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A Cannibalistic Model of Postmodernity

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A Cannibalistic Model of Postmodernity

By Hernán Neira

As an epistemological principle to classify political and cultural matters, the concept of “nation” is so strong in America that, typically, today no one uses to remembers that many leaders of Independence did not fight for national freedom in the current sense of the word “national”, for they fought for freedom in a less determinate and less modern sense ¹. After a short internationalist period that accompanied the rising of independent republics in America, a national political structure began to be established throughout the continent. It was during this period when the idea of a national culture germinated. This idea was new in America, and it was linked to the conquest of inner frontiers both ideologically and geographically. Different movements, first liberal and later of social or socialist inspiration, have linked the development of the state with the idea of nation. On the one hand, American liberals wanted a small but strong state, able to secure, through force if necessary, the individual rights against any authoritarian (private or public) power, such the catholic church. On the other hand, Latin American social movements saw in the state’s capacity of spreading education and social rights something that was linked to the heart of the nation. In both cases, there were great expectations for State, a State transformed into the harbour of political, cultural and epistemological values.

These values did not exist at the outset of Latin-American nations. Bolívar’s failure to accomplish continental unity led to the split of Peru and Nueva Granada’s viceroyalties, making possible the birth of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, as well as a national sentiment in place of a federalist one. In Chile the state was slowly developed several decades after the break with the metropolis in a war in which Argentinean soldiers and leaders played an important part in the Chilean victory. It was the unfolding of wars of independence, military rivalries and natural frontiers that contributed to the stablishment national frontiers in America, settling the bond between three essential components of the idea of nation ²: a people, a political

power and a land. Once the nation is formed, wars of independence are interpreted with a teleological sense, as if they had always been directly fought for the nation's sake. But how could we speak of nations in a time when the state was barely developed, frontiers were those inherited from the Spanish administrative order, Indians still had an important territorial power, and universal law and education were unknown outside the main cities? The Argentinean poem *Martín Fierro*, the Venezuelan novel *Doña Bárbara* or the Chilean novel *Gran señor y rajadiablos* tell us about the end of a world in which people could live without a state, without universal law and without very clear frontiers. The end of this world was related with settling permanent and urban values in places where social rules weren't yet very different from those necessary for conquering the land before the Independence. Whatever Independence might mean, the national principle in South America never had the historical deepness and spatial prevalence it has had in other regions of the world, especially in those where this concept was invented and first transformed into a political reality. Nation as a central political reference and, therefore as a base upon which is built an unique cultural reference, has been a main issue since the middle of the nineteenth century, by means of the frontiers wars, until recent times. If we compare America and Europe, we find that in the New World the majority of national heroes are military heroes who won their glory fighting for independence from Spain and fighting for frontiers with other American countries. On the contrary, in some European countries, there is more of an equilibrium between military, cultural, political and other kinda of heroes. Rousseau and Victor Hugo are buried in the national Panthéon in Paris, while no Chilean poet or philosopher has received a similar honour in his country.

The weakening of the current idea of nation does not place Latin America in a completely new situation. The recent prominence of Native Americans' demands, their link with ecological movements, the enhancing of international associations of all kinds, the rising of new literary themes, and the multiplication of sentimental and ideological references, are, in fact, a characteristic of both pre-Independence and post-modern times in America. In some respects, new challenges to the ideal of a nation allows the emergence of traditional forces. The absence of central national, political, cultural or philosophical references is one of the features of

postmodernism as it is defined by Jean François Lyotard³ or Gianni Vattimo⁴. For the native populations, the European invasion of America meant for the general loosing of references without, in many cases, the creation of new ones.

Vattimo reminds us that today the media has multiplied the centres from which recent history is narrated in such a way that it is no longer possible to write a "universal history" and that the influence of television weakens the historical character of experience. But in fact, in America, this phenomena had already existed long before postmodernism. In *Los vencidos: Los indios del Peru frente a la conquista española (1530-1570)*⁵ the French ethnologist Natham Wachtel writes a history of Peru based on the Native American perspective of Spanish influence on Indian cultures. There is a similar work by Serge Gruzinski: *La colonización de lo imaginario, Sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español. Siglos XVI-VIII*⁶, but his conclusions are rather different. Gruzinski concludes that it is impossible to write a history written from the point of view of the native inhabitants because they have lost their primitive epistemological principles. Even when the most benevolent friar approaches a Native American with the aim of writing their history, the subjects of his inquiries are unable to talk from their point of view because the questions themselves constrains the native inhabitant to answer according to the epistemological principles of the investigator. This last conclusion was confirmed in the book *El Espejo del Olvido*⁷, in which we showed that any attempt to rebuild the unity of a Native American history is condemned to fail for the very attempt to do so shows the weakness of the native epistemological principles.

The loss of lineal and continuous historical sense can certainly be a post-modern feature, but is it really something new? In fact, it was the common experience of native inhabitants and probably the common experience of every people that have been not only military, but culturally defeated. In his famous speech given in Angostura in 1819, Simón Bolívar, one of the main and most romantic American heroes, also realised that the patriots didn't have a sense of historical continuity that is proper of modernity. The tendency is to consider every war of independence as

an eternal and mythical origin of nation, but Bolívar's testimony adds to this non-linear sense of history when he declares that the break with Spain doesn't imply an automatic bond with American medians or America:

“We are, American by birth, and European by right, and we find ourselves in conflict, disputing with the natives over the titles of the land and to remain in the country that saw us born against the opposition of the invaders, so our case is the most extraordinary and complicated ⁸.

The discontinuous historical sense that Native Americans, as well as American creoles often experienced is an epistemological principle to interpret the present and the past. In many respects it challenges the idea of universal history, as described by Vattimo. Nevertheless, Vattimo and other authors fail to see that this loss of faith in the concept of universal history is not new, for there have been as many universal histories as dominant peoples in the world. As far as what concerns history, postmodernism in America is neither a reshaping of modernity neither its end, for it is not as much a completely new era but the merging of traditional historical forces with new ones in the cultural space voided by the disappearance of modern nationalism. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that this space was ever completely filled.

Modernity has never been completely established in America, could it be, for modernity is not an isolated concept or an historical era that one can simply apply to whichever object without taking into account its history and the concepts that shape its external semantic limits ⁹. Concepts in a linguistic system are not isolated; one cannot know what the idea of man means without knowing what the idea of woman means and vice versa. We could say the same about history; it would be difficult to understand what the period called modern means without understanding the meaning of ancient or medieval times, for modernity exists in relation to the periods that it completes and close. This leads us to ask if we can talk about a proper modernity in a continent which never experienced a proper ancient or a proper feudal period. The notion of ancient time does not have the same meaning for Native Americans as it does for Europeans.

The main difference between European and American post-modernity is that the state and the nation, two concepts that played a central role in reference to modernity, weren't developed in the same way nor in the same degree on both continents. For that reason, the loss of these concepts as a main point of reference does not have the same meaning on both sides of the ocean. While it is possible that in Europe the loss of references lead to a cultural void, in America the same fact is accompanied by the revival of tendencies that can not be understood strictly within the opposition of pre-modern, modern and post-modern history. Some of the cultural tendencies one can observe in current America are not pre-modern. American history did not have the same lineal aspect that Hegelian-Marxist philosophy attributes to European history. Discontinuity has been an important character of American history since at least 1492. The notion of post-modern discontinuity, based upon the loss of some references and on the impossibility of writing one universal history is a product of linear and progressive philosophy of history. This philosophy is part of a cultural and political movement that took place in Western Europe (in Eastern Europe it was quite different) in a relatively continuous way under the form of an internal developing of material and spiritual forces. On the other hand, in America one can only find a fragmentary modernity that is not the result of an internal development (native or Creole forces) but of an external influence.

One of the main features of America is its enormous capacity to physically incorporate almost physically the most different and apparently contradictory influences. Three centuries after the conquest, the Brazilian artist Alexandrinho was able to create the most sophisticated and multi-central sculptures, works which grew out of instantaneous mixing of references. The 20th century Cuban writer, Jose Lezama Lima has similar syncretic tendencies in his work. Could we call Lezama's work modern? Has he a sense of overcoming Cuban, Indian, colonial or modern history to reach a new stage of history? His work is neither progressive neither regressive, he wants neither to be part of modernity nor to speak for a perennial epoch. He works with contradictory tendencies without connecting them in a linear way. For Vattimo, the new experience of truth is no longer an object, but a horizon in which one can move.† The post-modern model of truth based upon art and rhetoric was already completely formed in Lezama's work. He sees art as a

continuous and multiple point of departure for experience rather than as an object of reflection or of any consciousness. In his art, time, space and history do not have a linear and closed sense:

“en la influencia americana lo predominante es lo que me atrevería a llamar el espacio gnóstico, abierto, donde la inserción con el espíritu invasor se verifica a través de la inmediata comprensión de la mirada. Las formas congeladas del barroco europeo, y toda proliferación expresa [de] un cuerpo dañado, desaparecen en América por ese espacio gnóstico, que conoce por su misma amplitud el paisaje, por sus dones sobrantes¹⁰.

Proliferation and discontinuity prevents in America the constitution of a tradition, at least if we consider tradition as a continuity, a transfer, a followability and a development of values and behaviours from one generation to another (not necessarily the next). In many respects there is no American tradition to develop, for the very concept of development implies a followability, for in in America one can find more break and superposition of layers than historical continuity. Each layer serves as ground on which the next can settle, but often there is no internal relation between the layers, so they remain blind to each other. It is one thing to conceive history as an internal development of some forces, which can eventually lead to its own negation. It is quite another to conceive it as different layers that can be used, misused or simply forgotten by the new eras, eras whose meaning have nothing to do with the preceding ones. Whenever one layer is able achieve to replace the precedent by means of a moral and physical destruction (with or without a military war), the new epoch has little relation to the preceding one. But that doesn't mean that the previous one has disappeared for ever, moreover, its revival can occur at any time without a logical process or followability. Some Spanish buildings rise upon the foundations of Incan temples, with no aesthetic relationship to them. In this way the Indian temples become a simple layer on which a cathedral can stand without any internal relation to the former temple. Nevertheless, that doesn't imply that in a later time Indian decoration can be incorporated into the altar, but not as an internal development of ancient Indian art for its internal development was

destroyed. The new altar is an instantaneous synthesis, not a linear development of previous religious art.

What changes with post-modernity in relation to the incoherent superposition of layers in other periods of American history is that destruction and revival happen in a general and accelerated way. A Mc Donald restaurant can be placed upon the foundations of a traditional restaurant where local dishes were served in such a way that new clients would never guess of the ancient service, but nothing prevents that in a new time cycle the Mc Donald building become a shelter for homeless people. This is not a utopia, the American urban cycles are especially short and often palaces become places of human *hacinamiento* (dreg) only forty or fifty years after being built. Lévi-Strauss says that one of the main features of American cities is their absence of vestiges and the fact that they are built not for lasting, but for being renewed constantly.¹¹ Renewal of many American arts occurs in a similar way, provided that we take into account that postmodernism has accelerated a fact that already existed. According to the Brazilian essayist Maria Esther Maciel, Octavio Paz considers the baroque as a feast made of repetitions and breaks in relation with peninsular model. Haroldo Campos, following the anthropophagic perspective, considers that baroque is a maxillary deconstruction of tradition; for Campos, contemporary literature is a planetary re-devouring.¹² Cannibalism and devouring are two modes of destroying materials furnished by tradition. This destruction would be impossible without the precedent materials, but the new result is not a development of the former, neither their synthesis. Borges' work can be better understood as a continuous devouring of Argentinean and European traditions than as a development of any of them.

The influence of ethics on aesthetic matters leads us to think that cultural creation is, or at least must be, the fruit of good relations between different traditions, peoples or nations. Nevertheless, in America the situation is many times the contrary: destruction of traditions, physically or morally, for example, by war or cannibalism, has been a main source of aesthetic creation. Geographically, temporally or ethically American history does not have one central unique source to which the different layers can be referred. There is no Indo-Hispanic or Indo-British

synthesis that can play the role of new historical origin. This historical synthesis took different forms in different moments, occurred in different ways and, sometimes, did not occur. Any of these forms can be considered superior to the others. Neither the Indian nor the Hispanic tradition supported the development of the other; they had such a complex relationship that sometimes they exterminated each other in such a way that it might be impossible to recognise in them as the result of a linear development. The cannibalistic model of understanding American history provides a non-linear conception of cultural links, in the present just as in the past, a model that works also for understanding what we conceive as postmodernity in America. It provides an opening meaning beyond a linear history in which postmodernity is no longer conceived as a new paradise or a new hell inscribed at the beginning nor the end of the linear road of the European progressive conception of history.

To wholly understand that postmodernity can be a kind of revival of ancient forces connected to modern ones instead of an internal development of the last it is necessary to abandon the linear conception of history according to which different epochs follow each other under the teleological and perhaps Christian model of birth, development and decay. Postmodernity is not the end of modern categories for understanding history; postmodernity is moreover a new stage in the linear Western way of conceiving history under which a new epoch cancels out the former following its internal development. American history can be better understood with a cannibalistic model in which the superposition of cultural layers does not require that any of these layers complete its cycle, if it ever had one. There is no reason to suppose that history had a sense that was broken by post-modern conception of human time. American historical experience, as far as we can follow its traces in documents, shows many cases in which men and women are unable to recognise themselves and their experiences in precedent or even contemporary cultural layers, finding themselves compelled to invent or cannibalise the materials they find at hand in order to settle themselves in a new cultural layer that integrate the precedents without developing them. Once again the cannibalistic model is useful: not only does the anthropophagic (*el antropófago*) devour its victims without waiting for them to complete their destiny, he/she usually prevents them from

reaching it. In cultural cannibalism the devoured is completely incorporated and nothing of him/her can be recognised in the cannibal. Nevertheless, the cannibal wouldn't exist without his victim. The superposition of local histories and the possibility that an aesthetic truth not be connected to an objective consciousness are better understood since one does not demand human cultural manifestations to be linked under an ethic of simple good will. I am not promoting cultural and even less a military war. It is the contrary; American cultures, and perhaps most of the world cultures, use to expand in a non linear but in a cannibalistic way.

For the philosophy of culture, the next step to enhance the understanding of American postmodernity is to transform cannibalism into an epistemological concept that replaces the principle of national culture. This model would have allowed Juan Baustista Tupac Amaru, Simón Bolívar, Borges and the average Latin Americans to better understand themselves and to be better understood by others.

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¹ See Halpering Dongi, Tulio; *Histoire contemporaine de l'Amérique Latine*, Ed. Payot, Paris 1972.

² Nevertheless, the word "Argentinean" does not mean the same that means today, and the idea of freedom was not as strongly linked to the idea of nation as it happened during the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

³ Lyotard, Jean François; *La condición postmoderna*; Ed Cátedra, Madrid 1989.

⁴ Gianni Vattimo; *El Fin de la Modernidad*; Gedisa, Barcelona, 1997

⁵ Nathan Wachtel; *Los vencidos Los indios del Perú frente a la conquista española (1530-1570)*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1976

⁶ Gruzinski; Serge; *La colonización de lo imaginario, Sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español. Siglos XVI-VIII* Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1991, 312 pag. Trad. de Jorge Ferreiro.

⁷ In *El Espejo del Olvido: ensayos americanos*; Dolmen Ediciones, Santiago, 1997.