

CLIMATE CHANGE AS THE HISTORICAL CHALLENGE FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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I would like to share with the audience two main messages.

The first is about the exceptional nature of the time we live in.

It is exceptional by the magnitude of its challenges. Exceptional also by the apparent disproportion between the growing volume of perils, some still in the shade, and the fragility of the tools we have to face them.

The second message is entailed in the first one, and tell us the following: A singular historical period with extraordinary tasks to be performed implies a new vision, prone to promote new practical measures, bold in their reach, and bringing new value in their implementation: “For great evils, we need great remedies”, quoting an old expression of popular Portuguese wisdom.

§1.

We need to build a common narrative on the seriousness of climate change

Climate change is the most important indicator of the exceptional nature of our time.

More than a century ago some pioneers had already alerted towards the risk of a collision course between our way of life, driven by a still young, immature and primitive technological and scientific structure, and the complex realm of dimensions of what was called during millennia by the word “Nature”, and it’s named now as “Environment”.

Climate change emerged in the last twenty five years as **the clear evidence of that collision course**, which is not a mere suspicion, but a matter of factual truth, repeatedly confirmed by the numerous collecting-data networks that cover the Earth system, from artificial satellites to monitoring devices installed under the oceans waters or inside the ice of glaciers and in the permafrost cover, both on Siberia or Western Antarctica.

The current generations living on Earth have a unique and overwhelming responsibility, with no match in any historical situation ever.

The first task over our shoulders is the need to establish a solid and lasting consensus about the **profoundly seriousness and novelty of the danger presented by the climate change process.**

Climate change contains in itself the prospect of a row of possible future events that would merge in a global tragedy. Accordingly, there is an extreme urgency in the need of dissipating, on the grounds of factual and scientific evidence, those myths that tell us about “winners and losers” in the climate crisis. When the “Titanic” sank, the luxury of the cabins was completely indifferent regarding the sad sake of all those who died in the shipwreck. **In the long run there are only climate change losers.**

What is really at stake, in our present decisions, is the future of humankind. Thomas Jefferson, the third American President, wrote that we should avoid both budget deficit and public debt on the ground of the fairness principle between generations. Upon an even more strong reason, we need to abide by the moral and political imperative of fighting against climate change if we want to be fair towards our children and grandchildren. **We have the moral obligation to avoid a kind of ontological debt, impossible to be solved.**

§2.

Towards a new global environmental and climate regime

The second task that should unite today humans everywhere is the enlightened refusal of old methods of thinking and doing, of “business as usual” habits.

We have to understand that the chief driving force that will allow us to find solutions with a similar scale and size of our current environmental and climate problems is the **ability to create new political procedures for decision making and new forms of governance.** That assertion is valid both for States and international relations and for small and large private organizations within civil society as well.

In spite of all its limitations, the European Union is certainly the best contemporary example of innovation at political level. The replacement of an endemic culture of hate and war by institutions that enhance peace and cooperation is certainly, today, an experience with strong universal power of inspiration.

The ambitious proposals advanced by the March 2007 European Council, regarding a new policy linking energy and climate change should be read not only as an internal challenge, directed to the 27 Member States, but also as a negotiation agenda offered by the EU to the rest of the world aiming the need to go further, after 2012, in a more effective path of mitigation and adaptation policies towards climate change, within the wide range open by the UNFCCC.

We should seek for a truly **Pact on Environment and Climate Protection** that should include every country and nation in the planet. Respecting however the **principle of common but differentiated responsibilities**, every country,

either developed or developing, should contribute to the common goal. The reduction and stabilizations of GHG emissions should result from the flexible combination of targets and instruments, using both market mechanisms and regulations, striving for technological innovation but recurring also to a more efficient use of already existing hardware, creating national and sector caps, but also preserving forests and enhancing the positive role of agriculture in the carbon cycle.

§3. Two ways ahead of us

If we allow ourselves to be conquered by the inertia of political egoism, by the narrow logic of the “balance of power” and “national interest”, we will lose the battle against climate change, entering immediately after 2012 into a hobbesian climate and environmental “state of nature”. Instead of a global regime for reduction and stabilizing of the GHG emissions and concentration, we would be placed before a tremendous drain in human skills and financial resources, sacrificed in the altar of a new arms race serving the fight to accede to dwindling natural resources. Such somber situation could at the end of the road drive us to a new major war and a formidable collapse with no parallel in history. In that case, the “Tragedy of the Commons”, studied by Garrett Hardin in 1968, would take real shape before our hopeless eyes.

On the contrary, if we are able to design and implement the political institutions convenient to what I usually call “**compulsory co-operation**”, meaning the urgent need to work together for the common interest of mutual survival, in that case we would have tremendous chances of being able to merge together the best of human intelligence and ingenuity in the endeavor of accomplishing a new industrial revolution, probably the first step to a clever way of living together in the world, creating a new global economy, freeing itself gradually from fossil fuels, and prone to establish a symbiotic, non predatory connection with the Earth ecosystems.

This is the great challenge before of us. Not for today or tomorrow, but for the 21st century as a whole.

This is a challenge for everybody.

However this is a challenge that looks upon the European Union, and upon the Europeans, as the major actors able to accept it, and hopefully to win the great battle ahead of us.

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