

Alvarez Blanco speaks on street children

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Carleton brings a variety of speakers to campus, but on Thursday, May 29, José Álvarez Blanco, President of the NGO Voces Para Latinoamérica, gave a different type of presentation—in Spanish. Álvarez Blanco’s speech was entitled “Niños-as y adolescentes en la situación de calle,” or “Children and adolescents in the street situation.” The discourse referred the negative impacts of the capitalist and neoliberal systems on children around the world.

Álvarez Blanco, from Spain, is the president of Voces Para Latinoamérica (Voices for Latin America; VPLat), a recently created organization that deals with the problems of social exclusion and marginalization of juveniles. VPLat was created by a group of people concerned with the impact of capitalism and neoliberalism on the poor, especially on children and adolescents living in the street (dubbed NASC, for the Spanish term “niños y adolescentes en la situación de calle”).

VPLat believes that the systems of capitalism/neoliberalism lead to the enrichment of a few and the impoverishment of many, with particularly devastating affects on the youngest, the NASC. An international organization, with networks in Spain, Bolivia, and Peru, VPLat works to demand rights for children in the political and social realms.

Álvarez Blanco’s speech focused on the dire conditions faced by the world’s children that are living in the street. “It is a global problem,” he said. “There is global suffering.”

Álvarez Blanco presented startling statistics on homeless rates for children and youth. According to him, in the world 600 million children live in absolute poverty, and 250 million children between the ages of four and fourteen are forced to work in 171 different situations that are extremely dangerous for health. An additional 27 million children are captured or sold as slaves on the black market.

Latin America, the focus of Álvarez Blanco’s presentation, has 40 million children living in the street. The United States has 9 million.

Children living in the street face a number of dangerous situations beyond hunger, poverty, and the struggle for survival, described in detail by Álvarez Blanco. With the world producing 300 million tourists to sexual destinations, children become involved in prostitution and are exploited sexually.

Children in the street are also exposed to violence related to drug trafficking and may become involved in the trade. Álvarez Blanco pointed to the victimization of children in these situations. “Twenty-two million Americans have used inhalants in their lives,” he said, “and 17.3 percent of students in the 8th grade have abused inhalants. But this doesn’t matter to anyone, because they’re not children in the street.” The common perception of the NASC as criminals puts them in greater risk of violence, from police or from “cleansing” death squads.

Violence is also what leads these children into the streets. Álvarez Blanco explained how in Colombia, war expelled one million children from their homes, as they either became orphaned or abandoned. With 3,500 children dying each year at the hands of their parents, children are also facing aggression within the home and fleeing.

“This is thanks to the systems of capitalism and neoliberalism,” Álvarez Blanco said. “Little by little, this system is causing pressure and breaking down the micro-units, and the micro-unit is the family. It is fragmenting.”

Álvarez Blanco argued that the fundamental problem of the capitalist and neoliberal systems is that they enrich the wealthy few and further impoverish the poor majority. He explained that marketing, publicity, and mass communication lead to an environment where production is highly valued—yet in the process of production, the money returns to those in power, while the poor are harshly exploited and fall into extreme debt.

According to Álvarez Blanco, the consequence of the system is the creation of a sub-economy and sub-culture for the poor majority. These sub-cultures are plagued by the problems of drugs, mafias, prostitution, slaves, etc., and ultimately lead to the destruction of social systems, the family, and the individual—supporting the current and drastic problem of children living in the street.

“Many problems rise due to the unequal distribution of wealth, and not necessarily in just the poverty,” he said, “But it doesn’t matter to us, because there are such deep distinctions between developed, developing, and underdeveloped worlds.”

In working with VPLat, Álvarez Blanco addresses the global issue of children living in the streets by drawing consciousness to the social problems he sees as fostered by the systems of neoliberalism and capitalism. The organization investigates diverse factors of social exclusion of young people, coordinates local specialists to work with the NASC, and supports different demands that denounce the violation of human rights for youth and children.