

A VERY SICK WORLD

Extract from *The Eye of the Needle* by Jon Sobrino SJ, translated by Dinah Livingstone (Darton, Longman and Todd 2008).

On 6 November 1989 Ignacio Ellacuría¹ gave a speech in Barcelona, which turned out to be the last speech he ever made: ‘Together with all the poor and oppressed people in the world, we need utopian hope to encourage us to believe we can change the course of history.’ That was nearly twenty years ago. What about today?

Certainly, history has brought about important new developments. From a historical viewpoint, René Girard thinks that we are seeing the birth of a kinder humanity, that is more concerned for the victims: ‘No society has ever been as concerned about the victims as ours is.’² However, he believes this is ‘really only a show of concern’;³ he does not want to ‘call the world we live in blameless’⁴ But he does insist that ‘it is an unprecedented phenomenon’.⁵ It could be something like what happened in the axial age, from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, as described by Jaspers. And, despite his strong criticism, which we quote below, Don Pedro Casaldáliga says that ‘humanity is “on the move” and turning towards truth and justice. There is a lot of utopian hope and a lot of commitment on this sad planet.’⁶ Nevertheless, today we are still deep in a *capital-civilisation*, which causes extreme want, dehumanises and attacks the human family: it excludes and impoverishes people and divides the world into winners and losers. Our civilisation continues to be ‘very sick’. As Jean Ziegler puts it, its life – both its material and spiritual life – is ‘under threat of death’.⁷

¹ On 16 November 1989, Jon Sobrino’s colleagues at the Central American University in San Salvador, the University Rector Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, five other Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter, were murdered by a Death Squad. Jon Sobrino escaped because he was speaking abroad.

² *Veo a Satán caer como el relámpago*, Barcelona, 2002, p. 209. (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 210.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 209.

⁶ ‘Utopía necesaria como el pan de cada día’, January, 2006.

⁷ ‘It is threatened with death by large-scale international finance capital, that makes the market’s invisible dealing the supreme and sole arbiter of history,’ (J. Ziegler, UN Special Advisor on the Right to Food, in ‘Entrevista’, *El Pais*, 9 May 2005).

The wrongs suffered by the majority: injustice, cruelty and death

There is more wealth on Earth, but also more injustice. Africa has been called ‘the world’s dungeon’, a continental *Shoah*. According to the FAO,⁸ 2,500 million people survive on Earth on less than two euros a day, and every day 25,000 people die of hunger. Desertification threatens the lives of 1,200 million people in about hundred different countries. (Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga)⁹

Sometimes we hear that our present globalised world offers new life chances to poor peoples, through migration. We should not rule this out or deny that migration may alleviate some evils, when people are driven to it by necessity. But today migration is not a simple readjustment of the human species – which has occurred throughout history and can be potentially enriching. Migrations today are particularly cruel because of how and why they happen. Let us quote Casaldáliga again:

Immigrants are denied human fellowship and even the ground on which to stand. The United States is building a 1,500 kilometre wall against Latin America; while Europe is putting up a barrier against Africa in the south of Spain. As well as being iniquitous, this is all part of a programme. In a horrifying letter, written ‘behind separating walls’, one African immigrant warns: ‘I beg you not to think that it is normal for us to live this way; because in fact, the cause is the ongoing injustice built into the inhuman systems that kill and impoverish people [...] Do not support that system by your silence.’¹⁰

Without batting an eyelid, we carry on in this crazy, shameless way, that is unjust, cruel, contemptuous and insulting. And we often cover up what we do. Here are just a few facts:

Worldwide spending on arms and armies in 2006 was a staggering 3.3 billion dollars a day,¹¹ while the total value of support to agriculture in rich countries still runs at over a billion dollars a day.¹²

⁸ Current World Food Programme estimates (http://www.wfp.org/aboutwfp/facts/hunger_facts.asp). In 2002, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said, ‘Worldwide 840 million people are undernourished in 1998-2000.’ This figure grew to 854 million in 2001-03 (FAO, State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2006) – page 8.

⁹ *Ibid.* In the Old Testament *shoá* (Hebrew, Greek: *holocaustos*) is not a metaphor taken from the *cultic* sacrifices, in which the victim was totally destroyed. To designate these the Pentateuch uses the terms *korbán* and *'olah*. *Shoá* is used, after the exile, to describe the *historical* destruction and extermination of human beings. Luis Sebastián has just published a book, *África, pecado de Europa* (Trotta, 2006). He uses the term ‘sin’, religious language, since no other civilised, democratic language appears to have the power that is needed to speak of Africa as it is.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook 2007, Chapter 8.

¹² OECD, *Agricultural Policies in OECD Countries: Monitoring and Evaluation, 2007 - Highlights* p.38 (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/3/39524780.pdf>).

The arms trade is one of the most profitable for all governments in the international community. Together with China, the G-8 countries account for 90% of arms exports. At least half a million people are killed annually by small arms. (Amnesty International)¹³

The aim of globalisation is to dominate the rest of us, any other country, any other world [...] Globalisation is simply westernisation. The West wants to be the centre of the world. (Aminata Traoré)¹⁴

Directly or indirectly, hunger, weapons, forced migrations through lack of land, water or soil, result in *death*. There are also diseases, which in one way or another lead to death: AIDS, malaria – with the scandalous complicity of the multinational pharmaceutical companies, who have sought to protect their own patents by lobbying against making much cheaper life-saving generic treatments available.¹⁵ Then there are many other sources of suffering, such as unemployment and social exclusion. None of these belong to the order of nature. Their causes are historical. And it is important to recognise that today the fundamental cause is capitalism.

‘Real capitalism’ is responsible for the organisation of the world economy that is ethically and morally wrong, for the shameful and absurd coexistence in an ever more integrated world of appalling poverty with unprecedented wealth.¹⁶

All this happens today without being noticed.¹⁷ When there is criticism, it focuses more on the *adjective* – such as *savage* capitalism – rather than on capitalism itself and its governing principle: *the right to property*.¹⁸ As long as that principle is held to be

¹³ Amnesty International Report , 2005.

¹⁴ ‘To help Africa you have to understand it first. We don’t want you to think for us.’ From an interview in Bamako, capital of Mali, during the celebration of the World Social Forum, January 19-23, 2006. The author was born in Mali 58 years ago. She has a doctorate in social psychology and psychopathology, is a former minister of culture, consultant for the United Nations, community leader, and writer.

¹⁵ See T. Forcades i Vila, *Los crímenes de las grandes compañías farmacéuticas*, Barcelona, 2006.

¹⁶ L. de Sebastián, *Problemas de la globalización*, Barcelona, 2005, p. 4.

¹⁷ ‘Today there a very few people who still say that poverty is caused by injustice’ (J. Vitoria, ‘Una teología de ojos abiertos. Teología y justicia. Perspectivas’, *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 69 [2006]). And even fewer relate it to capitalism.

¹⁸ Yves Calvez spoke recently about ‘the silences of the Church’s social doctrine’. Referring to these, José Comblin states that this doctrine ‘does not question the system’. It criticises what is referred to in the adjectives, such as *savage* capitalism, but not capitalism itself. John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem Exercens* did deal with the question; he stated that labour was the fundamental principle of economics and anthropology (see the commentary of I. Ellacuría, ‘Conflicto entre trabajo y capital en la presente fase histórica. Un análisis de la Encíclica de Juan Pablo II sobre el trabajo humano’,

absolute and unassailable, any economy in the world will be structurally configured by a dynamic of oppression; humans beings will be rated according to their ability to produce wealth; their right to possess and enjoy wealth will prolong and add to the oppression of others and, of course, widen the gap between the haves and have-nots.

Ultimately, this is a *cruel* society. It is cruel because of the suffering it inflicts on the oppressed, and because of its unfeeling attitude (although there are valiant exceptions) towards that suffering in a world of abundance. Leonardo Boff says: ‘When future generations judge our time, they will call us barbarians, inhuman and pitiless, because of our heartlessness towards the sufferings of our brothers and sisters.’¹⁹ To give just one example: ‘If human beings had even a little humanity, just 4% of the 225 largest fortunes in the world would be enough to give food, water, health and education to all.’²⁰ That is obscene.

We could go on quoting indefinitely.²¹ The figures we have given refer to today, not to some pre-globalisation period and they come from responsible and informed sources. But if we want them to help heal our civilisation’s ‘serious illness’, we must heed the warning of a Colombian missionary who has spent eighteen years in Uganda: ‘Statistics don’t bleed; people do.’

We are always seeking excuses to avoid confronting – or even coming into contact with – reality. Looking back, we might say that fifty years ago there was more wretched poverty on the planet, and in a sense that is true. But we must tell the whole truth; that is the only honest way to face reality.²² Looking to the future, there might even be a sense

Estudios Centroamericanos 409 [1982], pp. 1008-1024). This papal insight did not make it into the Church’s public discourse, probably because of its resemblance to the thought of Marx, especially during the 1980s, when Reagan was determined to crush the revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. Politically, any outright questioning of capitalism was considered to be going too far. Thus the Church’s social doctrine was co-opted. Ellacuría had already said that, whereas the Church’s social doctrine aimed more at (merely) moderating capitalism, liberation theology aimed more at humanising socialism.

¹⁹ *La oración de San Francisco*, Santander, 1999, p. 98.

²⁰ ‘¿Quién manda en el mundo?’, in *Servicios Koinonía*, 20 January 2006. UNDP Human Development Report, 1997. p.30: ‘It is estimated that the additional cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education for all, basic health care of all, reproductive health care for all women, adequate food for all, and safe water and sanitation for all is roughly \$40 billion a year. That is less than 4% of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world.’

²¹ We have piled up enough quotes to make our case. Please forgive the author for not always being able to give the precise sources from which they are taken.

²² ‘Today an estimated 30% of humanity live in dire poverty, which is much less than in earlier times, when it might have been 80 or 90% of the total. But it is also true that the kings, nobles, bankers, and landlords of the past were economic pigmies compared to the rich people of today. Modern societies are becoming ever more divided societies (two societies in one). They are made up of two separate groups whose lives are far apart, with very different standards of living and very different ways of using those societies’ material goods and culture. [...] The current difference between

of euphoria: within two decades China may be able to eliminate the hunger of hundreds of millions of people²³ – although we do not know whether they will manage it, or if they do, at what human cost.²⁴

But even if we are optimistic, reality still screams at us. ‘It can’t be like this!’²⁵ ‘God is angry.’²⁶ ‘The unreasonable has become reasonable.’²⁷ And we haven’t even mentioned Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Darfur...

Woes of the spirit suffered by human beings: dehumanisation

All this turns the vast majority in our world into ‘crucified people, [...] whose human face continues to be wiped out by the sin of the world. The powers of that world keep robbing them of everything, snatching their life from them, yes above all, their life.’²⁸

Ellacuría stresses the attack on life and that is where we began. The wealth-civilisation does not produce life; to a greater or lesser extent, it produces various kinds

wealth and poverty is more extreme than it has ever been before in history. [...] The inequality would not be so terrible if the worse off were living decently. The disgusting thing is they are not even doing that.’ L. de Sebastián, *Problemas de la globalización*, cit., pp. 2-4.

²³ Leonardo Boff comments: ‘I am frankly alarmed at the catastrophe that will result from the entrance of this giant into the capitalist circuit, which is characterised not only by exploitation of people, but also by destruction of the environment.’

²⁴ According to deputies of the Chinese Communist Party, 80% of Chinese businesses, do not offer their workers contracts. And with the 20% that do, the contract is for less than one year. The ‘Chinese economic miracle’ is doing serious harm: corruption and a massively widening income gap. In fact, Chinese development has often eroded labour standards and destroyed jobs in other countries, especially in the Third World. Something similar could occur with India. ‘If we were ever found talking in a group the supervisors would threaten us with the idea of the plant being closed, “If you don’t reach the production targets then all this work will go China,” they said.’ Lupe, electronics worker, Mexico in *Clean up your computer: working conditions in the electronics sector*, CAFOD, London, 2004. p2.
<http://www.cafod.org.uk/var/storage/original/application/phpYyhizc.pdf>

²⁵ Allow me to use words written by K. Rahner in a completely different context. In the 1960s, given the deplorable situation of the dogmatic theology then in use, in his first great article on the Trinity, he attacked the way the doctrine was then approached: ‘It can be seen to be wrong simply by observing its effective reality: *it can’t be like this*.’ (‘Advertencias sobre el tratado dogmático *De Trinitate*’ I in *Escritos de Teología* IV m, Madrid, 1962, p.117). John XXIII wanted to say something similar before the Council when he asked for ‘the church’s windows to be thrown open’. Inside the Church you couldn’t breathe any fresh air.

²⁶ See A. Nolan’s magnificent book *God in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B., Eerdmans, 1988).

²⁷ H. Marcuse said this many years ago in *One-Dimensional Man*.

²⁸ I. Ellacuría, ‘Discernir “el signo” de los tiempos’, *Diakonía* 17 (1981), p. 58.

of death. Neither does it humanise people, which is what we want to focus on now. It is *inhuman* to deprive others of life when it would be possible to ensure it. But even more inhuman is the way that it is done, unjustly, cruelly and contemptuously – sometimes even in the name of a god. And it is inhuman that this deprivation of life should go hand in hand with the head-on pursuit of success and affluence. The wealth-civilisation fosters thinking and feeling that create a cultural and ideological climate poisoning the air the human spirit breathes. So not only is the *oikos* – our fundamental life-web – sick and in need of healing, but also the very *air* our spirits breathe. We are dehumanised, because we forget the *truth*. There is a *cover-up* of the truth and a proliferation of lies, *silence* in the face of scandalous inequality between rich and poor, *numbness* of the rich – and also of the poor – generated and indeed intended by the mass media.

It is dehumanising to forget *decency*. It is a brazen *mockery* of the victims to fail to implement important UN resolutions on fundamental human rights. There is massive *corruption* in nearly all spheres of power, justified by the unquestioned dogma of profit. There is *impunity* before, during and after atrocities, often carried out by governments themselves. It is also wrong to turn western democracy into an *absolute dogma*, without checking how it operates.²⁹

It is dehumanising to forget *maturity*, especially now when we hear that our world has ‘come of age’. There are *forms of fundamentalism*, that look attractive but have serious consequences: individualism, superficiality, success and pleasure are heedlessly accepted, promoted and rewarded. Simplistic and infantile attitudes are sometimes expressed with sentimental language in politics, and particularly often, in religion.

Then there is the dehumanising *compliance* of the West with Empire – *imperium magnum latrocinium* (the ‘great thieving empire’), as Augustine called it, even if we don’t talk like that much nowadays. This servility in one form or another, makes the West an accomplice in that Empire’s economic and military crimes and its human rights violations. It accepts the arrogance and domination of some human beings over others as normal. And it accepts obedience to that Empire’s orders as necessary, or at least understandable, if we want to be assured of a ‘good life’, ‘success’, and ‘security’, the ultimate ‘saving’ benefits.

²⁹ The critique of democracy is an important long-term task. Here we point out that Ellacuría regarded the mere assessment of its procedures as inadequate. Democracy has to be understood as a form of government that seeks the common good, the necessary basis for establishing a society that is inclusive, just and in solidarity with the least well off. This means that democracy raises not only political but also social and economic issues that are equally important. Briefly, a social democracy is one that makes it possible to change the unjust conditions in which the majority of people live. Accordingly, Ellacuría thought that democracy has meaning only in so far as it is based on the reality of the poor majorities, those large impoverished sectors that are excluded by the dominant groups. That is what must be checked. If the assessment is not positive, there is not much sense in talking about democracy

In short, we are dehumanised by our *selfishness*,³⁰ and our *heartlessness* towards the dramatic facts of cruel poverty, AIDs, exclusion and discrimination. We are dehumanised by our *contempt* for poor and indigenous people, and for our mother Earth.

We regard this dehumanisation as quite natural and something we can do nothing about, because that is the way things are. We don't notice much since, unlike physical evils that lead to physical death, spiritual woes are not so easily reckoned. But they are extremely harmful.

Ignoring human dignity

The first dehumanising aspect of such attempts to eliminate poverty is the way human dignity is ignored, almost on principle, as if that dignity had nothing to do with the matter. Or accepting that any means of alleviating poverty will do. That way of thinking is not only unethical, but also dehumanising, because we are not talking about wild animals but human beings.

It is also dehumanising to accept so readily in practice, even if not in theory, the slow rate of progress in overcoming poverty and the targets countries set for themselves. From the viewpoint of abundance, the rate of progress may seem relatively human and quick, but from the viewpoint of poverty – and decency – it is inhumanly slow, and in some cases, as in some sub-Saharan countries, there has even been a postponement of the dates set. Development specialists have said that the millennium goals are flawed and will do little to diminish poverty.³¹ 'Reducing by half the number of people suffering from hunger will take 145 years, and not be achieved by 2015, as 189 heads of state had guaranteed.'³²

It is also dehumanising that in the search for solutions, ethics is sidelined. Abolishing hunger requires technological know-how and strategies and a good dose of

³⁰ Here are some examples: According to Kofi Annan (1999): 'Official development aid is at its lowest level for the last fifty years. 'Western aid to the Third World has simply decreased, and I regard that as a crime,' said James Wolfenson, former president of the World Bank (2000). Flavio Miragaya Perri, Brazil's ambassador to the FAO, speaks of an original sin, committed by the colonial powers from time immemorial. And he adds: 'First World aid to combat hunger and poverty (around 50 billion dollars annually) is equal to one-seventh of the subsidies that are given to their farmers (350 billion dollars) to grow cheaper products that have a competitive advantage in the market,' (taken from *Co-Latino*, San Salvador, 1 June 2004). Since 2005, however, aid has increased but the world's richest countries are still failing to fulfil the pledges they made at the G8 meeting in 2005.

³¹ 'Many poor countries, especially those in Africa, will miss the Millennium Development Goals by a large margin. But neither African inaction nor a lack of aid will necessarily be the reason. Instead, responsibility for near-certain 'failure' lies with the overly-ambitious goals themselves and unrealistic expectations placed on aid.' *What's Wrong with the Millennium Development Goals?* Michael Clemens and Todd Moss; Center for Global Development, Washington D.C.; September 2005. (www.cgdev.org/files/3940_file_WWMGD.pdf)

³² Figure given in the demonstration against poverty in Madrid on 21 October 2006.

political pragmatism. But ignoring ethics does matter. It matters for reasons of effectiveness: a top FAO official stated that ‘solving the problem of hunger today is not basically an economic or political problem; it is an ethical problem.’ And it matters on principle. If we can dispense with ethics to solve human problems, it means that efficiency and ethics can be divorced without damage to humanity. The ancient ideal, at least aspiration, of marrying virtue and happiness vanishes. All that remains is pragmatism with its strong brutalising potential.

And the same can be said for the language which is often used about human problems like hunger: *political will* is needed. Firstly, that means recognising that the political will is just not there, since hunger continues. And secondly, since *political will* is merely *human will*, the language of politics is being used as a cover-up. If there is no political will, that simply means that there is no effective human will to eliminate hunger. Confronted with the scandal of a hungry world, the term ‘political’ will is less shaming. It is used because it is less blatant than ‘human’ will, which asks us straight out: do we human beings want to eliminate hunger? We can debate the *politics* of this in order to seek a cop-out, and that is why the term is preferred. There can be no cop-out when we speak of the *human will* to eliminate hunger.

Let’s leave it there. Jean Ziegler says: ‘A child who dies of hunger is murdered.’³³ Those words bring Ivan Karamazov to mind.³⁴ Karamazov’s anger when children were torn apart by dogs by order of a landlord, who was a former soldier, found no consolation in the thought that those children might go to a place where they would become at one with a universal harmony. ‘If they invite me to that heaven, I’ll refuse to go.’³⁵

³³ *Op. cit.* And Irene Khan, director of Amnesty International, says that ‘governments are losing their moral compass’ (11 September 2001).

³⁴ Likewise, we should not trivialise the feast of the ‘Holy Innocents’ or just treat it as a decorative detail of our Christmas liturgy. Whether the story is historical or not, it is about innocent babies cruelly murdered.

³⁵ This refers to an incident in which a general and landlord ordered his dogs to be set upon an eight year old child (one child) who had flung a stone and injured the paw of his favourite dog: ‘I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.’