

WALLS

Walls can only hold people back temporarily. After a while, even the highest and strongest walls become permeable and, one day, they eventually disappear. Or, suddenly, people just decide to tear them down. The Great Wall of China, the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, Israel's Wall... Ideally, we should be able to anticipate the future –a capacity that is distinctly human– so as to render those walls unnecessary. But in any case, we must immediately seek the roots of the problem to understand why people are often willing to risk their lives tearing down walls and climbing fences. That way we won't make a spectacle of ourselves, standing in front of television cameras to condemn the present situation and demand respect for the human rights of a few, when for years thousands of immigrants have crossed –or have drowned trying to cross– the “sea wall” in pathetic boats, bringing with them the same rights, illusions and humiliations as those we have seen on live television, climbing fences with the tragic and insurmountable pole vault of hunger and neglect.

How can those who have kept illegal immigrants working under precarious contracts in degrading circumstances now justify their frantic demands for human rights? How can certain politicians, countries and European institutions that have continually failed to fulfill their development commitments to the neediest countries now place all of the blame on Morocco? How wonderful that now, for whatever reason, human rights are finally being discussed! It would be equally wonderful if all of the world

leaders, parliamentarians, council members, communications media, educational institutions, associations... took advantage of this tragic occasion to carefully reread the Universal Declaration, commencing with its enlightening preamble that affirms that “whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...”. Can you imagine? “Freedom from fear and want!” So many things would change! If instead of making terrifying apocalyptic predictions, we would soothe, learn, anticipate and mitigate. If instead of continuing to postpone the commitments assumed thirty years ago to develop the less-advanced countries while continuing to exploit their natural resources, we would invest in their progress and self-esteem.

In 2000 the heads of state and government solemnly declared the United Nations “Millennium Objectives.” Objective V concerning human rights, democracy and good governance affirms that we will “take measures to ensure respect for and protection of human rights (...) to eliminate the increasing acts of racism and xenophobia in many societies and to promote greater harmony and tolerance in all societies.”

At the summit held last September in New York, and despite having to recognize that little progress has been made toward compliance with this and other essential resolutions, such as the eradication of poverty, important agreements were reached, including the following: “We acknowledge the important nexus between international migration and development and the need to deal with the challenges and opportunities that migration presents to countries of origin, destination and transit.” We have

a duty to remember. Not many years ago, during the 1960s, it was Spaniards who crossed the “border of abundance”, which was then located at the Pyrenees. From there they spread out toward countries that needed their help to work at jobs which, due to their level of prosperity, local workers were no longer willing to do. Then came the internal migrations within Spain and later, when Spain had moved to a richer neighborhood within the global village, foreign immigration, not only to our country but throughout the European Union.

We have a duty to remember in order to be able to finally keep so many promises to assist in the endogenous education and development of those countries of origin, so that immigrants’ abandoning their homes and families will no longer be done out of sheer necessity to be able to survive, but rather shall become a process of incorporation and integration resulting from agreements benefiting both parties. We are finally realizing the enormous error we made in failing to fulfill the international cooperation goals set by the United Nations in the 1970s, and especially the pledge to contribute 0,7% of the GDP of the most advanced nations to promote development in the least developed. Replacing aid with loans further disrupted those goals and, despite years of protests from many institutions, non-governmental organizations, etc., has resulted in increased poverty and debt in those countries, broadening rather than closing the gap between the rich and the poor and cutting a deeper gash in the global social fabric that we were seeking to repair.

The best way to avoid these walls in the future would be the agreement that may result from the Euro-African Conference that the Spanish government has just proposed. The Secretary General of the United Nations has affirmed, or rather reaffirmed, that immigration problems will not be

resolved with arrests, but rather with human rights. And this must begin with a general mobilization in favor of providing the aid that we have denied the most needy nations for over forty years.

Based on the Marshall Plan model, the best “wall” would be a global development plan (agriculture, industry, health, culture, education, adequate housing...) in the poor areas of the world. This multidimensional mobilization would provide the best foundation for stability and security in the world as a whole. To implement this it is urgent to admit the failure of having replaced universal values with the laws of the marketplace, and return to politics based on ideals and ideologies founded on what the UNESCO constitution defines as “democratic principles:” justice, liberty, equality and solidarity. Action based on solidarity and a respect for all ethnic groups and cultures provides the best guarantee of unity. There are those who are determined to unify the diverse by force. But they are wrong. We must learn the lessons of history and avoid attitudes that did not exactly result in harmony and consensus, but rather in conflict and violence. Force, always fleeting, cannot replace the will to coexist. The grandeur of the melting pot of different identities resides in the bonds of solidarity it creates.

The walls that are hardest to scale and tear down are the walls in our minds. That must never be forgotten. Walls built of hastily-uttered words and thoughtless judgments, when we react to a proposal without having studied it with care, and reject, condemn and underscore only those aspects that make it appear dangerous in the eyes of our citizens. This is not the way to illuminate the future. That can be done only if we work to calmly express our points of view, while listening to others without condemning their ideas

prematurely. Sooner or later, the proposals, and not protests against them, will prevail.

This includes the walls of double standards, such as those from which the human rights of Cubans are invoked, while ignoring the rights of the prisoners at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo on that same island. Walls of silence, of misunderstanding, walls from which public opinion can be manipulated. Together with freedom of expression, the access to information that is as reliable as possible, is equally essential.

And there are likewise walls of commercial interests, such as the agricultural subsidies of the European Union and the United States, amounting to over 1,000 million dollars daily... Walls that are barriers to reconciliation and to mutual understanding. The solution lies in calm dialogue, joint analysis and in listening to one another. Dialogues among cultures and civilizations to achieve alliances rather than confrontation, so that the immense majority of citizens' desire to live in peace can serve to isolate the violent, including those who only build walls to defend themselves, ignoring those who attempt to tear them down. Withdrawal behind a wall will not protect a culture. That can only be achieved through mutual exchange and enrichment. Through the word. When it appears that there is no solution, in the midst of confusion and chaos, we must talk. Talk and share commitments, because the time for complacency, accepting the status quo, and the role of the spectator... is finally coming to an end. Nothing justifies violence. And nothing is every totally achieved by force.

For this world without physical or intellectual walls, today more than ever we need the supranational legal and ethical framework that only the United Nations can provide.

In September, 1994, at a concert in Oslo directed by Zubin Mehta joined by a chorus of Palestinian and Israeli children and youth, I wrote a poem that begins: “And we will plant olive trees/where once there were thorns.” This is what we must all do together. So that the human rights of others may finally be respected, we, the more prosperous, must meet our commitments daily. Forsaking any and all short-term interests. Focusing on the next generations, rather than on the next elections. It is said that this is the difference between statesmen and small-time politicians. The latter may be frenetically applauded by a court of self-serving flatterers. But our youth, those who after an initial period of inertia and reticence understand that what really counts is the future, will despise them because –as Albert Camus said- “they who could do so much dared to do so little.” Because when they should have thought of others, they thought only of themselves.

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