

Universalist Vocation and Cultural Fragmentation

The Same Masks

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Who are we?

The question thus formulated is inscribed in the purest philosophical tradition: it actualizes the scope of wonder, that Greek sentiment that awakens not before the extraordinary, but precisely before the most ordinary and obvious, before the fact of *being there*; wonder that is particular to the first thinkers of the dawn of the West and from which philosophy and science are born.

It is a question in which the rational character – in the sense of calculation, from calculus – predominates, both in its formulation and in the answer that it demands. Reason, in search of an explanation, seeks to understand and to explain what we are; it demands definition, separation, and delimitation of that which is human through the enumeration of man's particular traits in order to grasp the universality of the concept. This path, opened by Socrates, the tireless seeker of universal notions, was extensively traveled by Aristotle and by the entire line of philosophers that have laid the foundations of Western civilization.

Only man, self-aware being and possessor of language, has the faculty to inquire into his own identity, so that the answer to the question that calls us together seems much too obvious: we are human beings. Therefore, this question demands a definition of *we* as it pertains to the human race; a definition that assumes a distinction, beginning with specific traits, of all that is not human.

The Greek search for a rational definition of *we, human beings*, opens up against the light of the ecstatic aesthetic experience which promotes, in Greek tragedy, the understanding of man as a

marvel that surpasses all others in this world.¹ It is important to emphasize that this search unfolds against the background of answers previously expounded by diverse myths. Man's interrogative anxiety was calmed by these myths that provided the necessary means for the situation and realization of communal life and assigned values that give foundation to existence and meaning to human behavior.

Therefore, before and parallel to both the Greek interrogative anxiety and the rational formulation of our identity, the answer was given in the mythical accounts of all peoples. It should be stressed that in the biblical account, so important to the development of Western culture, man is the creature who has the power to name all animate beings. Genesis states that God led Adam before the animals so that he could give each one its proper name: man, from his perspective and owing to the power of the word, assigns to each one a specific place in the cosmos and a function to fulfill.

Greek knowledge also formulated, as a fundamental difference that defines humanity, man's constant need to compare himself with immortals, so that in the Homeric world the denomination of man is changed to that of *mortal*. Because of the singular awareness of his finitude, the tragic comprehension of his own mortality, and on account of the distance that separates him from the celestial world, man affirms his dignity not only as an indeterminate and finite creature, but also as creator of his life; from this stems his precariousness.²

In any case, the emergence of that which is human as it is presented in various myths is simultaneous with the emergence of the Logos; that is, man always appears endowed with language and reason.³ This understanding is accepted by Aristotle, who, following the rational calling initiated by his teachers Socrates and Plato, elevates it to the level of a general definition, valid for all times and in every circumstance: *ἄνθρωπος ζῶν λόγον ἔχον*, living being endowed with speech and reason. This definition insists upon reason as an essential and specifically human characteristic.

While stressing the rational aspect, Aristotle also emphasizes, upon separating the human from the inhuman, the communal will of man. Taking into account this fundamental and primitive need for social relations, which distinguishes him from the instinctual,

involuntary and unconscious association of animals, as well as from the divine self-sufficiency of heavenly beings, man is defined as ζῶον πολιτικόν: "And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without state, is either a bad man or above humanity."⁴

Man, ζῶον πολιτικόν, is that being who realizes his potential in the process of development, in the elaboration of his own forms of sociopolitical organization, in the creation of his culture, and in the continual making of his own history; it is fitting to say that man becomes human in the historical process.

The social nature of man, unlike the gregariousness of the animal, is also selective. Upon associating with other men, he will prefer to seek out those who may be closer to him through ties of affinity (which Aristotle calls friendship) since man pursues, as his supreme purpose, the realization of happiness and the most appropriate conditions for seeking truth. Solitude and the lack of friends are terrible for he who voluntarily seeks to associate himself with other men. For this reason Aristotle can affirm that it is absurd to claim that the solitary figure may be happy, since man is by nature a political being made to live in society. But it is preferable to live in fellowship with friends and with good men than with strangers: "The Happy man does need friends. ... Of the good man it is true likewise that he does many things for the sake of his friends and his country, even to the extent of dying for them, if need be."⁵ From this it may be concluded that the inquiry into human identity acknowledges an obvious answer. However, upon delving deeply into this question, abysses open up beneath our feet; it is a loaded question, filled with traps, in such a way that at each step we run the risk of being destroyed. In other words, we run the risk of deconstructing that first identity which we would have so easily found: a shared sense of belonging to humanity.

Thus, the selective character of human association, pointed out by Aristotle, causes a separation within general humanity, creating groups that associate amongst themselves through a community of interests, only to find themselves inevitably confronted with other communities that have distinct interests which are usually irreconcilable.

In this characteristic of sociability proper to man we can discover the origin of the plural in *Who are we?*, a question that is dif-

ferent from the traditional Kantian *was ist der Mensch?* in both formulation and purpose, since it no longer attempts to seek a definition of what is human by means of an enumeration of essential traits, but rather by an identification of aspects particular to one group or community in opposition to other human groups. Often in this confrontation the other appears strange or foreign, at times coming to see itself denied the attribute of humanity as if it did not form part of the first, common definition of human.

It was not easy to grasp the awareness of belonging to a universal humanity in which all "featherless bipeds" rightly participate.⁶ Centuries of confrontations, precarious agreements, necessary commercial transactions, and tireless administrative measures were necessary in order to arrive at the recognition of the other as part of the same human species.

The first groups were securely formed by ties of consanguinity.⁷ They themselves, constituting the center of self-awareness, could rightly say "we men." Naturally, in an encounter with other communities the reaction was aggressive in order to defend acquired rights. In those first hand-to-hand confrontations, in bloody battles, the limit of corporal relation is reached; death becomes confused with erotic paroxysm. Each victory is both a victory of the human ideal and a respectful homage to the conquered; the inevitable proximity of the enemy leads, out of necessity, to the recognition of the other as equal and to the respect and veneration of the enemy, needfully honored for his merit and courage.⁸ The same miracle is produced in battle as in love: the mixing of blood and the expansion of human awareness to the point of embracing the other and recognizing him as the same.

In fact, the recognition of the other has been costly throughout the history of that being who calls himself man; obtaining the status of humanity for all has not been, nor is, easy.

The awareness of who we are is always revealed in confrontation with the other; the self is founded upon alterity. The sense of "we" is affirmed in constant relation with the other, with the possible play of alterity, with the purpose of subsuming and including this alterity in the center of common self-awareness.

Emphasizing this reality, Nietzsche utilizes the genealogical method to thoroughly examine the understanding of that which is

human, not only as a distinction of the essential traits that differentiate the human from nature and from the gods, but as a being who constantly affirms himself in confrontation, not only with otherness, but in a privileged manner, with the other. Nietzsche finds, in the construction of the awareness of “we” opposite the “other,” the origin of the double perspective as it relates to the creation of moral values: good-bad (*gut-schlecht*) would foremost be the affirmation of the noble, the lord, which is recognized as good – in the sense of better – opposite the bad, that is, of inferior quality. As in the biblical account, the lord also has as his prerogative the power to name: “The master right to give names goes so far that one should be allowed to see the origin of language itself as an expression of the power of the rulers.”⁹ From the perspective of the noble, the conqueror, “we” becomes the center of awareness and power, separated from the other that opposes it; whether the other be confronted as an enemy or as the conquered, he is subdued yet he maintains a burden of resentment and a permanent potential for aggression.

On the other hand, the valuation good-evil (*gut-böse*) is shown from the perspective of the unfortunate awareness of the oppressed, the weak victims of the conqueror’s multiple abuses; brought together, they call themselves “we the good,” in order to protect themselves from the power of the other, the evil lord.

Whatever the case may be, every human community, once strengthened, clusters together and grows in a specific living space from which it naturally tends to extend, exterminating or at least subduing any weaker group. This is done with the purpose of forming *the world*, in the center of which are located the conquerors as the sublime image of what is human. Thus the first empires were formed, empires with a powerful unifying, totalizing and self-identifying will, whose all-encompassing horizon overcame the limited frontiers of communities, blurred linguistic differences and subsumed diverse religious conceptions, creating mixed and refined cultures such as the Hellenistic. Such was the origin of universal empires like that of China, which was said to be *the Middle Empire*, around which other human groups were dispersed, creating concentric circles that decreased in importance in accordance with the distance that separated them from the center of power. In like manner, the Incan *Tahuantinsuyo*, the empire of

the four regions of the world, appointed the four cardinal points towards which the domain of the conquering people would expand; this empire was thought to be located, by right of force, in the center of the world. Similarly, the horizon of the Roman empire was confused with that of earthly *Universum*.

In all of these moments of human history two fundamental impulses of the ζῶον πολιτικόν were operating: the expansionary drive to encompass the known world, and the imperious vocation of unification, to bring together all that is diverse under the power of the one, *e pluribus unum*, suppressing all that is different.

But it is in the West, or rather in Christian Europe, that this vocation reaches its most accomplished formulation: on the one hand, this is on account of the growing predominance of rationality, of reason that is aware of itself, which is founded upon the particular rationalities implicit in each culture and which rightly attempts to construct logical systems, upheld by laws that are universal by definition. On the other hand, this is a result of the *ecumenical* sense of Christianity: the Christian religion is monotheistic in origin and is not conceived of as particular to any one people, but as the religion of humanity. Hence its missionary and evangelistic vocation and its rapid expansion over the face of the earth. The belief in *one* true God inevitably generates the idea of a common human identity.¹⁰ Europe is thus the great forging power that transmutes the dispersed fragments of humanity into the resplendent unity of the human ideal.

Monotheism is the affirmation of the cosmic principle of *unity*, the fundamental *sine qua non* of all science; furthermore, the Christian God is proclaimed as the assurance of goodness and harmony in the Universe, a conception similar to that of the Platonic ἀγαθόν, recognizable in the characterization of the Aristotelian supreme being. Religion and philosophy, belief and reason, did not have any difficulty in mutually recognizing one another and in allying themselves in order to extend from Europe to encompass the entire planet.

America Emerges

Humanity's long and bloody struggle to recognize itself as part of a greater, simply human community, arrived at a critical moment

with the European contact with the various cultures that inhabited the "New World."

It is necessary to remember that man does not come from America but rather arrived from diverse horizons and various routes to populate it in waves of successive migration. Multiple languages, distinct myths and religions, dissimilar forms of sociopolitical organization, different ways of living and distinct concepts of the world and life, each strange to the other, coexisted in these new lands, creating complex interactions which covered the complete range of possibilities. From harmonious exchange to open confrontation, passing through all of the modalities of human relations, these interactions changed in accordance with time: submission of the weakest to the strongest, hostile isolation, provisional alliances against a common enemy, mutual respect with agreements of peaceful coexistence, broken by ambitious expansionary invasions, unexpected rebellions, triumphs and defeats.

Such was the complex, motley and polyphonic scene that the European encountered. With a varying degree of effort depending upon the people that he faced, the European ultimately subdued them and imposed his own culture upon them. He also added another new and powerful cultural force: the African, uprooted from his origin and enslaved. In the profound psychism of the Latin American there is a latent memory of the traumatic passage through the first extirpation and a collective defeat; but there is also the dormant image of a former splendor as an assurance of future vigor.

The already expanded awareness of being "we," extensively cultivated in Europe, encounters a real alterity in America; the inhabitant of these lands is strangeness itself, the stranger par excellence, the other. In the same manner, for the indigenous communities the European was the other, pure and simple alterity. Thus two cultures that mutually rejected each other from their contemptuous greatness created, in the inevitable confrontation, the prototype of humanity that now flourishes everywhere: the cultural and racial mestizo, the refined cosmopolite that epitomizes all manifestations of what is human.

The encounter of these two cultures was tragic; the birth of this new hybrid culture was painful. Tragic proportionate to the

degree in which the horror has been transcended, as a result of the aesthetic upheaval provoked by artistic creations and because of the transmutation of the frightful experience into the deepening of understanding and the amplification of knowledge. Not only is the vision of the geographic totality of the world completed with the incorporation of the American continent, but, and more importantly in our reflection, human knowledge of itself is also rounded out; in the encounter between Europe and America, humanity definitively gained awareness of its unity.

Invasion, confrontation, defeat. Victory for the other side. Europe dominates and imposes its language, religion, and culture on the defeated. Thus the former diversity now appears unified both by a common language, Spanish, and its close relative Portuguese, and by a single religion, Christianity. Any remaining languages or religions, previous or foreign, are either assimilated after being invested with Christian emblems or are considered marginal and isolated expressions, susceptible to evangelization.

As is characteristic of all conquerors, of those who dominate, Europe named the geographic space and the inhabitants of that new world; but in the very name that has been imposed we see the difficulty of classifying this all too complex gathering of human forces from all horizons of the planet. Of the troublesome list of names used to designate this portion of the planet conquered and colonized by the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula, the one that has had the most fortune is the one coined in France in 1870, that of "Latin America," presently in use and officially employed by international organizations (UN, UNESCO).

Throughout three centuries the process of colonial unification is implemented: the unity of language, of religion, of political, economic and social systems, and of customs and habits, make Latin America one single great land in which each region easily recognizes itself in the other regions, without amazement, as simple and enriching variations of the same.

It is necessary to emphasize a very important characteristic of the process of encounter between the two worlds in the recently denominated American continent: the Spanish colonizer did not exterminate nor isolate the indigenous populations in a systematic manner; on the contrary, in accordance with his Christian princi-

ples, he made an effort to incorporate them into his culture and commenced a permanent process of racial and cultural integration. In the entire history of humanity, Spain is the first imperial power to reflect upon its politics of conquest and colonization and to undertake a serious debate concerning its legitimacy, the nature of its errors and the reach of its injustices.¹¹ From this debate the modern concept of international rights, based upon universally respected human rights, is conceived.

This would seem to indicate that the dream of human unification and the consolidation of the ties of fraternity has been reached, as if this were the ultimate goal of a linear and eschatological history in which every transformation and each vicissitude would simply be a necessary step in achieving the desired human plenitude. Would America be the place for the realization of that impossible space that Thomas More dreamed of, in which every man is recognized as a brother? Had man finally found that lost paradise that salves the wound of being an individual separated from his origin, that paradise that calms the omnipresent nostalgia of return to one, to the intimacy of the human family from which he has been exiled? However, reality is stronger than dreams and it reminds us that even if it were so, we still have a long way to go. Thus it is necessary to reiterate the question and intensify the search for answers.

The unifying impulse of the Spanish empire over the new lands was powerful and effective. Unification of the diverse elements strengthens the formation of a hybrid and ecumenical culture whose motto could be, appropriately, "nothing that is human is strange to me." Nevertheless, the system of privileges and class established by filiation with dominant groups marginalizes the non-European cultural expressions and provokes the resentment of the mulattoes who desire equal rights and access to opportunities for self-improvement.

Furthermore, Spain and its archaic social system was not prepared to resist the impetuous ascent of modern, rational and progressive Europe, nourished by the Industrial Revolution and by the ideological transformations of the eighteenth century – especially the French Revolution – that support the vigorous establishment of young republics inspired by democratic, rational and

enlightened thought, validate the development of science and technology and promote an industrial and capitalist economy. Rational European discourse is thus introduced by implantation, forced upon an all too complex reality with the intent of shaping its development and its destiny.

Latin-American independence similarly indicates a new fracture in the violent history of the continent, in that it appears as a sudden cut without interruption. It was a traumatic passage from the peaceful colonial life devoted to a fundamentally agricultural society and sustained by Christian, monarchical, hierarchical and feudal values, to the impulsive and frenetic life of the new societies based on democratic values, a secular vocation, rational inspiration and open to the greed of a capitalistic economy centered on profit. The ruling class of the new republics imposed their liberal values upon the lower sectors of society, divesting them of the rights that they enjoyed during the colonial period. Far from attaining the standard of living promised by the idea of progress, they saw themselves rapidly devoured by the expansion of large landowners and transnational companies.

The great land of Latin America, homogenized by the Spanish culture, is broken into underdeveloped countries, utilized as a simple source of raw materials, a producer of cheap labor and as an open market for the reception of the waste of industrial overproduction. The consequences are: impoverishment, backwardness, degradation of political leadership, civil wars, dictatorships, popular revolts, loss of cultural values, and the death of the traditional spirit.

But there also remained in Latin America an unharmed torrent of creativity, impossible to contain or silence because of its power. Throughout the centuries this torrent has become abundantly clear in the quotidian tasks of its artists and artisans and has overflowed in the musicality of its writers, that which Carlos Fuentes calls the extraordinary cultural continuity of the Latin-American continent,¹² in which the true multicultural and multiracial countenance is reflected. It is they, the forgers of this culture that is Universalist by birth, who have most thoroughly examined with profundity, pain and multiform beauty the understanding of the American identity, and have maturely reflected upon the possibilities of creating more

harmonious forms of life for all of humanity, far from all particularism or folkloric stereotyping; they are worthy heirs, and they accept this inheritance with serene stateliness, from the multiple and considerable gifts that all humanity has deposited in that fertile ground.

Fragmented Identity

In the middle of this picture we return our attention to the inquiry into our identity. If we take the first Aristotelian definition into account, it would now seem impossible to deny the quality of ζῶον λόγον to all talking bipeds that we encounter. But if we emphasize the second definition, the political aspect of man, the traces of skepticism silenced in the first definition encroach upon the consciousness and it is then possible to divide humanity into "we," men of plenitude, those with the opportunity of access to material and spiritual goods, opposite the other who, deprived of such goods, marauds at the edge of what is human.

If emphasis is put on the legitimate human aspiration of forming a truly all-encompassing community that does not exclude any aspect of humanity, this demands, in some way, that the other cease to be distinct: a disguised way to rob him of his form of being, in order to assimilate him into that "we" that arrogates full right to humanity. Would the possibility nevertheless exist of dreaming about a universality that respects cultural multiplicity and necessary difference?

We now find ourselves faced with a paradoxical, almost aporetic situation: on the one hand the centers of power, the heirs of the material wealth of their warring ancestors, have consolidated their power on a merely economic scale and have organized a planetary society following the model of the great conquering empires. The design of the world has thus been created in agreement with a precise hierarchical order with stimulating points of power and its peripheries of marginality and backwardness. Could we say that these now classic divisions of center-periphery, North-South, first-second-third world, are decreasing stages of humanity? In any case they are decreasing stages of access to the rights of happiness that permit the full realization of our humanity.

Furthermore, if in both word and deed universalization is decreed necessary and feasible, and if this is now being realized through the power of a worldwide economy which is reinforced by the unifying power of the mass media and all of the systems of communication, as well as by the creation of multinational and polyglot executive organizations and political administrations, then particularistic tendencies, characterized by a strong nationalistic content and an aggressive, separatistic and xenophobic energy, are established everywhere.

On the other hand, excessive, almost pathological expansion of economic power has inflamed the centers and has dislocated the points of command, extending them to the periphery. And inversely, the same necessities created by the economy have drawn the periphery to the center.

In this manner we find ourselves before an unbalanced world, but one that maintains strong points of power from which originates the unequal repartition of privileges for all humanity. At the same time, the traditional world capitals see themselves increasingly invaded by the periphery and the margins, with all of the weight of the insufficiencies that the consciousness of "we" relegated, as alien, to the other.

The unifying awareness, the self-identifying "we" explodes and turns back from its fleeting location, while plurality and heterogeneity triumph everywhere. Thus we can foresee that in the future, the world will be in America's image, in its affirmation of human sovereignty: its hybrid character. Confrontation with the other, without the possibility of denying nor subsuming him such as occurred five centuries ago in America, is now inevitable and it will be even more so in the contemporary megalopolis that is characteristic of highly developed countries

It is possible to suppose that we, as inquirers into our own identity, constitute the fundamental unity of that which is human, which as a metamorphic power lies beneath the multiple masks that human tendencies have adopted in the necessary process of development, thus creating cultural fragmentation. Would it perhaps be desirable that the carnival end, that the masks fall and that we are allowed to see a monotonously identical countenance in the other? Is the overflow of appearances and the play of

masks in constant transformation not perhaps characteristic of all that is living?

It would seem clear that in the entire world definitive hybridization is established, creating multicultural, multilingual, polyphonic and motley societies. It is to be hoped that we are capable of accepting and of growing with the contributions of the other, since only difference can be enriching. Let us hope that we can create from all diversity a harmony in which the music of that which is human at last resounds through such a difficult arrangement.

Translated from the Spanish by Michele Gardner

Notes

1. "Of all the marvels of this world, none is superior to man." Sophocles, *Antigone*.
2. This is a persistent awareness in the history of the West. See Pico de la Mirandola, *De humanitatis dignitate*.
3. An analysis of interesting myths of diverse peoples, in which man appears, from the beginning, endowed with language is found in José Manuel Briceño Guerrero, *El origen del lenguaje*, Monte Avila, 1970.
4. Aristotle, *The Politics*, I, 2, 1253a.
5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 8, 1169a-IX, 9, 1169b.
6. This expression is from Briceño Guerrero. We use it to consider the double human characteristic that it expresses: on the one hand, the physical characteristic determined by the homonym—homo erectus—and the moral characteristic, pointed out by Plato, of the "fallen soul" that has lost its wings but not the longing to fly.
7. Aristotle says that the family is the community constituted by nature in order to satisfy the daily necessities, and the best communities result from the union of various families in order to satisfy more than daily necessities. Aristotle, *The Politics*, I, 2, 1252b.
8. Homer immortalizes this process in *The Iliad*.
9. "Das Herrenrecht, Namen zu geben, geht so weit, daß man sich erlauben sollte, den Ursprung der Sprache selbst a Machtäußerung der Herrschenden zu fassen." F. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Erste Abhandlung, 3.
10. See Briceño Guerrero, *La identificación americana con la europa segunda*, Merida, 1984.
11. Debate specifically raised by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, in his *Apologética historia sumaria*, published in Seville in 1533.
12. Carlos Fuentes, "Imagining America," in: *Diogenes*, No. 160 (Winter 1992), pp. 5-19.