

94 Paradoxes to Consider in the 21st Century

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In memory of my grandparents, Leopoldo Martínez Olavarría and José Nucete Sardi, who always inspire my path through public service.

And for the most intimate reasons for my commitment to the struggle for a more just society: my wife Analuisa and my children Leopoldo Henrique, Analuisa, Eduardo Ignacio, and Alejandro Antonio.

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Introduction

Because of the education I received at home, I understood that law and politics could be tools to act for justice, equal opportunities, and progress, longings I have carried with me since I was a teenager. That impulse has not changed. It has been strengthened and enriched over time. For more than three decades, I have studied trends affecting individuals and families, debated them in private and in public, organized meetings with specialists, and written articles—many of them gathered in this book—that testify to my interest in and vocation for the direction of world affairs. At the end of 2016, I began a series of articles with the title “Tendencias” (Spanish for “Trends”). From then, throughout 2017 and until the end of March 2018, I published the ninety-four pieces selected for this volume on Sundays in the *El Nacional* newspaper in Venezuela and in the blog *IQLatino*, published by the Center for Democracy and Development of the Americas in the United States, an entity of which I am the founder and president.

When I set out to start this series, I had the idea that a score of articles would be enough to share concerns about the state of affairs in which we live. That first estimate would soon prove insufficient; I soon realized that an expansion of the whole project would be inevitable. Reflection on one trend led to the next, and that one to another, in an uninterrupted chain, to the understanding of the profound interconnection of the problems that threaten or simply pose immense challenges to civilization.

I have been fortunate that these texts found an echo in newspapers and portals, as well as on radio and television stations in Spain, Mexico, and the United States, and other Latin American countries. I have been interviewed to talk about their contents, and readers from different parts of the continent have written to me or commented on social networks. These exchanges stimulated me to conceive of this book.

A Time of Conflicts

Accordingly, *94 Paradoxes to Think About the 21st Century* speaks of the most prominent trends at this crucial hour of civilization. It has its starting point in a perception that many scholars share that we are at a moment of decisive confluences. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, ethnic and religious conflicts have erupted, terrorism has expanded, populism has mutated and is booming, dictatorships have been reinvented, environmental problems have intensified, pandemics have become recurrent and more frequent, the gap between rich and poor has widened, organized crime has acquired a status never seen before in history, and violence is increasingly used by groups that feel legitimate. In the midst of this alarming state of affairs, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is taking place, the product of the growing process of robotization in factories and digitalization and automation in our lives and reality. Nothing escapes their expansion and consequences. Experts from all disciplines and from numerous countries agree on this; we are going through a time in which the future of humanity and of the world as we have known it until now is being decided.

Most of the indicators show that economic, political, and environmental problems have already crossed the danger line and have begun to produce death and substantial damage. It is enough to assess the aftermath of climate change events to understand what I am talking about. Droughts, floods, landslides, and climate disruptions not only kill productive humans and animals, but they also destroy infrastructure and roads, homes and schools, factories and crops, transportation, and electricity grids. In other words, climate change takes lives and impoverishes people.

In politics and economics, in knowledge and lifestyles, in ways of learning and working, changes accumulate with unequal impacts. All of this directly affects people, families, communities, institutions, and nations. Waves of events of different sorts, which have complex interactions with each other, act on us and determine the course of our lives.

Since the impacts are sustained and visible, citizens and organizations

have emerged across the five continents that develop initiatives to act against destruction and poverty. Foundations, non-profit associations, organized communities, NGOs, churches, political organizations, and government agencies work to stop and reverse the deterioration. This is also a clear trend at the beginning of this century, but, admittedly, it is an unequal struggle. The forces that struggle with the imperative of violence, of wealth at any cost and ignorance of human rights, are powerful in many ways. As a result, they are advancing, basically because the vast majority still does not notice the gravity of the dismal situation in which we find ourselves, nor does it see the consequences if we do not put a democratic brake on excesses.

This book is nothing more than a collection of notes on the issues at stake. Faced with the magnitude of the facts, one could say that these ninety-four paradoxes amount to a handful of sand in the desert. However, although its effect may be limited, I feel it as an indivisible task of my personal, professional, and civic responsibility. The mere fact that I have aroused interest among readers from various countries, who have written to me or commented face-to-face on some articles, confirms to me that any contribution, on whatever scale, has significance. I am convinced that we are in a phase where exchanging and debating ideas and raising awareness is urgent and vital.

The Crisis of Democracy

These ninety-four paradoxes for thinking about the twenty-first century are, in essence, a review of trends that demand responses to make society fairer and more equitable so that the impacts of the new digital modernity can be capitalized on in the light of a humanitarian worldview. Therefore, we can rise in the defense and respect of human rights, in the strengthening of democracies, and in their establishment too. And, of course, to take on the socio-economic challenges of this era, ensuring that economic growth is sustainable in every way.

Of all the trends I reflect on in these pages, there is one that is

particularly disturbing: the crisis of democracy. Our time is marked by the weakening of democracy, which forces us to mobilize against the currents that undermine it and jeopardize its viability.

When I speak of the crisis of democracy, I am not only thinking of my native Venezuela or the countries that do not have it or are oppressed by neo-authoritarians and populists of all stripes. I am also referring to that of my adopted country, of which I am also a proud citizen, the United States of America. And that crisis has very serious implications because the leadership of this country is very influential at the international level; much depends on whether it is positive or negative in nature.

From Venezuela to the United States

I wasn't surprised when Hugo Chávez came to power. Democracy in Venezuela had made great strides, particularly in its first two decades, but something about his breakthrough was foreseeable at the time. The inequalities were deep, the abuse of privileges constant, and economic growth regressive. In my first book, *Economic Democracy* (1996), I warned that the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus would have an impact on Latin America. They would throw us into a pendulum movement between economic approaches lacking social focus and populisms alien to the realities of production, and this would put democracies at risk.

It was always clear to me that the one chosen by Chávez was a path of destruction and subjugation. I decided to act against tyranny with the tenacious support of my father, in spite of the risks that my mother, my wife, and my loved ones warned me about. I went into politics—a story I will tell one day in the detail it deserves—until I was forced to go into exile and leave Venezuela.

After an exhaustive evaluation of our situation, my wife Analuisa and I, thinking above all to protect the future of our children, made the painful decision to travel to the United States, not knowing at the beginning that we would end up staying for so long. We had both studied and worked

there, we knew the strength of its institutions, and we had witnessed a tradition that offered opportunities to immigrants.

I had been living in the United States for twelve years when Donald Trump assumed the presidency in January 2017. During that period, as a US-Venezuelan citizen, I became involved in US politics. I worked on the campaign for the reelection of Barack Obama in 2012. Together with renowned leaders of the Latin American community, I participated in the creation and development of two projects—the Latino Victory Project and IQLatino—to empower Hispanic leadership and promote progressive policies aligned with the interests and priorities of the Latino community in the United States. I also became part of the Hispanic leadership of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, the National Democratic Committee, and the leadership of the Democratic part of my home state, the Commonwealth of Virginia.

While I was not surprised that Chávez came to power in Venezuela, I did not expect that Trump would win the presidency of the United States of America. Trump’s

surprising emergence alarmed me greatly once. Like millions of Democrats, I had seen him advance against the nation’s values and institutions with a supremacist, racist, and xenophobic discourse, without his own party seeking to control him in Congress.

My participation in US politics since 2012 led me to understand certain factors driven by the most extreme conservative and religious elements of the Republican Party, which contributed to creating the conditions for the rise of Trump. In particular, I refer to two issues: first, the growing influence of major corporations—that is, money—in US public affairs; and second, the establishment of electoral practices that lead to voter exclusion or oppression to weaken the political representation of minorities, immigrants, and progressive citizens—groups that are clearly growing in size in the United States. Gerrymandering and the manipulation of voter registries, which are practices aligned with Republican majorities in state legislatures, constitute nothing less than a

violation of the right to vote.

The confluence of these two trends is having a dangerous impact on the makeup of the US judiciary and the Supreme Court in particular, with an effort to turn them into instruments of social regression imposed by religious conservatism and the corporate interests of the elite.

The 2016 elections in the United States highlighted a third issue which correlates to the polarization of public opinion: the information bubbles of the world of algorithms, which define our navigation on social networks. This is what we know as the era of the “post-truth” or the “desired falsehood.” This element, connected to the capacity developed by Russia to interfere with and influence the outcome of elections in the United States—and probably earlier to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom—represents an immense challenge; another of the risks introduced, along with its immense benefits, by the advance of the digital revolution in which we are immersed.

The Black Box

During the 2015 and 2016 election campaigns—Democratic Party primaries and general elections—I had the privilege of conversing with major leaders, including Hillary Clinton herself. No one underestimated the threat represented by Trump. From those days, I vividly remember an encounter with Joe Biden, then-vice president. The grandson of

Irish Catholic immigrants, Biden has not remained indifferent to Trump’s attacks on Latinos. During a meeting at the Latino Victory Project headquarters, he shared with us a great story, reflective of his values in sharp contrast and opposition to Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric.

In a meeting between Biden with Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, they chatted about the search for the plane that had recently disappeared over the South China Sea and was occupying the interest of international public opinion. Biden, wanting to discuss geopolitical issues, asked Prime Minister Lee about China. Lee told him that the Chinese, like everyone else, were looking for the black box. Biden

assumed he was referring to the search for the missing plane. Lee Kuan Yew made it clear that he was not referring to that black box, but rather the one that contained the secret of the success of the United States as a nation.

Biden told him that, after thirty-six years in the Senate and nearly eight as vice president, he had had the privilege of seeing the secret formula for success kept in that black box. “What is it?” asked Lee. To which Biden replied, “The formula for success lies in immigration. The United States has been privileged in its historical evolution because every thirty or forty years, it benefits from waves of immigration that bring with them the best of the world: honest people willing to work tirelessly, to innovate, and to build families by adopting the United States with as much love as their homeland of origin. That’s the secret.”

Bill Clinton’s Perspective

Another exchange that I want to record here took place with Bill Clinton in Arlington, Virginia, with the state’s Hispanic leadership. The former president warned us about the global importance of defeating Trump. His reasoning was based on three central ideas. The first: a Trump victory would encourage his equivalents in Europe and elsewhere, where, fortunately, important consensus have been forged among social democrats, Christian democrats, and right-wing sectors on issues vital to the global economy and security. Trump would jeopardize the relative global stability partly achieved by these agreements. Second, Trump would not only test to the extreme our democratic institutions, he would send alarming signals on civil and human rights that would

undermine the prestige and influence of the United States to build sustainable solutions within the framework of international law and multilateralism. Third, Trump would push the Republican Party to an extreme that would make it more difficult to govern the country itself.

As I write these lines, in September 2019, all these threats have become ominous realities. It would take a lot of time to document Trump’s

mistakes with Europe, the World Trade Organization (WTO), Mexico, Central America, Canada, Venezuela, Cuba, and—a fundamental issue at this time—the trade war with China. As former President Clinton predicted, Trump has arrived to disable both the internal chessboard of the United States and that of global harmony.

The US and Hispanics

If I have dared to suggest that the United States is somehow part of Ibero-America, it is because the data underpinning this assertion is compelling. A significant part of the continental and insular territory of the United States has a Hispanic historical origin— Florida, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, California, Oregon, Nevada, and Puerto Rico. In the whole country, we are already close to sixty million Hispanics or Latinos. According to figures from the Department of Commerce, 29 percent of new businesses and almost a third of US small businesses are owned by Hispanics and are financed almost exclusively by their own savings or those of family members or friends. The potential for banking and financial inclusion that this offers is immense. Hispanics or Latinos consume 1.7 trillion USD in the United States and their business activity contributes 1.4 trillion USD to the country's GDP.

This human capital, as would be expected, is politically relevant. There are thirty electoral districts in the United States where Hispanics are the majority and nine where we constitute the largest minority. Nationwide, while some 12 million Hispanics vote and 17 million Hispanic voters are duly registered to vote, 32 million Latinos (12 percent of the total voting population) are already eligible to register to vote. However, only 3 percent of the elected officials are Latino, for a total of 6,700 officials, ranging from community representatives and council members to forty-one members of the US Congress, including two senators and a state governor. Both major political parties have

had a Hispanic president at the national level, as is the case with the Democratic Party at this time. Similarly, the presence of Hispanics and pressure to increase their presence among federal, regional, and local

government officials is growing. And we already have a Hispanic woman occupying one of the nine seats of the Supreme Court, Puerto Rican jurist Sonia Sotomayor.

The systematic work to close that gap, increasingly empowering Hispanics in politics, is ever broader and aware of what it represents. Consequently, the trend of economic and political flourishing of Hispanics is irreversible and, according to studies by the Pew Research Center and the Brookings Institution, we will reach 24 percent of the country's total population by 2045. At that point, the white Anglo or Caucasian population will be a minority compared to the people of color or other ethnic origins, with Latinos thus forming the country's largest minority, almost twice the size of the African American population. In fact, after the election of Barack Obama as president, all progressive sectors of the country are working so that in the near future, a woman or a man of Hispanic origin occupies the presidency of the United States.

Faced with these realities, it is not possible to remain silent when faced with leaders who, from positions of power, encourage xenophobia and social conflict, and confiscate the autonomy of democratic institutions by not giving Hispanics the recognition, power, and representation that we have earned in American society, to which we make such positive contributions. I am among those who maintain that the actions that have been carried out against so-called DREAMers and immigrants who cross the southern border of the United States to save their lives, the separation of children from their families— there are babies who have been placed in cages and, in general, people who have been denied the right to hygiene and rest—the imprisonment of minors, in short, all these intolerable abuses have degraded the government of the United States to a situation of moral and political weakness and put its reputation as the beacon nation in the protection of human rights at serious risk. As a Venezuelan, Latin American, and American, I feel compelled to act and speak out in the face of these realities.

Faced with this attack on Hispanics, led by Trump, it's necessary to be aware of the strong response that we are making and are willing to

continue making. I maintain that we are on the threshold of a new stage in the long struggle for civil rights that has been

going on for decades in the United States of America. That is why what Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote to César Chávez, the two leaders of analogous collectives in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, is still fully relevant today: “Our separate struggles are really one.” Vibrant words, inspiring and pertinent today.

Again: The Crisis of Democracy

I have highlighted these facts not to provoke sterile diatribes, but rather to emphasize a dramatic fact. When I speak of the crisis of democracy, I am not repeating a cliché of political rhetoric. I am referring to a summation of facts that directly and implacably affect the lives of millions of people in Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries or other places in the world, as well as in the United States, not only the minorities living in the country but also the immigrants who are being repelled and attacked.

The following pages deal with these and other issues that, as I confessed at the beginning of these lines, worry me greatly. The articles, which were published over fifteen months, are not presented here in the order in which they originally appeared. For the purposes of this volume, I have grouped them by thematic affinity into eight chapters: “Turbulent and Changing Times,” “The Economy: A Qualitative Leap and a Change of Direction,” “The New Parameters of Daily Life,” “Booming Cities,” “Society Awaits for Solutions,” “The Reinventions of Violence,” “Venezuela and Latin America,” and “The Planet at Risk.” I have added recently released data and, where appropriate, I have added new criteria and arguments.

For those of us who have the possibility of writing and publishing, it is a responsibility to our children and to the planet that has given us life. That is the motive for these texts. That is why I have compiled them in this volume. And so, with my greatest respect for the reader, I offer them

in order to warn you that we are at a turning point.

I am a follower of the thought of the renowned US congressman Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who I would like to quote here: “You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts.” It is true that in the debate on democracy there is room for

all perspectives, but it is absurd to deny proven facts or consensus reached by science for the sake of the autonomy of opinion.

Finally, I want to share the great lesson that I have received over the years: I never thought that, in my dual capacity as a Venezuelan and American citizen, issues that are essential to me, such as the balanced functioning of democracy, the defense of human rights, environmental activism, and the promotion of a market economy that guarantees equal opportunities, would pose parallel and similar conceptual challenges to me between my country of birth, Venezuela, and my adopted country, the United States.

With these introductory lines, I leave you with the invitation to continue the tour through the pages that follow.

Leopoldo Martínez Nucete

The Fake News Industry

November 27, 2016

Mark Zuckerberg, creator and president of Facebook, has been forced to address the issue of "fake digital news" and "post-truth"—the appeal to beliefs or prejudices over facts— and propose it as something unexpected for the business model of the world's largest digital platform: to explore editing or control mechanisms over the spread of false news, which are influencing the formation of public opinion, with an impact on all areas, including that of election results.

The media have been warning how algorithms used by social network platforms such as Facebook link the user with the content shared in the profiles of the people we most frequent, or with the content distributed by pages which the user has interacted with or liked. The world of algorithms produces an alternative reality in which we end up surrounded by opinions and contents that, regardless of their distance from the facts,

reinforce our perceptions without opening us to criticism or curiosity for other perspectives. And, most seriously, it reinforces a system of values and convictions refractory to facts or data, and that forcefully defy their veracity and even their logic.

Social networks are generating more intolerance and polarization as we spend more and more time in front of screens, interacting in social networks. Furthermore, we are being informed through these social networks—not only via the contents distributed by the digital communication platforms of well-known publishing houses but also through a whole variety of pages, blogs, and opinion "influencers,"— which has led to the formation of communication bubbles. At the same time, the growing lack of trust in the information or political agendas of the media in democratic societies, as well as the irruption of increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship in authoritarian countries (such as Cuba, China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela), have made the phenomenon of alternative journalism of

Facebook or Twitter the primary source of information for millions of people.

This, in turn, has led to a constellation of digital channels lacking editorial mechanisms that guarantee journalistic standards with professional quality controls, where news and opinions are clearly delimited, in addition to the necessary verification of information based on accredited sources.

Christiane Amanpour, one of the best journalists I know, added another element to the matter with meridian clarity upon receiving the prestigious Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) award. The media phenomena that arose under the protection of post-truth and fake news in social networks have imposed a very dangerous agenda on the traditional media, that of neutrality and false equivalence as a resource for competing with their new rivals. Consequently, the most absurd proposals are suddenly written about in the eagerness to offer an "equal coverage" that makes them competitive in a world where audiences are immersed in echo chambers or alternative realities engorged by rapid access to information that lacks legitimacy. Perversely, this all seems credible to us because it comes from social networks often endorsed by someone whom we perceive as credible.

Among the effects of this tendency, which equates the victim with the victimizer, is to mount scandals based on claims that nobody knows the truth of and to provide a

platform for lunatics and fanatics to discuss and repeat dead ideas or arguments defeated by facts and science, thus normalizing absurdity, falsehood, or simple manipulation. A good example is the issue of climate change. It's happening, confirmed by all the available science and the visible impact on the planet. And yet, renegades without credentials are set up as experts and acquire credibility by sitting on a television panel to repeat commonplaces and unfounded opinions based on simple prejudices.

A BuzzFeed report on false news and its influence on the recent US presidential elections analyzes the news with the greatest impact on social networks, not only in terms of traffic but also based on readers' "engagements," that is, the number of times they were shared, commented on, or approved by users of the social networks Facebook and Twitter. The study concludes that, out of the twenty most read and shared news on social networks at the close of the election campaign, not a single one was a source from a recognized media or publishing house (for example, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, or *The Washington Post*). Instead, the articles originated in channels, pages, or blogs dedicated openly and deliberately to the propagation of fake news. The twenty news items mentioned either favored Trump or were simply aimed at criticizing Hillary Clinton with no basis in fact.

On November 17, *The Washington Post* published an interview with Paul Horner, one of the entrepreneurs in the production of digital channels or sources, exclusively and deliberately dedicated to promoting fake news, a very profitable empire of dirty war labs and the falsification of information distributed through hundreds of websites, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts, which everyone converts and validates through the world of the algorithms that define our digital information environment as users of social networks. The interviewee acknowledges being the author of many of these fake news items and his intention to favor Trump but admits to not being sorry because he never thought that this lucrative exercise in manipulation could end with Trump's presidency. However, one of the fake news stories with the most social media engagement, written and distributed by Horner's lab, lied about the Amish community leaders' support for Donald Trump towards the end of the campaign (one of Trump's children even retweeted it). The Amish population is concentrated in the rural sectors of

the state of Pennsylvania, a Democratic bastion that, surprisingly and by a minimal difference, was key to Trump's election.

As concerning as this phenomenon is to us so far, it gets more serious

when we learn that the skein of manipulated or false information against Clinton in many cases cites WikiLeaks and Hillary's supposed e-mails to her campaign manager, John Podesta, or the Democratic Party as the source, with the aggravating circumstance that the e-mails revealed by WikiLeaks came from a hacking operation perpetrated by agents linked to the power elite in Russia. In fact, *The Washington Post* this week published an investigation conducted by two journalists who place Russian propaganda agents as one of the sources producing and distributing this sea of fake news. It becomes more complicated by the well-proven links between one of Trump's campaign advisors and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moreover, the leadership of the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign have claimed that the FBI has indications of this Russian and foreign intervention in the US electoral process and politics.

This bizarre episode has highlighted one of the most controversial issues on the political, legal, and journalistic agenda of our time. In the meantime, pertinent questions require a quick answer: What can be done to eradicate this perverse world of fake news in the digital field? What role can the media play to prevent it? And finally, will these business platforms that run social networks have an obligation to assume an editorial role that filters and prevents the spread of fake news?

The question is relevant for understanding what may be happening, with terrible effects, in countries like Venezuela. How will the political debate be affected when censorship, self-censorship, or hegemonic official communications throw us into the jungle of information that reaches us through social networks as the only alternative? How much manipulation can be carried out in this scenario with false news, half-truths, fallacies, or unfounded denunciation and speculation, elevated to the category of information or opinion by the procedure of false equivalences?

In the case of the most important democracy on the planet, this explosive combination of fake news, political cyber espionage, and possible foreign interference in the presidential elections have already caused

damage. The search for truth in journalistic

practice and finding the force to prevent technology from becoming a Trojan horse full of lies are two fundamental challenges for democracy in these times of change.

Xenophobia: Playing with Fire

August 31, 2015

In two very different contexts and with two very different ideologies, we are witnessing the irresponsible use of xenophobia in the electoral field by Donald Trump, in the United States, and Nicolás Maduro, in Venezuela.

In the same way that Hitler and his propaganda apparatus held the Jews responsible for hyperinflation and all the evils that raged in the late Weimar Republic, today Trump and Maduro, from ideological extremes that touch each other and with different objectives, resort to the same protocol of baseness.

In the United States, the eccentric Trump says that all the country's problems are the fault of Mexico and China, not least the immigrants of Hispanic origin. But it doesn't stop there; he has also suggested denying the constitutional right to citizenship to those born to undocumented parents in US territory.

Trump surfs the wave of the anti-political sentiment of which the Republican Party today is a victim, after having started to use it without gauging the risks. Trump's rhetoric of hate mobilizes radicals and assists him in his purpose of co-opting an organization that inadvertently has moved away from its historical roots. As a result, Abraham Lincoln's party is today transformed into a promoter of social exclusion. Unbelievable!

This narrative is not only irresponsible but also devoid of factual substance. The US economy is in a formidable recovery and strengthening, including, of course, energy independence. Hispanics, documented or not, are one of the groups that contribute most to the growth of that economy through their work and entrepreneurship. In fact, broad-based studies reveal that Hispanics represent 30 percent of the start up of new, small, and medium-sized businesses in the United States. Furthermore, official figures also show that, among all ethnic or

national groups, Hispanics, and particularly undocumented immigrants, constitute the segment of society least likely to commit a crime. In fact, undocumented Hispanics represent the social group with the lowest rate of violent crime and violence. So what is Trump talking about? What is the basis for his claims? Very

simply, he shouts lies that divide. Deceptive claims that look for results based on the politics of fear.

Maduro does likewise. Without the slightest care about the violation of the human rights of hundreds of thousands of people, he is trying to blame the border with Colombia for his immense and obvious economic failure, which is the result of fifteen years of continuous mistakes aggravated by his presidency.

Today Venezuela suffers because of failures directly attributable to Maduro: continuous devaluation due to the complex and absurd exchange system (even after the creation of the so-called SIMADI there was no sustained effort to offer dollars in that way); scarcity, because government policies have turned the country into importers of everything, even coffee; and generalized impoverishment, since after the fall in oil prices it became evident that there was no financial provision whatsoever to withstand the bad times, that production is falling, and that the payment of the debt to China, which requires the daily shipment to it of almost 500,000 barrels per day, happens through funds whose destination no one knows.

Now, after several failures, Maduro is betting on the xenophobia card in the search for a fabricated culprit. The curious thing is that as Trump tries to assault power as an outsider of anti-politics, Maduro is doing so from a presidency that is agonizing for lack of ideas and people capable of reversing a collapse that is suffocating Venezuela.

Trump's polls grant him first place in the Republican Party, which means that he can impose himself to polarize the national scene. But it is hard to see that Maduro can have any success, however small, in

reversing the twenty-point lead the opposition has, according to all the polls.

Trump and Maduro both achieve something with their bitter preaching—to divide and potentially complicate the solution of problems that already exist, which will only be solved with broad understandings that are inclusive enough to garner trust, opportunity, and hope.

For the moment, that scenario desired by the majority of Venezuelans looks mired in the waters of the Táchira River with the victims of Maduro's shameful and failed attempt to escape a destiny that is about to catch up with him.

Millennials and Global Politics

August 20, 2017

Some say that millennials are the generation of people born between 1981 and 1995. Others maintain that it is those born between 1982 and 2004. Others use a more generic

formula: those born in the 1980s and those born in the 1990s. Almost all commentators agree that they are people who began their adult life in the symbolic year 2000.

I must warn the reader that the issue of millennials is commonly the source of heated controversy. In recent weeks, for example, it has been the subject of articles in Spain that hold conflicting positions. On the one hand, they argue that it is the decisive generation for the immediate future of the economy and politics in the world and, on the other, that they are a group whose fundamental public characteristic is irrelevant.

These are, in principle, people who share a technological culture, grew up in a reality dominated by screens—computers, cell phones, tablets, and televisions—are highly competent in the use of the resources offered by the online universe, and (the bulk of them) are active on social media.

Compared to their parents, they are better educated; the percentage that has been trained in technical institutes or universities, depending on the country, ranges from 30 to 70 percent. In general, especially in the United States and Europe, they have a more worldly outlook than previous generations, as well as a more developed visual culture than their parents, who were trained by reading on paper and reporting from newspapers. An interesting feature of them is it is not uncommon to find millennials who have very specialized knowledge in some matter unrelated to their training, their work, or their experience. You can find experts in animals in extinction, in recent astronomical discoveries, or extreme sports.

The reason why this fraction of the world's population concentrates so much interest among businesses, academic institutions, public policy

planning centers, and politicians is that they represent approximately 27 percent of the world's population. More importantly, it is estimated that by 2025, they will make up more than 70 percent of the labor force in developed countries.

So far, the category enjoys a certain consensus. Things become very controversial when trying to determine the consistency of the link that exists between millennials and politics, or millennials and public affairs. One study shows that, in developed countries, millennials have a purchasing power of 110 percent greater than their parents. They are said to be narcissistic and spoiled, a generation that has grown up with the feeling that

society owes them something. *Time* magazine said they were the "me and me and me and me" generation, which produced controversy.

What has happened is that large contingents of them, even though well trained, either have precarious jobs or none at all or have been forced to continue to live with their parents even after crossing the thirty-years-old barrier. Uncertainty and the absence of a clear vision of the possible future have caused resentment, psychological fragility, and an attitude of disbelief and distrust towards institutions such as politics and political parties. In Europe, someone wrote that millennials were "the collective of broken dreams."

Millennials are at the core of two phenomena of our time. First, there is the worldwide expansion of successful enterprise practices that range from the artisanal production of a wide range of products, using new technologies, and marketing and sales to the creation of popular applications for mobile phones, which someone develops in their room for millions of users.

The other side of millennials, possibly more determinant in the medium and long-term, challenges traditional partisan political practices and the excessive overlap between politics and economic powers, and demands transparency, clarity, results in management, and which prefers straight-

talking to high rhetoric.

Beyond the electoral behaviors of millennials, which depend on the circumstances and may lead to mistaken conclusions, the central issue is that many feel closer to solidarity than to profit, to participation than to exclusion, to collaboration than to rivalry. The millennials are, right now, the nucleus of thousands and thousands of projects and actions in the world that fight against hunger and the destruction of the environment and seek to diminish or eradicate violence in the world's impoverished communities. There is, of course, a profound link between millennials and the public interest. Rather than seeking the power of profit, they aim to improve the quality of life of those living in poverty.

It is, of course, often possible to find anti-system or anti-political expressions among millennials, a feeling that it is better to camp away from the institutions and politics that agglutinate in political parties. Because it is a risk—populisms can make use of this unrest—millennials are now the sector of society that poses the greatest challenges to the authorities of universities and business schools, businesses, and state bodies, practicing politicians, and interpreters of reality. In the United States presidential elections in 2016, the enthusiasm of millennials energized Bernie Sanders' campaign in the Democratic primaries. The result was a relatively high abstention that undermined Hillary Clinton's candidacy, contributing to Donald Trump's triumph.

That they are an economic and social force is not in dispute. No one doubts that they can contribute to improving the state of things in the world. The question political parties are asking is how to incorporate their energy and capacity to mobilize to the established channels of politics.

Of course, a lot depends on the action of the parties—whether they courageously implement the reforms of their organizations, empower the new generations, open the channels to listen to them, and act. At the same time, millennials should reflect on whether what happened with

Trump can serve as a lesson. One conclusion might be that abstention is not an option, that the pursuit of perfectionism may lead us to wrong decisions, and that politics is, in the end, a midpoint between ambitious goals and the reality of the possible.

The Cruel Separation of Immigrant Families in the USA

June 24, 2018

In the last two weeks, some of the most scandalous scenes of violation of international law and human rights have occurred and not precisely in the countries where we are used to it happening. This time it was Donald Trump's government in the United States. And it happened in the face of the most resounding rejection by other branches of public power and the so-called "fourth power,"—the free press and public opinion.

With the worsening situation of violence in Central America, fertile ground for drug cartels and other criminal gangs, thousands of families have persisted in their painful and risky pilgrimage in search of safety. On arriving at the US border and requesting asylum protection, instead of due process, the Trump administration preferred mass detentions, separating minors from their parents and placing them in horrific detention conditions, including babies being placed in cages.

Immigrant rights and human rights advocacy groups sounded alarm bells throughout society. Senators and deputies were arbitrarily denied access to detention centers to check on the status of detained adults and children, even by appointment scheduled with the authorities.

Senators and congressmen finally gained access, as did NGOs, which allowed the dissemination of shocking images, including audios, which confirmed the seriousness of what had happened. Among others, Democratic Senators Bob Menéndez (New Jersey),

Jeff Merkley (Oregon), Tim Kaine (Virginia), Bill Nelson (Florida), as well as Representatives Joaquín Castro and Beto O'Rourke (Texas), Nidia Velázquez (New York), and Michelle Lujan (New Mexico), along with other members of the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators (NHCSL), and many others from civil society spoke out against this xenophobic practice of the Trump government.

Later, the governor of Virginia ordered the investigation of possible cases of abuse in some children detentions in that state, to which the

minors were transferred under the auspices of immigration officials.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions responded, in the usual Trump administration manner, by lying. He said that the "zero tolerance" approach was—wait for it—biblical, because, according to him, it was about enforcing the law, and that duty is in the Holy Scriptures! Such manipulation ended up being rejected by some leaders of the most conservative evangelical groups who are fervent followers of the Republican Party. Trump himself, in frank adulteration of reality, blatantly said that everything was the result of laws passed by the Democrats (when both chambers have been under Republican control for several years). And he even referred to immigrants as "animals" who come to "infest" American society.

In both direct and between-the-lines statements, Trump himself and his operators gave a glimpse of two perverse objectives of this policy (not set out in any law) of separating families. One, to dissuade other migrant families from entering the US. Second, to condition the suspension of this shameful policy on the Democrats accepting the terms of a very deficient immigration reform, which includes the resources to build the border fence (supposedly to be paid for by Mexico).

Among the many legal aspects at stake in this ruthless Trump ploy are human and children's rights, provided for in international treaties to which the United States is a signatory. And, of course, the right to asylum, which imposes a judicial procedure that respects the applicant's rights. For that reason, the UN Commission on Human Rights condemned this practice by the Trump government and underscored the grave risk, admitted by the United States migratory authorities, that many of these minors would not be able to return to their parents due to deficiencies in the system. We are therefore talking about an orphanhood imposed by the culpable negligence of the State.

Days after this UN pronouncement, Trump's government (behaving like a third world dictatorship) announced that it was withdrawing from the UN human rights body, with the strange excuse that it has a "pro-

Palestinian bias" in the conflict with Israel. This decision deepens the devaluation of the White House's global leadership in the face of the condemnatory gaze of the world's democratic governments.

In the crossfire of attacks and excuses marbled with lies (the most prominent being the one according to which all this barbarism is legal), it was said that the governments of Obama and Bush had done the same. Nothing could be further from the truth. In an objective report published by *The New York Times*, it was clearly established that families were never separated in the processing of asylum cases or illegal entry across the border in previous administrations. Previous crises, in which minors were involved, occurred within the framework of legal proceedings, due to the migration of children and adolescents unaccompanied by adults. This situation even dealt with exceptional resources as a humanitarian situation. Many of these minors, who were subject to judicial proceedings during the resolution of their migration cases and asylums, subsequently failed to comply with their presentation before the authorities for fear of Trump's challenge and his "zero-tolerance" policy. It is for this reason that, right now, there are many cases of children whose whereabouts are unknown.

In the end, the falsehood that this policy of family separation was provided for in the law became evident when a presidential order was enough to disregard it. Trump's change of direction came in the face of pressure and disapproval from the leadership of his own party, as well as former First Lady Laura Bush and even, according to government sources, First Lady Melania Trump and the daughter of the president, Ivanka Trump.

But by covering up his conduct in this executive order, which is also arbitrary, Trump established two very serious precedents. Instead of being separated at the time of their arrest, families could be detained indefinitely—violating judicial precedents in this matter—until deportation takes place. At the same time, he omitted a fundamentally necessary provision, which consists of establishing the means and resources to guarantee the reunification of more than 2,300 minors with

their parents.

These terrible facts show that, in some cases, demagoguery has no limits. And as might be expected, in this case, two of its first victims are human rights and people's dignity. Given all this, it is difficult to think that leaders such as Trump could accumulate the moral authority to convene an international consensus in defense of democracy and human rights.

As Congressman Joe Kennedy rightly put it on Sunday, June 17, 2018, at a demonstration in Tornillo, Texas, "Humanity is not related to citizenship or to carrying a green card. Humanity, we might say, is in the pain we feel when we see the faces children snatched away from the protection of their family."

AIDS and Pandemics: Battles Won and Battles Lost

August 26, 2018

In May 1983, an event of enormous importance for life on the planet occurred; the scientific article announcing the discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was published. This achievement helped us understand the suffering of several hundred patients in Europe and the United States, which, until then, had no explanation. A scientific and health race then began, which, despite the complex difficulties of the early days, today shows undeniable progress (in 2008, the French scientists Luc Montagnier and Françoise Barré-Sinoussi received the Nobel Prize for Medicine for their discovery of HIV).

Older readers will remember the first treatments: they were costly, produced side effects, and only marginally managed to prolong the life of those affected. To this we must add another painful matter; in those years, and for more than a decade, an AIDS patient was a kind of pariah, socially stigmatized, who was subjected to extreme precautions within hospital systems.

The race that researchers, doctors, and health systems launched produced better results in a surprisingly brief time. In 1996, the first highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) was introduced, which, in addition to mitigating side effects and reducing the possibility of contagion, significantly prolonged patients' lives. In thirty-five years, many battles have been won by patients, specialized NGOs, families of affected people,

doctors, and the scientific community, among them the gradual lowering of the cost of medicines, but other battles have been lost or are still being fought.

Although it is undeniable that they have gained much ground and social rejection has diminished, especially in Europe, Canada, and the United States, in other places such as Latin America, many patients keep their condition secret. Indeed, there are still companies that, in violation of the

relevant laws, refuse to employ people, but this is a decreasing phenomenon.

Since 1983, when the virus was discovered, institutions started to count the number of people that contracted it. Experts say that until about 1990, thousands and thousands of people, especially in Africa, died without ever entering the statistics. We should not forget that only towards the end of the 1980s, the world's experts understood the seriousness of what was happening in several countries on that continent.

In July of 2017, the International AIDS Conference took place in Amsterdam. More than 15,000 people—including doctors, patients, activists, health planners, journalists, and AIDS experts—took part in the extensive program of forums, debates, conferences, and events. The main headlines generated by the meeting give us a picture of the state of affairs; of the 78 million people who have been infected with the virus, just under half—around 35 million—have died as a result of the associated diseases. Right now, almost 37 million are living with the virus. Of these, and this is the most alarming figure, 16 million are not receiving adequate treatment.

While statistics show that the mortality rate has declined, there are regions of the world where the disease is not fading, such as the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, it is spreading in other areas, such as Central Asia and Eastern Europe (70 percent of cases in this region are concentrated in Russia). For many of the experts gathered in Amsterdam, the explanation for the boom is clear. There is a direct relationship between the more repressive policies concerning drug use—which are generally associated with the exclusion and persecution of LGBTQI people—and the expansion of the disease. The Spanish newspaper *El País* recently published an article that cited policies implemented by Russia in Crimea from 2014 onwards that have already produced a rise in the disease. In the last decade, the increase in the incidence of AIDS in Russia and Eastern Europe has reached no less than 30 percent.

The Agenda 2030 for sustainable development clearly defines a feasible route to substantially reducing the incidence of the disease. The strategy, which has been called 90-90-90, aims to ensure that by 2020, 90 percent of those who are HIV-positive know their status, that 90 percent receive appropriate treatment, and that of these, 90 percent achieve a high level of viral suppression (i.e., that blood levels are low, tending towards zero).

Health professionals, planners, and scientists have indicated that these goals are not illusory, but are within the framework of what is possible. According to discussions at the International AIDS Conference, it is crucial to get out of the "state of complacency" that seems to have taken hold among authorities in various countries. Right now, one of the most fundamental problems is not limited to the misguided policies I have already pointed out. Instead, it is due to funding shortfalls for all the objectives; for scientific research to continue; for diagnostic tests to be carried out, especially in the most at-risk populations; and for systematically guaranteeing treatment to those affected. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's warning should not fall on deaf ears; if the necessary investments are not in place, the progress made could be reversed. Not only is it essential to raise awareness of this fundamental issue among political sectors, but society as a whole must take up this cause.

While we are still learning and fighting AIDS, we have witnessed other pandemic crises of lethal consequences. Indeed, during the first part of 2020, as I write these lines, medicine, drugs, infectiology, and health care experts are struggling around the world, alongside governments, to respond to the COVID-19 or coronavirus pandemic effectively. Beyond acknowledging the horrific human tragedy and death toll, it is inevitable to look beyond the health crisis and fix our eyes on the economy.

Stock markets are hypervolatile after a sharp decline of more than 35 percent in the first quarter of the year, despite aggressive intervention measures by the Fed and central banks. The coronavirus has forced extreme quarantine (and in some places shelter-at-home or curfews) to

prevent the spread of a virus that has claimed at this point millions sick and dozens of thousands dead around the world. Although the death rate of the virus is low compared to other pandemics, the virus propagates rapidly and is incredibly contagious. Thus, the affected population and the growth rate statistics are alarming, and

the virus will potentially claim more lives than any other pandemic crisis in history by the time we are capable of dominating the crisis. The epicenter of COVID-19 started in the city of Wuhan, China, but rapidly dispersed throughout the world with three new epicenters: Italy, Spain, and the United States. Given the magnitude of the US and the erratic and delayed public health reaction by its government, it is estimated that over 100,000 deaths this year will be a consequence of the virus.

Large industries, such as airlines, have already floated numbers for the amount of investments they need to avoid a collapse, in the \$50 billion range. The United States Congress has already agreed to a bipartisan package of economic stimulus measures which go further, proposing soft loans to small businesses in the order of \$350 billion, \$500 billion to corporations in general, and other measures that together add up to \$2 trillion. These will serve to strengthen the health system, protect the workforce, and finance state insurance against forced unemployment, among other things, which even go up to \$1,200 of direct subsidy per person with an annual income under \$75,000 per year, and up to \$2,400, plus \$500 for each dependent minor in the homes of couples with less than \$150,000 in family income. Similar measures have been adopted in France and Spain, as well as in other countries.

Meanwhile, another problem has arisen amid the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic could further affect fragile and extremely vulnerable countries. In the Americas, Venezuela, which has become the center of perhaps the largest refugee crisis in history, is especially vulnerable given the humanitarian crisis triggered by the economic incompetence of its oppressive regime in the past two decades. An estimated five million people have fled Venezuela in recent years, with more than million million migrating to Colombia in less than two years. With a weak and

bankrupted health system, there is a need for an adequate response from the international community. That would require leaving aside the political conflict and the country's stalemate, divided between Nicolás Maduro's "de facto" dictatorial regime and the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, who is recognized as interim president by more than fifty countries, including to the United States.

Some experts, including Jeffrey Sachs, a Harvard economist with immense world prestige, argue that, given the current pandemic crisis, the United States should lift

sanctions against Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba. On the other hand, other expert voices such as Frank Mora (former assistant undersecretary of defense for the Western Hemisphere under President Obama and director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center Kimberly Green of Florida International University) believe that the sanctions could continue and be used to incentivize changes in the Venezuelan regime (likewise in others subject to sanctions) through elections and negotiated forms of transition to democratize the country, while humanitarian assistance programs are implemented to remedy, among other things, the coronavirus pandemic, financed and administered by the UN and international organizations.

As the debate unfolds, conditions in Venezuela's oil-dependent economy continue to worsen with falling oil prices, which have reached less than \$25 a barrel. At the same time, the International Monetary Fund responded that the financial assistance of five billion dollars requested by the Maduro regime could not be approved since, literally, "... The IMF's commitment to member countries is based on the official recognition of the government by the international community, as reflected in IMF membership. There is no clarity about recognition at this time."

It is clear, then, that to articulate an immediate response of internationally managed and funded cooperation, which is essential to avoid a tragedy in the case of Venezuela, both parties to the political

conflict would have to reach an agreement based on a political truce, facilitating financial aid to rescue a nation that is very vulnerable to the pandemic, which is already progressing throughout the territory, similar to its expansion in other parts of the world. Perhaps this is the necessary catalyst or lubricant, in the midst of an unfortunate situation, to facilitate broader agreements that allow changes that can no longer be deferred in Venezuela.

Meanwhile, the response to the coronavirus throughout Latin America is under trial and error, with very limited financial, health, and professional resources. Developed countries like the United States continue to be overwhelmed by the crisis; governments like that of Spain, with one of the best health and public health networks in the world, also fight without controlling the pandemic, amid adversity.

All of which summons us to reflect, what are the true national security challenges facing states in these times? How much can we trust the results of an expanding economy if suddenly an invisible enemy like this virus comes upon us?

Humanity has known similar situations since the times of the so-called Spanish flu (1918), which originated in the United States, specifically in Kansas, and reached wartime throughout Europe, wreaking havoc. Governments of the countries in conflict hid the information so as not to demoralize the troops until the correspondent for *The Times* in Madrid (Spain being a neutral country) found space to report its severity to the world. The first historical lesson in the face of this type of crisis, which some world leaders like Donald Trump and others seem resistant to learn, is that concealment, or the deceptive and dubious behavior of governments, for whatever reason—including the economic impact or the political interests—accelerates the speed and geographic reach of the contagion because it reduces the time needed to take the necessary measures of social distancing. The cost of these conducts is paid in lives, in the collapse of the health systems, and in exacerbated economic impacts caused by the prolongation of the pandemic.

In short, as long as the three response fronts—free and massive contagion testing, vaccination, and medication—are not resolved, nothing can substitute or relax quarantines or shelter-at-home measures. And in that, every government must recognize in South Korea a successful model in managing the pandemic. One of the key tools of this success to contain the COVID-19 or coronavirus was the immediate application of quarantine and curfew protocols, containment or early clinical attention in the most vulnerable population, the massive and free administration of testing (in schools, pharmacies, commercial and office buildings, public places, and ports or airports) to determine the presence of the virus. The other thing that South Korea did was to use technology to create maps of the risk of infection based on the data obtained by the geolocation data out of mobile phones and consumption places out of the credit card charges of patients treated for the infection. This immense database allowed them to anticipate the pandemic waves and where to act timely.

In summary, a lesson from this crisis is that every government must have units specialized in dealing with pandemics that are continually studying and preparing

containment, response, and cooperation scenarios with the advice of the World Health Organization and multilateral organizations. President Barack Obama had left this capacity installed in the White House, based on the experiences of the Ebola virus and the so-called Swine Flu (H1N1) that he had to face during his eight years in office. However, the Trump administration dismantled that office, which brought on a general inability to respond to the moment.

And it is time we realize one paradox of our times. While we have made so much progress in medicine and health issues and successfully funded incredible research and solutions to fatal illnesses and diseases like cancer, leukemia, and others, in recent years, we have seen a recurrence phenomenon in this critical scenario of pandemics. Between 1918, the time of the influenza known as the "Spanish flu," until 2002, when the SARS crisis exploded, six pandemics took place in the span of eighty-

four years, while from 2009 to today (a decade), we have already known three pandemics. It is worth noting that before the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, the last known pandemic was that of cholera, which occurred in six phases from 1816 and at different times, affecting different regions of the planet until 1899, with different intensities and range. Therefore, along with climate change, pandemics emerge as the second form of existential threats to humanity in these times. Accordingly, it is time to focus resources and efforts in a systematic way to address these two problems; and perhaps with a systemic response, reinforce the transition towards a healthier, more prosperous, and sustainable society.

The Two Sides of Gentrification

July 23, 2017

Let me begin by clarifying what the term gentrification means. The word describes a phenomenon that is occurring in many large cities in Latin America, North America, Europe, and Asia: the renovation, rescue, and reconversion of neighborhoods or urban sectors in order to improve them, to elevate their standards as places to live, to work, or to visit.

As planners say, gentrification decisively transforms urban space. It usually, but not exclusively, takes place in old neighborhoods or those that are part of historic centers, or that are located in the center of cities. These are neighborhoods with infrastructure in a poor state in which the quality of life of their inhabitants has deteriorated over time. In

many of the neighborhoods that have undergone a process of gentrification, crime has become a relevant issue. There is a tendency that is characteristic of certain urban areas, that criminals concentrate in certain places to live, have fun, and carry out their activities. As numerous studies have shown, there is a paradoxical relationship between urban deterioration and drug trafficking, as if the business of distributing and selling illegal substances was associated with the destruction of the environment in which it occurs. The idea that the leader of the drug gang behaves like a paternal figure to members of his gang is more fiction than fact.

The decision to change the destiny of a neighborhood is associated with three other factors: one, the deteriorating neighborhood generally has very low productivity indicators (predominantly unemployed, retired, large families with minimal income, etc.); two, it is costly in terms of public investment since it requires a lot of work to be done, especially in the categories of social and citizen security; and three, which can be a key variable, the rundown neighborhood tends to project itself towards neighboring districts. It does not stay within its boundaries; it acts as a negative model.

The gentrification process is always complex and requires significant investment, in most cases from public and private resources. Streets and sidewalks are widened, boulevards are created, squares and parks are built, buildings and houses are remodeled, service lines and pipes are replaced, and much more. What was once a space dominated by decay and ugliness is often transformed into an attractive place from an aesthetic point of view, friendly to pedestrians and, this is fundamental, profitable for companies and businesses. Because gentrification is often used to turn a neighborhood that had a negative reputation into a prestigious urban zone (i.e., attractive to tourists), the possibility of becoming a tourist magnet is at the heart of the decision to rehabilitate entire areas of a city most of the time.

But this process, which at first glance might appear to be entirely positive, has other consequences that are not. Gentrification displaces the inhabitants of these neighborhoods to other, usually peripheral, areas because upgrading the status of the place where they lived increases the cost of staying there. Poor or very low-income people and families must leave the homes where they have lived for decades to settle in other places, because they do not have the resources to pay for the new standards. Gentrification produces a

substantial increase in prices, not only for housing, but also for services and food. There have even been cases where small businesses have been forced to close.

Gentrification is undoubtedly a solution to the dangers that incubate in the central districts of large cities. However, it is a partial solution that creates new problems. In some small towns in Europe, there are experiences of what I shall call victimless gentrification; renewal has taken place without the displacement of the former inhabitants. These are obviously much slower processes which require greater investment by the state, but, above all, a huge number of man hours from a diverse range of actors— sociologists, social workers, risk prevention experts, etc.—who must carry out case-by- case accompaniment and assessment tasks, which are costly and arduous.

Gentrification is a revealing metaphor for the problems of our time. It confronts us with the fact that solutions which, at first sight, are real and possible are often the cause of other problems. In big cities, everything is connected to everything else, and it is very difficult to generate solutions without creating new problems. And the challenge for those who govern them is to make them a space for living without victims.

What Does Russia Want in Latin America?

January 11, 2017

As a result of support for the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, as well as the role played in the downing of a Malaysian airliner over Ukrainian territory which resulted in the deaths of 300 people, Russia has been subject to economic sanctions by the United States and the European Union in areas such as defense, energy, and finance since July 2014.

Moscow has responded with retaliation against European and American products and, at the same time, has turned the action towards its new partners in Latin America, a region where some people are rubbing their hands together in glee at the possibility of doing business and increasing trade by taking advantage of this apparent renewal of the Cold War.

Russia has begun negotiations with diplomats from different Latin American countries to replace the foodstuffs it has banned from the European Union, the United States, and other nations such as Australia, Canada, and Norway: meat, dairy products, fruit, vegetables, and fish. These are, precisely, some of the main food products exported by several countries of the continent.

The speed with which several Latin American governments have acted to offer themselves as trading partners to Russia has not been well received by Brussels. The European Commission is preparing to convey to representatives of “a group of countries” on the American continent its disagreement with the rapid decision to deal with Moscow and will call on them to “reconsider” their budding contracts with an “unreliable” partner, the Spanish daily *El País* recently reported.

Will Putin and Latin American rulers care about threats from Europe and the United States? The available data do not support this hypothesis. Everything indicates that trade links between Russia and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are growing considerably. Although the total volume of bilateral trade amounts to \$16.2 billion—a lower figure than that of trade between Russia and Germany in the first quarter

of 2013— it is double the volume that was produced ten years ago.

At present, the most important projects carried out or to be carried out between Latin American countries and Russia are in the field of energy: hydroelectric power, nuclear power, and oil and gas extraction. Moscow has also done well with arms sales, especially with Venezuela, which after India is Russia's second-largest arms buyer, with sales of \$3.2 billion.

In the energy field, Russian participation in projects with Venezuelan oil, through the Rosneft Company, has appeared on the scene. These negotiations, as is characteristic of the Russian business style, are marked by opacity and aim at the production of 150,000 barrels per day in the Orinoco Oil Belt. Russia's main trading partner in the region is Argentina, with a volume of 1,873 million dollars. Other trading partners include Venezuela, with 1.732 billion; Mexico, with 1.414 billion; Ecuador, with 1.299 billion; Peru, with 725 million; Chile, with 455 million; and Cuba, with 225 million. The volume in the area of electrical energy is substantial and amounts to not less than \$10 billion.

But relations between Russia and Latin America are not limited to trade. Between 2000 and 2012, Russian presidents visited the region six times, including countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina. Hugo Chávez, in his fourteen years of government (1999-2013), traveled to Russia ten times.

Taking advantage of the 2014 World Cup final in Rio de Janeiro, President Putin traveled to several Latin American countries to reinforce his alliance with nations far from the influence of Washington. His tour began in Cuba, where he announced the cancellation of 90 percent of the debt contracted since the time of the USSR. He went on to Nicaragua and then flew to Argentina, a country with which Russia has 125 years of relations. Buenos Aires exports fresh fruit, meat, and dairy products, and receives nuclear reactors, vehicles, and pharmaceutical products from Moscow. The tour ended in Brazil.

In March 2014, Andrés Oppenheimer devoted an interesting article to the analysis of the military issue. He wondered whether Russia might be thinking of establishing military bases in countries with which it has established links in Latin America. Oppenheimer concludes that there are no such plans, but some sources affirm that it would be possible for the Russian government to establish refueling stations and logistical support for its ships and planes.

The truth is that the agreements are proliferating in many areas, and the question experts ask themselves when looking at the portfolio of Russian interests in Latin America is very clear: what is Russia trying to do? Is it sending a message to the United States or is it simply taking advantage of the potential offered by a market full of opportunities, underestimated by the United States in recent decades?

The other fundamental question is whether, in addition to business, Russia's presence in the region will be more openly political in the coming years. In the last century, there was an unmistakable tendency for the Russians to link their economic activity outside their borders to political objectives that, in general, always have the same objective—to challenge the United States for leadership in the region. The episode of the annexation of the Crimea (2014) has set off alarm bells among many analysts. Their thesis is that Russia's aggressive foreign policy could lead us in the short-term to a new stage of the Cold War.

The Deadly Reality of Climate Change

January 8, 2017

If I had the power to influence readers' decisions, I would like nothing better than for this article to be read aloud within families. If the issue of global warming were to become the subject of conversations between parents, children, and grandchildren, there would be some hope. That I am writing about this here is a reflection of the seriousness of the issue of climate change.

News and reports published a few days ago informing us that the recently ended 2016 has been the hottest year since these measurements were taken should not leave us indifferent. If we could add global warming to our current concerns, then we would already have taken a step forward. The point, it seems to me, is that despite being a constant subject of books, magazines, and news, it remains a matter that the right audiences are not aware of and, despite being such a serious issue, it has not reached the place it deserves in public opinion. We do not feel it threatens us in the immediate future. It is one of the things that we always leave for others to take care of later. For example, while Germany and the Netherlands are announcing legislative plans to ban gasoline- powered vehicles by 2030 and 2025, respectively, Trump is leaning towards a cabinet that seems to privilege oil energy over the green alternatives developed in the last decade.

You may not have heard much of the Maldives—the Republic of Maldives, to be precise, with almost 1,200 islands, just over 200 of which are inhabited—located in the heart of the Indian Ocean, but if temperature rises continue, global warming will wipe the islands off the map and, with them, the place where almost 400,000 people like us live. And if this were to happen, it would not be an isolated phenomenon. Every coastal city would experience some level of danger. The mystical Venice, the exotic Shanghai, and New York itself would suffer the consequences. Entire small islands in the Pacific would be washed away.

No fewer than three billion people live on or within 200 km of a coast. If

part of the Arctic ice disappears and the Greenland and Western Antarctic plates break up, the floods that will occur will change the profile of coastlines all over the world. At least a third of that population, more than a billion people, will have to move. Their lives will be radically affected. To make matters worse, the same risk is looming over southeast Florida, specifically the city of Miami, to the point that incredulous conservatives have already begun to refer to the “rising tide” off the coast of Miami.

The list of consequences is such that new considerations are added every day. I would simply like to remind readers that wheat and maize harvests have fallen by around 5 percent over the last three decades as a result of global warming and climate change. The projections for 2040 are truly alarming; harvests, which are affected by climate variations, could fall by up to 20 percent from those levels reached in 2014, which could mean that a kilo of pasta could increase by four or five times its price today.

As has been repeated by many, this is a deeply complex problem because it is directly related to our way of life. The whole of our lives depends, directly, on energy consumption. Moreover, the productive and economic growth of people, especially in the poorest countries, is inseparable from an increase in the amount of energy they consume. In other words, well-being and progress are inseparable from energy. A study in India in 2012 showed that poor households increased their energy consumption fivefold from the time they purchased a refrigerator and television.

Experts often point out that the measures and goals that countries subscribe to at world climate summits are not realistic. The changes that we would have to make to stop global warming go beyond simple measures of saving and responsible use of energy—a practice to which approximately 15 percent of the world’s families contribute. Not only does this percentage need to be increased very quickly, but we also need to prepare for structural changes. We are creating more and more risks for our children and grandchildren.

The transition from a consumer society to a society of frugality is at the heart of the debate in the near future of our plan. My impression is that we have not prepared ourselves sufficiently to answer the question of the sacrifices we would be willing to make. We are, it seems to me, at the stage where we must be aware of the seriousness of

what global warming means and how it will affect us, whether we want it to or not. That is why at the beginning of this article I said that this is a matter we must talk about with our families, because the necessary change cannot be imposed. It must be the result of the active will of the people. Therefore, more than through imposition, it must be the result of conscious and active goodwill, extended across the five continents.