Recensión.

Review in English of "Arianne Shahvisi, Arguing for a Better World. How Philosophy Can Help Us Fight for Social Justice, Penguin Books, New York, 2023".

Ortiz-Delgado, Francisco Miguel.

Cita:

Ortiz-Delgado, Francisco Miguel (2025). *Review in English of "Arianne Shahvisi, Arguing for a Better World. How Philosophy Can Help Us Fight for Social Justice, Penguin Books, New York, 2023*". Recensión.

Dirección estable: https://www.aacademica.org/francisco.m.ortizdelgado/47

ARK: https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/psro/oY1

7

2025

FM
MP

Filosofia Morale / 01 / Moral Philosophy 2025

MIMESIS

SIFM
SOCIETA' ITALIANA DI FILOSOFIA MORALE

FM/
MP

Filosofia Morale / Moral Philosophy

vol. 1, 2025

MIMESIS

FILOSOFIA MORALE/MORAL PHILOSOPHY
La rivista della Società Italiana di Filosofia Morale

MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)

www.mimesisedizioni.it
https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/MF/index

ISSN: 2785-5457
ISBN: 9791222322681

Piazza Don Enrico Mapelli, 75
20099 Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 21100089

Indice

Recensioni

Francisco M. Ortiz-Delgado

Arianne Shahvisi, *Arguing for a Better World. How Philosophy Can Help Us Fight for Social Justice*, Penguin Books, New York, 2023, pp. 293

In *Arguing for a Better World*, Arianne Shahvisi (researcher and professor of ethics at the University of Sussex and the University of Brighton) offers a rigorous, scholarly, but sometimes quite personal reflection on contemporary sociocultural and ethical issues (mainly from the decade 2012-2022). She analyzes a diverse range of topics in nine chapters, such as "wokism," racism, feminism, environmentalism, and others. The book defends progressive sociocultural positions and effectively argues against conservative and oppressive stances.

Throughout the book, Shahvisi explains the dialectics between the different progressivism-related or oppression-related topics mentioned. For example, she explains the relationship between capitalist exploitation and racism by speaking of a dialectic where the persistence or intensification of racism is due to the existence of a "hierarchy of exploitation." In this hierarchy, the members of the lower or middle classes of a dominant ethnic group, for example, the "whites" from the lower class in the United States, think they are less exploited (or think that they would be less exploited) than other ethnic groups, for example, in comparison to the non-whites, and, therefore, such poor "whites" do not fight against capitalist exploitation in general and, much less, against racism (p. 12). This "thinking", according to the author, comes from white people´s belief in the "system" as one that will grant them their "rightful place" above other ethnic groups. Even more, the poor "white people" do not realize that all people belonging to the lower or middle classes, independently of their ethnicity, are equally exploited and all have very few real possibilities of moving up socially.

In another dialectical case, Shahvisi shows us how racism combines with classism and sexism to oppress a person simultaneously as a member of a historically oppressed ethnic group, as a member of the lower class, and as a member of the oppressed gender. This implies, for the people seeking social justice, that we must fight *simultaneously* against the different types of oppression, without separating or favoring one from the other, and this is because "All of us have multiple identities, and

privilege and oppression coexist along different dimensions of a person's experience. My father is a person of color and a Muslim, but he is a heterosexual man. My mother is white, but she is a working-class woman. Both of them have forms of privilege and oppression marbled through their experiences in ways that are hard to untangle" (p. 23).

The author's interest in addressing the dialectics between the diverse ways of oppression is also due to her idea of the necessity of intersectionality for the fight for social justice. And, she explains, the intersectionality is possible through three avenues: there is heterogeneity in the fight for social justice, which means that different social struggles could exist simultaneously and must converge; there is "non-additivity" in different cases of oppression because one person could be oppressed in several ways simultaneously, therefore, it is possible intersectionality as we do not compare the oppression of two oppressed persons if one of them is oppressed in more ways than the other (for example, two members of the exploited lower economical class should not be compared in their oppression if, in addition, one of the exploited belongs to a historically oppressed ethnic group or, to the oppressed gender, etc.); and, finally, in intersectionality there are "conflicting interests", especially when one chooses to privilege some over others, but we must avoid such conflict fighting against *all* kinds of oppression (for example, in the United States, the fight against racism towards African Americans should be implemented in concordance with the feminist struggle, as African-American women are frequently and doubly oppressed; by the white majority and by the black husbands) (pp. 24-29).

I will now dwell briefly on the author's incisive comments against the critics of the welfare policies in favor of historically marginalized groups (pp. 67-72). Then I will connect those comments with some of the (cultural) situation in Mexico. (I will briefly comment in this recension about some aspects of the left, the progressivism, and the "culture war" in Mexico because is the cultural context that I know the must (I am Mexican), and also with the objective that the international reader could appreciate how Shahvisi´s deliberations can be applied to other contexts (beyond the United Kingdom and the United States)). Shahvisi tells us that "Welfare recipients are often portrayed as being feckless and work-shy. Further, there is a widespread association between welfare and people of color: consider the idea in the United States of the 'welfare queen' who, thanks to racist stereotyping, is typically understood to be Black, or the idea in the United Kingdom that immigrants are illegitimately reliant on the state" (p. 69).

Using this comment, I outline that, in the case of Mexico, there is a prejudice (often explicit, even among the right-wing political class) shared by the conservative and/or classist groups, in which Indigenous

people and/or much of the population in the south/southeast of the country is considered intrinsically feckless, irresponsible, and "work-shy" or "güevona" (lazy). Such prejudice has been more politically explicit since the left accessed to the Mexican federal power in 2018, because such political left has increased or created several welfare state programs. So, the "industrious" classes in the north of the country, as well as in Jalisco and Mexico City, have increased their attacks and disdain (even if only verbally) toward such welfare or aid programs, for the poor or Indigenous groups (in short, these are the Mexican 'welfare queen' groups). The author clearly tells us that we must be alert to this type of discourse or thought against welfare state and against the help towards marginalized groups as such discourse is, in truth, racist and classist.

Shahvisi then analyses the concept of "dog whistling," this concept outlines the use of ambiguous and veiled phrases by racists. These phrases are used by racists to draw the attention of other racists and far-right people without being openly accused of being racist. The "dog whistle" is also used by sexists, classists, and other people with oppressive ways of thinking, to avoid openly sympathizing with politically incorrect or far-right ideas. And such dog whistle, in turn, would prevent their reputation from being damaged (p. 62). Extending the concept to Mexico, I believe that those who call the current Mexican president Claudia Scheinbaum "presidente", instead of "presidenta" (i.e. those who deliberately opt to not pronounce the "a", indicative of feminine, in the Spanish substantive "president") are expressing a veiled sexism. These people that use "presidente," for referring to Sheinbaum, are sending a nod to all conservatives as they subtly indicate their opposition towards gender equality, feminism, inclusive language, etc. And yet, they cannot be accused of being sexist, misogynistic, unjust, anti-liberal, because they are simply avoiding changing a letter in a word.

Regarding feminism and machismo, the author delves into interesting and important issues, such as how certain men are far more privileged than others within the patriarchal system. Shahvisi points out that "The vast majority of men are poor and powerless, their male 'privilege' a currency rendered almost worthless by other oppressed identities or by bad luck. They lead lives of thwarted promises and are ill-equipped to manage their disappointment, which can lead to shabbier displays of dominance, often directed at women" (p. 89). This implies that men have to be more violent, bellicose, anti-pacifist, anti-effeminacy, etc., to triumph inside the patriarchy, precisely in the role of "man" (which also unfortunately impacts the construction of peace and/or pacifism).

Expanding on the issue of nonviolence and pacifism, the author takes the position that resistance against oppression and social injustice sometimes needs to be violent (p. 110). This is a position that, as a (moderate)

pacifist, I do not agree with, but I would accept that nonviolent or peaceful struggle against oppression and social injustice is often ineffective or very slow. Of course, for nonviolent struggle against systemic oppression to be effective, such a struggle must be organized globally, and this is highly unlikely, if not impossible. The author then confirms that, in effect, the anti-racist struggle, as well as the anti-colonial struggle, must be eminently global: "Our anti-racist movements cannot merely condemn the colonialism of the past, they must also denounce the ongoing colonialism that is evident in the fact that the darker-skinned two-thirds of the global population are at much greater risk of poverty, disease, premature death and the effects of the climate crisis" (p. 121).

Another two concepts discussed in the book that I find useful for researchers of systemic oppression is "credibility deficit," and "testimonial injustice." Shahvisi delves into the idea of credibility deficit and, among other things, argues that it arises when a person belonging "to a marginalized group," and because she/he belongs to this group, is systematically unbelieved (p. 131). Again, I extend this idea to the Mexican experience: when lower-class people and/or indigenous persons report a crime (almost) anywhere in Mexico (but specially anywhere out of Mexico City), they suffer from a credibility deficit, and the authorities either deny the seriousness of the report, or completely doubt the statements, or pretend to believe them but do nothing to investigate the denounce. Shahvisi states that "Challenging testimonial injustices requires us to destabilize the stereotypes on which they rely and radically revise how we apportion credibility. […] Consciously breaking away from the received views of who is believable promises to move us all towards something more like the truth" (p. 154).

Finally, I must say that the text addresses the most recent debates on the various forms of structural oppression, from the ancient and traditional patriarchy up to the rapacious neocolonialism in the 21st century. However, although the text sometimes seems to jump from one topic to another without a clear order, this does not lessen the arguments. This is also, as I noted, a personal book, essay-like in tone, which is nevertheless useful for rigorous researchers seeking to improve their arguments against conservatism and the enemies of cultural or socioeconomic progressivism. Such usefulness is especially true for obtaining arguments to defend the misnamed "wokism," as well as the misnamed "cancel culture." In this respect, before finishing, I have to declare that Shahvisi's arguments against the detractors of "cancel culture" are particularly compelling because she dares to declare that "cancel culture" does not even exist. In other words, Shahvisi convincingly argues that "cancel culture" is merely (bad) right-wing propaganda (pp. 178-182). *Arguing for a Better World* is then an indispensable text for taking a clear pro-social-justice position in the current (also misnamed) "culture war."