

Humanism and the Crisis of Civilization Moscow, June 18, 1992

I thank the Moscow Academy of Sciences, the Club of Humanist Intentions and the representatives of the different Cultural fields who are here today. I thank my publisher, the team of translators and the numerous friends who have invited me to speak. I also thank the presence of the media and of course the presence of everyone who is here today.

Surely you can understand the difficulties caused by the need for translation, because due to this inconvenience we will have to compress more than one of the ideas so as to shorten the presentation.

Today's subject, "Humanism and the Crisis of Civilization," requires us to consider the concept of "civilization" as a step prior to the whole development.

Much has been written and discussed about the word "civilization." Even at the beginnings of the Philosophy of History, the different civilizations were conceived as sorts of historical entities that had a process, an evolution, and a destiny. This entity, *the civilization, can be defined as an "environment,"* as a domain of human behaviors that allows us to identify a people with a certain *mode of production, certain social relations, a certain type of Law, and a certain system of values.* In general, the concept of a "people," or "nation," has not been identified with the concept of civilization, because numerous peoples and nations, irrespective of their frontiers, are included within the mentioned common environment. Traditionally, a relationship has been drawn between a civilization and a type of "cultural space" included within geographical limits, also, civilizations have been thought of as having the capacity to irradiate and receive the influences from other neighboring civilizations.

When we speaking of the "Egyptian" or the "Greek civilizations," reference is being made to the environments of human behavior mentioned before, yet, it is not correct to assume that a somewhat centralizing artifice such as the State was the decisive factor in the articulation of said environments. The fact that the Macedonians and the Spartans participated in the Hellenic culture without being a part of the League of City-States, and the fact that they even fought with each other, shows that *the State* is not a substantial factor in defining this civilization. In any case, the fact that civilizations were settled within certain geographical spaces has allowed us to speak of the "Mesopotamian" civilization, the "Nile" civilization, the civilizations of the islands, and so on. This type of classification, of course, implies a conception by which all civilizations are bound by their geographical conditions. Similarly, when speaking of the civilizations "of wine, milk, or honey," or the civilization "of corn," reference is being made to food resources, and when the "Neolithic" civilization is mentioned, reference is being made to the cultural stages resulting from the production of tools and technology.

Extensive work has been vested into classifying civilizations, but most importantly into trying to determine, since Vico and thereafter, what the temporal stages are, how a civilization comes about, and what its destiny is. From this *corsi e ricorsi* of human events that this bright Neapolitan tried to understand (relying on a general idea about the shape of historical development, on a set of axioms, and on a philological methodology) up until Toynbee's historiology (based on the idea of stimulus-response borrowed from Pavlov in his physiological studies), a great deal has been written, and there have been numerous attempts to make science out of ideas that are somewhat diffuse. Naturally, these efforts have been rewarded with varying degrees of success. Comte wrote about a law of all civilizations. According to him, civilizations began with a heroic and theological stage, they advanced towards a metaphysical stage, and finally entered a positivist moment of rationality, abundance, and justice. In his works, Hegel spoke to us about civilizations as a manifestation of the dialectical steps of the Absolute Spirit. On the other hand, Spengler described civilizations as biographical proto-forms, entities that would biologically follow the stages of birth, youth, maturity, and death.

A lot of work has been done to understand the functioning and destiny of civilizations. But many of the researchers and philosophers who undertook these tasks did not delve deeply enough into recognizing, as a primary fact, that their questions and answers arose from the cultural landscape, from the historical moment in which they lived. And today, if one tried to search for a new answer to this subject of civilization, it would be hard to ignore the difficulties presented by the cultural landscape in which we were formed and the historical moment in which we live. Today, if we want to understand how things came to be, we should ask ourselves about the conditions of our own life. With this action we would be humanizing the historical process we are reflecting upon. This would not happen by externally interpreting the facts produced by human beings as in a history book, but by *understanding* what is happening in the situation in which we live, *starting with the historical structure, which is* also the giver of meaning of human life. This point of view allows us to become aware of our limitations when asking certain questions and providing certain answers, because the moment in which we live, itself, prevents us from breaking through the limits of our beliefs and cultural assumptions, and yet it is precisely because of a breakdown of our beliefs, and because of events happening that we considered impossible that we will be able to advance into a new moment of civilization.

As you all well understand, we are speaking about a *life-crisis situation in which we are all immersed* and, consequently, about the moment of a breakdown of the beliefs and cultural assumptions in which we were formed. In order to describe the crisis from that point of view we could focus on four phenomena that are having a direct impact on us: 1. *There is a rapid change in the world*, fueled by the technological revolution, which is clashing with the established structures and the mode of life of societies and individuals. 2. This out-of-step situation between the technological acceleration and the slow pace of social adaptation to change is generating *progressive crises in all fields*, and there is no reason to assume that these crises are going to stop; quite the contrary, they will tend to increase. 3. *The unexpectedness of events* prevents us from foreseeing, not only what direction events will take, but also what direction the people around us will take, and ultimately, the direction of our own lives. In reality, it is not change itself that concerns us, but the unexpectedness of this change. 4. Many of the things we *thought and believed in are no longer useful to us*. Additionally, *there do not seem to be any solutions* being proposed by a society, institutions, nor individuals who are subjected to the same ill conditions. On our part, we are in need of references, and yet, to us the traditional references are asphyxiating and obsolete.

From my point of view, it is here in this region of the planet, more than anywhere else, that the most formidable acceleration in the conditions of historical change are taking place. In this confusing and painful acceleration a new moment of civilization is underway. Here, today, nobody knows what will happen tomorrow, but in other parts of the world there is a naive assumption that civilization is headed in a direction of foreseeable growth within a pre-established socio-economic model. Of course, this way of seeing things is more like a mood, a manifestation of desires, than a justified position based on fact, because if these things that are happening were examined, the conclusion would be that the world, taken globally and not schizophrenically divided between East and West, is becoming *increasingly unstable*. Focusing only on one type of State, or administration, or economy for an interpretation of the coming about of events reveals an intellectual short-sightedness and discloses the foundation of beliefs that we have incorporated in our cultural formation. On the one hand, we notice that the socio-historical landscape we are living in has dramatically changed in comparison to the landscape we lived in a few years ago. On the other hand, in the interpretation of new situations we are still using tools for analysis from an old landscape. The difficulties are even greater, however, because our sensibility was formed in other times and is not changing at the same rhythm of events. Certainly, this is why everywhere in the world the distance is growing between those who have the power, be it economic, political, artistic or any other, and between the new generations who feel very differently about the role that institutions and leaders should play. I think that this is the moment to say something that might seem shocking to the older sensibilities. *The new generations are not interested*, as a main subject, in the socio-economic model that the formers of opinion discuss daily, *on the contrary, they want the institutions and the leaders to not become one more hindrance in this complicated world*. On the one hand they expect a new alternative because they consider the existing models to be obsolete, and on the other, they are not willing to follow proposals nor leaderships that do not coincide with their sensibility. Many people consider this as a lack of responsibility on the part of the youth, but I am not speaking about responsibilities, I am speaking about *a type of sensibility that must be seriously taken into account*. This is not a problem that can be resolved with opinion polls nor surveys which are later used to find novel means to manipulate society. This is a problem that requires a global evaluation about the meaning of the concrete human being who, so far, has been given lip service in theory and betrayed in practice.

The reply expected for these comments is that people want concrete solutions in this crisis. But I insist that it is quite different to promise concrete solutions than to provide concrete solutions. The concrete fact is that no one believes in the promises. As a psycho-social reality, this is much more important than proposing solutions that people can sense will not be practically carried out. The crisis in credibility is also dangerous, because it hurls us defenselessly into the arms of demagoguery and makes us fall into the immediate charisma of the latest leader who rallies profound feelings. Even if I were to repeat this over and over again it is hard to acknowledge it because our *landscape of formation places* an impediment that creates a confusion between the facts and the words that mention the facts.

Now we have come to a point when we evidently need to ask ourselves once and for all if the "look" we have been applying to understand these problems is adequate. This is not such an unusual comment because for a number of years now the scientists of other fields have ceased to believe that they are observing reality itself, so they dedicated themselves to understanding how their personal observation interfered with the phenomenon they were studying. In our own words, this means that the observer introduces elements from his or her own landscape that are non-existent in the phenomenon under study, and that even the look directed at a field of study is already focusing on a certain region of that field, so one could be attending to unimportant matters. This fact becomes more critical when trying to justify political proposals that always say that everything is done taking human beings into account, when in reality *this is false*, because instead, other factors are taken into account that place people as accessories to situations. It is never considered that it is *solely by understanding the structure of human life that the events and the destiny of civilization can be thoroughly explained*. This leads us to comprehend that the subject matter relating to human life is merely declaimed, it is not given real consideration. The assumption is that people's

lives are not a productive agent of events, but rather a recipient of macroeconomic, ethnic, religious, and geographical forces. This is based on the assumption that it is necessary to, objectively, require people to work and to have social discipline, and subjectively, to be credulous and obedient.

After these observations about the mode of considering the phenomenon of civilization having present our landscape of formation, beliefs, and values, it is best that we continue concentrating on the main subject.

Today, when speaking about the situation of crisis, it no longer refers to a world of separate civilizations as it occurred in other days when civilizations could interact with one another, and could either regulate or ignore factors. In this process of increasing globalization we are presently undergoing, *we must interpret the events at the same time that we act, with a structural and global dynamic*. However, we clearly see everything becoming unstructured: the national State being wounded by the blows it receives from the localisms from below, and from the regionalization and the globalization from above; the people, cultural codes, languages, and goods all intermixing within an incredible tower of Babel; the centralized corporations in a crisis because they cannot implement the flexibility they need; the gap among generations widening, as if in the same moment and place subcultures co-exist yet are divided because of their pasts and their projects for the future; family members, co-workers, political, labor, and social organizations experiencing the action of centrifugal disintegrating forces; the ideologies, being swept by this whirlwind, cannot respond nor give inspiration for coherent action to human groups; the old solidarity disappears in a social fabric that dissolves more and more, and, lastly, the individual, who today is surrounded by more people in his daily landscape, and by more media than ever before, finds himself isolated and un-communicated. *All of this indicates that even the de-structured and paradoxical events respond to the same process, which is global and which is structural*. And if the old ideologies cannot respond to these phenomena, it is because they are part of a world that is disappearing. Still, many people believe that these facts signal the end of ideas and the end of History, and the end of conflicts and human progress. In our terminology, we call all of this a "crisis," but we are far from considering this crisis a final downfall. In fact, we see that the dissolution of previous forms coincides with a "bursting at the seams" of garments that no longer fit human beings. These events, which have already begun to happen, and which are faster in some places than in others, will soon cover the whole planet. In fact, things will happen in places, that so far have maintained an unjustifiable attitude of success, that daily language will define as "unbelievable."

We are advancing towards a planetary civilization with a new form of organization and a new set of values. This will inevitably start off with the most important subject of our times: *to know if we want to live and under what conditions*. The circles of greedy minorities and provisionally powerful people will certainly not take into account in their projects, this subject which, for all the small isolated and powerless human beings, is valid ; instead, they will consider the macro-social factors as decisive. However, by ignoring what the needs of the concrete human being are they will be quite astonished by the social despair, in some cases, and by the violent uprisings in others. In general, they will be astonished by how people will escape daily through all types of drugs, neuroses, and suicide. In sum, these dehumanizing projects will become obstructed in the process of their practical implementation: twenty percent of the world population will no longer be in any condition to sustain the increasing distance that will be separating them from the remaining eighty percent of human beings who will be lacking the basic conditions to live. As we all know, this syndrome cannot disappear simply through the concerted action of psychologists, drugs, or sports, nor by the suggestions of the formers of opinions. Neither the powerful mass media nor any gigantic public spectacle will be capable of convincing us that we are not ants nor a mere statistical number. What they will be able to achieve, though, is an accentuation of the sensation of the absurd and the lack of meaning of life.

I think that in this crisis of civilization we are undergoing, numerous positive factors can be advantageous in the same way that technology is when it pertains to health, education, or improving the conditions of life, even though we may reject technology when it has veered off from its original objective and is being applied for destruction instead. The events are helping in a positive way: that we revise, globally, everything we have believed in up until today; that we value human history from a different perspective, that we launch our projects in the direction of a different image of the future, and that we look at one another with renewed compassion and tolerance. Then, a new Humanism will emerge through this labyrinth of History in which human beings so often thought they would disappear.

Today's crisis is spreading in all the directions of the planet, not only in the Community of Independent States, nor in Moscow, which at one time were the most notable points of expression of this crisis. The world civilization is here today. It cannot make do without the initiatives and solutions that this land will find for its problems. All of our futures depend on it because we are all participants in the same world civilization.

We have spoken about the concept of civilization, and about a civilization that today is becoming global. We have also covered the subjects of the crisis and the beliefs that we rely on to interpret this moment we live in. With regards to the concept "Humanism," which is integrated into the title of this conference, I would only like to mention certain topics of interest. In the first place, we are not speaking about historical Humanism in the sense of literature and arts which constituted the motor of the Renaissance and broke the chains of that long medieval night, the Dark Ages. Historical Humanism has a precise identity, and we feel that we are its successors in spite of the falseness of certain ideological and religious currents today who call

themselves "humanists." There can be no humanism if any value is placed above the human being. I should emphasize, furthermore, that humanism extracts its explanations about the world, about values, about society, about politics, about Art, and about History basically from its conception of the human being. The understanding of the structure of the human being is what gives clarity to the perspective of Humanism. It is not possible to proceed otherwise. It is not possible to understand the human being other than beginning from the human being. Contemporary Humanism cannot be based upon theories about matter, about the spirit, or about God. It is necessary to base it on the structure of human life, its liberty, and its intention, and logically, no determinism or naturalism can become a Humanism, because its initial assumption views the human being as secondary. Today's Humanism defines the human being as "the historical being whose mode of social action transforms his own nature." Here we find the elements that, when correctly developed, can justify a theory and a practice that responds to today's emergency. It would take too long to make extensive developments about this definition and, unfortunately, we do not have enough time.

It must be evident that the quick description we made, about civilization and about the crisis at present, begins by taking into account the structure of human existence and the fact that this description is precisely contemporary Humanism applied to a given subject. The terms "Crisis of Civilization" and "Humanism" become linked to each other when we offer a vision that could contribute to resolve some of the difficulties we have today. Even without lengthening this description it is still clear that *we are* considering the theme of Humanism as a group of ideas, as a practical occupation, as a current of *opinion*, and as a *potential organization that carries forth objectives of social and personal transformation*-giving shelter to concrete political and cultural particularities, without them losing, *by this fact, their distinct qualities as forces of change, but converging in the mutual end intention*. It would be a great disservice to this moment of change if someone felt that their destiny was to give *hegemony and universality to a specific tendency, precisely because this is a moment of de-centralization* and because there is a clamor for the recognition of the real particularities.

I would like to end with a very personal consideration. During these days I have had the occasion to attend gatherings and seminars with well-known personalities in the fields of Culture, Science and Education. More than once, I seemed to perceive a climate of pessimism when exchanging ideas about a possible future. I did not feel tempted in these occasions to make naive exaltations nor to declare my faith for a fortunate future. However, I think we should make an effort to overcome this discouragement right now, remembering other moments of severe crisis that the human species lived through and overcame. In this sense, I would like to quote a phrase that I thoroughly share and that vibrates in the origins of Greek tragedy: "to all apparently closed roads, human beings always found an exit ."

That's all. Thank you very much.