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THEIR CRISES, OUR SOLUTIONS

Keynote speech for the Governance Innovation Week

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Warm thanks to the University of Pretoria and to Lorenzo Fioramonti for inviting me to this event; I'm extremely grateful.

Dear Professor de La Rey, dear Professor Duncan, dear Friends, and –perhaps most of all, dear students,

I'm very honoured and happy to be here and to share this part of Governance Week with you. It's particularly interesting and rewarding for me to be part of this conference as well as part of the whole programme dedicated to studying governance innovation. But I am going to be very rude and give offence right away. I want to confess my prejudice against the word "governance". I recognise that this is perhaps not the best way to make myself popular at the very beginning of my talk! But since my mother used to say I was the most tactless woman she had ever known, I will honour her memory by diving right in and proving that she was right, as mothers generally are.

What's wrong—certainly not with this Week we're celebrating together, nor with the Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation hosting our Conference—but with the *term* 'governance'? In Middle English and old French it was a perfectly good word, but it meant individual conduct and control or rule over oneself and had nothing to do with *government* in the modern sense. The word had thus become archaic, but was picked up by the US and European corporate sectors about twenty years ago in the guise of "corporate governance". It then quickly spread to the rest of the world and in my view has done considerable harm. We need to be extremely careful of the words we choose and of the baggage they carry.

Corporate governance deals with the legal or extra-legal relationships the corporation maintains with its so-called "stakeholders"—another word that has got completely out of control and is found everywhere. The stakeholders can be employees, investors, creditors, suppliers, sub-contractors, bankers, ad agencies, franchisers, customers—but the relationship that connects the stakeholder to the company almost invariably rests on some variety of commercial transaction or exchange. In the original sense, a stakeholder could even be a gambler and the stake was the capital he had decided to risk as in "I've got a stake in that horse".

Just as governance isn't the same thing as government, a stakeholder is never synonymous with a citizen. Citizens have rights guaranteed by instruments such as constitutions, these rights are upheld by the rule of law and, theoretically at least, they are the same for everyone, male or female, rich or poor. Stakeholders have an interest or a business relationship with the corporation or other entity which can change at any moment.

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Please forgive me if these distinctions seem farfetched or excessively rigid. I make them because I'm a writer and writers believe that the words we use have consequences, in this case political consequences. This is even clearerworld to me as a European citizen because official Europe, particularly the European Commission, has taken over the entire corporate vocabulary and made it the official jargon of the European Union. The Commission, its acolytes and its bureaucracy talk all the time about *governance* and *'stakeholders'*—but you will rarely hear anything from them about *government* and *citizens*. We also have an entity called *civil society* which substitutes for such outdated concepts as *the people* or *popular sovereignty*.

Throughout the world one can find many people in high places labelled as experts or *technocrats*. Such people are frequently the products of, or beholden to, the corporate sector, particularly the banking industry and its close neighbours such as accounting firms, legal specialists and so on. At one point recently, the prime ministers of Greece and Italy as well as the President of the European Central Bank were all ex-Goldman Sachs men. But this word in the dominant neoliberal ideology is there to tell us that technocrats make only impartial decisions; implicitly they never favour one social group over another and they never make laws imposing political views benefitting the class they belong to.

In the same way, many institutions encourage “dialogue” with civil society but are never going to actually listen to or negotiate with citizens.

In the same vein, corporations and banks may sign on to “codes of conduct” or “codes of ethics”. For example, that's all a company has to do to join the Global Compact of the United Nations—you endorse five general principals with regard to human rights, labour rights and the environment and that's it—no one is ever going to monitor your behaviour but the company gets to use the UN Global Compact logo, attend many meetings etc. A signature at the bottom of a code is all the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and other clever public relations groups require of their members and many of us have noted how convenient this can be in order to remain one's own regulator. The message behind the code of conduct is “we are quite able to regulate ourselves, thank you, we do not need cumbersome State regulation that could get in our way”. Nor do codes prevent such interests from lobbying fiercely against any new law that could actually limit their freedom to do as they please.

This same vocabulary is also abundantly used by institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF. Many people here will recall the drastic austerity programmes imposed on Africa and other continents during the decades of the debt crisis which is still a reality for some countries. These so-called structural adjustment or conditionality packages always contain a criterion labelled “governance”. If the Bank and the Fund don't detect sufficient improvement in “governance” the country is condemned to another X years of adjustment austerity. This is an extremely convenient criterion for these institutions which act on behalf of the Northern creditors and especially in the 1980s and 1990s could impose a quasi-colonial rule. Such a system is a much better one for them than actual colonialism,



since it is less visible, and less expensive, entailing no costs like an army or an administration yet still able to force governments to do their will. And all of these more or less subtle changes in language over the past 30 years or so seem to me to have a single purpose: to limit the democratic expression of citizens and their capacity to organise, alongside their elected representatives and strive for genuinely democratic governments that answer to the popular will.

But I know that my friends here at Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation, believe the word 'governance' can be rescued. They believe that this concept can help us unpack the many ways in which citizens can make their voices heard, hold governments accountable and build forms of decision-making that are controlled and responsive to direct participation. They are committed to looking at both 'governance' and 'innovation' with a critical eye because "innovation", too, is not always beneficial. They know that their task is to identify new ways for citizens to uphold social justice and rethink conventional wisdom, both in our political and in our economic life. This is why I wish them a long and fruitful future, while reminding them to pay close attention to the semantic traps placed on the road ahead.

Now that I have finally finished venting on that subject, let me address head on the topic I've been asked to talk about. Lorenzo was kind enough to invite me to deal with the subject of a recent book of mine, called in French and some other languages "Their Crises, Our Solutions". In English, on the insistence of my publishers, it's called "Whose Crisis, Whose Future?"

Some people I'm close to think the publishers were right to make me change. I still disagree, first because there's only one crisis in their title whereas I believe there are several converging crises and that they are all making each other worse—and simultaneously making our lives worse. I also believe that titles should be used to tell the potential reader what the book is about, not to pose questions such as Whose Crisis? Whose Future? Whose crisis seems clear enough to me—it affects everybody. Not even the richest people in the world can escape the impacts of climate change—or at least their children can't. As for Whose Future, the question will be soon decided if it isn't already. Unless we undertake, and fast, to invest in solutions very different from those now put in place we shall learn to our cost that you can't fight the laws of nature and if you try to, you lose.

In the climate crisis as well as the financial, the economic and the social ones, we really are in the midst of a kind of global class warfare and if the corporate and financial elites win, the future will be ruthlessly market-oriented, anti-democratic and extremely grim, not to mention one in which we shall have created even greater inequalities than today, both within and between nations. That of course is in addition to a less and less liveable environment, featuring increasing lethal extreme weather events. These droughts, floods and storms can no longer be called "freak"—we know for a fact their frequency and severity is on the rise.



My own title, *Their Crises, Our Solutions*, also made clear that I distinguish between a “Them” and an “Us”. “They” are a comparatively tiny group that I call the Davos class and I believe that the crises really are of their making. I am not indulging in conspiracy theory here. The people who belong to this class may be international and nomadic—in my view they still constitute a genuine social class with its own attributes, such as having the same meeting places, including Davos, sitting on the same transnational corporate boards, frequenting the same holiday spots and clubs, choosing similar schools for their children, preferred sports, favoured brands and ways of dressing that send subtle coded signals to other members of the class; they drive the same vehicles, display the same ways of consuming generally and even their wives (or, in rare cases, husbands) may tend to look pretty much the same.

As a class they defend interests based on a belief system that is generally neoliberal to the core. Individually, the members of the Davos class may be highly intelligent, charming and generous. I’m not criticising anyone’s private morality, intentions or lifestyle here—I’m simply stating that *as a class* they can be expected to defend certain interests and that it’s better to recognise the fact. And, one also has to admit, democracy sometimes gets in their way.

Neoliberal ideology serves to uphold their interests which are also buttressed by various international media or major national and international institutions. In a word, the members of the Davos class, whatever their nationality, ethnicity or religion do share the same goals and the same culture. The crises we now confront globally are an outcome, a consequence of those goals and that culture. Naturally, every country continues to have its particular problems and specific issues but I would argue that these are amplified by the more general crises brought about by neoliberal globalisation and market rule, particularly the dominance of financial markets.

As for the “We” or the “Us” implied by “Our Solutions” in my title, I believe it would normally include everyone in this room—people who generally seek to improve the *status quo* and who, in one way or another, in one sector or another, try to change that order for the better through proposals, debate, persuasion, teaching, belonging to associations and trade unions, participating in government, and other actions of all kinds.

Let me now explain further how I believe our now-globalised world is structured. Despite the word “globalisation” which sounds all-inclusive, with everyone holding hands and marching together towards the promised land, present-day globalisation excludes vast numbers of people, towns, regions and even entire countries. Today, we have the places that count and are worth including because they have useful material or immaterial resources to contribute and they have purchasing power to buy the resources of others. People, towns, regions, and so on, that neither produce much that is of interest to paying customers nor consume much beyond the basics of existence are nearly always disregarded or rejected by globalisation unless they have the good luck to live under truly progressive governments.



For example, as a sign of who counts and who doesn't, the rich countries of the OECD have reduced their official aid budgets for two years in a row. Between 2010 and 2011 their aid to all developing countries fell by 3 per cent but aid to the 48 countries classed by the United Nations as "least developed" dropped by 9 per cent. The same was alas true in 2012 as well. These cuts are one bit of the fallout from the crisis and the budget cuts due to austerity policies in the US and Europe. The Least Developed countries that are suffering from these cuts in aid are mostly African and small island States which are by definition the places of limited interest whose participation in global markets is extremely limited.

Making the situation worse, the Cold War is over. That statement may sound bizarre but I mean it seriously. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union had to prevent each other from capturing States they could claim as allies and/or use as military bases. Any place on earth could become an asset for the other side. Since this option no longer exists, there is no particular *political* reason to take the Least Developed into account either. *Realpolitik* has thus become even more brutal than it used to be.

Within the context of this exclusionary globalisation in which more and more people simply don't count; this globalisation which "takes the best and leaves the rest", one can identify other hierarchies and power structures at work particularly since the financial and economic crisis began in 2007-2008. One of the metaphors we can use is that of a prison, a prison with four walls that reinforce each other. I think we can all agree that the global financial system is probably the strongest wall because it has become the most powerful economic and even social force worldwide, making decisions that touch everyone. It has also, astonishingly perhaps, gained even more power since the crisis began, bullying entire countries and dictating to governments how they must behave. Some have claimed that the so-called BRICS have escaped from the crisis which has settled in so firmly in the United States and Europe but in so far as South Africa is one of the BRICS, I think few South Africans would agree with them. As a matter of fact, China, India and especially Brazil have also begun to suffer the ill-effects of the crisis caused mainly by the US and British financial sectors.

Although it is true that South Africa had little direct exposure to the U.S. and European banks at the heart of the financial turmoil, your country has still been a victim of the knock-on effects. For example, as in many other countries, food prices increased substantially here in 2008. Although extreme weather played a role, the main cause of increased food prices world-wide was the huge amounts of cash—20 times as much as only three years previously—that poured into the commodities markets as soon as subprime securities trading began to go sour and speculators were looking for another lucrative market. For all practical purposes and for most cereals and vegetable oils, US prices *are* the world price.

In 2008, the market competition for, say, wheat contracts was purely speculative—only a tiny proportion of the buyers actually planned to take delivery of the physical grain—but to cite one extreme instance in March 2008, their bids pushed up the price of wheat by 31 % in a single day. This kind of extreme volatility was felt around the world and helped to double



or triple the cost of food thousands of miles away from the commodities markets where the speculation took place.

Another example of Northern financial crises contributions to South African problems has been the precipitous drop in trade. Europe is still your most important trading partner on par (or just slightly behind) China, buying about 35% of your exports--mostly manufactures and finished products. Such exports are more valuable than the raw materials bought principally by China and other Asians; but the value of your exports to Europe fell by nearly 20% in 2008. The healthy annual average growth rate of about 4 ½ per cent which you achieved here from 2003 to 2007 dropped by nearly 40% and credit was restricted.

I don't know what part of your job losses were due to such factors; the fact remains that South Africa created 1.6 million jobs between 2003 and 2007 and saw half of those jobs destroyed between 2008 and 2010. The financial industry, directly or indirectly brought on the crisis and you and the rest of the world are still feeling the impact.

After finance, the second wall of our metaphorical prison is inequality. In the 18 years since the end of apartheid, South Africa has made quite stunning progress in some areas but reducing inequalities has unfortunately not been one of them. At the end of 2012, the *New York Times* announced that your country had set an unenviable record and had become the most unequal in the entire world, with a Gini coefficient of 0.70. As many of you will know, the Gini coefficient is an economic measurement that tells one nothing about how much wealth there is to share but measures how whatever wealth does exist is distributed. A coefficient of zero means everyone gets exactly the same amount; a coefficient of 1 means that one person takes everything—both these cases obviously being impossible.

What can we learn from these indexes? They tell us that successful, developed, wealthy, free and democratic societies with good health, education and social protection systems and thriving market economies boast, on the whole, low coefficients. These range from the mid to high .20s (all the Scandinavians, Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, Austria...) to the lower .30s (Australia, Ireland, Canada, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, South Korea, most of Eastern Europe). Italy, the United Kingdom and Japan are in the upper .30s. Any number below .40 seems to denote a tolerable degree of inequality and a national framework with scant history of social unrest. *No other wealthy developed country is more unequal than the USA* which has a Gini coefficient of .45 and is sandwiched between Uruguay and the Ivory Coast. The wealth of the United States has never before been so skewed in favour of the ultra-rich.

Up in the .50s, one finds most of Latin America, traditionally a highly unequal region, as well as African countries like Zambia and Zimbabwe; whereas the .60s, with the exception of Bolivia, are reserved for the ultra-poor of Africa. And now South Africa, at least if we can believe the *New York Times*, tops the list at .70. This is a particularly unwelcome distinction.



Why should these economic signals concern us? Many people can and do argue that if everyone in the society has enough to live on, and the floor is moving slowly but surely upwards, then the degree of inequality doesn't really matter. This is false and we can now prove it, thanks to the pioneering work of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, two epidemiologists who have painstakingly collected all the statistics on a huge number of undesirable social phenomena and graphed their correlations with degrees of inequality. Their evidence is overwhelming and although the studies and statistics they've gathered relate only to the OECD countries, they seem to me very much worth citing here.¹

Although we have known for some time that in more unequal societies the poor have shorter lives and are more subject than the rich to all the ills in their societies, these scholars show that *everyone* –not just the poor—will be better off if they live in a more equalitarian place. This is true partly because of the levels of physical and mental stress generated by living in a very unequal society. The costs are not just social but also financial and ecological and they are extremely high. Here are some of the undesirable phenomena that always increase with the degree of inequality:

- physical and mental illness
- drugs and alcohol addiction
- lower life expectancy, low birth weights, infant mortality
- clinical obesity, higher incidence of major diseases including diabetes and cancer
- children's educational performance
- teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, single mothers
- chronic depression, homicides, suicides
- delinquency, crime and imprisonment rates
- lack of trust

We cannot even claim that all these indicators of rates are high simply because there are numerous poor people in an unequal society. Let me quote from Wilkinson and Pickett on this point:

"The truth is that the vast majority of the population is harmed by greater inequality. [The reason] which we initially found surprising is just how big the differences are...Across entire populations, rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies, people are five times as likely to be imprisoned, six times as likely to be clinically obese"... "murder rates are many times higher..." and so on.

Nor can we claim that such effects are due to ethnicity, at least not in the United States where—I'm still quoting-- "if you take the death rates of just white Americans, they still do worse than the populations of most other developed countries."²

¹ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, Allen Lane/Penguin Books, London, 2009.

² Idem, p.181



Lack of trust is particularly serious—not only does it, in itself, increase stress and physical and mental illness individually; it also destroys collective solidarity and pits people against each other. Cooperation becomes difficult to impossible. Investment in the reduction of inequality is investment that will bring vast dividends.

Such dividends can be reaped in two ways. *Either* use taxes, subsidies and benefits to redistribute very unequal incomes *or* introduce greater equality in gross incomes before taxes and benefits. You can either spend more to prevent the deleterious effects of inequality *or*—when disparities have already grown as widely as they have done in South Africa, you will certainly be obliged to spend more in order to deal with the consequences. One radical proposal is to set fair ceilings and floors, that is, fix a maximum multiple for salaries and benefits. If the lowest paid person receives 1000 units—dollars, rand, what have you, what should the maximum revenue be? 10, 20, 50, 100 times that? It's not up to me to say but it is a debate that needs to occur. Another radical proposal: share the work so as to share the income. So long as chronic unemployment persists, no one works more than, say, 30 hours a week so that more people can find work. If trade unions object, because they see their job as defending only their members, then let unemployed people join the unions with their dues paid by the government.

If a government is especially courageous, and this is the best solution—it should spend both to destroy the roots of inequality—both of income and of opportunity—and to deal with their consequences. What is sure is that if nothing is done, inequalities and their damaging and costly outcomes will continue to worsen and weigh increasingly on everyone.

In my book, the third wall of the metaphorical prison is sufficient access to the basics of life—enough food, clean water and energy, but I shall have to leave these out in order to leave time for the fourth wall and, more important, for the democratic solutions we need to promote.

This fourth wall is all-important yet it gets short shrift and less space today—I'm speaking of climate change and environmental degradation. Since the Copenhagen conference of 2009, international agreements have been at a standstill, even regressing as became clear in Durban last year. Many well-meaning people, in both richer and poorer countries, see unemployment as the root of all our problems and growth as the solution to them. During our French presidential campaign last year the major candidates barely mentioned anything else. What they do not, or refuse to understand is that growth can be positively harmful when it contributes to destroying the environment. Cut down a forest for making furniture or, worse, packing cases, chopsticks or just selling it off as logs and you have destroyed an asset that will take about 400 years to grow back.

To create growth, let's have more automobile accidents—an excellent demand-creating factor for spare parts or mechanics' services. Let's have more disease—meaning more medicines, therapies, hospital beds, nursing services and the like. The best way of all to



increase growth is to have a war. Long ago, Herman Daly and other ecological economists estimated that about half of what we call “growth” could actually be attributed to destruction or to repairing the impacts of past failures and choices. Everything depends on *what* grows.

What our growth-obsessed economists also refuse to understand is that the transition to a clean, green economy would be an enormous reservoir of jobs at every level of skill and competence. Many studies have shown this and most of them show as well that these jobs would be on the whole better ones, while simultaneously making our environments healthier and safer. Lorenzo Fioramonti in his excellent book about GDP, *Gross Domestic Problem*, has written about how governments have become obsessed with growth—but let’s face it—so are most trade unions. Meanwhile, as we neglect to pay our ecological debts, nature is striking back—I said a bit about this at the beginning. Here in South Africa, coal is the major source of energy and also the dirtiest of all the green-house-gas producing fuels.

Fortunately, your country is beginning to diversify and has a particularly innovative programme of encouraging small, independent producers to use renewable energy technologies and sell the power to the government. I know that the energy efforts here are already considered extremely costly and while it is not my place to recommend policy changes, I would still like to see more space for renewable, clean energies as well as far less space for both coal and nuclear power. Nuclear installations in particular provide less employment per energy unit produced than any other power source. South Africa exemplifies the dilemma of a relatively small and relatively poor country faced with the certain knowledge that internal energy demand is going to double in the next fifteen years or so. And why should the relatively small and poor make a particular green effort when the major emitters like the US and China are contributing massively to global warming whereas South Africa is only the world’s 14th largest emitter?

The answer is that this country should still make the effort because a green conversion would not just reduce emissions and improve environmental quality—it would also be highly labour intensive. Jobs are also created through energy conservation and economies of scale. Refitting older buildings, particularly publicly owned ones, to make them more energy efficient or, better still, energy neutral should be considered part of the energy budget. Clean, green public transport alternatives to private vehicles are another path to progress.

Many experts now admit frankly if somewhat despairingly that global warming will not be stopped at the 2 degrees increase level—it is alas already too late for that. If, as is likely, this turns out to be true, South Africa should be preparing itself for tough times and encouraging research and experimental programmes to protect the most vulnerable people from the worst effects of the changes that are on the horizon. Governments can provide both carrots and sticks to hasten the green transition—carrots like cheap or even



free public transport or tax incentives for investors in green projects; sticks like making individual transport or automobile insurance more costly.

Green investment and preparation for the impacts of climate change and job creation are priorities. There are nonetheless many other solutions to our crises, whether financial, social or ecological. To these, as if they were not enough, we need to add the crisis of democracy and in particular the total absence of democracy at the international level where only non-responsive institutions rule. Sad to say, Africans have virtually no clout in such institutions as the World Bank or the IMF.

The first thing one usually hears when one makes proposals is that these ideas are all very well but completely utopian because they are unaffordable. Bluntly put, where is the money to come from? In Europe and the United States—and I believe elsewhere—the answer ought to be “Socialise the banks”. Banks that have been inundated with public money from taxpayers should become public utilities run by boards made up of their employees, their customers and suppliers working alongside the State. Drastic savings on the billions they pay their top personnel in salaries and bonuses would go some way to kick starting the green transition.

It is true that South African banks were much less implicated in the crisis, but the extremely rapid enrichment of the upper class here since the end of apartheid does offer some scope both for reducing inequalities and environmental degradation. A progressive taxation system is the main way to attack both. Government guaranteed green bonds for specific projects could be another way forward. We are making some slow progress in Europe on closing down tax havens where experts say that about 26 trillion dollars are stashed. If transnational corporations could be prevented from using these secrecy jurisdictions to avoid or evade taxes through transfer pricing and front companies, at least an extra \$300 billion in tax revenues would flow yearly into the coffers of various governments. In Europe we have also had a breakthrough on a financial transactions tax which is to be instated in 2014 in thirteen countries. Those of us who have pushed this measure for years called for the proceeds to go to development aid and climate mitigation. It won’t—it will go into European government budgets. But at least this move shows that international taxation is possible and you might want to think about it for the rand.

Quite often after a talk, I’m asked “are you optimistic or pessimistic”. It’s a fair question, given that much of what I’ve said can be pretty grim. But my answer is that I’m neither. Antonio Gramsci put it very well when he spoke of “optimism of the will, pessimism of the mind”. However, more than that, I simply don’t deal in the categories of optimism and pessimism, particularly because I’m not a prophet, I have no crystal ball to hand and like everyone else, I have only a partial picture of reality, not a total god-like vision. What I do have is *hope*, and by now, a reasonably long term perspective over many years of working on these issues as well.



I believe that hope is not just an emotional but a rational perspective. I began my own political education with the Vietnam War because that war broke my little American heart, even though I was already in France. The example of courage and hope the Vietnamese provided to everyone who had the privilege of knowing and working with them in that period was an education in itself, and they were right to believe they would win in the end. So it was also with the decolonisation struggles: in country after country, the peoples' forces got rid of the occupiers.

In the 1970s and 1980s, virtually the whole of Latin America was oppressed under vicious military dictatorships. It's often forgotten that the 1973 coup d'état in Chile which brought Margaret Thatcher's great friend General Augusto Pinochet to power was the *other* September 11th. As in Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere, the Chilean opposition was murdered or, to use that terrible verb that entered the language then, "disappeared".

Ronald Reagan calmly watched as another dictator massacred thousands of innocent Guatemalans and he sent the American-paid, American-trained *contra* forces into Nicaragua in 1981 because the Sandinistas had committed the crimes of giving land to the peasants, providing health care and literacy classes to the poor and becoming self-sufficient in food production in just a year and a half. Yet look at Central and Latin America now: despite those innumerable crimes and the wholehearted complicity of the United States, every one of those countries is now a democracy and even if the US wanted to, it no longer has the power to intervene that it once had.

God knows you don't need me to tell you what the situation was in your own country twenty years ago and the rest of Africa was also in sorry shape. On the whole the continent is doing better now. And to me it is a marvellous thing that much or most of this must sound like ancient history to the students here. Despite the odds, we can see that human emancipation is still moving forward and the most recent proof of this is the so-called Arab Spring. Whatever their difficulties today, and there are many, these popular uprisings got rid of two of the remaining dictators, Hosni Mubarak and Zinedine Ben Ali. Even the United States may—I stress the "may"—have learnt its lesson in the near East as it has continued to lose every one of its military interventions.

Let's admit, however, that every change takes far longer than we wish it would, and the more fundamental the change, the longer it takes. This is hard to take, especially when you're young. Just being *right* is never enough, the good ideas and the knowledge you can obtain during your studies are necessary but not sufficient. We also have to learn strategy and organisation in order to change the *rapport de forces*, the balance of power. Sometimes even those of us who feel committed, each in our own circumstances, to trying to change the course of history for the better get discouraged—we wouldn't be human if we didn't. Sometimes it's tempting to throw in the towel and say that nothing we do does any good.



To that I would reply: you can't know that. Scientists have a concept called "self-organised criticality", which describes the properties of a huge number of open physical, chemical or biological systems into which incremental inputs can be made—an extra snowflake in a blizzard, an extra molecule of CO₂, an extra dry branch on the forest floor. At a time you cannot predict, because of another input just like all the inputs that preceded it, the system reaches a critical point and suddenly reconfigures itself—you get an avalanche, or an extreme weather event, or a forest fire. I see no reason why the same principle should not apply in social and political systems.

I ask you to consider the case of the young Tunisian vegetable seller. Mohammed Bouazizi. Bouazizi's whole family depended on his income and one day he was stopped for the nth time by a policeman, actually a policewoman as it happens, who probably demanded a bribe and in any case confiscated his vegetables. For Bouazizi, this was the last straw. That evening, he sat down in front of the provincial governor's palace and set fire to himself. After two weeks in hospital, he died. No one beyond his town had ever heard of him and now statues are being erected to commemorate his act, because he set off the Arab spring. We cannot predict what our own actions may trigger. I hope and believe they need not be so violent as the desperate gesture of Bouazizi. The spark that sets off the forest fire can come at any time, from anywhere. And that is why I want to tell you not to give up. Don't give up trying to change the course of history. Don't stop trying to stop climate change because nature, too, is full of surprises. Don't give up on making your country less unequal and more democratic. How? Build alliances. Talk to groups beyond your own so long as they agree on at least a part of your own agenda. We needn't agree on everything to work on many things together. None of us can win by ourselves—neither farmers, nor workers nor environmentalists, nor retired people nor educators nor students. We all need each other. And from long experience let me also tell you that if you follow this advice, you will meet far more interesting people and have a much richer life than you otherwise would. This has been a long talk and a wonderful opportunity for me. Thank you for your patience and your kind attention.