

IN THE FACE OF THE NORMALISATION OF WAR, A CULTURE OF PEACE

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This is a necessary and urgent Congress in a context of an alarming growth of warmongering narratives that present the path of war as the only option, as something pertinent and inevitable, as our salvation. We are in a global scenario in which too many sectors reward the promotion of war and punish, stigmatise, misrepresent or criminalise the defence of the ways of peace. The defence of peace, the defence of human rights, the defence of international law are ridiculed.

Record figures have been reached in world military spending and we are being told that the way forward is more weapons, more war, more confrontation. You don't have to be an expert in conflict resolution to know that at the end of the road, at the end of a war, there is always a peace agreement, a negotiation, a pact. The sooner it comes, the more lives are saved, the more pain is avoided.

The longer a war lasts, the more destruction, the more deaths, the more social fragmentation, the more risk of geographical extension of the war, the more poverty, the more hunger, the more division, the more pain that is perpetuated for several generations.

Those who ridicule peace brand its advocates as naïve. However, there is no greater naivety than to think that the solution is armed confrontation. Only from a lack of human rights culture and a deficit in the knowledge of history can war be defended as the best option.

In the wars I have lived through, I have met men and women who have wanted to work for peace in the midst of horror. They are people who have tried everything, who in many cases first took the path of violence, of weapons, of war, descended mountains, climbed mountains, surrounded mountains, before concluding that the necessary path is that of peace, of a just peace, with human rights for all, without exclusions.

History and newspaper archives remind us of the collective madness generated by warlike climates, enemies of calm thought. Tolerance means understanding that no one deserves to be dehumanised - and even less so when hate speeches are making so much progress - or to be misrepresented or stigmatised for believing in peace.

This needs to be emphasised because we are hearing voices for peace stigmatised in many places: singled out, misrepresented, criminalised, for defending ways for peace.

Racism, dehumanisation, contempt for the other, for otherness, is something that conditions and defines our current situation. The discourse against vulnerable sectors, singled out as a surplus population, is commonplace. Any honest historian of the future will underline this normalisation of dehumanising narratives to define our present. These discourses pave the way for war and the perpetuation of war.

Dehumanisation is often accompanied by demonisation. One of the foremost contemporary experts on genocide, Omer BARTOV, explains that in the most barbaric chapters, "the people who commit the massacres see themselves as victims of the people they kill. And they also imagine that if they don't kill them, they will turn against them and do to them what they are suffering". This is indeed the scenario of war: more impunity, more barbarity. It is a never-ending wheel in which the strongest, the one willing to be the most brutal, wins. It is the framework of crushing, the us or them. It is the option that leads to annihilation, in which those who bet on greater brutality always have the upper hand.

Without alternatives to the use of brute force and war, it is perpetuated and becomes an eternal war.

Many places on the planet are experiencing conflict after conflict, in a scenario of global resource depletion, in the face of which the starting signal has been given to a race for plunder and appropriation, to an every man for himself, seeking impunity through war, because it is claimed that in war anything goes: more occupation, more robbery, more plunder, more domination.

This normalisation of impunity is revealing, more clearly than usual, the double standards in the face of violations of international law. This was recently denounced by the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court himself, who has been pressured by various leaders not to apply the same standard to the occupations of Ukraine and Palestine.

The call for removing or applying human rights and international law increasingly dilutes the red lines and weakens the scaffolding built after the Second World War, based on the development of international law and the Universal Charter of Human Rights.

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Allow me to dwell on the continuing massacre in Gaza, because of its significance, because of the consequences it is already having on the normalisation of impunity, which weakens that scaffolding, international law, the bodies responsible for overseeing and protecting human rights without double standards. In many areas of the so-called first world, the suffering of the Israeli hostages and their families is understood, as it should be, but not the situation of the others: the Palestinian population is dehumanised, despised, presented as a mass that can be killed. We are facing several unprecedented phenomena:

- For the first time we are seeing in real time a large-scale massacre, everyday war crimes. Srebrenica and so many other barbarities, we learned of them after the fact, days, weeks or even months later. We are watching this in real time, from anywhere in the world.

- For the first time, the international press cannot be on the ground, as Israel and Egypt keep access to journalists closed. We know what is happening only through local journalists, who live in Gaza, and through the people who are suffering, who have social networks. Our teachers covered World War II on the ground, Vietnam, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia. Journalists of my generation have covered the wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and so on, sometimes with difficulty, but always succeeding. It is important for a country to have its voices seen, told, transmitted. It is pertinent to ask: if there were European journalists on the ground, counting the daily massacres, would we have reached the eleventh month of massacre?

- Despite the fact that a significant part of the facts are known in real time, arms and political and diplomatic support continue to be sent, allowing the massacre and the violation of international law to continue.

- There are other new aspects: unprecedented moves in international courts in an attempt to protect international law in the face of impunity, an increase in the power of Jewish voices for peace who are saying *not in my name*, and a greater global awareness of the existence of an illegal occupation and apartheid system against the Palestinian population.

At the last Oscar ceremony, the director of the film 'Zone of Interest', this year's winner for Best International Film, British Jew Jonathan Glazer, said, on accepting his award: "I refuse to allow my Jewishness to be hijacked by the occupation".

In the film 'Zone of Interest' a Nazi commandant takes over a mansion next to a large concentration camp. There he settles with his family and there he builds his zone of interest, his comfort zone, pretending that the genocide taking place just a few metres away from them does not exist. The genocide is heard throughout the film - through noises, shouting, booms - but it is not seen. It is a mere background noise, an ambient background sound, in the midst of a seemingly normal life, as if that barbarity were not taking place.

It is to this idea that the Canadian Jewish thinker Naomi Klein refers when she speaks of environmental genocide to refer to the massacre in Gaza, to those crimes that we are meant to normalise as if they were mere background noise, background ambient sound.

Numerous Jewish voices around the world are speaking out for peace and human rights for all, knowing that never again must be never again for all, without exclusion. Jewish thinkers and artists such as Masha Gessen, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Yuval Abraham or Jonathan Glazer himself, among many others, have been branded as anti-Semites for defending human rights for all and for denouncing all violations of international law. This misrepresentation of peace speeches has even been applied to members of the United Nations and the two international tribunals in The Hague, which is damaging the defence of the human rights of the Palestinian population, of everyone in general, and is also damaging something very necessary and essential: the fight against anti-Semitism.

Protests against the ceasefire or the arms embargo are also being misrepresented, stigmatised and persecuted. The UN rapporteur for freedom of expression, Irene Khan, has warned: "the crisis in Gaza," she said, "is already becoming a major crisis of freedom of expression and protest that will have medium- and long-term consequences."

The Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuscinski, whom I had the pleasure of knowing, wrote that one must always be with those who suffer. In his book *One More Day Alive*, in which he recounts his experience as a correspondent in the Angolan war, he dedicates a few lines to a woman in her eighties who, day after day, whether it rained, thundered or bombed, went out with her basket full of bread to distribute it to the people. Major Farrusco, cornered in his barracks, said of her: "She is eighty years old, she makes bread. She has been doing it for more than sixty years and she doesn't want to leave. She is neither with us nor with them. She is a supporter of life. Life and bread. And that is enough, more than enough".

This woman represents the majority of people who suffer from violence and who are trying to make their way through it: people who are in favour of life. Women like the Angolan baker exist in each and every war. I have seen them in Baghdad ravaged by Bush's *Operation Shock and Awe*, in Afghanistan broken by decades of violence, in Libya turned into a powder keg, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in Yemen, in Syria, in Lebanon, even in an Egypt without armed conflict but crushed by oppression.

War is that place where mothers bury their children. Where people forever lose their peace even if they survive the bombs, where people disappear without a trace and memory stands as the only salvation. It is that place where any halfway decent human being realises that, as Kapuscinski wrote, "what matters is saving lives".

In the film *One More Day Alive*, based on the Polish reporter's book, Angolan journalist Artur Queiroz, still alive, a friend of Kapuscinski's, says: "We won that battle for independence, but all my ideals were destroyed along the way."

One has to ask: Is there any war that does not leave a bitter taste, one that can be conceived of as a satisfying accomplishment by anyone with sanity? I have seen bombs falling on whole neighbourhoods while two streets away little people try to get to school so as not to miss class, while men and women wait hopefully for the city bus to take them to their workplaces, their homes or the homes of relatives.

I have seen children killed by bombs in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, women with their faces burned by men in charge in Afghanistan before and after 2001, refugees who have lost everything in Sudan, in Libya, on the

escape routes, I have seen young people shot in the Palestinian territories, girls getting up at dawn in the hope of being allowed to cross the checkpoints that separate them from their schools in the West Bank, families yearning for peace and rights in so many places on the planet....

Wars are never won by the people. They are won by the tycoons who get rich from them, the arms companies, who seek to make their careers at the cost of other people's lives. And they do so through, among other means, what the thinker Susan Sontag called "the public's lust for mass bombing".

I said earlier that the scaffolding built after the Second World War, based on the defence of human rights and international law as tools to preserve peace, is in danger of collapsing.

After the barbarity committed by Nazism, the foundations were laid for the development of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a text that should be the backbone of European policies and of current educational programmes in schools and institutes. However, those principles are all too often little more than ink on paper. Impunity is on the march and hate speech is normalised on too many television sets.

The banality of evil theorised by the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt is normalised from the highest echelons of world power, even in the way the executioners are excused and the victims blamed. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the Jewish philosopher described the process by which the perpetrators of crimes exempt themselves from all responsibility, abiding by orders and bureaucratic procedures, and placing on their victims the ability to make them the executors of what they do not wish to do, but are forced to do by them.

Through this process, the executioner presents himself as someone who does not wish to commit the crime, but who is forced to do so by the stubborn insistence of the victims not only to exist, but even to be - that is, to have rights, identity, memory, justice, freedom.

Albert Camus wrote that any form of contempt, if it intervenes in politics, prepares or establishes fascism. Contempt is the prelude to dehumanisation, that process by which a person is stripped of their name, their identity, their rights, reduced to just their body, as Hannah Arendt explained.

The focus should not only be on Sudan, Congo, the Middle East, Ukraine and so on.

In the so-called first world there are people stripped of their identity, their rights and even their name, reduced to a number, narrated and seen as mere bulk. It happens through normalised mechanisms, through the most invisible wars: border wars.

Borders are externalised so that migrants die far from our territories and our consciences, through the business of war and repression, with the tracing of more dangerous routes that are like gloomy gymkhanas, where many people fleeing wars and poverty die. An increasingly perverse classification of people is taking place, assessing their degree of usefulness and, on the basis of this, establishing how human they can be considered, who deserves to have full rights, who only has some rights, who must live condemned to clandestinity, to nothingness, to be nobodies.

It is necessary to reflect on communication, on language, on words, on truth and lies, reality and fiction, experience and the absence of experience. Hannah Arendt explained that "the ideal subject for a totalitarian government" is "the individual for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) have ceased to exist". When in public debate reality, facts, are treated as debatable, the boundary with fiction can become blurred. When the edges of our present are turned away from journalistic spaces, the debate is reduced to mere entertainment, exempted from its consequences.

In the comfortable pillows of privilege, reality is reduced to mere theory, to a harmless game, to banality: there is no connection with the consequences of the acts, with the bodies affected, with the effects of indifference. From the point of view of privilege, all denunciation seems exaggerated. Victims are just nameless, faceless numbers, poverty is just a word. Climate change, the depletion of natural resources, human rights or migration are debated as if they were abstractions without concrete results in which the interlocutor can defend one position or the opposite in the same way that in a video game we choose sides. There is no journey of knowledge or experience that traverses the path from cause to consequence.

Answering the whys is what distinguishes journalism from child's play. All the basic questions that need to be answered to produce information - what, who, when, where, how - are incomplete without the why. Whys provide the receiver with understanding, context, clues, depth. This is also the case in sociological, philosophical, political or historical knowledge.

The why forces us to analyse all the factors that affect our present, the questions that affect us and that any historian of the future would underline in order to define our present. It is not possible to investigate the whys, nor to answer them, without the will to be honest, without the word, without the commitment to contrast and understand, to be able to explain, to be able to speak. There is no human community that does not need a great conversation, because in the process of communication there is an acceptance of the other, of otherness, ethically and metaphysically. As the philosopher Martin Buber pointed out, using language to address others is a process of love.

The narrative, the story, what we talk about, how we tell what happens, condition the world. "We are the words we use", said José Saramago, aware of the importance of vocabulary. "Wars always begin long before

the first shot is fired, they begin with a change of vocabulary in the media," said the Polish reporter Kapuściński. Reality is shaped by definitions.

The historian and author of *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari, puts it this way: "The narrative we believe in shapes the society we build. Words build, build us and lead us to action. They can also destroy. And they suffer: manipulation and appropriation. In one of Francisco de Goya's prints of the Inquisition, a tortured man appears, and underneath this caption: "For moving the tongue in another way". It is still difficult to move the tongue differently in too many places, in too many spaces.

It is when we communicate with others that we construct our own self, which is the result of the process. We are not if we do not express ourselves, if we do not speak, if we do not negotiate. As Walter Benjamin argued, communicating is a process of incubation of experience through which certain messages transfer us to their dimension of reality.

It is difficult to imagine something if it is not named, to understand a reality if it is not narrated, to know an object if it does not have a designated word, to explain and explain ourselves without a prior representation. In this present tending towards dystopia, we need precise words that name scenarios of hope, stories that conceive other possible worlds, more humane, more decent, because what is not imagined beforehand can hardly be created.

What room for manoeuvre does a society have? There are undoubtedly enormous limitations in the capacity for action and management, but there are always things that can be done, starting with the use of the word. We can always move our tongues in other ways, to denounce, to rebel, to point out the impediments. It is possible to widen our gaze and visualise non-dystopian futures in order to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies. Even in the most hopeless of our present "we always have the power to refuse our consent", as Primo Levi wrote.

In this 2024, we still have the power to defend decency, to cry out for help, to point out injustice, to name hope, to vindicate memory, not to pervert words, to preserve truth, to question war, to defend peace. To protect the fire that Prometheus took from the gods and gave to humans, risking the punishment of Zeus, refusing to satisfy the lords of Olympus.

Allow me one last thing. Outside the bubble that normalises war and ridicules peace there is a world of great dimensions that has memory, that remembers recent history, that understands far better than all of us here together what the dynamics of the powers of the planet are. I have met old women in lost villages, in lost countries, who have more knowledge of geopolitics and international relations than any average European. Do you know why? Because geopolitics is written on their own body. On your own skin.

In Baghdad before the US invasion of 2003, journalists worked around the clock during the day. In the evenings, after gathering information and sending in our reports, we would gather in a room at the Al Rashid Hotel to share our impressions, conjecture about the immediate future, and exchange ideas and plans for possible risks ahead.

On one such night, as correspondents of various nationalities danced to release tension and others confessed, to my astonishment, their eagerness for war and "action", I thought that the most spectacular news we could report would not be that of a bombing, but that of the triumph of good sense and negotiation. That instead of being war reporters in that Iraqi city of almost infinite skies, we could tell that war was avoided and thus act as peace correspondents. I shared that thought with a fellow journalist who wanted to dream it with me.

A few days later, the sirens woke us up in the early hours of the morning and the first bombing raids shook our soil. For weeks we recounted the war, the dead, the wounded, the fear, the pain of the people, the murder of two fellow reporters, the collapse of the country, the chaos. Twenty-one years have passed since then, but I still have a beautiful friendship with that journalist. And even today, when we see each other, we still drink a toast to that yearning for peace shared on a night out in a Baghdad before the inferno.

I still want to approach all conflicts with the desire to be a correspondent for peace, not for war. This requires a collective effort. It is necessary to devise a society that, from the earliest childhood, receives an education with a culture of human rights and peace, which teaches us to see others as human, because by observing what we call otherness we can know much better who we are, what we are and where we are. That is what words help us to do, which is what we have. Nothing more, nothing less.

Thank you, salam, shalom, paix, peace, pace, mir, irin, paz.

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