDEC opened up possibilities for me to develop new studies, beyond giving me opportunities for rich collaboration with researchers and politicians, both within Brazil and abroad, and everyone interested in creating the conditions for much-needed democracy. I analyzed, for example, urban violence and the rights of citizens.

***How did the public competition with the School of Education go?***

Celso de Rui Beisiegel [1935–2017], sociologist and head of the School of Philosophy and Education Sciences, knew my work. In 1985, he invited me to join the teaching body. I remember having said to him: “But I don’t know anything about education; I haven’t even read Jean Piaget [1896–1980], for example.” He responded that the faculty needed someone to give classes on political sociology. I was selected and, over my 27 years there, I advised 12 master’s students and 15 PhD students, I taught undergraduate and graduate classes, and I created a discipline for human rights.

***In what way did your work with FE-USP impact your thinking and way of seeing the world?***

With the mind of a political scientist, I returned to the dialogue between education and democracy, seeking to understand what an actual emancipating education would be. I also became interested in education and Brazilian culture, so I created a field on this subject, with the works of sociologists Gilberto Freyre [1900–1987] and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda [1902–1982] and literary critics Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwartz. I was happy there and even had an advantage: as I was not from education, I did not have to fight for space. I never wanted to be a faculty dean, nor be part of the State Board of Education, for example. The only time I competed was in 1996, when

I participated in the public competition for tenured professor. There were three of us applying, and I got the only spot. At that time, I had already worked on human rights. I joined USP’s Education Professorship for Peace with the support of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]. I helped the faculty build a field on the education of human rights, which became a discipline that was distributed throughout universities, faculties, and not-for-profit organizations. Today, I am a board member of the Vladimir Herzog Institute, the Sérgio Buarque de Holanda Center of the Perseu Abramo Foundation, and the Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns Committee for the Defense of Human Rights. I am also part of the Brazilian Network for the Education of Human Rights and the Department of Human Rights and Citizenship for the city of São Paulo. All of these entities have plans for the education of human rights.

***You also had a strong institutional role at USP.***

For two terms, I was the FE representative on the University board of directors. I was so involved that, at one point, the chancellor asked the dean of my faculty

to not elect Benevides anymore. “Every time she puts up her hand, I go pale,” he said. I also spent two terms with the Legislative and Resource Committee and the International Relations Committee. My university life was intense, and I ended up seeing much of Brazil because I was invited often to participate on juries in various states.

***Brazilian democracy takes center stage in your academic works. What challenges do you see today?***

In Brazil, we have never experienced true democracy in terms of being a sovereign nation. We have always had intervention from economic groups and from people who have historically held power in our country. In the Latinobarómetro research—an annual public opinion poll with approximately 20,000 interviewees from 18 Latin American countries—the level of popular interest in democracy is measured. When asked “if there were jobs and food for everyone, would you prefer to live under a dictatorship or a democracy?” in Brazil, there are those whose responses include “I don’t care” or even the option of a dictatorship. Our main problem is unfathomable inequality. We had almost 400 years of legal slavery and, today, we still have people working in situations of slavery. Studies show that democracy has a greater chance of taking root and working when the middle class represents the majority of the population, which is the case in some European countries. To share a personal example, I lived in France in the 1960s, when social welfare was fully supported by the State. While pregnant, I needed a housekeeper who came once per week for two hours. When her work was done, we had tea together and she would go home, driving her popular Renault. When she got pregnant, she did her prenatal exams at the same place as I did, and she had her baby in the same clinic as I did. Our children went to the same school. Can you imagine, in Brazil, an employer and employee being patients of the same gynecologist and their children at the same school? [During] the years I lived in this European city, my husband was a member of the intellectual elite, and we never saw one person put their child in a private school. Public schools are truly democratic institutions in the majority of European countries.



Active citizenship is contrasted by passive citizenship, which relates to obedience to the law and to citizen obligations

### **What is unique about the middle class in Brazil?**

In our society, the idea that privileges are rights, albeit wrong, is entrenched. I always told my students that the word “privilege” comes from the Latin word *privilegium*, meaning private law, which is absurd since a private law does not exist. Every law is public. The middle and upper classes have become accustomed to privileges determined by class. For example, in a situation where inflation is 10%, the last thing most employers consider is adjusting the salary of their employees by this percentage. However, these same individuals will complain about an increase in IPTU [property tax]. The middle class has always been racist. This is one of the topics I covered in the field of human rights. It’s difficult to claim that one is not racist. Even today, a denial of racism disintegrates with simple questions such as “Have you had a black friend or professor? Do your children have black friends? If your daughter dated a black guy, would your family accept him?” The answers are embarrassing. The first consequences of deep-rooted racism are violence and the devaluation of work. There is great distance between manual labor and intellectual work. Even if intellectual work is bureaucratic and poorly remunerated, it is still considered of greater value than the work of an excellent stone layer, wood worker, electrician, or even housekeeper. Perspectives such as this make it difficult to understand what democracy and having rights in Brazil would be like.

### **The concept of participatory democracy is central in your thinking. What is this exactly?**

Democracy is a political regime where power entitlement is—or should be—popular sovereignty. This means that, ultimately, the people rule. However, everything in a democracy, including popular sovereignty, is ruled in accordance with the rule of law and the Constitution. The rule of law can be understood as the validity and transparency of equal standards for all, with full respect for minorities and control divided among branches of government. Furthermore, human rights prevail and must be recognized by the State and by society. Their effectiveness comes from constitutional principles and social victories. Social, economic, and environmental rights—which here are the most



## **The first consequences of deep-rooted racism are violence and the devaluation of work**

disrespected—should be guaranteed by public policy, leaving space for promoting new rights. In other words, as stated by lawyer Fábio Konder Comparato, human rights follow a line from the rights of the individual to the rights of peoples, social groups, and even the rights of all humanity, with a commitment to the future of new generations. Regarding the rights of humanity, what is important today is the right to life on this planet and to the defense of the environment and climatic balance, a sustainable economy, and native and traditional peoples.

### **If a dictatorship is considered able to offer employment and food, why is a democracy better?**

The dictatorial regime can even guarantee economic rights and ensure that people do not die of hunger, but society is deprived of many other rights that are equally important—such as those related to freedom of expression and diversity of culture, religion, politics, and gender. There is an essential link between democracy and the guarantee of human rights.

### **And what does active citizenship involve, a concept you have also worked with?**

I wrote my adjunct professor thesis on participative democracy, where I talked about the instruments of direct democracy, such as referenda, plebiscites, and popular legislative initiatives. These constitutional mechanisms facilitate the improvement of

the system of representative democracy. I studied how these work in Europe, in some countries of South America, and in the United States, where they take place every two years, primarily in states such as California and Oregon. Active citizenship is contrasted by passive citizenship, which only relates to obedience to the law and to citizen obligations. Active citizenship is the right and obligation of the people to political participation, to democratic processes of control and the determination of fiscal authorities. This includes not only voting but also making an effort to be involved in decision-making processes, keeping informed and participating in community debates that can be held in groups, such as neighborhoods or political parties. Democracy requires effort. It demands the effort of those who govern and those who are governed.

### **Has your academic background helped you move forward during the circumstances our country is currently facing?**

I’m retired, but during the pandemic, I was part of five dissertation committees in various areas, such as philosophy, law, and communications. I continue to hold a strong interest in writing proposals about brutal social inequality, including inequality in education. In these almost two years of the pandemic, my grandchildren have had online and in-person classes, studied languages, and sat for the national entrance exam—they did not miss out on very much in terms of formal education. However, the losses were horrific for the vast majority of children and young people of families who are now very vulnerable. Many have gone hungry because the only source of food was at school. I had COVID-19, but I was already vaccinated, so the symptoms were light. I was isolated in a comfortable house, thinking the entire time of our friends who had died or required intubation. Of people going hungry and living in the streets. When I thought about all of this, what kept me strong was my involvement with the Arns Commission, founded by 22 people at the beginning of the current administration to condemn and fight human rights abuse throughout the country. However, regarding my academic background, what has kept me going and helped me deal with social and political anxiety during the pandemic has been my involvement with the Commission. ■