



KEYNOTE SPEECH

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A NEW SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF CULTURE

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“The contemporary human being is desperately climbing a slope that is crumbling. We are rushing forward only to stay in the same place, in a present that is constantly fleeing. For if we stop running even for one second, -running after work, after our emails, our appointments, our obligations, our money, after time that flies- we fall. Into unemployment, poverty, oblivion, and desocialization.”

*(Hartmut Rosa, interview with Frédéric Joignot,
le Monde magazine, 28 august 2010.)*

It was only about a decade ago that the German philosopher and sociologist Hartmut Rosa, author of the book *Acceleration (and Alienation)*, said this in an interview. “Unemployment, poverty, oblivion, and desocialization”; these are what await humans of the Late Modern Age (which we also call the Anthropocene) who are trying to run after time –in vain. Rosa’s pessimistic predictions suddenly all came true with the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that ensued, leaving us all astounded at how it was possible. What had been talked about for some time but was not expected had happened; and all at once too. What was especially surprising was that the rapid pace came to a quick and sudden stop. We were faced with this sudden stop at an utterly unexpected moment, because the acceleration had continued even though we knew more or less that it was not sustainable. The global economy, stock markets, social interaction all stopped. Humans living on the face of the earth started questioning the future in an unprecedented state of confusion, drawing on news and information from different sources. Yet there was one thing that was certain; and that was absolute uncertainty. Although post-pandemic prophecies came thick and fast, nobody knew how we were to get out of this situation, including scientists. Despite all the talk, the reopenings, the recovery predictions, etc. the only thing that was certain was uncertainty. How long was this period of being locked down at home, yet still connected, going to last? What kind of a new life, a new world, were we going to emerge into?



Actually, at the beginning, our hopes went up with some of the news that came during the first lockdown. Air pollution was decreasing, the seas looked bluer, and the threatening clouds over Delhi that made it difficult to breathe had dissipated. Perhaps, once the virus was gone (would it ever be gone?), we would live in a “cleaner” world after having learnt our lesson from what it had taught us. Nowadays, after more than a year and half has passed since the pandemic was officially recognized and declared as such, we are transitioning from lockdown to a kind of reopening without knowing how protective the vaccine will be against the new variants –a vaccine that has been unfairly distributed among the people living on earth. And the



uncertainty and questions persist. While more than 4 million people have died –and primarily healthcare workers and the most vulnerable social groups, and of course the elderly–, there is an alarming increase in mental health issues such as anxiety, sleep disorders, and depression as a result of quarantine, social distancing and isolation. Not to mention news of an unprecedented heat wave nearing 50°C in the Pacific Northwest, while oceans where pipelines are laid on the seabed have caught fire. And Turkey surrendered to the mucilage that threatened the life of all living beings in and around the Sea of Marmara, which lies between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and lately fires devastating the coasts of the country. Inevitably, the question arises: will we just return to a life that is even worse than before without having learned anything from the pandemic?

Yet there were signs. Only 50 years ago, in 1971, the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" report, clearly stated that if population, production, industrialization, pollution, and consumption continued to accelerate at this pace, the earth's resources could no longer renew themselves. But it soon became obvious that this warning would be of no use. "... who is society? there is no such thing. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first..."¹ said Mrs. Thatcher, who is one of the founders of neoliberalism and gave her name to a form of government, Thatcherism. Seeing that we had become individuals, then we had to fend for ourselves. Was it not taught to us all from the earliest days of Modernism that production, consumption, technology, and acceleration were all one and a whole and that they all meant irreversible progress? And yet, despite the signs of warning, the rulers of the world favored the economy over health and the environment. What mattered was that the wheels of production and retail kept turning at all costs. They even aimed, if possible, to turn the crisis into an opportunity. After all, don't we say slowdown rather than economic recession? Then let's continue to accelerate at this pace despite the pandemic... But at what cost?

Let us take a look at what has happened in the realm of cities. In the last 30-40 years, we have witnessed the rise of and dizzying race –another competition for acceleration– between metropolises, cosmopolitan cities, and megalopolises. Big cities have snatched away the lion's share of the population, the economy, social mobility and the production and consumption of culture, while leaving the majority of populations

¹ Thatcher, Margaret. 1987. 'Interview for "Woman's Own" ("No Such Thing as Society").'



of entire territories in poverty, inequality, deprivation, as well as desolation. These big cities, or –to put it in terms frequently used by those of us working in the field of culture– the cities (or “capitals”) of culture, have exploited, sucked up, and depleted the resources produced by all the people living in those countries. Everywhere in the world, practices applied by initiatives on cultural production and sustainable development have been extensively scrutinized. Nevertheless, it was big cities, in parallel with the accelerated lives within them, that received the heaviest blow during the Covid- 19 pandemic. Now, the time has come to put to a long rest, constructs such as the “creative city” or “creative class”, whose authors themselves have



recently begun to revise. It is now time to focus on what kinds of action can be taken by cities of smaller scale, which are not autarkic in the narrow sense, yet are viable and closely interact with healthy citizens who enjoy life. (In this regard, it is important to note that the long-term projects and collaborations with a wide variety of cities developed as part of the Agenda 21 for Culture constitute a major exception. Their websites not only provide information on emergency support offered to artists and those working in the field of culture, but also include many good cases that have developed from the bottom up). “We, the people, are the city. Through our beliefs, values and creative activities –our culture– we shape the city of stones and dreams.” These are the two opening sentences of the 2020 Rome Charter signed by the many cities that are actively involved in the work of the UCLG Culture Committee and whose representatives are present here in Izmir. These two sentences cannot be repeated often enough in terms of reminding us once again that demonstrating the willpower of a “we” to sustain life in cities would not be in vain, and that intangible values and the imagination are not futile things.

So, what did we do, as those being ruled, as the individuals who “must look to themselves”, in other words, as autonomous subjects? If there was no such thing as society, then we would try and hold on to communities. Our micro identities took on importance beyond anything else. But none of this has yielded any tangible results; not even the mass protests we occasionally see in various parts of the world, the resistances we demonstrated to defend spaces that should belong to everyone, to defend that which is public, i.e., the places that are ours. And this is where we are at now. Where can we go from here?

Until now, culture and nature have always been seen as opposite things. In fact, people have even resorted to approximations such as ‘everything outside nature’ when defining culture. So, we have carried out research, produced documents, and issued various publications in order to establish solid foundations for ensuring that culture is accepted as an essential component of sustainable development and included among the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. All of us involved, and especially the UCLG, have devoted efforts toward this end on a wide variety of platforms. There are a great number of studies that can be cited as evidence to demonstrate the social and economic impact and spillover effects of cultural products and services. We cannot deny any of this. We must continue to work in this direction. In the meantime, people are struggling to make ends meet. We know that in Turkey alone, over a hundred musicians



reached the edge of despair and committed suicide. The concept of “precariat” was deemed appropriate to describe the situation of those working in the field of arts and culture and the efforts spent in this field, and most analyses were based on this. But from now on, we will need to concentrate on expounding the concept of “survival” and figuring out how and under what conditions it can actually be possible. When it comes to cultural activities, there are two more criteria that need to be taken into account along with, and perhaps even more than, social and economic impact: and



those are ecology and public health. Therefore, when it comes to sustainability, it is now time to rethink acceleration together with and based on nature's own particular pace (a nature that includes not only underground and aboveground resources, but also bacteria and viruses), and also consider the cycles of life on earth and its ability to regenerate itself. We must continue to emphasize each and every day that culture, and primarily art, whether they are included in international documents or not, are to have a say in the sustainability of beauty and of life itself. As I stated in an article last year, none of us foresaw that the Anthropocene would end so quickly. Yet, here we are, witnessing the sinking of an era: the dusk of the Anthropocene.

Uncertainty, anxiety, restlessness: These are the characteristics of the people of the Anthropocene. But since this era has come to its end, then it means that it is time to replace these characteristics with new ones. "Nothing is beautiful; man alone is beautiful: all aesthetic rests on this piece of ingenuousness, it is the first axiom of this science. And now let us straightway add the second to it: nothing is ugly save the degenerate man..." This is what Nietzsche wrote when he put forward the Will to power as a new concept in *Twilight of the idols* (in the chapter '*Skirmishes in a war with the age*' [section 20]). When power went beyond all acceleration, everything that humans created and all that surrounds them became unsustainable. Now, we are all experiencing the outcome together. To pull through this, we need new concepts; we need a brand new language that does not rely on our old conventions. And this will be possible through new concepts i.e., the children of the creative mind which gives birth to language. But how?

First, we must start off with new questions. That is what I tried to do in this speech. Although they have no answers for now, I have no doubt that it is the right questions that will pave the way for new concepts. For this, I propose replacing Nietzsche's Will to power with a different "Will" which will develop brand new concepts that favor beauty and life rather than the borrowed or customary language that we are in the habit of using; I propose replacing it with the "*Will to thought*".





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