

THE OTHER TRAGEDY

In the meeting I had with the economists of CIEM (World Economy Research Center) on Tuesday, July 13, I talked to them about an excellent documentary film by the French director Yann Arthus-Bertrand which includes statements by the most farsighted and well informed international personalities about another terrible danger threatening the human species that is cropping up right before our eyes: the destruction of the environment.

The documentary clearly and categorically asserts as follows:

"In the great adventure of life on Earth, each species has a role to play; each species has its place. None of them is either useless or harmful; they all balance one another. And it is right there when you, Homo sapiens, the intelligent human, come into history. You are the beneficiary of the fabulous legacy of 4 billion years provided by the Earth. You are only 200 000 years old, but you have already changed the face of the world."

"The invention of agriculture changed our history. This happened less than 10 000 years ago".

"Agriculture was our first great revolution. It produced the first surpluses and gave rise to cities and civilizations. The memories of the thousands of years spent looking for food faded away. Having turned grains into the yeast of life, we multiplied their varieties and learned to adapt them to our soils and climates. We are like any other species on Earth. Our main daily concern is feeding ourselves. When soils are less than generous and water becomes scarce we are capable of making incredible efforts to get enough from the earth in order to continue living."

"Half of mankind tills the land; more than three fourths do it with their bare hands."

"Pure energy. The energy that comes from the sun has been captured by millions of plants for more than 100 million years. It is coal; it is gas, but, most of all, it is oil."

"During the last 60 years, the Earth population has almost tripled. More than 2 billion people have moved into the cities."

"New York, the world's first megalopolis, is the symbol of the exploitation of the energy that the Earth provides human ingenuity with: The labor of millions of immigrants, the energy that comes from coal, the indispensable power of oil. The United States was the first to ride on the phenomenal, revolutionary power of 'black gold'. In the countryside, machines replaced men. One liter of oil generates as much energy as 100 pairs of hands in 24 hours."

"They produce enough grain to feed 2 billion people. But much of that grain is not used to feed persons. Here, as well as in other industrialized nations, grains are transformed into animal feed or biofuels."

"Fertilizers below and plastics above as far as the eyes can see. The greenhouses of Almería, in Spain, are Europe's vegetable garden. Day after day, a city of vegetables, all of them the same size, awaits the hundreds of trucks that will take them to the supermarkets of the continent. The more developed a country is, the more meat its inhabitants consume. How could the world demand be satisfied without resorting to concentration camp-like cattle farms? Things move faster every time. It is like the life cycle of cattle; quite likely they never catch sight of a prairie."

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"In these food plots, crowded with millions of livestock units, not even a blade of grass grows. A whole fleet of trucks coming from every part of the country bring in tones of grain, soybean food and granules of proteins that will be turned into tones of meat. As a result, 100 liters of water are required to produce 1 kilogram of potatoes; 4000 liters are required to produce 1 kilogram of rice and 13 000 liters are required to produce 1 kilogram of beef, not to mention the amount of oil burned during production and transportation."

"We know that the end of cheap oil is imminent, but we refuse to believe it."

"Los Angeles. In this city that spans more than 100 kilometers, the amount of cars is almost the same as the amount of inhabitants."

"Daytime is nothing but a faint image of the nights that turn the city into a star-spangled sky."

"Everywhere there are machines digging, extracting and grabbing the pieces of stars buried deep into the Earth since its creation: The minerals."

"...Eighty per cent of that mineral wealth is consumed by 20 per cent of the world population. Before this century comes to an end, excessive mining would have used up almost all reserves in the planet."

"Since 1950, the volume of international trade has twenty folded; 90 per cent of trade is travels by sea; 500 million containers are transported every year; they are sent to the biggest consumption centers..."

"Since 1950, fishing has five folded -from 18 to 100 million metric tones per year. Thousands of factory-vessels are leaving the oceans empty. Three fourths of the fishing areas are depleted, terminated or face the risk of becoming so."

"Five hundred million human beings live in the desserts of the world -this is more than the total population of Europe."

"Israel turned the desert into arable land.

While these farms now have a drip irrigation system, water consumption continues to grow as much as exports."

"The once powerful Jordan river is now only a stream. Its waters have flown inside fruits and vegetables crates to supermarkets all over the world."

"India is facing the risk of becoming the country that would suffer the most in the coming century out of lack of water. Mass irrigation has nurtured its growing population and during the last 50 years 21 million new wells have been dug."

"Las Vegas was built in the dessert. Millions of persons live there. Thousands arrive in every month. Its inhabitants are among the world's biggest water consumers."

"Palm Springs is another dessert city with tropical vegetation and luxurious golf courts. For how long will this mirage continue to thrive? The Earth can not withstand it."

"The Colorado River, which supplies water to these cities, is one of those rivers that no longer make it to the sea."

"The lack of water could affect 2 billion people before 2025."

"All living matter is interconnected: water, air, earth, trees."

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"Primitive forests provide a habitat to three fourths of the biodiversity of the planet -that is, three fourths of the whole life on Earth."

"...in only 40 years, the Amazon, the world's biggest rainforest, has shrunk by 20 per cent to make room for cattle farms or soybean fields; 95 per cent of this soybean is used to feed livestock and poultry in Europe and Asia. Thus, a forest has been turned into meat."

"More than 2 billion people, almost one third of the world's population, still depend on charcoal. In Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world, charcoal is one of the population's main consumer goods."

"Up in the mountains of Haiti, only 2 per cent of forests remain..."

"Every week, the cities of the world increase their population by more than one million persons. One out of six human beings lives now in a precarious, unhealthy and overpopulated environment, deprived from daily needs such as water, sewage or electricity. Hunger is expanding again. It is affecting almost 1 billion people. All over the planet, the poor are struggling to survive, while we continue digging for the resources we can no longer live without."

"Our actions cause the release of huge amounts of carbon dioxide. Without even realizing it, we have affected, molecule by molecule, the climate balance on Earth."

"The ice cover of the Arctic is melting away as a result of global warming. After 40 years it is now 40 per cent thinner. This area shrinks year after year during summer time. It could disappear by the summer of the year 2030. Some say it could disappear by the year 2015."

"By 2050, one fourth of the terrestrial species could be facing the risk of extinction."

"...Since Greenland is warming up very quickly, the fresh water of a whole continent is flowing into the ocean."

"The ice of Greenland accounts for 20 per cent of all the fresh water of the planet. If it melts away the sea level will increase by almost 7 meters. Our planet's atmosphere is an indivisible whole. It is an asset we all share."

"Lakes are becoming part of Greenland's landscape. The ice cover is melting at a pace not even the most pessimistic scientists could have predicted 10 years ago. More and more these rivers, nurtured by the glaciers, are merging and emerging to the surface. It was thought that, deep into the ice, water would freeze. Quite on the contrary, water flows under the ice, pushing the ice cover into the sea, where it breaks up and become an iceberg."

"Only in the 20th century, the expansion of warmed up water caused a 20 cm sea level increase. Everything becomes unstable. Coral reefs are extremely sensitive to the slightest change in water temperature. Thirty per cent of them have disappeared. They are an essential link in the chain of species."

"If the sea level continues to rise quicker and quicker, what will big cities like Tokyo -the most densely populated of the world- do?"

"...in Siberia as well as in many other parts of the world it is so cold that the soil is permanently frozen. This phenomenon is known as permafrost. Beneath that surface lies a climatic time bomb: methane, a greenhouse effect gas that is twenty times more powerful than carbon dioxide. If the permafrost melts, the release of methane could cause the greenhouse effect to go out of control, the consequences of which no one could predict."

"Twenty per cent of the world's population consumes 80 per cent of the world's resources."

"The world invests twelve times more in military expenses than in the assistance to developing countries."

"Five thousand persons die everyday after drinking contaminated water; 1 billion persons do not have access to potable water."

"Around 1 billion are afflicted by hunger."

"More than 50 per cent of the grain that is marketed in the world is used for animal feed or biofuels."

"Species are dying one thousand times faster than the natural pace."

"Three fourths of the fishing areas are depleted, diminished or are dangerously decreasing."

"The average temperature during the last 15 years has been the highest ever recorded."

"The ice cover is now 40 per cent thinner that it was 40 years ago."

During the final minutes of the documentary, director Yann Arthus-Bertrand uses a milder language to praise some positive actions by countries he was forced to mention –and I don't mean to offend or hurt anyone.

His final words went as follows:

"It is time for us to be all together. What matters now is not what is gone, but what still prevails. There are still half of the world's forests, thousands of rivers, lakes and glaciers and thousands of successful species. Today we know that solutions are right here. We all have the power to change. Then, what are we waiting for?

It is up to us to write what comes next, together."

The topic that has absorbed most of my efforts –the imminent risk of a war that would be the last in the prehistory of our species-, to which I have devoted 9 Reflections since June 1st, is a problem that becomes more and more serious by the day.

Obviously, 99.9 per cent of persons entertain the hope that elemental common sense would prevail.

Unfortunately, based on all the elements from the reality I perceive, I don't see there is the slightest chance that this could be so.

Therefore, I think it would be far more practical for our peoples to be prepared to cope with that reality. That would be our only hope.

The Iranians have done precisely that, just as we did in October 1962, when we would rather disappear than put down our banners.

Out of mere chance –and not because of the merits of the intelligence or the individual history of anyone of us- things are evolving today just as they were then.

News coming from Iran everyday are not even one millimeter away from their announced position to uphold their just rights to peace and development, but they include a new element: they have already managed to produce 20 kilograms of 20 per cent enriched uranium –an amount enough to produce a nuclear artifact-, which is making all those who long ago decided to attack them to go even crazier. I discussed this with our ambassadors on Friday 16.

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Not even Obama could change that decision –nor has he given so far any indication he would be determined to do that.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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