

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, “Defend this little planet called Earth”: *lectio magistralis* at “La Sapienza” (Rome, 21 May 2016)

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Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the Nobel Peace Prize for 1980, took the floor in the lecture hall of the Faculty of Letters of Rome’s University, “La Sapienza”, the morning of 6th of June 2016. As the rector Eugenio Gaudio said during his introductory speech, there could not be a better place than that very one to host such a *lectio magistralis*: a lecture about mankind, which is the fundamental element of all the faculty’s curricula.

Considering his personal biography, Esquivel is not just an expert in his own country’s history, Argentina, but someone that shared the suffering of an entire population, surviving one of the worst Latin American dictatorships of the last century and dedicating the rest of his life as a witness: when he was only 33 years old, he left the chair of architecture at the University of Buenos Aires to take part in the creation of a number of pacifist groups such as “Servicio paz y justicia”, becoming known for his activities even abroad. In the first year of General Jorge Rafael Videla’s government, 1976, he attempted to convince the United Nations to open a new commission into the rising number of crimes and violations of human rights that were taking place in his country, but the regime’s reaction came first, and Esquivel was arrested in the spring of 1977 without being tried with a proper trial. What saved him from the regime’s ‘death flights’, whereby Videla’s soldiers threw the prisoners into the sea to get rid of their bodies, was the pressure made by the international community, that finally realized what was going on¹. In a similar way, the audience of the *lectio magistralis* had the opportunity to see that the world is still a place with its iniquity, even if it does not seem to be so everywhere.

After the fall of the regime, Esquivel continued to fight for global justice against his enemies of today, which are consumption, apathy and inequality. According to the sense of his speech, people focus their attention only on the bloody violence that is closest, neglecting the first cause of death in the world: hunger. As he said, ‘the hunger is a silent bomb’, which kills millions of people – children especially – every year, too slow and distant to be heard by the richer continents: malnutrition causes a defect in the children’s immune system, which exposes them to illnesses such as diarrhea and other

* Roma, Sapienza Università di, Italia.

¹ Minà G., *Un mondo migliore è possibile: da Porto Alegre le idee per un futuro vivibile*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 2002, pp. 173-174.

infectious diseases, contributing to the weakening of their nutritional *status*, in a lethal relationship that affects the youngest especially²; on the other hand, Europeans and Americans die for the opposite reason, due to diseases connected to a fatty diet such as diabetes, heart condition and hypertension. To feed this way of life, the international network of industries, investors and organizations – also known as globalization – has exploited the Earth's resources for years, leading its capacity to breaking point.

As an Argentinian, Esquivel knows what it looks like: from the day when Cristobal Colon walked onto the island of Guanahani the morning of 12th October 1492, seizing the ownership of the beach in the name of the Spanish kings and contributing to making 1492 “the diamond point of XV century”³, South America has had dealings with foreign interests, which had cyclically drained the continent's resources: gold, chocolate and sugar. Even today, almost two centuries after the fall of the last of the colonies, the continent still suffers from the western demand from goods. In fact, Esquivel made the point that while the human rights condition of his continent is improving, the environmental resources are still in danger: according to data of the United Nation's development program (UNDP), the average growth of the Human Development Index (HDI) of most of the Latin nations from 1990 to 2014 is 0.72%, leading a country like Argentina into a higher rank than the United Arab Emirates, Portugal and Croatia. Conversely, the Natural Resource Depletion (NRD) index reports that the same nations are losing great portions of their green areas at the same time in favour of their industrial and agricultural activities⁴. More than 20% of Amazonia has been lost in the last fifty years⁵ due to the business of today, soy and beef: in order to meet the increase of international meat consumption of the past decades, foreign and local corporations have set up their ranches even in the forest territory, causing both the loss of natural biodiversity and the identity of the tribes who live in it. When the pastures exhaust the soil resources, they are replaced by the soy cultivations, of which only 6% of the crops goes towards the nutrition of human beings, while the rest is used to feed chickens and pigs in form of flour. The consequences of these practices are not just local: as the first world beef exporter, Brazil has become one of the greatest countries for emissions in the world, adding to the growth of another ‘silent bomb’: global warming.

Under Videla's regime, Esquivel's fight against this enemy is even harder, because it faces an attitude, a lifestyle: according to his spiritual approach, Esquivel blames the idea that there is no alternative to today's consumption,

² Pesaresi C., “La condizione dei bambini nei paesi in via di sviluppo. Relazioni bidirezionali tra infezioni gastroenteriche e malnutrizione”, in *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, 4, 2005, pp. 833-857.

³ Conti S., *Viaggi di scoperta, di conquista e di scienza in America tra Colombo e Malaspina*, Roma, Libreria Scientifica Dias S.r.L. (L.S.D.), 1997, pp. 1, 40.

⁴ Argentina -16.9%, Venezuela -12.2%, Brasil -10.4%, Perú -3.5%, Ecuador -23.6%, Colombia -3.6%, Paraguay -18.6%, Bolivia -9.9%, www.unpd.org.

⁵ Filho J.M., *Amazzonia*, Milano, Corbaccio, 2007, p. 11.

created by those who have interests in shaping people's minds as a huge monoculture depicting globalization as an oligarchical system ruled by ruthless stakeholders. In this world made for customers, not citizens, the life of the people depends on the place where they live: the environmental issues caused by mass production are visible at all scales, so that the consequences of Amazonian deforestation are indirectly forcing the citizens of the Tuvalu and Kiribati islands to evacuate their countries due to the rise in sea level, thousands of kilometers away. As Eduardo Galeano said, the world could be divided into 'countries specialized in winning and others in losing'⁶, so that the wellness of the minor part is made by those who live worse off. Much has been done in these years, including the Paris Agreement on climate change of December 2015, and which has recently become law thanks to its ratification by dozens of countries, including Brazil, USA, China and India: according to the text, the signatories must reduce their CO2 emissions together while financing a fund for the countries geographically more exposed to the effects of climate change.

Progress has been made thanks to the dedication of people like Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who changed his life in a living testament to denounce world injustices, struggling to include environmental crimes in the list of the International Criminal Court jurisdiction. But the goal is still far away and time is running out. Rather than technologies to build dykes, there is the need to change people's minds, teaching the importance of sharing, caring for and preserving the Earth, topics which all belong to geography. As a subject made up of both human and natural sciences, geography has a key role in the understanding of globalization mechanisms, which is the basis whereby to direct human actions to sustainability⁷. By promoting multiculturalism, one of geography's aims is to protect local cultures by knowing their values and histories, studying and finding sustainable alternatives in the regions' development: for instance, the growth of sustainable tourism offering the opportunity to turn local resources into goods by conserving their status. With regard to Amazonia, an example is to be found in the recent case of Yasuni park in Ecuador, that managed to catch worldwide interest: as one of the richest world regions in terms of biodiversity, the park is recognized as one of the main national attractions by tourists, and it was included by UNESCO in the Mab (Man and the Biosphere) programme in 1989. But beneath the forest there is another treasure, petrol, which is the main attraction of another kind of actors: the oil companies. Despite the current situation, where the drills had finally started, the global pressure moved by the risk of losing this natural treasure forced the government to substantially reduce the extraction territory to a 0.1% of the park's surface. In Latin America's contemporary agriculture,

⁶ Galeano E., *Le vene aperte dell'America Latina*, Milano, Sperling Paperback, 2012, p. 3.

⁷ De Vecchis G., "Principi e rappresentazioni dell'educazione ambientale: spazi e distanze", in Ancilli S., Lo Re A., a cura di, *Educare per l'ambiente: percorsi didattici nelle aree naturali protette urbane*, Roma, Carocci, 2010, pp. 13-28.

local communities are helped by NGO organizations in learning the skills needed to start their own sustainable business, restoring the balance between humans and nature, as well as they do for humans and humans.

The complexity of this world is exacerbated by the speed at which it changes, so 'geographical knowledge and skills are more necessary than ever to understand' it⁸, which is what Esquivel wishes the school and university to do. Before time expires, together with the little space that has survived, we need to turn the people back to their role of citizens, shaping their minds in a way to respect themselves and the nature in which they live, teaching the importance to 'share the bread and the freedom', as Adolfo Pérez Esquivel said before leaving.

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⁸ Van Der Schee J., "Geographical education in a changing world", in *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-Reading)*, 1, 2012, pp. 11-15.