Degrowth Seminar, Copenhagen Klimaforum09 - Speech by Miguel Valencia

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Liberating the Social Imagination to Liberate Our Villages

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Our villages and cities are dying because of intense development. Everywhere in México, the same force is at work. It weakens our villages, sickens and kills their inhabitants. It destroys our communities and makes a mockery of our traditional commons. Year after year, it causes the loss of support capacities: water tables, streams and lakes, groves, rainforests, and seas. It constantly impoverishes our country's fauna and flora.

This force is modernization. It is an undeclared war waged against nature and the people's commons. In its name, the landscape is tainted with actual monocrops such as corn, barley, and palms, and also with monocrops of urban sprawl, channels, and pylons. All towns are more and more invaded by pavement, pipes, autos, noise, advertisements, commercial franchises, and WalMart stores. The peasants and town residents observe helplessly how in a few months there is the building of underpasses for freeways, big parking lots, huge malls, and industrialized housing. In a few hours they see how their public parks and gardens, sidewalks, and squares are filled with used plastic bottles or bags, aluminum cans, printed matter, and debris of metal, glass and plastic.

Mexican towns and cities are rapidly losing their peasants, artisans and wise men and women. Meanwhile they resent a fast increase in levels of violence, poverty and unemployment, because of the soaring growth of the huge land monocultures, migration, drug harvest and traffic, sweat shops and new lifestyles. Our towns are powerless territories subject to powers without territory. The global economy now dominates our village life, and towns and cities have lost the means to stand on their own.

Confrontation and dissent with globalization in México: A chronicle of bloody warfare

Dissent rose in the early 1990s, but since the beginning of this century at least 1,500 local movements have been initiated; campesinos, indigenous people, women, workers, neighbours, citizens of all social strata have rejected the construction of airports, large dams, turnpikes, oil facilities, toxic waste confinement, mining operations, water extraction, elevated freeways, and Metro lines.

The most relevant dissent in México:

• the town of Atenco stopped the construction of Mexico City's new international airport

• Ignacio del Valle, the campesino leader of this movement, is now in top security seclusion, convicted for 120 years

• Zimapan town halted a toxic confinement

• people of San Luis Potosí City succeeded to stop operations of San Xavier, Canadian mining company

• campesinos of La Parota stopped a large dam project in Acapulco

• people of Cuatro cienegas continuously oppose to water extraction in the desert ecological reserve

13 towns movement

• campesinos against the urbanization of Morelos rice fields

• campesinos and people of Tlahuac against the 12th Metro line project on their wetlands in Mexico Cy.

In recent years, most local resistance leaders in Mexico have arrest warrants. At least every fortnight a local leader mysteriously disappears or is found tortured and killed by unknown people.

The social imagination manipulated by development programs and globalization has been a tragedy.

For decades, the images of new cars, high-speed roads, big dams, bridges, towers, underpasses, houses in suburbia, have devastated the mind of the majority of Mexican people, but globalization introduced again new images of world class weapons, cruiser sea travel, contemporary houses, and many others that colonized the mind of part of the low income, middle and well-to-do Mexican classes. The American Dream or the European lifestyle has now become a part of the social imagination of most Mexicans. But these images drive the transformations that ravage Mexican towns, villages, and nature's treasures. Derived from the spectacle of wealth, several new creeds or faiths invade not only a great portion of the Mexican people, but, I think, of most people in most countries. This new creed could be summarized as the following: faith in progress, development and modernization; faith in science and technology; faith in economic growth, and faith in the modern State and democratic institutions. As a result of the emergence of these creeds, most people believe that there is no dignified human life on earth without mobile phones, lap tops, bottled water, cars, fast trains, planes... along with the idea that world class newspapers, big radio networks and national TV broadcast are essential for a good living. And that society cannot achieve prosperity without abundant school certificates, university degrees and doctoral studies.

With the rise of economic classical thinking, in the 18th century epistemic revolution, these contemporary faiths emerged:

Economists introduced the idea of a world without boundaries and limits, unbridled exploitation of nature and the legitimization of big risk activities; in those days, modern states lost the notions of scale, size, proportion and limit and began to nurture industrial activities, international trade. In that century, the fundamentals of our legal system were created in order to protect pirates, bankers, corporations; and then, science and technology became the most important partners of economy. From this epistemic revolution evolved creeds of our modern thinking; nowadays everybody is deeply involved in only one dimension of life: the economic dimension.

The One Dimensional Man, denounced by Herbert Marcuse in the '60s, is now present everywhere in the world. Techno-scientists presently conduct high risk experiments using nuclear energy, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, robotics, in such a manner "to make humans an endangered species," according to Bill Joy, the great American computer scientist. The global economy has conquered the mind of modern man and commands his life, needs, desires, and beliefs. The idea of scarcity, essential to economic thinking, saturates contemporary thinking. Nowadays, because of economic ideas, multinationals and states face a Shakespearean dilemma "to grow or not to be" -- as economy implements the ugliness, gigantism, and accelerated change that now subdue the modern world.

The economy operates by means of various systems and instruments designed by techno-scientists:

Systems such as states, world organizations, central banks, financial operations, employment, schools, universities, hospitals, media, agribusiness, tourism, transportation. Instruments like autos, planes, internet, and mobile phones disturb human behavior and produce profound changes in values, beliefs, desires, and needs. In the process, certain new values emerge deep in human mind that change social perception of reality: an estrangement of the individual from community, society, or the world. Alienated individuals desire to have more stuff, bigger and faster, and they are the most influential. Systems facilitate "free choice," but in a world without people in person. THey inculcate love for competition, profitability, and technical concerns; they stimulate anonymity, conformism, addictions, consumerism, servitude, subordination, uprootedness, and disenchantment. The modern systems and values induce parting from nature, squandering of life, stingy interchanges between people, scorn for manual work, love for hierarchies and disdain for spontaneity. They turn work into an addiction, and consumption as the basis of life. Techno-systems empower the dominant system and degrade people's minds. The colonization of the modern social imagination is systemic. It is evident that these economic systems are against the natural order and human conviviality; they turn poverty into misery and bring about awful violence that pervades the world; they drive the destruction of nature.

Schools teach the great advantages of productivity and how to become a disciplined consumer, but they really teach how to live in permanent servitude and dissatisfaction. Not only Coca Cola and the automobile are addictive, also schools or clinics become a drug. As Ivan Illich said "School opium is more powerful than old time churches." Mass media systematically misinform people thru excessive information and petty details; the combination of misinformation with commercial and political

advertising produces distortion, propaganda and manipulation. Like the VIH virus, schools destroy immunity defenses, just as drug dealers do, and as advertising creates new necessities. Daily work is every day more abstract and takes more hours: it strongly colonizes the imagination. Unemployment is resented by people as a personal blame, not as a systemic failure, which leads to paralyzed, destroyed lives. In the new consumer society, as Zygmut Bauman says, individuals simultaneously promote a product while they are themselves the product they promote; they are the consumer, the marketing manager, the salesperson and the article for sale. The exams that a person should pass to achieve social recognition requires the individual to recycle himself as a precious object or property, as a product capable of catching attention, attracting clients, and generating demand.

Modern systems produce uniformity all over the world; differences are disappearing among cities, suburbia, towns, dwellings, landscapes, generations, and gender. In this uniform environment the human personality loses identity and cultural references to guide his life; individual high risk behavior proliferates in the world: drugs consumption, crime, extreme sports, and certain forms of sexuality tend to increase; panic and emptiness haunt all human activities; as society malfunctions increase, politicians and capitalists feel more powerful than ever. The tragedy today is that too many people in the world want even more jobs created; want ever more investments in infrastructure, housing, hospitals, scientific experiments and technological advances. People trust in the modern systems and in the growing economy; people rely on the pervasive instruments and institutions that are destroying their lives and future.

Liberating the social imagination is essential to relocate life and economy

It is impossible to liberate the social imagination without a severe critique of the dominant system. This liberation implies studying, investigating, reflecting, and working on oneself. It implies philosophical endeavors; it entails a desire to be free, a will to change our own life style and the construction of a pertinent personal praxis. It also requires detoxification and education in the ways of "degrowth." Without the abandonment of the drug of growth, says Serge Latouche,

We cannot change our own imagination and the less we will be able to change others' imaginations. It is not possible to change the world with laws and decrees...The key is self-transformation.... As our imagination has been colonized, the enemy hides deep in our minds... nevertheless, because of the systemic character of the dominant values... nobody is responsible; the process is anonymous. .. Thus, the adversary is other people, and we feel impotent to transform ourselves.

He quotes Zygmut Bauman: "There is a common world in the globalized society and this is the unique thought ..." Latouche says "beyond the elite, the ensemble of values and beliefs shared by people is considerable." To liberate our villages, many people should abandon many ideas, like: having a car, a house in suburbia or a university degree; they must abandon the idea that having an employment is good for his health and his future. We degrowth activists have to demonstrate that we can live much better with much less infrastructures, equipment and things,

and with minimal dependence on governments, parties and big enterprises.

But the liberation of the social imagination also implies the voluntary defense of territories, animals, forests, rivers, seas, peasant cultures, people's commons, traditional knowledge, endangered species, clean air, public space, and human rights. It also implies rejection of GMOs and their harvests, nuclear power, agribusiness, mining and petroleum operations, toxic waste pools, dam construction, big farms and livestock operations, cookie-cutter housing, automobile use, and "developing" our local environment. It implies also denouncing the misleading notion of sustainable development. Liberating the social imagination means revitalizing the village by producing for local needs and consuming local produce; organizing micro-cooperatives and micro-syndicates; reducing work-time voluntarily and cutting consumption, and constructing new ecological communities with rigorous rules. It also means growing vegetables by our own dwellings or nearby in the eco-region; to walk and bicycle for everyday mobility; to modify toilets and water facilities; to separate residues for reuse and recycling; to support local money, savings and loans, and to use or produce hand-made products. Abandon the use of automobile, bottled water and red meat consumption.
On the other hand, liberating the social imagination means also to enhance political and social involvement within our village environment; to collaborate with citizen initiatives; to voluntarily work on environmental and social issues without the support of the governments, foundations or national or multinational companies; to experiment on ways to survive the economic crisis, peak oil and climate change; to refuse to empower the State and "free trade" and to break with the symbolic system of globalization. Last but not least, to make art an integral part of our lives.

A cultural revolution emerges when men and women work together for the rebirth of their village, town or community, when they expand the realm of gratuity and solidarity, when they are blessed by the love for nature, altruism, cooperation, luddism, autonomy and beauty.

This cultural revolution begins in our minds, the moment when we become aware, as Baruch Spinoza did, that simple poor life constitutes in itself a source of light to inspire us to understand the different dimensions of poverty and our own potency; that the joys of frugal or poor life permit us to liberate a strong desire to live free to our natural limits and avoid external affections or imaginations that diminish or inhibit this desire and our capacities. And he says to let reality teach us this truth in order to comprehend the world as it is here and now; in that way we can liberate ourselves from all forms of servitude and acquire a freedom rooted in need; thus, we can find good responses to very difficult questions. We have to discover and respect the essential link between desire and reason, for the good deployment of our own potential, to facilitate the creation of societies based in freedom and respect for everybody's singularity. Spinoza said that "weakness solely consists in letting external things conduct our lives and decline what demands our nature in itself." Centuries latter, Gandhi said: "Freedom can be achieved through inner sovereignty"

Climate change, peak oil, and high risk technologies can easily bring harsh, painful, corrective changes in our villages in the coming years. But joyful, pleasant transformations will come from the discovery

of our inner power and potential while we voluntarily adopt a frugal, poor, simple, and slower life.

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Miguel Valencia

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Textos recientes en red-ecomunidades.blogspot.com

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Editor's note: Miguel Valencia's speech will be available on this website also in Spanish. His previous articles on Culture Change are The energy transition in México: Towards a post-petroleum era and PEMEX privatization / Downshifting . Miguel Valencia has been associated with Culture Change since its inception in 2001 (after it changed from being the Auto-Free Times magazine for the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium).

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