RE-ENCHANTING HUMAN RIGHTS

New, and as yet untested, political instruments can revitalize our rational desire, our combative joy, and our capacity to re-enchant the world by summoning and mobilizing the living forces of our society

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Keywords
Human rights, Colloquium, Authoritarianism

The following text is a transcript of a speech delivered by the renowned Brazilian activist and intellectual Sueli Carneiro, during the opening panel of the 17th International Human Rights Colloquium, hosted by Conectas in São Paulo, in November 2024. It was just a few days before the elections that would secure Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States—an event that would accelerate the social and political processes described by Carneiro.

In her speech, Sueli reclaims joy and desire as mobilizing forces against the emotions of sadness—fear and hatred. She also places the struggle for human rights in its historical context, born from the ongoing tension between forces of oppression and movements for freedom, and calls not only for resistance but also for "a profound reappraisal of the principles that underpin a just society." "We must begin anew, by reclaiming our dreams and utopias. We must remember how we have fought in somber times before. We must remember that we have overcome somber times before."

Camila Asano – Sueli Carneiro is the founder of Geledés, the Black Women's Institute, which was established in 1988. Alongside other activists, Sueli created an organization to expose the disadvantages and discrimination experienced by Black women in Brazil as a result of racism and sexism. Sueli holds a doctorate in Education from the University of São Paulo and has become both an activist and a leading theorist on race and gender issues. During her career she has published *Racismo, Sexismo e Desigualdade no Brasil*,[1] (*Racism, Sexism and Inequality in Brazil*) in which she discusses the main advances and challenges in

overcoming inequalities stemming from racial discrimination. She was also a columnist for *Correio Braziliense*, an important Brazilian news outlet, and a member of the National Council for Women's Rights, where her participation contributed to raising awareness about race and gender issues at a national level.

At Geledés, Sueli headed initiatives such as *S.O.S. Racismo*, which received international recognition and tributes from the French government, as well as social impact projects, such as *Portal Geledés*, and the *Projeto Rappers*. Sueli was initiated in Candomblé as a daughter of Ogum [a person spiritually guided by this *orixá*] and *ekedi* [carer, guardian] of Iansã. She found the Afro-descendent religiosity to be a source of strength and connection with her ancestry, which inspired her to investigate the roots of Afro-Brazilian thought. She was the first Black woman to receive an honorary doctorate at the University of Brasília. Today, she is one of the coordinators at Geledés and serves on the boards of several organizations. We are deeply honored to have Sueli as a member of the Conectas Advisory Board. I now give the floor to you, Sueli Carneiro.

Sueli Carneiro – Good morning to all. It gives the impression that an exhaustive description is required, in order for someone to be regarded as legitimate. I am an activist, an anti-racist feminist and the executive coordinator of Geledés, the Black Women's Institute. This is the role I hold with the greatest honor. It is a pleasure to be here at the opening of the 17th International Human Rights Colloquium. We have missed this space and perhaps it has never been as necessary as it is now, given the extraordinary threats currently looming over humanity. I would like to reiterate some of the points already made by Camila and Aldo Fornazieri, Professor and Academic Director at the São Paulo Foundation School of Sociology and Politics (FESPSP).

Reiterating the challenges we are currently facing is inevitable and it would be impossible not to highlight the escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, which is spreading beyond the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories and people. It has reached Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, intensifying the drama we must confront. There is also the war between Ukraine and Russia, exacerbated by the possibility that North Korea could become a strategic partner of Vladimir Putin in this escalation. There are unprecedented regional issues in Latin America, such as the new experience of tense relations between Brazil and Venezuela, and worst of all, the threat of the possible re-election of Donald Trump.

These are just some of the facts—I am not even going to mention all the armed conflicts that are ongoing across the African continent. All these situations place the world in a state of complete uncertainty regarding the future of humanity and the planet, under the auspices of conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and fascist racial supremacism.

Looming on the horizon before us are multiple holocausts. And the possibility of a third world conflict on an unprecedented scale of destruction will demand tireless resistance and resilience from progressive forces around the globe. Our own national conflicts and challenges are aligned with those on the international stage, compounded by the aggravating factors that are inherent to our violent history.

We have ideologies of hatred and intolerance fueling all forms of violence against historically oppressed groups—such as the genocide of Black youth and the Indigenous peoples, femicides, LGBTphobia, political violence, and criminal factions, now operating internationally, competing for dominance in the drugs trade. We also have the predatory treatment of the environment, particularly through illegal mining, which devastates the land and contaminates the waters of

traditional peoples' territories, such as those of Indigenous and quilombola communities—a concrete example of what we call environmental racism.

Conectas has been organizing the International Human Rights Colloquium since 2001. The objective is to promote integration and exchange between human rights defenders in the Global South by sharing information, experiences and strategies that advance the human rights agenda. I believe that among the debates and objectives that this Colloquium proposes is the urgent opportunity to organize civil society resistance on a global scale, in the face of the rising influence of the far-right movements in Brazil and around the world.

As highlighted by the program of the Colloquium, this intolerant point of view, propagated by ultraconservative, authoritarian governments in so many territories, has been gaining traction and has not met with resistance and push-back to match its strength. In this scenario, I am among those who believe that Conectas, because of the legitimacy and credibility it has earned as a representative of civil society worldwide, occupies a unique position nationally to orchestrate an effort to mobilize and organize different progressive political forces of global civil society to defend democracy, human rights and social justice. I know you do not like to hear this, but it is necessary. In 23 years, Conectas has held 16 editions of the Human Rights Colloquium and around 90 countries have participated, making it a mini-UN of global civil society, with great responsibility to contribute to civil resistance to the assault of reactionary forces on the values and civilizing principles that human rights defenders worldwide, have been embedding into the language and praxis of human rights defense.

The range of human rights has been bolstered and re-signified by the progressive movement to recognize and include within its framework

the multiple identities that make up humanity and that legitimately demand recognition and new rights. As Oscar Vilhena says, the grammar of human rights,[2] shaped by the liberal revolutions of the 18th century, has placed the human person—as a being endowed with moral value—at the center of the political and social system. Institutions focused on conjugating this grammar have been refining it ever since. Paradoxically, despite all the effort to construct this emancipatory legacy, we are facing a precarious scenario that calls for vigorous resistance in a world increasingly driven by hate—the weapon of war wielded by current reactionary forces—which must be confronted with more democratic principles and values, more respect and recognition of the dignity of all people, more justice, more rights, more duty, more love and more hope.

In times of urgency, of re-enchanting the world, I draw on the words of the philosopher Marilena Chaui, according to whom, we do not, in our political sphere, have the right to work without hope. We have a political, ethical and intellectual obligation to reveal future possibilities. Quoting Baruch Spinoza, Chaui argues that we are essentially emotional human beings, who feel what happens in our bodies, and in our relationships with others. We are feelings. Our thoughts are a kind of feeling. According to Spinoza, therefore, we are rational desire and desire reason, says Marilena Chaui. In this sense, according to Spinoza, to think is a desire, an affect, and there are three primary affects that are the source of all the others and of everything we are: joy, sadness, and desire.[3]

Joy increases our capacity to exist and for others to exist as well. It expands the power of our being. The affects of joy enhance the power of our existence, of our being, and of those around us. The affects of sadness do the exact opposite.

Sadness lowers our existential power, our power to feel, our power

to think and the power of other beings to do the same. And desire is what drives us to act. Among the affects of joy, Spinoza lists love and hope; among the affects of sadness, he lists hatred and fear. Fear and hope are opposites, as are love and hatred. This opposition lies between what expands our vital force, our power of thought, and the transformative capacity of our desire, and that which kills it at the root. So, between fear and hope, says the philosopher, I choose hope.

Therefore, it is in this struggle that we find ourselves: a struggle in which hatred appears to want to take root in every crack, fueled by extreme ideologies, seeking to subjugate and destroy, creating an environment in which fear reigns and distrust is the norm. But it is precisely in these moments, when the shadows of intolerance become denser, that the light of democratic principles, of respect and human dignity must shine most brightly.

Human history has been marked by struggles between forces of oppression and movements toward freedom. Whenever humanity has found itself on the brink of the abyss, it was the unity of individuals committed to the highest values who brought about renewal and hope. For this reason, the fight against hatred requires not only resistance but also a profound reappraisal of the principles that underpin a just society. Principles such as equality, freedom, solidarity, and respect for diversity must be vigorously upheld.

The first step in this process is recognizing the innate dignity of all human beings, regardless of color, belief, or gender identity. Every person has an intrinsic worth that cannot be denied. This is a concept that must transcend formal declarations and be incorporated into our daily actions, education systems, and public policies.

When a society is committed to the dignity of every human being, it lays a solid foundation against hatred, because it is through our acceptance of others and recognition of their humanity that empathy and solidarity are born. However, principles and ideals alone are not enough. They must be accompanied by the construction of true concrete justice. This means fighting not only for more rights to ensure a dignified life for all humans but also for duties that reinforce collective responsibility.

A just society is one in which rights and duties coexist harmoniously, where the right to live in liberty involves a commitment to respect the freedom of others in the same community. Justice is not merely about punishing wrongdoing but is also about preventing the causes by providing equal opportunities and addressing structural inequalities. At the same time, there is a need to cultivate more love and hope.

Love, understood here as an active principle that drives people to strive for a better world, is what inspires someone to reach out to others, to stand up against injustices, and to dedicate themselves to the common good. Love is brave because it challenges the tide of hatred and, in doing so, becomes a revolutionary act that disarms oppressive and reactionary ideologies.

As for hope, it is not a passive expectation of better days to come, it is instead the active determination to build those days. Hope requires work, perseverance, and faith in the transformative power of human actions. This is what enables someone to continue the struggle, even when circumstances seem unfavorable. Keeping hope alive is, in itself, an act of resistance against the discouragement that hatred and oppression seek to instill in us.

Resistance to hatred and defending human dignity requires a reassessment of our values and the daily practice of empathy. Exercising empa-

thy is not just the ability to put yourself in someone else's position, but also to feel their pain as your own—and to act to alleviate it.

Empathy is the antithesis of indifference. In a world increasingly governed by hatred, indifference is a form of complicity. Therefore, we need a new approach to education that teaches the value not only of individual success but also of cooperation and solidarity. We need leaders who promote unity and justice, rather than exacerbate divisions. We need systems that treat everyone equally and recognize the complexities of being human in a diverse world.

Democracy is the only form of government that truly allows for the peaceful coexistence of differences and the free expression of ideas. However, it must be more than a political tool; it has to be a way of life, an ongoing commitment to participation, transparency, and inclusion. When democracy is alive in every collective action and every individual decision, it becomes the most effective safeguard against all forms of authoritarianism and intolerance. This transformation requires recognizing that the fight against hatred is not only a confrontation with external ideologies but is also an internal process within each person. We must acknowledge and dismantle prejudices within ourselves, because this is the only way to build truly inclusive communities.

Change begins when we step out of the comfort zone of our echo chambers to listen and learn from others, especially those who have had different experiences from our own. The future we desire can only be achieved through greater justice, more rights and responsibilities, more love, and more hope. Love, in its purest form, is inclusive. Hope, in its most vibrant state, is collective.

By uniting these elements, we can create a world in which dignity is not the exception but instead the rule. Resisting hatred, therefore, me-

ans continuously promoting a culture of peace, dialogue, and a commitment to democratic principles. There is no stronger antidote to authoritarianism than a society united by shared values of respect and mutual recognition. Together, we can build a world in which hatred has no place and where hope paves the way for future generations.

To achieve this, in such turbulent times, we must begin anew, by reclaiming our dreams and utopias. We must remember how we have fought in somber times before. We must remember that we have overcome somber times in the past, in order to restore our faith and hope as we struggle. We need to once again engage our hearts and minds. We need to re-educate. We need to re-educate for and through human rights. We must restore the civilizational values that take shape around human rights. We have four generations of human rights with which to confront what is before us. We have a substantive set of ideas, principles, and values that guide progressive causes. Freedom, equality, diversity, and participation are the ideals that define a substantive democracy capable of realizing emancipatory dreams. We must fight for a secular state, for democratic freedom, for due process, for the democratic rule of law—and this means fighting for the human rights of all people. We have defeated discretionary, reactionary, and fascist ideologies before.

The Second World War unfolded largely on the basis of the same values that are on the rise today, and we were able to defeat them back then. The fight we waged against them gave rise to much of what constitutes the contemporary conception of human rights. We cannot falter; we have neither the right nor the choice but to resist and fight. I believe my generation has a duty to pass on the libertarian and emancipatory legacy we have accumulated in over half a century of struggle for human rights. We need to pass all this on to you, the younger generations, to ease the way for generations to come.

Without memory there can be no vision for the future.

We have to update the social technologies of popular education, training courses for new political individuals, and the use of alternative and digital media to challenge the narratives of conservative ideologies that are on the rise. We must reclaim and resignify public spaces—not only spaces for protest but, above all, as spaces for the formation and affirmation of citizenship. In this sense, the attacks on the humanities, particularly philosophy and sociology, that are now widespread in Brazil, must be countered with more philosophy and more sociology. The streets and squares must become the new cathedrals for philosophers, sociologists and humanists in general, in response to the discrediting and/or elimination of these disciplines.

The current context challenges us to argue for historical truth, in clear opposition to the revisionist efforts that are underway—ones that risk erasing slavery from Brazilian history, as well as the abolition symbolized by *Lei Áurea*,[4] as well as the military dictatorship and its victims. We have received the call to join the fight against environmental racism, which fuels violence against the Indigenous peoples, quilombola communities, riverside populations, as a result of land and territorial disputes.

We are condemned to resistance, and for us—especially Black people—struggle is a verb. As Veridiana Zurita said, in the face of death, only life in struggle and the joy of collective mobilization. Reflecting on this edition of the Colloquium and on the challenges in which we are immersed in countering the entrenched culture of hatred as well as in reinvigorating our agenda and our political instruments, and in the new political instruments that these challenges demand, I remembered an article by Fábio Konder Comparato, from twenty years ago, titled "*Organizar o contrapoder popular*".[5] The suggestive title that he gave it addresses what, even at that time, twenty years ago, he called "the moral ruin" that

was rampant in society and in political institutions as well as the indifference and skepticism that this moral ruin engendered.

This article, which I will describe later, becomes even more compelling when juxtaposed with Oscar Vilhena's latest piece in the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper, with the title "*Combate ao crime organizado é questão de Estado*",[6] (Combating organized crime is a matter of State) in which he describes a process which is on the rise in which the State is appropriated by militias and organized crime factions. Vilhena warns us that the most worrying development at this moment is the encroachment of organized crime into party politics, the legislature, governments, the police, and even the judiciary. According to him, "it is essential that urgent measures be taken before this process of State capture becomes irreversible."[7] In light of this alarming scenario, Konder Comparato's proposal to establish an organized system of agents with political engagement, operating with the people as an instrument of counterpower against State organs, takes on new significance. Comparato concludes this reflection with the idea of creating a consortium of non-governmental organizations dedicated exclusively to the task of acting as agents of this grassroots counterpower. The sovereign people would thus have at their disposal a political instrument capable of promoting protests and public opinion campaigns, as well as making the best possible use of the scarce mechanisms for reporting and holding public officials accountable that exist in our legal system: citizen lawsuits, public civil actions, referrals to the Public Prosecutor's Office for administrative misconduct or criminal practices in general, and charges of responsibility for public crimes.

This consortium could also take on the task of promoting grassroots legislative initiatives and submitting proposals for constitutional amendments or the holding of plebiscites and referendums to the appropriate authorities. Its activities would be complemented by an

annual National Forum of Citizenship at which concrete proposals for political action would be discussed. In conclusion, Comparato states: "What matters, above all, is that we learn to fight against our longstanding sickness—a lack of civic spirit."[8] So, new, and as yet untested, political instruments can revitalize our rational desire, our combative joy, and our capacity to re-enchant the world by summoning and mobilizing society's living forces—a civic engagement aimed at reaffirming the values and principles that guide our struggle for citizenship rather than privilege, for democracy instead of authoritarianism and arbitrariness, and for justice, rights and recognition for all people.

I think it is an interesting challenge for the next few days to think about the role this organization can play in the mobilization, convening, and organizing of such a strategy. I will end by saying: let us dream and dare. We move ahead with strength and honor. And, as the Brazilian Black Movement says, we will make Palmares again. Marielle, present. Thank you.

Notas

1 Sueli Carneiro, *Racismo, sexismo e desigualdade no Brasil* (São Paulo: Selo Negro, 2011).

2 Oscar Vilhena Vieira, "A gramática dos direitos humanos," *Boletim Científico*, no. 4, July/September 2022, accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/download/59384981/A_gramatica_dos_direitos_humanos20190524-27592-8b666r.pdf.

3 Marilena Chaui, "O Brasil precisa da vitória do Lula," interview by Pedro Camarão and Alberto Cantalice, *Focus Brasil*, September 19, 2021, accessed September 4, 2025, https://fpabramo.org.br/focusbrasil/2021/09/19/entrevista-marilena-chaui-o-brasil-precisa-da-vitoria-do-lula/.

4 Law of 1888 that decreed the end of enslavement in Brazil.

5 Fábio Konder Comparato, "Organizar o contrapoder popular," *Folha de S.Paulo*, February 22, 2004, accessed May 20, 2025, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/opiniao/fz2202200408.htm.

6 Oscar Vilhena, "Combate ao crime organizado é questão de Estado," *Folha de S.Paulo*, November 1, 2024, accessed May 20, 2025, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/oscarvilhenavieira/2024/11/combate-ao-crime-organizado-e-questao-de-estado.shtml.

7 Vilhena, "Combate ao crime organizado é questão de Estado."

8 Comparato, "Organizar o contrapoder popular."

Transcript of a speech given in November 2024.

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