

Sebastião Salgado

Migrations: Humanity in Transition

In early November, PDN's Nancy Madlin had the opportunity to interview Sebastião Salgado about Migrations: Humanity in Transition, his latest documentary project, book and exhibition. The following is an edited version of that interview which, in Salgado's own words, tells the story of this amazing project, whose grandeur, nobility of purpose and vast scope mark it clearly as the work of this unique and extraordinary photojournalist...

Personally, I believe that people in the future will look back at this turning point and see it as a revolution experienced by mankind at this end-of-the-century, end-of-the-millennium historical period, this marking point of 2000 years of Christendom. This is a revolution that can be compared to the passage from the Middle Age to the modern age at the end of the fifteenth century. The scale of change is vast: For the first time in history, the majority of the planet's population is dwelling in cities, and at the same time the concepts of borders and cultural distinctions have started to disappear.

At this time, I want to speak out for immigrants, for those who live in such circumstances, and to speak out to those who can receive them. I want to show the immigrants' dignity in their willingness to integrate into another country, to show their courage and their entrepreneurial spirit and, not least, to demonstrate how they enrich us all with their individual differences. Above all, by using migration as an example, I want to show that a true human family can only be built on foundations of solidarity and sharing.

I know this story very well because it is my story. I made the same migrations that a great mass of the world's population is doing now. I was born on a farm in Brazil. And when I was five, I moved with my family to a small town, about 10,000 people. Then when I was 15, I went to a medium-sized town, about 120,000 people. And when I finished college, it was necessary for me to go to a big big town, to São Paulo, and in São Paulo I had some political problems and the time came to leave Brazil and I came to France. That means this story that I'm photographing is my story also. I am a migrant, too.

I started to develop this project in 1992, I began photographing in 1993, and I finish now in 1999. So I have been photographing this project for six-and-a-half years. And I have traveled to about 47 different countries around the world where people are moving from place to place, and shot in more than 40 I have found this to be a story about the complete reorganization of humanity, the human family around the world. I have organized this large-scale documentation into six chapters.

First is International Migration....There were about 20 million international migrants in the mid-1980s; 50 million by the end of that decade; and more than 120 million today. News travels fast in our global village. The radio and television around the world portray the Western way of life; beautiful, rich and easy to achieve. In the most backward regions of the world, the poorest of the poor are convinced that somewhere over there, everybody leads that "ideal" life.

My exploration of international migration took me to photograph in several regions of the world, including the ex-USSR, where I followed the departure of Jewish peoples for the U.S.; the U.S.-Mexican border, where I photographed Latin Americans crossing over; Italy, where people from the Balkans and Asia attempt to enter Europe via the Adriatic Sea; Spain, a destination for Africans via the Straits of Gibraltar.

Next is Refugees....The flow of refugees has also grown under the pressure of natural disasters and wars, which have been unprecedented in number since World War II. According to official estimates, there are currently 26 million refugees around the world, compared to 2.5 million 20 years ago. This figure includes neither unrecorded refugees -- estimated to number six million -- nor persons displaced inside their own countries, estimated at 32 million people.

Among the refugees I have photographed are: Bosnians, Vietnamese "boat people", Afghanis, Kurds, Palestinians and Iranians.

Third is The African Drama....For several decades now, Black Africa has fallen victim to a series of natural disasters and wars which have resulted in complete destabilization of economic and social life in most countries on the African continent. Furthermore, Black Africa has the highest birthrate in the world, the largest rate of demographic growth on the planet. In 1970, the population was 362 million people; in 1990 it was 642; and it is estimated that it will be 1.15 billion by the year 2010, indicating that demographic growth doubles every 20 years. By 2025, then, it is expected that Nigeria alone will have a population as large as the entire European community.

As a result of this combination of natural disasters, wars and demographic growth, Africa today is the unfortunate record holder in terms of numbers of refugees and displaced people. It is also unique in terms of violence.

Because of the scale of disaster that this enclave of humankind is experiencing, we decided to devote a specific chapter to them, with reportages including: voluntary repatriation to Mozambique of millions of refugees, after 15 years of war; Southern Sudan, with its displaced peoples worn down by war, drought and famine; the huge flow of Rwandan refugees to Tanzania and Burundi, and the conflicts within Rwanda; the appalling refugee camps in Goma, Zaire.

Next is Leaving the land for the cities....Between 40 and 50 million rural dwellers leave the land to go to the cities every year. The growth of migration within and between nations is inexhaustible. Because of

pressure on the land, over-exploitation of the soil and demographic growth, the Third World is at the core of the planet's environmental crisis. In this part of the world, the environmental problem is weakening and erosion of the soil, which often provokes famine. Some 450 million Third World peasants cultivate land that is both low-yielding and declining in terms of quality. Millions are left without work or land.

This work is composed of the following stories: the struggle of the Brazilian landless peasants, who refuse to be corralled into urban centers; the hundreds of thousands of peasants who have been swallowed up by the diamond industry in India; the exodus of men from rural areas of Oaxaca and Guerrero, Mexico, leaving villages only inhabited by women and children; the leaving of the land by the Indians in the Chimborazo region of Ecuador; the tribes of southern Bihar in India, who want to protect their land against large mines and dams; the abandoning of their villages by million of peasants in China, due to the construction of the Three Gorge Dam; the last bushmen of Namibia and South Africa.

This trend is creating The planet's new metropolises....Bombay, India; Djarkata, Indonesia; São Paulo, Brazil; Cairo, Egypt; Mexico City, Mexico; Bangkok, Thailand; and Shanghai, China.

Growth comes mainly due to exodus from rural areas. By the end of this century, eight of the planet's ten largest metropolises will lie in the Third World, each of them with a population of more than 15 million. Thirty years ago, these cities had an average population of less than 5 million people.

These huge cities, with their belts of shantytowns, are more than ever an El Dorado in the eyes of jobless and landless rural workers. In the city, income is twice as high as in rural areas and drinkable water, schooling and doctors are more accessible.

The final piece of the project is Children Today: men and women of the new century.

When I was working in the displaced persons camps in Mozambique in 1994, I constantly found myself surrounded by groups of children who kept me from my work, always trying to be in the picture. So I made a deal with them: I would make a portrait of each of them, and in exchange they would let me be. I continued to do this every time I encountered the same problem.

Back in Paris while I was editing the work, I realized that I here I had a group of powerful portraits; that in front of my camera, I had had very young people who had lived experiences of great intensity already. These seemingly simple and straightforward portraits depict with force their pain and their dignity. Here, I have a true sample of the men and women of tomorrow, on whom humankind must depend in order to build the future.

Through all these themes and chapters together, we tell the story. This is the story I imagined in 1992, which is now completed.....We are living a globalization of humans. I believe this concept of border as we have had in the past, is now a relic of the eighteenth century. Now we are living in the moment close to the twenty-first century, where we are

completely changing the concept of borders. In the European community, we have eliminated the border for goods. We eliminate the borders for information. We eliminate the borders for money. The border concept must change completely, and quickly to accommodate the reality of human movement.

The re-distribution of population is going on now, and happening very, very fast. And, when we speak about globalization, we must speak today about globalization of population now. This is happening now.

From these photographs, we are preparing an international book, exhibition and a series of films.

What we are trying to do with all this is to provoke a debate, to provoke a discussion about the human condition today.

I want the person to come out of this show to see immigrants in a new way, with a new respect. I want the person in the United States who is sitting at a restaurant with a young man from El Salvador, from Mexico, serving him, I want that person to see through the pictures that it is a long, long trip to come there and sometimes very dangerous. This young man working in the restaurant had the courage to move himself, to fight for his dignity, to fight for a job. I want the American to see that all these people moving around are moving somewhere to work, to produce, to give something to the country in which they want to live. This is the spirit in which I have created these pictures, this book and this exhibition.