

Multiple modernity¹

Bolívar Echeverría

Before getting into the core of this presentation, I would like to tell you something about the perspective through which **modernity** has become a central theme of my work at the University of Mexico. It arises from my research in cultural history and, more specifically, into the history of Latin American culture during the Seventeenth century, the century of the Baroque. This is a prolonged and seminal period of Latin American history, which happens to be a very neglected chapter in the academic books and studies of the continent's history.

In Latin America, the theoretical approach to modernity has to do with a current discussion on the nature of political thought: the discussion about democracy, its possibilities at present and its economic and social promises for the future.

It is well known – and there is no need to insist on it-- the situation of permanent economic and political disaster, in which the historical development of Latin America has been trapped and seemingly appears unable of breaking. The catastrophic exploitation of natural resources, to which we can add a similar catastrophic overexploitation of labor, provides a volatile wealth that a small minority of the population consumes with scandalous rapidity. This leaves almost nothing to contribute to an objective, public infrastructure, and condemns the majority of the people to misery and frustration. The succession of all sorts of authoritarian regimes, interrupted by periods of weak and merely formal “democratic” governments, confirms time and again that the oligarchy remains the untouched species of political life in Latin America.

In the last ten years, as the “socialist perspective” seems to have lost relevance, and radical revolution is no longer seen as a realistic alternative, the current political and sociotheoretical thought sets the clock back almost exactly one hundred years. What Latin American societies must do in order to get out of this destructive and self-destructive destiny should be, once more, to accomplish a historical transition from pre-modern social organization to a real modern one.

¹ Presentation at a Colloquium on XVIIth Century in Mexico, organized. by Josefa Salmon, Loyola University, New Orleans, 2001.

The history of Latin American nations beginning with the wars of Independence against Spain in the early Nineteenth century has been a history that repeats a peculiar and never-ending circular pattern of behavior; a vicious circle that can be called “the circle of democracy and development”.

«Democracy first», is the leading statement; only by applying it, the conditions of injustice prevailing in these republics can be really changed. On the other hand, it is impossible for democracy to become an essential part of political life without a minimum of fair economic play and a minimum of justice in social life. Thus, democracy appears as a pre-condition of economic and social development but also as a result of them. And the same occurs with development, it appears also as a pre-condition and as a result of democracy.

How can this vicious circle be broken? How can democracy and development be reached simultaneously?

Leftist intellectuals and social reformers used to have an answer to this question. But now, at the exact place where the left used to put the idea of revolution, the current generation of leading politicians and academics revives another method of reaching it, the old method of modernization; restores the idea of the healing effects of a modernization shock.

The shock of modernization (another name for “neoliberal” policy) is nothing more than the combined shock of total liberalization in the field of economics and a complete institutionalization of representative democracy in political life.

What does “modernization” mean in the case of Latin America?

The modernization of a social and historical reality characterized as pre-modern, implies or brings with it --both again as a condition and as a result-- a radical change, a change of its essential features, a change of identity.

And what can this change of identity possibly mean? It could mean either change as a complete substitution of the traditional identity or change as a renewed reconstitution of that identity.

The first definition of radical change, as substitution of identity, has been tried by the official praxis for almost two centuries by successive waves of “progressive politics” in the Latin American republics.

The administration of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico a hundred years ago, could be mentioned as a salient example of this.

French, English, but most of all, American identity can be pointed out as the identities that Latin American societies were induced to copy and reproduce as their own.

Beginning with the attempt of the Bourbonian *Despotisme Illustré* during the Eighteenth century, substitution of identity is a way of modernization that has failed time and again in the history of Latin America. The repeated failure of these attempts has had its byproducts: a long list of monstrous phenomena on the economic and political scene, which are usually seen as almost picturesque features of social life in Latin America. For instance, corruption, a fact that begins with the unfair subsidy of the national capitalists by the state (to make them better able to compete on the world market) and continues to trickle down to the whole economy and the entire social body.

For instance in politics: the excesses of militarism, “caudillismo”, populism, oligarchic “democratism,” etc. The best example of this is perhaps “caciquismo”, a peculiar adaptive configuration of “natural”, almost tribal exercise of local power played out at the national political level, right in the middle of modern institutional life. This is a form of domination that pervades economic, social, political and high cultural life in Latin America. This phenomenon can only be understood as the result of a process of hybridization; it is a conflictive mixture of the new imported identity and its “modern” political culture with the old identity and the traditional political culture; a mixture where the new and modern appears too weak to become exclusive, and where the old one proves to be too strong to be eliminated.

As you can see, the theme of modernity appears in Latin America as a question of cultural and historical anthropology.

Emancipation and affluence, or if you want democracy and development are two goals inextricably linked together, and they become possible only in modern civilization; even more, they characterize modernity as such. But --and this is the question--, is this established, this so-called “Western” image of this pairing (democracy and development) its only possible actualization? In fact, can modernity only exist as what we know traditionally as “Western” modernity?

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the spread of democracy, of “American democracy”, as he understood it, could only exist in the presence of an “egalitarian trend” in civilized life. That is why he meant that only certain countries should try to be democratic and certain others, like Russia or South America, should not. A hundred years later, Max Weber spoke of capitalism and the main feature of modernity, as an economic fact sustained by a “spirit”, by a pattern of behavior that matches at best with a community of Calvinistic-protestant ethics. Many other observations and studies similar to those of de Tocqueville and Weber determined what can be called the cultural determination of “Western” modernity. ” A trend towards egalitarian behavior” in social life; social internalization of an “ethic of productivistic self-repression”, becomes the feature of an economic and a political culture. These are the features of communal identity that lead us to study “Western modernity” --that is, Western democracy/Western development-- as a huge and a very complex figure in cultural history.

At this point, Karl Marx’s critical approach to the capitalist reproduction of social wealth becomes crucial. This is so, because cultural forms, as George Bataille says, always come up as condensations of strategies for surmounting a contradiction between the renewed needs of the social body and the new limits put to them by nature, strategies to reach a compromise between drives and constrains. The specific contradiction of social life in modern civilization --a contradiction that can be found at the core of what Fernand Braudel calls “*la civilisation materielle*”-- seems to be, as Marx formulates it, the “contradiction between the concrete, ‘natural’ or non-mercantile mode of reproduction of social life, on the one side, and an abstract, artificial or capitalistic-mercantile mode of performing that same reproduction, on the other. This is the contradiction that appears in the objective world under the the form of a contradiction between the “use-value” of things, on the one hand, and the “exchange value” of the same on the other.

===

Thus, cultural forms in modern “Western” civilization should be seen as emerging under the gravitation of a dominant necessity, the necessity to surmount the “capitalist contradiction” prevailing in modern everyday life. This contradiction dominates not only the modern process of circulation of social wealth as a huge world of commodities but each and every act of production and consumption of concrete goods and services.

According to Marx, all perception of the world of life and its components must come in modern “Western” civilization through a determining experience, the experience of this capitalistic contradiction. Modern people must live in a world that pays obedience to two legalities at the same time; a world that follows simultaneously two incompatible organizing principles and has therefore two divergent dynamics. The first one, the reproduction dynamic of the concrete qualitative dimension of social body and social wealth can be seen as the “natural” dynamic of production and consumption of “values in use”, as a process of work and enjoyment. The second one, a reproductions dynamic of the abstract, only quantitatively growing dimension of the social world can be seen as the dynamic of production and consumption of pure economic value, as a process of exploitation of surplus value and accumulation of capital. Modern people must live in a world where the first of these two dynamics, the concrete one, is permanently dominated and subordinated --*subsumiert*, says Marx-- by the second, the abstract one; a world, in sum, where the qualitative dimension of life is constantly sacrificed to the economic-quantitative part of itself.

Identities, that is, cultural forms in modern times can then come up as condensations of very different strategies to surmount countless sorts of conflictive situations, but they cannot hide the fact that the most radical and acute contradiction with which they have to deal is the contradiction between --on the one hand-- the “natural” mode of social life, the life that produces and consumes values in use as such, that cares about the concrete consistency of the world, and, on the other hand, the capitalistic-mercantile mode of it. The life that produces and consumes abstract economic values, amounts to a sort of currency that is a meant for nothing but its own reproduction, a life that cares only about the growth or the progress of the piece of capital (riches) that it presumes to posses.

Max Weber studies Protestant ethics as the most pure or adequate response to the “call” or the “spirit of capitalism”, that is, to the behavior pattern that capitalism requires of modern human beings so they can lead a prosperous life. His book on this matter may be seen as one of the best theoretical approaches to the basic cultural form in modern “Western” civilization. Max Weber’s assumption is that all other possible “calls” or all other possible “spirits” that may still be active in modern society are condemned to disappear, that they are tendentially non existent. For him, modern history is not only a history of the dominance of the “spirit of capitalism” but a history of its exclusivity. Now, if we observe modern society before its hypothetical total conversion to the

“spirit of capitalism”, we can see a society that lives under capitalism but has developed many impure or not quite adequate responses to the “call” or the “spirit of capitalism”, responses that are being reproduced together and parallel to Protestant ethics.

The question in modern society seems to be not about how to obey the “spirit of capitalism” and identify one self with it, but, less conspicuously, about the strategy required in every day life to surmount the capitalistic contradiction, to neutralize it and to make habitable or livable a world that otherwise would be unbearable because of its inner contradiction. If we consider this fact, if we do not think of modern ethics only in terms of contributing or supporting capitalism but in terms of enduring or bearing capitalism, then the question arises unavoidably is if the cultural form that comes from the Protestant ethics the only or exclusive basic cultural form in modern Western civilization? Or can we think of other basic cultural forms that come from other strategies and patterns of behavior under the gravitation of capitalist contradiction?

As you can see, this question is crucial if we have to deal with such problems of identity as the problems that I mentioned before in the case of the Latin American societies. Because if we can assert that “Protestant” basic form of modern culture is not the only one but just one of several other possible versions of this basic cultural form, then that change of identity that is considered indispensable for the modernization of the Latin American societies could not be necessarily a substitution of identity, not an assumption of the cultural forms based on “Protestant” ethics, but an internal change to another possible modern identity, a radical re-constitution of cultural forms based on another sort of modern “ethics”.

If we contest the claim by the now dominant, so called “Western” model of modern emancipation and affluence, as being the only possible one, then we can answer in the affirmative to the crucial question about whether or not there are there other alternative figures of modern democracy and modern development to the established one, that could be considered now as valid and possible?

If we look at people’s everyday behavior in the capitalist mode of modern life, in its contradictory determination, we can detect not one but several spontaneous ways of composing a strategy to convert it into a normal, a “natural” reality in what otherwise could be considered a

hostile, unlivable reality. If we take as the main criterion for classifying these many strategies the specific attitude towards the capitalist contradiction that we can find in each of them, we distinguish four different types. Borrowing the terminology of the main stylistic trends in the history of art since the Renaissance, we can call them: the realistic ethos, the classical ethos, the romantic ethos and the baroque ethos.

Let's consider very briefly the main features of these four figures of modern ethos.

The strategy of behavior that we call realistic corresponds in many ways to the "Protestant ethics" described by Weber. It has a particular but very effective way of neutralizing the capitalistic contradiction: it uses the recourse of simply denying it. Concrete qualitative needs are perfectly convertible to quantitative abstract-mercantile needs; whatever is good for the accumulation of capital is also good for the improvement of values in use. Accumulation and satisfaction are for this ethos essentially the same; they are practically not discernable from each other. There is no place for a contradiction; the "natural" form of the dynamics of social reproduction is for him perfectly well represented by its mercantile-capitalistic dynamics. The conflicts that may appear between them are due to exceptional, accidental episodes of malfunction that the march of progress will soon eliminate. This realistic ethos, that teaches to take life under capitalism exactly as it is, without any utopian weakness or deviation, is of course the most functional cultural basic form that comes up in the capitalistic modernity. It favors capitalist development, in the same measure in which capitalist development confirms it.

The second modern strategy for living under capitalism, the "romantic ethos", shares with the former the same attitude of denial facing the capitalist contradiction in economic life. Far from being incompatible, for both of these strategies, reproduction of capital and realization of values in use coincide. But, opposite to realism, for the romantic ethos this happens not because the concrete or "natural form" of human life is reducible to the capitalist form, but on the contrary because this capitalist form is a special historical configuration, a peculiar way of accomplishment of that concrete or "natural form". Accumulation becomes transfigured (*verklärt*); it is not just an economic compulsion but it has a concrete spiritual dignity; it is a realization of the spirit, the "spirit of enterprise". Individuals are not just a mass of working forces under the command of capital but real sovereign subjects, members of a concrete community, a macro-subject that is the national state, a subject that has the command over his national accumulation of capital.

The third modern ethos, the “classical ethos”, takes another way to neutralize the capitalist contradiction of modern life. It does not imply, as the earlier two do, an identification of the human subject with the subordination or subsuming of “natural” life under the “life” of capital. It realizes the experience of sacrifice that this subordination implies and keeps its distance from the capitalist destiny. The “classical” strategy to live under capitalism constructs a positive attitude towards it but only inasmuch as capitalism appears as an unavoidable condition of the new possibilities that technical progress opens to human life. The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment period of French history would be perhaps the best exponents of this modern ethos.

But preparing oneself to live within capitalism, by means of neutralizing its contradiction, does not always imply an internalizing or an affirmative attitude towards the subordination of concrete reproduction of life under the reproduction of capital. A negative, dysfunctional behavior is also able to neutralize that contradiction in everyday life. That is the case of the baroque version of modern ethos. Aware of the subordination and the sacrifice that it implies, the Baroque strategy --completely opposite to the realistic and the romantic and clearly different from the classical-- it does not internalize that capitalist fate and is also reluctant to accept the sacrifice of the “natural” dynamics of social reproduction to the dynamics of the “self-valuing economic value” (*sichselbst verwertende wert*, says Marx). This Baroque behavior turns the sacrifice of the real qualitative consistence of the world into a construction of an imagined second qualitative consistence for it. «Man can endure in the real, unbearable conditions of life during the capitalist modernity, but only if he simultaneously re-tells himself his experience in another way, an imagined, a “transreal” way. This could be the *motto* of the baroque ethos. Of course, the baroque basic cultural form can --as well as the classic or the romantic can in their own way-- be seen as an obstacle in the pure and orthodox development of capitalism, but in itself it also implies a deep conformity with it, an acceptance of capitalist destiny.

“*Decorazione assoluta*”, so refers Th. W. Adorno to Baroque art. What he means is that the specific feature of a Baroque work have to be found in the ambiguity of the dialectics of central and peripheral elements, of essential and accessory levels. In a Baroque painting, for instance, certain of its elements or levels that should be secondary, only ornamental in a traditional renaissance painting, become at that point protagonistic that they are able to propose their own “forming principle”, a second degree principle, for the picture as a whole, yet without abandoning its dependent, subordinated function. Take, as an example, the famous *trompe-l’oeil*

in the Meninas-painting by Velázquez. In a Baroque image, the image contains a duplication of itself within itself, a duplication that over-determines it and makes it mean uncertainly more than it would mean as a classical image. This uneasiness with the very fact of representation that prevails in the Baroque representation of the world --an uneasiness that leads the work of art to be always transcending itself, always telling that it says more and always doing so but in a fleeting, enigmatical way-- is similar to the uneasiness of modern everyday life as it appears to the “B” ethos when it creates a second qualitative consistence, an imagined consistence, for that world of values in use that is being sacrificed to the accumulation of capital. This similarity is the reason for the name “Baroque” for the fourth of the basic cultural forms that we try to describe in the Western capitalist modernity.

I would like to insist on this issue of Baroque modernity because --as I already told you-- the concept of a baroque ethos can give us an important key for the comprehension of the Latin American societies, their culture and their history.

Cervantes, in his ambivalent --condemning and praising--approach to the Hispanic world at the beginning of the so called “Baroque century”, has shown the first historical results of typical baroque behavior in the satiric, exaggerated or caricaturized figure of Don Quixote. In his misunderstandings with the real world, Don Quixote has arrived to the point where only the translation of it into a tale can make it acceptable for him. Only “aesthetized,” “literaturized” (made part of a roman of chivalry) can reality be bearable for this allegory of decadent Spain that is Don Quixote.

If we look now with archaeological eyes to the present forms of Latin American everyday culture, we find that most of them refer us undoubtedly to the seventeenth century, to the baroque culture that Cervantes’ Don Quixote satirizes in its beginnings.

Much research coincides in confirming a main hypothesis of economic history that says that an “*economie-monde*”, as Braudel calls it, was in process of formation during the seventeenth century: An “*économie-monde*” that was mostly “informal” or “*de contrabando*”, that didn’t develop as a result of a economic policy of the Spanish Crown but against it, in the margins of it or beneath it, was strong enough as to organize with its underground legality most of the economic life of Mexico and Peru, unifying it around the commercial activity of the Caribbean “Mediterranean Sea”, as Carpentier used to call it.

The formation process of this Latin American *economie monde* --an interrupted process-- takes place during the historical period of a “large XVII century” that begins with the defeat of the Spanish *Gran Armada* at the end of the XVI century and ends with the expulsion of the *Compañía de Jesús* in the second half of the XVIII century.

The nuclear form of the characteristic features of Latin America culture was built spontaneously in this “large XVII century.” But not only was there a strong organizing action that came from the urban centers dominated by the “criollos”, an action in which the *Compañía de Jesús* took a very important part. The broad and persistent utopian activity of the Jesuits, that spread from California to Paraguay --an activity that was focused on rebuilding the Catholic world according to the project of a specific “Catholic” modernity-- gave to the development of Latin American culture some of its baroque orientations. We should not forget that the reason that Carlos III gave for the expulsion of the Jesuits was that they --in a very Baroque way-- had constructed an “informal” state, an “state within the state” that could not be allowed to continue.

I won't try now to approach this reflected, conscious and organized origin of the Baroque forms of Latin American culture. I will say instead a few words on the spontaneous origin of them.

The Baroque appears originally as a spontaneous behavior by the remaining Indian population in the urban centers of México and Perú. It appears as a survival-strategy in a situation of general decay of civilized life in American Spain during the first decade of the XVII century. In fact, not only had the ancient civilization of American Indians had been completely destroyed together with 90 per cent of its people, but also the incrustations of European civilization, that only a few years earlier had been strong and flourishing, were exhausted and in danger of regression or disappearance.

The recivilizing reaction to this desperate situation came as a compelling reactualization of what has always been the “method” of historical change in the history of human culture: the “method” of “mestizaje” or “cultural crossing.” Culture can be defined as the process in which a community cultivates its identity, its concrete, singular way of being human. Each community behaves, as well in its praxis as in its discourse, not only according to the specific human codification that shapes that human codification into a very peculiar form. Culture is the process

of material and symbolic reproduction of this sub-codification in every day life; a process that goes together with the material production and consumption of meanings.

But reproduction of identity does not mean preservation or protection of identity. Each subcodification of the human behavior implies not only the construction of a closed world but also the recognition of its own limitation; it implies not only the exclusion of all other alternative subcodifications but also a need for them, an openness to other possibilities of being human. Only when a community yields to this need of the Other and loosens the stiffness of its subcodification can really cultivate its own being. The life of culture is only possible when an identity is ready to be devoured by other identities and is capable of devouring them. Culture, cultivation of identity, implies this process of mutual devouring, this process of cultural “mestizaje”.

That part of the Indian population of Mexico and Peru at the beginning of the 17th century that was not expelled from the “civilized” centers, and had to survive in them, reinvented for the modern times this old “method” of cultural historical change. Their behavior was typically baroque. They accepted that they had been defeated, that their ancient world had been annihilated and could not be revived anymore; they adapted the new world of the conquerors and let their identity be devoured by the Western European identity of the Spaniards. They did this, but they did something else too, or something more; they took in their hands the task of reconstructing a Western civilization that was not able to reproduce itself properly in America anymore. They worked in their own way in the Western cultural structure and transformed it from within. The Indian-mestizo population invented a way –a baroque way—to live the decline of Western-European or Spanish civilization as a peculiar manner of civilized life, as a new, properly American type of Western civilization.

This is the spontaneous historical process which created the original cultural forms that we can find until now characterizing the Latin American societies; those forms that the “criollo” society adopted and developed in its reflective, political activity during that “long 17th century.” It is a historical process that follows a baroque strategy, the same strategy that was described as a distinctive feature of the fourth ethos in capitalist modernity.

Modernity is multiple. There are at least four basic types of modernity, and one of them, the baroque modernity, can be found as that that determines the forms of civilized life still prevailing

in societies like those of Latin America. It is a very ineffective and subordinated version of modernity because it doesn't organize the world in order to improve the capitalistic mode of economic reproduction but only in order to reconstruct the possibilities of human life that are being sacrificed by that mode of reproduction.

I gather that there is a lesson to be learned from the actual existence of such failed or not successful forms of modern life, like the baroque modernity of Latin America. In times like ours, in which current modern life seems to lead civilized life to a self-murderous future, a historical account showing the plural tradition of modernity can let us hope that not every possible civilized life will be lost with the end of capitalist modernity; that, after all, an alternative modernity could still be a real perspective.