

Balcony Seats in a globalised World

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Many of us have a snap-shot-like insight to the so-called “Third World”, i.e. large parts of the southern hemisphere, through TV reports on “flood disasters” or press reports on famine. Some of us know the exotic, but strange surrounding of a high-class hotel which we associate with beaches, drinks and holidays.

We all live in a world where globalisation plays a major role. Nevertheless, we know very little about the reality in large parts of the world, and even less about the poor regions. We know little about the largest part of this world and even less about the people who live there. Our knowledge is so far restricted, as our angle is a particular one: we, the wealthy, see this other world from a superior position, like looking down from a balcony.

We are barely able to imagine our wealth. In our world, we take the functioning of everything for granted, which is not the case elsewhere. There is no electric light, no train or road system, barely any water. For many people in this world, life can be very easy, simply by the threat of failing to survive: there is no drinking water closer than at the distance of a walk of several hours. We, on our balcony, are also able to assess our wealth. In Western Europe, a yearly income of 25.000 dollars is common standard. In the USA, it is even 30.000 dollars, - against 300 dollars in other parts of the world - at least for those who do well.

Those in their balcony seats have the attitude of getting used to looking down at the others. Why are they so poor?

There are several factors which in wealthy Europe are different to the poor regions in this world.

The first factor is nature. Of course, there are beaches where bananas grow in abundance. But people live in regions where nature is not easy going to live in. In Bangladesh, a large river dominates the central settlement areas, every two or three years, a flood makes hundreds of thousands of people homeless. In Senegal, there is the problem of asphalt covered roads which become regularly impassable due to sand from dunes. In Nicaragua, with its warm climate, over large areas, the soil is mingled with stones to an extent that an Austrian farmer would not build a rockery there. What we barely know anymore, what our farmers do know, is true for large regions in this world: there is a grim nature which has to be forced with many efforts, in order to have bread every day.

Besides nature, the past often constitutes a powerful and violent factor of poverty in many parts of the world. There have been longstanding conflicts between nations and nationalities. There are efforts to impose religions. In many parts of the world, the frontiers have been drawn and imposed deliberately, often one century ago and even earlier, by the Christian white man. At that time, spheres of influence were distributed on the grounds of supposed treasures of the soil: gold, diamonds and important ore. Hence, we, smart Europeans, having just recently introduced the Euro, should not look down at the history and the conflicts in other parts of the world. We, too, have to assume responsibility for our history: in the last century, two world wars were initiated in Europe. Apparently, we are no better.

One third factor has to be mentioned: the brutal struggle for existence. Those who do not know what they will give their children to eat tomorrow, if at all, search for solutions. In many cases, these solutions are desperate ones. In addition, the revolution against those who secure their portion corruptly, who fail to share, this revolution is triggered off frequently.

One of the most quiet forms of this struggling for one's existence is the migration to large cities. People, at a distance of hundreds of kilometres away from the metropolis, hear that there is work and food. Then, they go there, with their spouse, children and their sparse belongings, with whatever one can carry. The only thing is that thousands of people do this at the same time. For a long time, the migration rate to Mexico city has amounted to 10.000 people - not per year or per month, but per week. In this way, the population of large cities reaches millions of inhabitants, slums emerge, delinquency develops, children on the street resort to beggary, in this way, misery comes into existence in metropolitan cities of this world which we designate proudly a globalised one.

These were only some few factors. There has not even been talk of those wealthy, in their balcony seats, who satisfy their daily elementary needs in buying at a low price, because in international trade, prices are determined to the detriment of the poor. Let us not even think of what is thrown away every day in a large European city. Let us not even go into detail about the comfortable life of those wealthy in their balcony seats.

Let us, instead, do something different. Let us pose a famous question which was coined by the European philosopher Immanuel Kant: What can I do?

1. First of all, one must learn to attend to other people's problems.
2. Then, one has to admit that development projects cannot be realised without financial resources. Therefore, it is important that political promises made in wealthy Austria are kept. For many years now, Austrian governments have promised their contribution to development cooperation to the extent of 0,7% of the gross national product. Some European countries already achieve even 1%. In this way, Austria, ranging below European average, has to catch up.
3. Finally, we, euroland inhabitants, could make efforts in donating the same amount as before, only in euro. The amount of contributions in shillings could be made in euro. It is true, this is a larger amount, but it will not ruin us. And it will add a little value to the assistance given until now.
4. And finally, if you know an institution or a group in your surrounding which deals with a "Third World" project for the "South", for the people in other parts of the world, just participate. A successful example is given by the organisation "Médecins sans frontières" (Doctors without borders).

In concluding, one can say that there are sufficient means to become active. It is up to you to descend from the balcony. You will be rewarded by more than you have ever expected: the immense, multifaceted world.