

Humanism and the New World

Today's subject of "Humanism and the New World" can benefit from a little context. When people speak of "Humanism", they are most often referring to the current of thought that, while contemporaneous with the development of the Renaissance, began in literature with Petrarch. We can also observe how, in other civilizations, even some far-removed from Renaissance Europe, many subjects are treated from a standpoint similar to that of the Renaissance Humanists. Those currents of Roman culture that draw their name from Cicero are an example of this. Humanists have traditionally conceived of the human being not simply as the subject and producer of the historical event, but as the center of all fundamental activity. The human being was also the highest rung in an axiology that might be summarized in this way: Nothing above the human being, and no human being above any other.

During the Renaissance in particular, we can see the full dimension of the word "humanism" in the struggle initiated by Art and Science against obscurantism. Though it would take too long today to talk about the contributions of historical figures such as Giordano Bruno, Pico della Mirandola and, of course, Galileo—who are venerated by contemporary humanists—all of these thinkers suffered persecution at the hands of a system in which the true dimensions of the human being were cut off, a system where, above everything else, stood a deity and its subsidiaries: first the Prince, then the State, then its Laws.

The eruption of Humanism onto the scene turned that old scale of values on its head, and suddenly there stood in the very center of the stage the soul and the body of the human being. This emerging current of thought, often borrowing concepts from Greek and Roman paganism and strongly imbued with Neo-Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean tendencies, unleashed a heated debate in the Europe of old.

Simultaneously, Europe was beginning to extend its influence over the Americas, colonizing and conquering, and, logically, carrying this out not with the progressive elements that were then gaining ground in courtly circles, but rather with the brutality and ideology that were still in season—that is, obscurantism and monarchy by divine right. The Inquisition and the persecution of free thought were thus exported to the new lands, but also, though silently in the beginning, came the ideas that would later ignite in the French Revolution and in the wars and revolutions of independence in the Americas.

It was the development of this humanist, anthropocentric vision that finally ushered in the modern age. This vision expressed itself not only in art and science, but also in the politics of the time, in the growing attempts to check the monarchy and ecclesiastical power. Irrespective of the acceptance or rejection Humanism met with during this period, special recognition must be given to the contribution this movement made to the thinking and events of the age that, at least in the West, ushered in the age of revolutions in all its dimensions.

Today, in the twilight of the revolutions, that vibrant humanism seems likewise to be in decline, facing as it is the rise of a technology that appears to have absorbed the revolutionary transformation of economic-social structures, to have stripped political discourse of all real communication, to have replaced the ideas of Fraternity and Solidarity with the economics of competition and the market, with laws of self-regulation, with the cold variables of macroeconomics. An empty scale of values is being built in its place, where the concrete human being is displaced from the central position and the worship of money installed in its stead. Naturally, in this contemporary myth there is a justifying ideology—the ideology of the End of Ideologies and the End of History, in which we can recognize the chords of pragmatism that were first struck toward the middle of the nineteenth century.

In my view, this elementary pragmatism—based on a Neodarwinism that zoologizes society by characterizing it as underlain by a struggle for the survival of the fittest—has gained ground not because of any exceptional quality but because, due to many factors, the great systems of thought have collapsed. Today what we are witnessing is a vast emptiness, a vacuum left by the failure of structured systems and structured systems of thought, a vacuum that can now be filled by anything, no matter that it is of inferior quality, so long as it satisfies the interests of those who control the financial springs and levers.

I realize that what I have been saying must, of course, be more fully justified and substantiated, which would give rise to a long and wide-ranging discussion. Yet I have briefly underscored some points that seem to me important in understanding the situation of Humanism in the present moment. At any rate, I should stress that those currents of thought that have taken up Humanism in this century have in reality been very few.

We can recognize a reclaiming of the question in Sartre's Existentialism (*L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*) and in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," productions that, though in some way opposed, can both be located within the line of existentialist humanism. We should also mention the pseudo-humanism of a Christian stamp represented by Maritain, the Marxist counter-humanism of Althusser, and the dialectic in Marxism between bourgeois humanism and proletarian humanism in Aníbal Ponce.

I would like to comment very briefly on the currents of contemporary thought that attempt to reformulate humanism theoretically, and I will simply note the two principal variants: the Christian and the existentialist. The word "Humanism," however, has gone beyond that division and has become well accepted in the

popular mind as though it simply denoted any attitude that favors the human being and opposes the advance of technology and the mechanization of the world. In this sense it appears today to be what we might call "in good taste" to profess a fashionable humanism, but in a way that has nothing whatever to do with its arduous and tragic development, and even less with its precise framing and context, regarding which I ask you to allow me to cite some essential characteristics:

1. The affirmation of human consciousness as active, as opposed to positions that consider consciousness to be a "reflection" of objective conditions.

2. The historicity of the human being and human productions, which means that the human being is not a natural being but rather a social and historical being.

3. The opening of the human being-to-the-world, through which the dichotomies of the individual and society, subjectivity and objectivity, are resolved.

4. The basing of human action and ethics on the human being, and not on any other authority such as a deity.

Today, any consistent humanism must therefore be libertarian, active, and characterized by its solidarity with and commitment to the social reality. In no way does humanism oppose art to science, nor does it make the error of identifying art with humanism and science with technology. It conceives both terms, art and science, as included within the process of human cultural development, though it does see certain facets of technology as instruments in the service of those who would arrogate all economic power to themselves.

To center our discussion on the subject "Humanism and the New World," let me say that the conquest and subjugation of the cultures of the Americas by the European powers had nothing to do with a dialectic between culture and technology, but rather reflects the social model that-for five hundred years from the first contacts until only a short time ago-flourished in the warmth of obscurantism and absolutist institutions. This was a historical, political, and social phenomenon, and not a long process to which the nations and popular classes of Europe were committed, since the working classes of Europe were, of course, every bit as oppressed as their counterparts in other parts of the world. Furthermore, both European humanists and later humanists of the Americas suffered the same persecution on both continents, until that moment when they were finally able to make their contribution to revolutionary change, also in both the Old World and the New.

But today, new dangers threaten Latin America, and particularly this country, Mexico, with its unique cultural profile. Shall we set in motion a misconceived dialectic between culture and technology, or instead place the emphasis on our vibrant distinctiveness and catch up with those other regions of the world that today seem to be monopolizing science and technology? These subjects, of such enormous importance, should not be ignored or passed over without reflection. That is why I propose the formation of a commission to study them, which can carry these concerns across the breadth of the Americas, with the proposal of establishing an ongoing conference to examine and discuss the relationship between culture and technology, hopefully beginning in the year 1992, the year that will mark five hundred years since the European arrival in the New World. Today, as then, a struggle is beginning that must be pondered and appreciated in all its dimensions, and I believe that this country, Mexico, should be the physical and cultural center of that debate.

Thank you very much.