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BEYOND BORDERS
People, spaces, ideas

PARA ALÉM DAS FRONTEIRAS
Pessoas, espaços, ideias

UNCERTAINTIES AND WAYS AHEAD

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Preparing this presentation I came across an article published by the *New York Times* last December describing the long trip hundreds of thousands of Africans are making every year from different countries to Europe. The article, called “A road on fire for Africans”, describes the nightmare they go through crossing deserts, borders, and violent places in the hands of the actors of the “migration industry”: drivers, smugglers, money changers, corrupted police officers, sex workers and the long list of people that “live off the men and women on the move”.

The road on fire could last months or years. Nobody knows how many died in the attempt. But millions are currently ready to embark on this long trip. Looking into the situation, it is as dramatic as unbearable. Children are traveling alone or losing their parents. Massive rapes of women. And thousands of people are drowning in the Mediterranean before reaching European soil.

A similar situation faces Central Americans, Mexicans and Caribbean people who make their long road trying to reach the United States; and the Rohingas from Myanmar looking for asylum in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, and asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan trying to reach Australia

Poor people are exploiting other poor people. The traffickers are also frustrated migrants on both sides of the Mediterranean or at the deadly Mexican-US border or areas of the Pacific Ocean

From the other shore, from the rich countries and poles of attractions of the world, from the United States to Europa and Australia, and from South Africa to Singapore, governments and part of their societies are ready to resist the push. They reject multiculturalism; they want to preserve their pure identities and jobs and they are ready to fight for them. Consistently, since September 11 2001, the refugee issue has moved from *a humanitarian to a security paradigm*, and the migration debate from *supply-side labor effect to criminalization*.

Supported by 63 million voters and surrounded by a group of mega riches, retired hawkish generals and right-wing lunatics the President of the United States dreams about a wall and signs Executive Orders that would bar migrants. On the other hand, the EU is cutting financial deals with the authoritarian Turkish government and the inexistent Libyan authorities to stop the immigrants on their soils.

In parallel, most of the European Governments did not fulfill the Brussels agreement to give asylum to 1 million refugees. The EU is limiting entrance, limiting rights and benefit access, and having discussion about the eventual use of force for interdiction and combatting traffickers. And many Southern governments are playing the game of agitating the “foreigner’s threat” to justify closing borders and expulsing people.

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But then, why millions of people is willing to lose their life in their nightmare trips just to ending up in kind of concentrations camps, being deported or living in tents in the streets of Paris, Calais or being exploded by mafias and performing lousy jobs? At the very least there are three answers.

First, many millions did it before and are now making a living in the North. It is true that now there are more entry restrictions. But why not doing a try?

Second, they have nothing to lose. This could be difficult to understand for many of us. For the ones we live protected by a number of safety nets (citizenship, welfare state services, jobs, family, friends, properties), even if they are under severe cuts, *desperation* has a different meaning to people living in the middle of critical situations that could be define as *extreme poverty*. Accordingly to the World Bank 746 millions of people lived in extreme poverty, meaning leaving with less of US1.90 per day.

Third, in many cases it is not an individual decision. Young men and women initiated the road on fire with the small money their families gathered from selling the last sheep or cows. They expected the chosen relative to travel, cross the border, make a living, send money back and then call other younger ones.

Let’s return to the *New York Times* article. The author asks why many young men are ready to try to make a living far, far away, while running many risks. His answer:

“They do it because the rains have become so fickle, the days measurably hotter, the droughts more frequent and more fierce, making it impossible to grow enough food on their land. Some go to the cities first, only to find jobs are scarce. Some come from countries ruled by dictators, like Gambia, whose longtime ruler recently refused to accept the results of an election he lost. Others come from countries crawling with jihadists, like Mali”.

“(t)he slow burn of climate change makes subsistence farming, already risky business in a hot, arid region, even more of a gamble. Pressures on land and water fuel clashes, big and small. Insurgencies simmer across the region”.

“Climate change on its own doesn’t force people to move but it amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities.” (...) They move when they can no longer imagine a future living off their land — or (...), “when life becomes increasingly intolerable.”

“(t)he rainy season will be more unpredictable and more intense. On top of that, the hottest parts of the continent will get hotter. Extreme heat can have grievous consequences on food and disease, the World Food Program found in a survey of scientific studies. Malaria-carrying mosquitoes thrive in it. Pests are more likely to attack crops. Corn and wheat yields decline”.

If instead of using the example of migrants I would have used the case of refugees (about 65 million displaced persons in the world today, 21 million recognized as refugees by the UN) the picture and conclusions would be similar.

The empirical and political redefinition of refugees goes beyond legal definitions, forcing a reconsideration of the traditional distinctions between voluntary (mostly economically driven) and involuntary (humanitarian) migration. Thus, the refugee crisis is also a migration crisis.



Every personal and family story shows the difficulty of establishing a clear line between who is running for his/her life from war and violence or those fleeing terrible living conditions.

Gallya Lahav, professor of political science at Stony Brook University, writes that “the elusiveness of policy categories not only deflects institutional responsibility; it neglects the gray areas which include unaccompanied minors and victims of natural catastrophe, trafficking, female genital mutilation, and other forms of discrimination. An untold number of those people fall through the terminological cracks in definitions of protected status”.

I am using this short and incomplete overview of the so-called refugee or immigration crisis as the point of entry to my presentation because it is a good example of the world we live in.

It is a picture that speaks-- on the surface and in the subtext-- about poverty, inequality, poverty, dictatorships and wars as well as about States organized to serve corrupted elites, environmental stress, the rural/urban gap, illicit trafficking and different forms of violence. And it also a picture of a fragmented future with people living in areas of security and massive amount of people living in areas of high risk under un-human conditions.

The example of the Africans trying to reach Europe shows several of the present global trends and uncertainties.

1. *Crisis of state responsibilities and responses.* The so-called fragile states characteristically don't provide employment and fail to deliver services and security and protect rights. Inequality is rampant and poverty affects most of the populations. The state is a distant and abstract concept associated with past aspirations in the struggles against colonialism and embodied in corrupted elites associated with international financial, economic and political actors. The state means modernization processes that brought economic models with promises of growth and consumption but ended up deepening inequality. For many people, particularly young ones, modernization and a liberal state are synonymous with corruption, exploitation and Western influences in their culture. Thus, a rejection of the post-colonial liberal State and an embrace of traditionalism are two of the roots of religious radicalization.
2. *Inequality and its consequences.* There is wide recognition that resource inequality, related to distribution of income and wealth, caused by neo-liberal austerity economic policies is one of the major problems affecting international society. Inequality is also at the root of social revolts. Varied expressions of inequality are directly or indirectly a prime cause of societies' divisions and the causes of current or potential organized violence: grievances regarding social and economic inequality; unfair distribution of public goods and unequal access to natural resources and land; racial and ethnic exclusion; and gender discrimination and exclusion of women from political decision making processes. Other grievances include inequality in education, employment and quality of life and unfair access to science and technology innovation (artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, robotization of work) in fields such as medicine and weaponry; and increasing and unequal urbanization.
3. *Climate change and the competition for natural resources.* The impact of climate change on states, societies and communities is increasingly strong. Climate change is a fundamental cause for rivalry over land and water, and is a push factor for those wanting to emigrate or seek asylum. Climate change interacts with political, social and economic problems. Natural resource competition leads to instability and even violent conflict in the absence of effective dispute resolution. Resource competition and climate change will manifest itself in livelihood insecurity; people's vulnerability and grievances, especially in conflict-affected situations; migration and an increase of illegal activities as a source of income; high prices and disruptions in food production; increasing demands on governments from the populace and civil revolts; conflicts over transboundary water sharing; loss of arable land due to sea-level rise and coastal degradation.
4. *States' diminished capacities.* States cannot individually solve issues such as climate change and its impact, demands for asylum and immigration, protection of human rights, international organized crime, humanitarian crises or achieving the millennium goals for development.

The complexity, velocity, and volatility of interconnected global events challenge national and intergovernmental efforts to manage international security. But multilateral cooperation, which is needed more than ever, is very limited because, and this is my fifth point, there is now a return to a rise of the national interest and anti-cosmopolitanism.

5. *A return to aggressive Realism.* In a multipolar world powerful states are making a strong return to aggressive realism, harsh power politics and right-wing nationalism, moving away from multilateral cooperation and human security policies. Global regimes are weakened by the lack of commitment by the states in fields such as international law, international humanitarian Law, and on protection of minorities, gender, extinction of species and climate change. They have signed international agreements, as the Paris Declaration on climate change, but the implementation is always on hold and slowly implemented. In parallel, in domestic politics there is growing anti-multiculturalism.

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Based on a multidimensional research project about global trends in economy and environment the Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen considers that “the tension between economic development and human sustainability is becoming chronic, and it constitutes the most fundamental contradiction of twenty-first century capitalism”.

Looking at concrete local examples in communities in different countries, Eriksen considers:

“people across the world have to renegotiate the ways in which they sustain themselves economically; their right to define who they are is under pressure, sometimes resulting in crisis of identity; and the physical environment changes in ways which sometimes indicate that the contemporary world civilization is ultimately unsustainable”.

The ecological footprint humans leave is now everywhere in the planet. This pervasive factor is producing “unintended consequences” that will be difficult to reverse.

Ylland Eriksen looks at the world embedded in “mutually reinforcing growth process under neoliberal policies and ideology which eventually lead to collapse because an “overheating” effect.

He accuses the policymakers of contradicting themselves under a “double bind” pattern, which is a “self-refuting kind of communication of behavior”. Examples are the rhetorical commitment of the policymakers to protecting the environment while continuing to promote the same model of growth (particularly the use of fossil fuels); or the wish and promise to create employment while not modifying the industrial patterns of producing more with less human work.

“This is an accelerated world, says this researcher, where everything from communication to warfare and industrial production takes place faster and more comprehensively than ever before. Speed (...) is closely related to heat. (...) The burnout is a direct consequence of too much speed”.

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If we look to international relations, they are undergoing under an accelerating reconfiguration. We are living in a multipolar world where no State, not even the USA with its huge military power, can impose its will over the others. But nobody can predict the shape of this system two or three decades from now.

It is easy to predict that China will continue its rise, becoming a superpower in many fields, but more difficult is to guess about the future of the EU or the internal disruptions the US society could suffer.

Neither is sure the exercise of democratic policies as we know them today will be alive. The use of algorithms to know the tendencies and choices of the electorate, through the “extraction of information” Saskia Sassen mentioned here, might change the concept of political campaigns.

The ways ahead, the future, will be very much signaled by the scientific and technological advances, partic-



ularly in the so-called big data, and the fast developments in robotization and artificial intelligence. In his recent book *Homo Deus*, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari alerts about a future in which data processes will outperform politics and governance as we know it today. A world under the risk that algorithms would take over humanity. Then humankind would become a single data-processing system. He is also concerned about the mix of very high technology and megalomaniacal politics and neoliberalism. The blind market with artificial intelligence would be a receipt for disaster.

Ways ahead

Looking ahead it is not easy to be optimistic. Of course there are huge areas of the world where all these problems look like distant fiction. It is also true that poverty has been reduced in the last decades, more people around the world are educated, women equality is much better, there are fewer wars than 20 years ago, and technology provides new horizons for millions of citizens around the world. And it is right that more people live in democratic countries than before.

But any thinking about the future should be based on the complexity of the world system and subsystems and networks in which we lived in. A complexity that makes almost impossible to capture all the aspects, trends and nuances. Any relevant questions about “ways ahead” in the foreseeable future should take into account some of the variables briefly described above, and ask a key question: are we moving forward towards the good signs, or will the world be divided between zones of prosperity and zones of risk? Giving the financial control the élites and the circle of people working for them have, is it still possible to talk about democracy?

Inequality shows that you, and your descendants, will be determined by where you are situated today and where you could be living in the future, not only geographically but in the labor, knowledge and wealth fields as well as access to data.

Inequality will establish a red line and define whether you would have access to the most modern medical advances, will be just a survivor or will find yourself in the middle of the road. If you may be, as Bob Dylan’ sang, “*a construction worker working on a home / (or) You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome*”.

The North-South gap will define your life and your access to education, housing, and health resources, and the chance to have a decent job. But important exceptions should be mentioned.

If you are part of the élite in the so-called Global “South” perhaps you would be allow to buy goods and services, from homes to health services, and invest your money in London, Geneva or Manhattan banks. Even more, you might invest your money (sometimes from dubious origins) in exchange for a European or American passport, impossibility for millions of asylum seekers.

For some people becoming a citizen of a different country, looking at the common people from the distance of high towers in the richest areas of some global cities and dreaming with extending the length of their lives for some decades are becoming a reality.

But perhaps you could be living in the North but being part of an excluded sector, being an inhabitant of a marginal neighborhood with limited access to resources. Then you are living in the South, in the social periphery inside the North.

If income inequality continues its trend within and among the countries, there will be clashes and different forms of violent responses. Some will be legitimate resistance; some others will take the form of individual or organized terrorism, or simply social chaos mixed with violence. And there will continue to exist many peaceful forms of resistance and communal organizations.,

I mean, for example, people struggling against the privatization of their water or trying to save their towns against gentrification and destructive tourism, indigenous communities, environmental, human rights, women and LGTB groups, journalists defending civil rights against big data, unions and movements against the austerity policies, and the worldwide demonstrations in favor of science and against the “alt-reality”.

Thousands of these initiatives challenge the neoliberal system and its arrogant assumption that there is not an alternative order.

As matter of fact, one of the defining characteristics of the neoliberal model is to present itself as *the only* possible economic and social organizer. In 1983 the late British sociologist Raymond Williams wrote that the Thatcherites and Reaganites were determined as the “hardest kind of revolutionaries” but with no wish to change the order except for their benefit. Two big challenges for the future will be how to construct and alternative to neoliberalism that presents itself as the only possible option.

The second will be how to define political representation and democracy in a context of increasing authoritarianism, the use of big data to manipulate the constituencies and the complexity of reversing the current destructive economic growth patterns.

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I started with the example of the “roads of fire” taken by the African and Middle Eastern, as well as the Central Americans and Mexican immigrants: a complex picture of exploitation and desperation.

Now, I want to end mentioning and celebrating the high number of European NGOs, citizens, journalists and academics who jointly with some politicians support are providing food, shelter, legal advice, and organizing themselves or joining existing NGOs. And mention the people and cities that are offering their homes to the refugees whom are arriving to Europe. They are showing that the values of solidarity, caring and respect for others are alive and not in retreat, and that refugees should not be “disposable people”, in the words of the late researcher Zygmunt Baumann

I want also to end with the ethical example of the Sanctuaries movement across the United States that is rejecting the President Executive Orders and giving shelter and legal advice to hundreds of thousand undocumented immigrants threatened, and many already deported. (And I prefer to say undocumented instead of illegal).

With its actions, majors, churches, lawyers and NGOs in cities as Los Angeles and New York are defying the racist hypocrisy of trying to expulse people that has been and is working and providing services demanded by the US industry, services and homes.

With their actions these Europeans and US citizens are also showing respect for the international agreements signed by their states, but unfulfilled. They shame the racists, the autocrats and the cynics that turned their face away and pretend to be blind to the immense suffering of millions of people. With their example they signaled the times of resistance, the show us the way ahead.