

The seven necessary reforms of the 21st Century

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I'll start with the Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, who once said "No sabemos lo que pasa y esto es lo que pasa." That is, "We don't know what's going on and that is what's going on". Why don't we know? Because we cannot be aware of what is happening until after the event; only then can we understand what has taken place. Moreover, because we're living in a speeded up period of evolution, the delay is even greater. Furthermore, what is going on is extraordinarily complex. Everything is mixed up: economic, social, political and religious phenomena. And this complexity is hard to understand. So, we are dealing with a situation where our knowledge is fragile, all the more so because the knowledge we use, the knowledge that is available to us, is knowledge that has been formed within separate, compartmentalised disciplines, that do not communicate with one another. So there are expert economists, expert demographers, experts in every field of knowledge who do not communicate. But real life is not like a university. Things that are separate in a university are all mixed up in reality, and that is the ultimate reason why we do not know what is going on. Our way of acquiring knowledge makes us blind to global or fundamental problems. This is a very important issue because these are the problems that have become vital, and at the same time deadly.

So let's try and begin with a diagnosis of what is going on. What is going on, as we all know, is what we call in French "*mondialisation*" or globalisation; that is to say the fact that nowadays everything across the globe is shared and interconnected, in a process that is constantly evolving. This process, however, contains, one could say, the best and the worst. The best in what sense? Well, in the sense that today there is interdependence among different sections of humanity; we can all consider ourselves interconnected, while for a very long time societies, human beings, were separated, without communication. Our destinies are linked, that is we are experiencing a community of destinies, all the more so because the same threats affect everyone. The same threat of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the threat of the degradation of the biosphere, the threat of a worsening economic crisis, the threat of an ethnic, religious and ideological meltdown. Even the threat of hunger has not vanished. Thus we all share a common destiny. It is the common destiny that should unite us, that should give us shared aims, and that should make us all citizens of the planet earth.

This process, moreover, has created the foundations of a society on a world scale. Why? Because in order to have a society, you have to have a territory with communications. Nowadays the planet is a territory plied with multiple and immediate communications, as never before in the past in any nation. In order to have a society, you have to have an economy. A globalised economy is already in place, but unfortunately it is unregulated. In order to have a society, you have to have a legitimised authority, and unfortunately there is no legitimised authority. We cannot consider the United Nations to be this authority. In order to have a society, you have to have a common awareness, and it is the awareness of a common destiny that gives us a sense of

patriotism. Today it is not a matter of suppressing the patriotism of a nation, but we must understand that the whole earth has become our fatherland. And this awareness only exists among small, scattered groups.

Thus, we have the basis of a new kind of society, and at the same time we have our technical and economic processes that don't let this new society take shape. So the best thing is that, for the first time in the history of humanity, there is the opportunity for unity, unity of diversity, in diversity, a peaceful unity. That is, the chance truly to achieve a new stage in the development of humanity - this is the best thing. But, unfortunately, the best things are always inseparable from the worst. And what is the worst thing? The worst thing is that the process that animates globalisation, which is scientific, technical, economic - a process that is anyway ambiguous because science leads to knowledge, and science brings benefits, as does technology - has freed mankind from the effort and energy that it used to devote to matter. But this is equally ambivalent, and its negative effects are always on the rise because science, with the help of technology and the economy, also brings weapons of mass destruction and, as we see, this leads to degradation. Not just in the biosphere but also in everyday human life.

So you have the worst linked to the best, and the worst is to do with the continuous degradation of this living environment which is indispensable for our lives. That is the biosphere, the degradation of the biosphere, global warming, extensive and unlimited pollution. I'm not going to go through the whole list; it is fairly clear to us all. The worst thing is that this globalised economy does not have a real system for regulating or controlling itself, and therefore a crisis can lead to catastrophe. The worst thing is that we are experiencing a crisis, not only a crisis of the biosphere, and of the interaction of humans with nature, but we are experiencing a crisis of development, a crisis of traditional societies, a crisis of modernity. The crisis of traditional societies is that the process of globalisation, which is at the same time a process of westernisation, is a process that in traditional societies does not limit itself to sweeping away prejudices and closed mentalities; it also destroys solidarity networks, knowledge bases, skills, the art of living. These societies are left in disarray, but the solution - that is westernised globalisation - is itself in crisis today.

It's in crisis because we ourselves, in the very societies we call developed or evolved, have begun to realise that wherever there is wellbeing, there is not necessarily moral and psychological satisfaction. We realise that there is an underlying psychological unhappiness within material wellbeing, that these societies create new problems. We realise that our civilisation has not only brought about a lack of wellbeing, but excessive individualism has destroyed traditional ties of solidarity. In short, we are engaging in an unleashed race, towards where? This is the point where we have to pose the problem of the idea of development, since we consider our nation to be developed and the rest of the world to be underdeveloped or in need of development.

Again, in this idea of development there is the best and the worst. It's true, for example, that development in China, in Latin American countries and in India, has led to the emergence of a middle class with access to western standards of daily life. And of course you can see clearly that in these countries young people are very happy to find themselves free of the constraints of the traditional family, of family prejudices, to acquire a certain liberty in their relationships, including their sexual relationships. There is even certain magic in the discovery of Macdonald's or Coca-Cola, things that for us are terribly banal, but which in those places seem to express the prestige of the western way of life. There is effectively something important in this access to western prosperity, but there is also the fact that they gain access to all the poisons that lie

within western civilisation, that is to say consumerist poison, the obsession for consumption, the increasingly important role of money that suppresses a whole area of human relations based on what is free, on friendship, on the exchange of services rendered. The obsession with cars that make us prisoners of this obsession, with all our traffic jams soon to be replicated in other continents that are rapidly equipping themselves with cars. If China were to have the same number of cars in proportion to its inhabitants as in the West, and if India had the same, we would need five planets as big as Earth in order to be able to satisfy their energy needs, and to be able to clean the ensuing pollution as well as be free of today's waste. The race towards development is a race towards an abyss.

These are the completely ambivalent characteristics that lead to development. But the fact is that development does not only bring certain kinds of prosperity to the sections of the population that gain access to the status of the western middle classes. It also leads to enormous pockets of misery. All we have to do is look at the maps and we can see the enormous shantytowns that surround the big cities of Latin America, Asia, Africa. What is this misery? Majid Rahnema, an Iranian philosopher, has written a very important book called "When Poverty becomes Misery". One can be poor, as in traditional African civilisations, the villager with this family and his plot of land, using different farming methods, with chickens and goats, and with a minimum of self-sufficiency. Well, when this same villager is chased away from his land by industrial monoculture he goes to the city slums, the shantytowns, and that is where he turns into a proletarian, he has nothing left, he is totally dependent. That's what misery is.

This is the situation today: development has created enormous misery while, at same time, it has created a certain amount of prosperity. In countries such as those in Western Europe, France, for example, countries where there used to be poverty, but where there was no misery except in a few very marginal categories, one can see today that there is more misery than poverty. It is time to cast doubt on the dogma of development. The idea of lasting, or "sustainable" development is an idea that does not succeed in eliminating all the poisons and all the disparities in the notion of development. What we should be talking about at this time is human development, because development, as it has been conceived, dictates that technology and the economy are the locomotives that tow societies towards a better life, made up of democracy, wellbeing, satisfaction, the reduction of social conflicts. But this is not the case. We have clearly seen economic development under dictators, such as under the dictatorship of Pinochet. It is obvious that it does not bring democracy, or wellbeing. Of course it brings about certain kinds of liberation, it brings about important changes, but we need to transform the meaning of the word development, and call it human development. Development, as we conceive it for example in the living world, means the bud that will give birth to a flower, that is to say, something that doesn't actually exist inside the bud, but which represents its potential. Or take, for example, an embryo that is due to come out of the mother's womb. It develops in terms of quantity, quantity of cells, but it also develops in terms of organisation and takes on new qualities.

Development does not only mean quantitative development; it is also qualitative. Until now development has been conceived only in quantitative terms. And this notion has been applied in only one way to cultures and to civilisations that are very different from one another. A standard western model has been applied, without taking account of the fact that it is necessary to operate a mutually beneficial relationship between what other cultures have acquired in terms of wealth, the art of living, their knowledge bases, including their medical knowledge, and what our western culture can give them in terms of health, freedom and democracy. Instead of keeping in mind this important question of symbiosis - what I would call a politics of humanity,

which is a symbiosis between the qualities that exist within different cultures - what we do is apply a single formula in a grossly simplistic fashion that ignores the qualities inherent in cultures.

Going back to Majid Rahnema in his first book: he wrote that we need to fight illiteracy but not illiterates, because illiterates are not only people who don't know how to read, they are people with a traditional oral culture that goes back thousands of years, with their own knowledge base, their life skills, their wisdom, their illusions, and, of course, their superstitions. We too have our illusions and our superstitions. To start with we have lived for a long time with the illusion that progress is a law of history and that it would take place, but this illusion has vanished.

All these crises put together (in other words, globalisation and progress), trigger their own crisis, that is a crisis of the planet, or even, I would say, a crisis of humanity, because humanity has failed to be humane. This does not only trigger a crisis. What globalisation has triggered is the space vessel Earth - propelled by the economy, by science, by technology and by profit - which is steering, without a pilot, towards the abyss.

This is why we need to try and find a perspective. I'm saying we're heading for the abyss, there's a probability, but there is no certainty, and anyway what does the word probability mean? It means that with the best information available, in our time, in our age, watching today's processes, the probability is of a catastrophe. And yet often in history the improbable has happened. Why? Again, something unpredictable or creative can come from something new. Take, for example, a very recent improbable event, the fact that Obama, an outsider, a man who was not essentially American, a man who was black and mixed-race at the same time, the fact that Obama became the candidate of the Democratic party, and then President of the United States. No one could have predicted this six months before. The unpredictable often happens, and there can be heightened awareness during a period of crisis. After all, what is a crisis? A crisis, evidently, is a time when uncertainty reigns, when more or less regulated systems deregulate, when repressed factors are released, when imagination and research find new solutions, and sometimes, on the contrary, when there is recourse to magic, or providential solutions for solving the crisis.

We saw this after the 1929 crash, whose effects reverberated around the world. There were two different responses to the crisis: the first, Roosevelt's New Deal, which was a Democratic response; the second, Nazi totalitarianism, which came to power legally in Germany. Nor should we forget that these responses to the crisis only made things worse at another level. Hitler's rise, in fact, triggered German rearmament, and whet the country's appetite for regaining some of the territories lost by Old Germany. And this, in its turn, led to World War II. A solution to the crisis was perhaps represented by those 20 million deaths, and in the post-war period a new kind of crisis emerged.

Thus, we must bear in mind that crises can have extremely serious consequences, but we must also bear in mind that there is always the chance to overcome them. That is, after all, the basis of our work here, the work I am proposing together with my colleague: what path, or what paths will allow us to join together and find a way to help ourselves overcome crises. In order to understand this point, we must be aware that when a system is unable to deal with its vital issues, which are at the same time its deadly issues, either the system disintegrates, or it regresses, or again it succeeds in engendering, creating out of itself, a richer system that is more able to deal with its issues. In other words, it needs to create a meta-system. And we are,

we don't know...We do know that the system can regress, that we could go back to a situation where globalisation is dismembered by a return to various forms of protectionism. We can believe that all this will lead to overall disintegration; we can even believe we have to move towards a meta-system. But how should we do this? 'Meta' is an interesting prefix. The word 'meta-system' reminds me of metamorphosis, and the word 'metamorphosis' is a word full of meaning, even more than the word 'revolution', because it means transforming. Even if we stay the same, we become something else. Take a larva, for example. A larva is a worm that transforms itself into a pupa; inside its chrysalis it starts to destroy its own digestive system, saving its nervous system. After pupating, it breaks out of its chrysalis as a completely different creature: a winged butterfly or dragonfly. It has metamorphosed, and metamorphosis is quite common in the animal world. We ourselves, in our mother's womb, are aquatic animals who do not breathe with air, or oxygen, but when we are born we metamorphose into terrestrial mammals. In human history there have been examples of metamorphoses, such as, for example, when the small hunter-gatherer communities populating scattered areas of the globe came together and began to organise, created hierarchies, and somehow founded the great historical societies, with their cities, agriculture, armies, religions, and craftsmanship.

So metamorphosis is a possibility. The biggest problem is to escape from this ten-thousand-year history of uninterrupted warfare, wars that today have become pure madness because they risk destroying the whole of humanity. In order to reach this new stage, this world-society I've been talking about, what should we do? This is what we propose to explore: to seek the paths that will lead us there. The first idea that we have is that there are seven kinds of possible reforms that are inseparable. Why? Because these reforms are: economic, social, political, knowledge-based, educational, ethical and bioethical. One reform alone is insufficient. For example, in the Soviet Union, the whole capitalist class, the whole bourgeoisie, was physically suppressed in order to create a classless society. Not only did this experiment not succeed; it created a new society, new kinds of exploitation. The effort was completely wasted. Take 1989, for example, when the capitalism they thought they had stamped out forever came back with a vengeance, and the religion they thought they had wiped out re-emerged stronger than ever.

We need economic reforms, but they are not enough. We need social reforms, but they are not enough. We need ethical and moral reforms, but on their own they are not enough. We need to set out on a path together towards these reforms. I'm not going to cite a list of much-needed reforms in each and every field. What we do understand right now is the extent to which a reform of knowledge systems is important. Knowledge, as we know it today, disables us, makes us blind. It is essential, therefore, that we start with an education reform. I'll go into that issue in more detail at a later date. What I want to say now is that reforms need to be considered together not separately. Another thing I want to say is that all over the world - whether in Europe, France, Africa, or Latin America -there are bottom-up initiatives creating solidarity, forming associations, encouraging entrepreneurship, fighting pollution, giving new life to a village, creating mutually beneficial economic activities, forging links, combating environmental damage. One of the aims of our work is not to compile an encyclopaedia of all the initiatives that are taking place, but to identify and evaluate the main kinds of reform as they come to life - isolated, separate, compartmentalised - and link them. In no administration, no political party, nowhere, can we find these initiatives linked into something we can consider an organic movement. To sum up, our work consists, on the one hand, in identifying possible paths, and, on the other, to show that each one of these paths already has a starting point, which is detached and isolated, but which anyway represents potential.

Take for example, western society, where individuals are strongly conditioned by their jobs, by the conurbations they live in, by time constraints, behavioural constraints, constraints of all kinds. Those who can afford it go away for the weekend or take a vacation. What happens during the weekend or during the vacation? People change their life styles, or do the opposite of what they do every day in the city. They stop looking at their watches, they eat food cooked on a fire, they don't have to wear a tie, they don't have to dress up, they spend time with their friends, forge links, have more time for thinking about love. In other words, in order to deal with the constraints of daily life, those who can afford it find a kind of temporary antidote during the weekends and during the vacations. But this means, in my view, that we are increasingly living in a world that is quantified. Everything is measured in terms of quantity: our salaries, GDP, growth. And we forget that quantity does not take account of the many important things in life that cannot be quantified. Love, happiness, peace of mind, none of these things can be calculated. We can improve quantitative indices, but there is no real index for happiness or satisfaction.

I could cite the Markassen case. There was an education level index, a hygiene level index, an index to evaluate certain external conditions. But if we take money as a factor, we all know that happiness and wellbeing are more important than money. But when these things are lacking, when there is no happiness, no love, no understanding, money becomes a form of compensation for what is lacking. Money becomes a way to forget, a kind of consolation prize. You go shopping, you save up, take a trip. I think that, if we have the chance, we all understand that the most important thing for us is to have our "own" lives, as I would put it. A poetic life. Why poetic? Well, I think there are two sides to life: the prosaic side, the things we do because we have to, things that do not interest us and that we do not like, but that we need to do to earn our living and in order to survive. But living is much more than surviving, but unfortunately until now politics has always dealt with surviving, not with living. Living means blossoming into life, living in a community, living harmonically with ourselves and with others. This is poetry. Living poetically means living according to our aspirations. Of course we can't always live poetically, but nor should we become slaves to the prosaic side of life. We need to demonstrate that the way out is not necessarily to have yet more development, yet more money, yet more goods. Of course there are many quantifiable things that have become useful, but the essential things are not in this category; they lie in the development of our personalities and of our lives. If we can show this, then I think it's easy to understand that this is the way to go. This is the new path.

In conclusion, great world adventures have always had modest beginnings, historically speaking. Take the adventure of Christianity, for example. It started very modestly, with a few apostles. It took two centuries of the Roman Empire to turn Christianity into a force to be reckoned with. The roots of Islam were similarly humble. Mohammad was chased away from the Mecca and had to take refuge in Medina. From this start, it grew into a formidable historical force. The debut of capitalism was also low key: in a feudal society it was considered parasitical to start with and only later did it take off, destroy feudalism and then feed on its cultural relics. Socialism has a similar story, starting with a few isolated nineteenth-century thinkers who were considered mad. And yet, socialism became an important social force. I think we are in a similar moment: a new beginning. We can see many signs, not just in all the initiatives we were talking about before, but also, I would say, in what we would call "other-worldism" or no-globalism. Despite the parasitism of certain ideologies, there is a new awareness about the fact that we are all citizens of the earth, which is our fatherland.

We are part of a new beginning, and the aim of our work is to show that there is a possible path forward. Why? The previous generations, who believed in socialism and communism, who believed in capitalism, who believed in the market economy, who believed these were

solutions for the problem, are paralysing the process. These generations are disappointed, disenchanted; they have lost hope. The world the new generations are going to have to deal with has no future. Nobody can say what tomorrow holds. It appears there are threats, both global and personal, especially in the precariousness of society, where there is a similar lack of hope. To show that there is a possible path - which does not mean it is a certain path - that is open to hope could be a way to contribute powerfully to our progress along that path, to widen the path, and to move towards that kind of metamorphosis that nobody can yet imagine because before something is created one can never know what it will become. And that is the problem. That is why we're proposing working on the 13 reforms. (before there were seven!)