

INTERVIEW BILL DRAYTON  
El País Semanal  
November 10, 2019  
Translated by Marina Ferrari

## Bill Drayton: "Half the population is out of the game"

Fighter for civil rights, grown up in the values of empathy and fascinated by Gandhi's India, this American with exquisite education believes that the entrepreneurial model, to which he dedicated himself for years, can change the world. 40 years ago he created Ashoka, the largest network of social entrepreneurs on the planet. He insists that technological progress creates a new inequality that must be addressed before any other.

THE SEARCH for solutions to social problems should not be a bureaucratic and bland task. Ideally, people would deal with it with the spirit and drive of a Steve Jobs type of person, the co-founder of Apple, for example. This was seen almost 40 years ago by Bill Drayton (New York, 1943), a man with many lives who worked 10 years in a consulting firm, and in the White House in the days of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981), to end up creating the largest network of social entrepreneurs that exists, Ashoka. An achievement that earned him the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation in 2011.

Drayton, who is elegantly dressed and maintains an air of youthful informality at 76, is a person who speaks softly, but his speech is obsessively unique: the colossal changes we are living are creating two-speed societies. That of those who have received the necessary education to contribute to the development of today's hyperconnected world, and to bring changes, and that of those who do not have the necessary skills and live in a bitter and dangerous marginalization. A speech in open opposition to the prevailing individualism.

"Spain is a very special country" he says as we sit in the room where the interview takes place, taking advantage of his fleeting passage through Madrid. "It is one of the true leaders of the global change movement." Something that would connect with its historical role because, after all, "who opened the Americas to the world, who found the way to Asia?"

**You founded Ashoka in 1980, with \$ 50,000 ...**

No. At first we didn't have a cent.

**The idea was to promote what you defined as "social entrepreneurship." Finding people capable of combining the initiative of an entrepreneur with the concern for the common good of NGOs. Ashoka now has around 3,600 of these new entrepreneurs spread across more than 90 countries. In these almost 40 years, how would you measure the impact of the organization?**

In different ways. First, the words "social entrepreneur" today convey an idea of a good life. In the whole world people already know what that means. They realize that worrying and organizing others is practical and possible. And it generates the respect of society. It also makes life more interesting, healthier, better and longer.

**Ashoka sponsors for three years those who propose an innovative and socially useful idea. The money is provided by private institutions, companies or individuals. In all these years, would you say that philanthropic interest in the world has increased?**

Regarding the first part of your statement, I would like to specify the criteria. It has to be an idea that serves to change patterns in a given field, education, health, environment, whatever, at least on a certain scale. Second, the idea has to be in the hands of a truly good entrepreneur, someone committed to the good of all.

**And has philanthropy increased?**

Of course. All over the world. If you look for example at a country like India, where many social organizations operate, there are many more institutions or companies that dedicate large sums of money to finance them than a decade or two ago.

**Precisely because there are so many NGOs, the competition for funding must be very large.**

In any city there are many groups dedicated to the environment or trying to help children grow more intelligently and, of course, compete with each other. And this is good.

**Always?**

Well. If you have many groups and one has a better idea, you will have more volunteers and arouse more interest. I assure you that there are hundreds of groups that have followed Ashoka's model ... And we love that. They compete with us, they compete with each other. Which means we have to always be ahead of the game. I understand that what you mean is that many people may think that it is a waste of money and energy that there are so many organizations doing the same. But note that we cannot think of saying that it is totally unnecessary to have more than one restaurant in the city. If a restaurant is bad, it will not remain open for long. Why won't it be the same in the case of people who work to serve society?

**You named your organization after an Indian emperor from 300BC who ended up embracing Buddhism. Do you feel close to that religion?**

What I wanted was to create a global space. If you choose a name in a specific language, the project is linked to a specific country. Nor did it serve us an image, because it cannot be transmitted by phone, or in a conversation. That is why we chose the name of a person who represents our values. Ashoka was extraordinarily creative in social matters, he was also a man of peace. Not in his youth, because he unified India by defeating independent kingdoms. At one point he realized how terrible war was, and for 50 years he supported all the currents of thought, signed the peace and managed to spread his ideas throughout the world. And, in the end, it has turned out to be a great name because it starts and ends in a vowel, and it doesn't mean anything bad.

**And about Buddhism?**

We are global, all points of view, all faiths are part of Ashoka. Therefore, we are not a Buddhist organization.

**I was not referring to the organization, but to you.**

Oh personally. I think all major religions have a common substrate. Just 2,000 years ago, with the surpluses produced by agriculture that had already been developing for a few hundred years, the first small cities, Jericho, for example, began to be created. And a few people settled in them. There they faced changes. And the law based on ethics was not very helpful, they needed an ethic based on empathy. Think of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, which is totally based on empathy, just like the parables of the Bible. And it is not very different from Buddhism. Today we face for the first time the reality that it is impossible to be a good person by limiting yourself to complying with the rules. It is essential to have that empathy based on ethics. That ability, which we explain from a scientific point of view, is life based on cognitive empathy for the common good. And whoever does not have it, is lost in this world, and this is the goal of all religions. That is why I believe that the Jesuits are the first group in the world of social entrepreneurs, capable of making global changes. The Society of Jesus - San Ignacio de Loyola, and San Francisco Javier, who went to Asia - is very impressive and that is why I said earlier that Iberia is one of the first societies in which we find authentic global changemakers. Precisely now we have the first Jesuit pope, because we are at the crucial moment of the initiative that we all have to be drivers of change. And the Church needs such leadership for this historic occasion.

**I understand that you traveled to India in 1963 and were very impressed by a disciple of Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, who toured the country asking the rich landowners to legally give away their land to distribute among the poor. And they gave it to them.**

It is hard to believe. Vinoba Bhave was a disciple very close to Gandhi. During the independence of India, Bhave was responsible for leading the social aspects of that movement, while Nehru and others were integrated into the Government, but always kept in touch. I had participated in the American civil rights movement that was inspired by that spirit of nonviolence. And that led me to India, when I was about to turn 19. The idea of Gandhi, who no longer lived, was very powerful, and Vinoba, who was the true leader of the movement, managed to get land for an extension equivalent to the State of New Jersey (22,500 square kilometers; India is 3,287,263 square kilometers).

**Perhaps the landowners shared Gandhi's ideas. I wanted to ask you about the influence of your parents, very committed and very tolerant people, as you told yourself.**

One's parents are always very important. On the part of my mother, Australian, she was very attentive to her community, very creative. My father came from New England. In that culture, the idea is that family, community, church are there to help you, that's why they matter so much. When I was little, we would meet at the house of one of my uncles, in Boston, we would be between 40 and 60 people. I grew up in Manhattan, a place where waves of immigration have happened in the last 400 years. People arrive and succeed, and it is a city with tremendous energy. My mother left Australia and settled in New York without knowing anyone and during the economic depression. And she was hugely successful. In hindsight, all that has been very good for me.

**Since you founded Ashoka, you live in the organization as a kind of secular missionary. Not interested in anything else?**

Yes of course. I also founded, and I'm still in it, an initiative called Get America Working which has a global dimension as well. I'll explain the idea roughly: in the world we have 40% of the population that wants to work and can't find work. It is a much higher percentage than the unemployment statistics. If labor taxes were lowered, we would create about 40 or 45 million new jobs. So that this loss of tax revenue does not affect budgets, the price of materials, energy, land, for example, could be raised. Which would also contribute to reducing pollution.

**Social entrepreneurs seek solutions to the biggest problems in the world. Are the environment and poverty the most serious ones?**

For me it is very clear that we have one half of the population that is successful in a new world defined by continuous change, and interconnection. Keep in mind that in the last 300 years the changes have accelerated exponentially. Currently everything is moving very fast, worldwide and in all sectors. That can be great for you and for me and for our friends. For all of us who know this game. There are many jobs for those who have the right knowledge, and employers fight for their talent. The problem is that there is another part of humanity that does not have the very complex new skills that are required to participate in this new game. It is the ability to be part of a team and engage with others in perfect harmony. That is why there has been a new inequality in society. Some earn more and more and are increasingly satisfied. But those outside see their position deteriorate every day. Therefore, while all other inequalities, gender, race, etc., are quite static, the new inequality is exacerbated every year. That is why I believe that the world cannot solve environmental problems when the political system is stuck. The United States cannot do anything against climate change even if California is burning, nor Brazil even if the Amazon is burning. While half of the population lives in this state of despair, in which we tell them that we do not need them, that they have no future, neither they nor their children, the situation will not be resolved. Naturally there will be demagogues who blame immigration for this situation, or other things... What demagogues seek is to blame someone, find a scapegoat. But that deep and permanent anger acts as a short circuit in the political system. And we cannot face any of the other problems as long as we have not solved this. We can help parents of any social extraction to have their children succeed in the new game.

**The problem is in education.**

The world today demands a different kind of education. The key measure today is what proportion of young people know they are changemakers. And you can't know if you've never done it. 150 years ago we realized that we all needed to know how to read and write properly. Now we say the same thing, we need people to be aware that they must have change initiatives. Many Ashoka entrepreneurs take care of children who are in foster care institutions. And they are changemakers. We must change the school culture to adapt to this.

**But not always the ideas of social entrepreneurs are positive. Esther Duflo and her husband, Abhijit Banerjee, two of the three winners of this year's Nobel Prize in Economics, have studied the effects of the microcredits that Mohamed Yunus launched in Bangladesh, and have seen that in other countries, such as India or Mexico, its benefits are small.**

Well, precisely the people who have this ability to change, when something does not work, they simply change it. We know how to do teamwork. Then, when something does not work, it is because it's flawed. It's what great entrepreneurs do. It's what Henry Ford did. The microcredits that Yunus devised work. But, obviously, you have to adapt your application to each place.

**There is much talk about the changes that capitalism is undergoing. This summer, big businessmen from the United States signed a declaration in which they promised to work for the good not only of their shareholders, as they have done so far, but for that of consumers and workers. What do you think about it?**

We have said before that the social sector works with entrepreneurial impulse and is competitive, the old and bureaucratic is ending. It was a captive group of governments: the government is a premodern sector, unfortunately. In 1980, the social sector broke free of that bond and entered into a business and competitive sphere and is putting itself at the level of the business world. Every organization has to be part of this broad organism of the human species that is emerging, and that is a brain-like organism, each person, in each group, is connected to the others. And the business world faces the same challenge. It cannot continue to serve exclusively the narrow economic interest. Our world will be increasingly entrepreneurial and competitive, but at the service of the good of all.

**Your motto is that we should not follow the elites, but propose changes ourselves. But you have had an elitist education, at Yale, at Harvard and at Oxford, something that will have been important in your life.**

I have been very lucky with the parents I have had, and living in Manhattan. And with the schools I've been to, which are part of a tradition. In Oxford there were individual tutorials and one could not hide at the end of the class, nor simply repeat what was read. These are cultures that value people having initiatives and ideas. I've been very lucky. Also for having had the opportunity to work for 40 years with our social entrepreneurs.