

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure you have already heard the famous quote from Malcolm X “*The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.*” A truly inspirational quote, although it has to be said that it is slightly modified from the original wording the influential African-American human rights activist used in his speech held at the founding rally of the organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964. However, this does not diminish in the least the significance of his message, but I will return to this aspect later on in my speech.

To begin with, I want to ask you a question. What is it with human beings and their fixation with the future? Come to think about it, we are most probably the only living species on Earth that invests so much intellectual and emotional effort in thinking about and trying to shape their future. We are willing to make sacrifices in the present in the hope of obtaining a greater reward in the future. Some say that this is what differentiates us from animals. Of course, others would argue that even animals, more or less, plan for the future, at least in the short term. Wolves or lionesses plan their hunting strategies while bees exchange information about the quality of the various sources of nectar, and based on that, they decide which location to pick. Experiments show that ravens and apes are willing to wait to be given better tools that would grant them a more significant reward instead of settling for the immediate prize, and hard-working ants, unlike lazy crickets, store food for the winter, or so the poet tells us.

Nevertheless, although humans have been planning for the future for millennia, the idea that decisions in the present can have an impact on the future of mankind as a whole and, furthermore, that it is possible to a certain degree, to exercise control on the future, is rather new. The first ones to ponder on this idea were the liberal philosophers of the 17th century that believed in the fulfilling destiny of a free individual. However, it would take another two centuries until Karl Marx dared say that philosophers should change the world. And since then, for better or worse, change it they did!

And I say for better or worse, because much has depended and still depends on the manner in which people have chosen to prepare for and embrace the changes that the future would bring. And to better explain what I mean by that, let me briefly remind you about the well-known biblical story of the Exodus, in which Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land of Canaan, thus liberating them from slavery. The journey takes 40 years, enough for a change in generation, time in which the people of Israel receive the Ten Commandments and several codes of laws. In the end, they reach Canaan, but Moses himself dies before stepping on the Promised Land.

Much has been written regarding the various interpretations of this story. For example, Susan Mendus, a philosophy professor at the University of York, points out in her book *Feminism and Emotion* that within the Exodus story there are two alternative interpretations depending on whether one chooses to emphasize the *journey* or the *end*. For those who choose the journey, the Promised Land “is not simply a place, it is a practice.” In this light, the Promised Land is not Canaan per se, it is the new and free society that the Israelites, by the end of their 40-years long journey, have become. As professor Mendus says, the Exodus is a story of moral progress as an open-ended process and the result of a journey guided by rules.¹

Returning to Malcolm X’, it has to be said that he himself has gone through a process of change during his life. As a young man, he preached radical and violent ideas that mirrored his own personal experiences as a black person in the 1950s America. Later in life, however, he understood that violence was not a solution but that education was. His quote, which I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, has been slightly altered, and which dates back to this second phase of his life, sounds like this: “*Education is an important element in the struggle for human rights. It is the means to help our children*

¹ Mendus, S., 2000, *Feminism and Emotion*, London, Macmillan Press LTD.

*and our people rediscover their identity and thereby increase their self-respect. Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today."*² So, although `tomorrow`, read `the future`, belongs to those already preparing today, for Malcolm X the key to that future is `education`. Indeed, education offers identity and indeed, education provides the much-needed self-esteem in the absence of which moral progress would be impossible. More than that, education may very well be the only efficient tool we have against ideological dogmatism in its various shapes, Communism, Nazism or, for that matter, contemporary Populism.

As someone who was born during Communism in Romania, I remember my parents insisting that I should learn German. Back then, in a country where the future looked quite bleak and hopeless, my parents thought that by learning German, one day I will be able to escape my country and flee to West-Germany. It was something they desired and dreaded at the same time, but it was their way of granting me a passport for the future. Then, 1989 came and, ironically, the future caught most of my fellow Romanians, including my parents, completely unprepared. Almost one year later, West Germany, the Promised Land my parents had imagined for me, ceased to exist. Later on, although objectively speaking life had been slowly improving, I was noticing that my parents were growing increasingly disillusioned with the new Romania. Somehow, pinning their hopes on a future they had imagined, they were unable to adapt to the real future that was so overwhelming to them.

Thirty years have passed since and I guess thirty is not quite forty yet. Meanwhile, I have travelled to many countries but, for better or worse, I decided not to leave Romania. I guess the idea of the Promised Land not being a place somewhere but rather a practice or a state of being had a certain appeal to me. I also accepted that actually no matter how much I might try to prepare for the future, sometimes, there is only so much I can do.

And yet, it seems that both Malcolm X and my parents were right and that if you are prepared, the future can bring some pleasant surprises with it. As I said, as I child, my parents insisted that I should learn German and later on English and French. So far, in my professional life, English was the only language that I have really made use of, however, I found great pleasure in reading German and French literature in the original, without believing I would ever do more than just that. For me, foreign languages were a thing of the present, not of the future. However, in 2017 I joined the Master Programme in Interpreting with English and German as B and C languages in the hope that this decision may one day help me change a professional career, I thought I would pursue forever. And I found out that interpreting, with its ever-changing topics and challenges, is something that I really love to do. It keeps your brain active and it teaches you that you always have to be prepared for the future sentence. In a way, interpreting feels to me as a perpetual journey with an open-ended destination. I guess there is some truth in the fact that in everything we do, we have to allow ourselves to be changed by the present and keep an open mind. And who knows, the Promised Land we are striving for, may turn out to be quite different from the one we imagined. As far as I am concerned, it turns out that interpreting may well be the future that consciously or not, I have been preparing for my entire life.

Thank you!

² <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/>