
Reflections: Mexico and the United States

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*Reflections:
Mexico and the United States*

OCTAVIO PAZ
*Translated from the Spanish
by Rachel Phillips*

[Editor's Note: The following article, an unusual emphasis for *The History Teacher*, is offered less for its content—that is to say, the substantive value of the conclusions reached—than for the demonstration it provides of the uses of history. Through an imaginative exploration of forces and events in each country's past, Octavio Paz shows how Mexico and the United States today represent "two distinct versions of Western civilization" that are profoundly different from one another. This analysis by a distinguished literary figure serves as a reminder of the role—frequently unperceived by many members of the educated public—that history can play in sustaining informed thought on matters of contemporary concern. In reflecting on the bold

OCTAVIO PAZ is one of Mexico's most prominent literary figures. His poetic works include *Raiz del hombre* (1937), *Entre la piecha y la flor* (1941), *A la orilla del mundo* (1942), *Liberatad bajo palabra* (1949), *Blanco* (1967), and *Ladera este* (1969). His most important work in prose is considered to be *El laberinto de la soledad: vida y pensamiento de Mexico* (1950), an analysis of Mexican national character. A number of his writings have been published in English, as, for example, the anthology *Mexican Poetry*, translated by Samuel Becket. In 1963 Señor Paz was awarded the International Grand Prize in Poetry. He has served as a visiting professor at Harvard (where he held the Charles Eliot Norton Chair in Poetry) and Cambridge (as Simon Bolivar Professor of Latin American Studies).

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uses Paz makes of historical generalization, the reader may wish to consider what Partington says in the preceding article. Responses, either in the form of a developed statement or a letter, are invited to Paz and Partington, as well as to other articles appearing in these pages.]

WHEN I was in India, witnessing the never-ending quarrels between Hindus and Muslims, I asked myself more than once this question: What accident or misfortune of history caused two religions so obviously irreconcilable as Hinduism and Islam to coexist in the same society? The presence of the purest and most intransigent form of monotheism in the bosom of a civilization that has elaborated the most complex polytheism seemed to me a verification of the indifference with which history perpetrates its paradoxes. And yet I could hardly be surprised at the contradictory presence in India of Hinduism and Islam. How could I forget that I myself, as a Mexican, was (and am) part of a no less singular paradox—that of Mexico and the United States?

Our countries are neighbors, condemned to live alongside each other; they are separated, however, more by profound social, economic, and psychic differences than by physical and political frontiers. These differences are self-evident, and a superficial glance might reduce them to the well-known opposition between development and underdevelopment, wealth and poverty, power and weakness, domination and dependence. But the really fundamental difference is an invisible one, and in addition it is perhaps insuperable. To prove that it has nothing to do with economics or political power, we have only to imagine a Mexico suddenly turned into a prosperous, mighty country, a superpower like the United States. Far from disappearing, the difference would become more acute and more clear-cut. The reason is obvious: We are two distinct versions of Western civilization.

Ever since we Mexicans began to be aware of national identity—in about the middle of the eighteenth century—we have been interested in our northern neighbors. First with a mixture of curiosity and disdain; later on with an admiration and enthusiasm that were soon tinged with fear and envy. The idea the Mexican people have of the United States is contradictory, emotional, and impervious to criticism; it is a mythic image. The same can be said of the vision of our intellectuals and writers.

Something similar happens with Americans, be they writers or politicians, businessmen or only travellers. I am not forgetting the existence of a small number of remarkable studies by various American specialists, especially in the fields of archaeology and ancient and modern Mexican history. The perceptions of the American novelists and poets who have written on Mexican themes have often been brilliant, but they have also been fragmentary. Moreover, as a critic who has devoted a book to this theme (Drewey Wayne Gunn, *American and British Writers in Mexico*) has said, they reveal less of the Mexican reality than of the authors' personalities. In general, Americans have not looked for Mexico in Mexico; they have looked for their obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, hopes, interests—and these are what they have found. In short, the history of our relationship is the history of a mutual and stubborn deceit, usually involuntary though not always so.

Of course, the differences between Mexico and the United States are not imaginary projections but objective realities. Some are quantitative, and can be explained by the social, economic, and historical development of the two countries. The most permanent ones, though also the result of history, are not easily definable or measurable. I have pointed out that they belong to the realm of civilization, that fluid zone of imprecise contour in which are fused and confused ideas and beliefs, institutions and technologies, styles and morals, fashions and churches, the material culture and that evasive reality which we rather inaccurately call *le génie des peuples*. The reality to which we give the name of civilization does not allow of easy definition. It is each society's vision of the world and also its feeling about time; there are nations that are hurrying toward the future, and others whose eyes are fixed on the past. Civilization is a society's style, its way of living and dying. It embraces the erotic and the culinary arts; dancing and burial; courtesy and curses; work and leisure; rituals and festivals; punishments and rewards; dealings with the dead and with the ghosts who people our dreams; attitudes toward women and children, old people and strangers, enemies and allies; eternity and the present; the here and now and the beyond. A civilization is not only a system of values but a world of forms and codes of behavior, rules and exceptions. It is society's visible side—institutions, monuments, works, things—but it is especially its submerged, invisible side: beliefs, desires, fears, repressions, dreams.

The points of the compass have served to locate us in history as well as in space. The East–West duality soon acquired a more symbolic than geographical significance, and became an emblem of the opposi-

tion between civilizations. The East–West opposition has always been considered basic and primordial; it alludes to the movement of the sun, and is therefore an image of the direction and meaning of our living and dying. The East–West relationship symbolizes two directions, two attitudes, two civilizations. The North–South duality refers more to the opposition between different ways of life and different sensibilities. The contrasts between North and South can be oppositions within the same civilization.

Clearly, the opposition between Mexico and the United States belongs to the North–South duality as much from the geographical as the symbolic point of view. It is an ancient opposition which was already unfolding in pre-Columbian America, so that it antedates the very existence of the United States and Mexico. The northern part of the continent was settled by nomadic, warrior nations; Mesoamerica, on the other hand, was the home of an agricultural civilization, with complex social and political institutions, dominated by warlike theocracies that invented refined and cruel rituals, great art, and vast cosmogonies inspired by a very original vision of time. The great opposition of pre-Columbian America—all that now precludes the United States and Mexico—was between different ways of life: nomads and settled peoples, hunters and farmers. This division greatly influenced the later development of the United States and Mexico. The policies of the English and the Spanish toward the Indians were in large part determined by this division; it was not insignificant that the former established themselves in the territory of the nomads and the latter in that of the settled peoples.

The differences between the English and the Spaniards who founded New England and New Spain were no less decisive than those that separated the nomadic from the settled Indians. Again, it was an opposition within the same civilization. Just as the American Indians' world view and beliefs sprang from a common source, irrespective of their ways of life, so Spanish and English shared the same intellectual and technical culture. And the opposition between them, though of a different sort, was as deep as that dividing an Aztec from an Iroquois. And so the new opposition between English and Spaniards was grafted onto the old opposition between nomadic and settled peoples. The distinct and divergent attitudes of Spaniards and English have often been described before. All of them can be summed up in one fundamental difference, in which perhaps the dissimilar evolution of Mexico and the United States originated: in England the Reformation triumphed, whereas Spain was the champion of the Counter-Reformation.

As we all know, the reformist movement in England had political

consequences that were decisive in the development of Anglo-Saxon democracy. In Spain, evolution went in the opposite direction. Once the resistance of the last Muslim was crushed, Spain achieved a precarious political—but not national—unity by means of dynastic alliances. At the same time, the monarchy suppressed regional autonomies and municipal freedoms, closing off the possibility of eventual evolution into a modern democracy. Lastly, Spain was deeply marked by Arab domination, and kept alive the notion of crusade and holy war, which it had inherited from Christian and Muslim alike. In Spain, the traits of the modern era, which was just beginning, and of the old society coexisted but never blended completely. The contrast with England could not be sharper. The history of Spain and of her former colonies, from the sixteenth century onward, is the history of an ambiguous approach—attraction and repulsion—to the modern era.

The discovery and conquest of America are events that inaugurated modern world history, but Spain and Portugal carried them out with the sensibility and tenor of the Reconquest. Nothing more original occurred to Cortes' soldiers, amazed by the pyramids and temples of the Mayans and Aztecs, than to compare them with the mosques of Islam. Conquest and evangelization: these two words, deeply Spanish and Catholic, are also deeply Muslim. Conquest means not only the occupation of foreign territories and the subjugation of their inhabitants but also the conversion of the conquered. The conversion legitimized the conquest. This politico-religious philosophy was diametrically opposed to that of English colonizing; the idea of evangelization occupied a secondary place in England's colonial expansion.

The Christianity brought to Mexico by the Spaniards was the syncretic Catholicism of Rome, which had assimilated the pagan gods, turning them into saints and devils. The phenomenon was repeated in Mexico: the idols were baptized, and in popular Mexican Catholicism the old beliefs and divinities are still present, barely hidden under a veneer of Christianity. Not only the popular religion of Mexico but the Mexicans' entire life is steeped in Indian culture—the family, love, friendship, attitudes toward one's father and mother, popular legends, the forms of civility and life in common, the image of authority and political power, the vision of death and sex, work and festivity. Mexico is the most Spanish country in Latin America; at the same time it is the most Indian. Mesoamerican civilization died a violent death, but Mexico is Mexico thanks to the Indian presence. Though the language and the religion, the political institutions and the culture of the country are Western, there is one aspect of Mexico that faces in another direction—the Indian direction. Mexico is a nation between two civili-

zations and two pasts.

In the United States, the Indian element does not appear. This, in my opinion, is the major difference between our two countries. The Indians who were not exterminated were corralled in "reservations." The Christian horror of "fallen nature" extended to the natives of America: the United States was founded on a land without a past. The historical memory of Americans is European, not American. For this reason, one of the most powerful and persistent themes in American literature, from Whitman to William Carlos Williams and from Melville to Faulkner, has been the search for (or invention of) American roots. We owe some of the major works of the modern era to this desire for incarnation, this obsessive need to be rooted in American soil.

Exactly the opposite is true of Mexico, land of superimposed pasts. Mexico City was built on the ruins of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec city that was built in the likeness of Tula, the Toltec city that was built in the likeness of Teotihuacán, the first great city on the American continent. Every Mexican bears within him this continuity, which goes back two thousand years. It doesn't matter that this presence is almost always unconscious and assumes the naïve forms of legend and even superstition. It is not something known but something lived. The Indian presence means that one of the facets of Mexican culture is not Western. Is there anything like this in the United States? Each of the ethnic groups making up the multiracial democracy that is the United States has its own culture and tradition, and some of them—the Chinese and the Japanese, for example—are not Western. These traditions exist alongside the dominant American tradition without becoming one with it. They are foreign bodies within American culture. In some cases, the most notable being that of the Chicanos, the minorities defend their traditions against or in the face of the American tradition. The Chicanos' resistance is cultural as well as political and social.

If the different attitudes of Hispanic Catholicism and English Protestantism could be summed up in two words, I would say that the Spanish attitude is inclusive and the English exclusive. In the former, the notions of conquest and domination are bound up with ideas of conversion and assimilation; in the latter, conquest and domination imply not the conversion of the conquered but their segregation. An inclusive society, founded on the double principle of domination and conversion, is bound to be hierarchical, centralist, and respectful of the individual characteristics of each group. It believes in the strict division of classes and groups, each one governed by special laws and statutes, but all embracing the same faith and obeying the same lord. An exclusive society is bound to cut itself off from the natives, either

by physical exclusion or by extermination; at the same time, since each community of pure-minded men is isolated from other communities, it tends to treat its members as equals and to assure the autonomy and freedom of each group of believers. The origins of American democracy are religious, and in the early communities of New England that dual, contradictory tension between freedom and equality which has been the *leitmotiv* of the history of the United States was already present.

The opposition that I have just outlined is expressed with great clarity in two religious terms: "communion" and "purity." This opposition profoundly affects attitudes toward work, festivity, the body, and death. For the society of New Spain, work did not redeem, and had no value in itself. Manual work was servile. The superior man neither worked nor traded. He made war, he commanded, he legislated. He also thought, contemplated, wooed, loved, and enjoyed himself. Leisure was noble. Work was good because it produced wealth, but wealth was good because it was intended to be spent—to be consumed in those holocausts called war, in the construction of temples and palaces, in pomp and festivity. The dissipation of wealth took different forms: gold shone on the altars or was poured out in celebrations. Even today in Mexico, at least in the small cities and towns, work is the precursor of the fiesta. The year revolves on the double axis of work and festival, saving and spending. The fiesta is sumptuous and intense, lively and funereal; it is a vital, multicolored frenzy that evaporates in smoke, ashes, nothingness. In the aesthetics of perdition, the fiesta is the lodging place of death.

The United States has not really known the art of the festival, except in the last few years, with the triumph of hedonism over the old Protestant ethic. This is natural. A society that so energetically affirmed the redemptive value of work could not help chastising as depraved the cult of the festival and the passion for spending. The Protestant rejection was inspired by religion rather than economics. The Puritan conscience could not see that the value of the festival was actually a religious value: communion. In the festival, the orgiastic element is central; it marks a return to the beginning, to the primordial state in which each one is united with the great all. Every true festival is religious because every true festival is communion. Here the opposition between communion and purity is clear. For the Puritans and their heirs, work is redemptive because it frees man, and this liberation is a sign of God's choice. Work is purification, which is also a separation: the chosen one ascends, breaks the bonds binding him to earth, which are the laws of his fallen nature. For the Mexicans,

communion represents exactly the opposite: not separation but participation, not breaking away but joining together; the great universal commixture, the great bathing in the waters of the beginning, a state beyond purity and impurity.

In Christianity, the body's status is inferior. But the body is an always active force, and its explosions can destroy a civilization. Doubtless for this reason, the Church from the start made a pact with the body. If the Church did not restore the body to the place it occupied in Greco-Roman society, it did try to give the body back its dignity: the body is fallen nature, but in itself it is innocent. After all, Christianity, unlike Buddhism, say, is the worship of an incarnate god. The dogma of the resurrection of the dead dates from the time of primitive Christianity; the cult of the Virgin appeared later, in the Middle Ages. Both beliefs are the highest expressions of this urge for incarnation, which typifies Christian spirituality. Both came to Mesoamerica with Spanish culture, and were immediately fused, the former with the funeral worship of the Indians, the latter with the worship of the goddesses of fertility and war.

The Mexicans' vision of death, which is also the hope of resurrection, is as profoundly steeped in Catholic eschatology as in Indian naturalism. The Mexican death is of the body, exactly the opposite of the American death, which is abstract and disembodied. For Mexicans, death sees and touches itself: it is the body emptied of the soul, the pile of bones that somehow, as in the Aztec poem, must bloom again. For Americans, death is what is not seen: absence, the disappearance of the person. In the Puritan consciousness, death was always present, but as a moral entity, an idea. Later on, scientism pushed death out of the American consciousness. Death melted away and became unmentionable. Finally, in vast segments of the American population of today, progressive rationalism and idealism have been replaced by neo-hedonism. But the cult of the body and of pleasure implies the recognition and acceptance of death. The body is mortal, and the kingdom of pleasure is that of the moment, as Epicurus saw better than anyone else. American hedonism closes its eyes to death, and has been incapable of exorcising the destructive power of the moment with a wisdom like that of the Epicureans of antiquity. Present-day hedonism is the last recourse of the anguished and the desperate, an expression of the nihilism that is eroding the West.

Capitalism exalts the activities and behavior patterns traditionally called virile: aggressive, the spirit of competition and emulation, combativeness. American society made these values its own. This perhaps explains why nothing like the Mexicans' devotion to the Virgin

of Guadalupe appears in the different versions of Christianity professed by Americans, including the Catholic minority. The Virgin unites the religious sensibilities of the Mediterranean and Mesoamerica, both of them regions that fostered ancient cults of feminine divinities. Guadalupe-Tonantzin is the mother of all Mexicans—Indians, mestizos, whites—but she is also a warrior virgin whose image has often appeared on the banners of peasant uprisings. In the Virgin of Guadalupe we encounter a very ancient vision of femininity which, as was true of the pagan goddesses, is not without a heroic tint.

When I talk about the masculinity of the American capitalist society, I am not unaware that American women have gained rights and posts still denied elsewhere. But they have obtained them as "subjects under the law"; that is to say, as neuter or abstract entities, as citizens, not as women. Now, I believe that, much as our civilization needs equal rights for men and women, it also needs a feminization, like the one that courtly love brought about in the outlook of medieval Europe. Or like the feminine irradiation that the Virgin of Guadalupe casts on the imagination and sensibility of us Mexicans. Because of the Mexican woman's Hispano-Arabic and Indian heritage, her social situation is deplorable, but what I want to emphasize here is not so much the nature of the relation between men and women as the intimate relationship of woman with those elusive symbols which we call femininity and masculinity. For the reasons I noted earlier, Mexican women have a very lively awareness of the body. For them, the body, woman's and man's, is a concrete, palpable reality. Not an abstraction or a function but an ambiguous magnetic force, in which pleasure and pain, fertility and death are inextricably intertwined.

Pre-Columbian Mexico was a mosaic of nations, tribes, and languages. For its part, Spain was also a conglomeration of nations and races, even though it had realized political unity. The heterogeneity of Mexican society was the other face of Spanish centralism. The political centralism of the Spanish monarchy had religious orthodoxy as its complement, and even as its foundation. The true, effective unity of Mexican society has been brought about slowly over several centuries, but its political and religious unity was decreed from above as the joint expression of the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church. Mexico had a state and a church before it was a nation. In this respect also, Mexico's evolution has been very different from that of the United States, where the small colonial communities had from their inception a clear-cut and belligerent concept of their identity as regards the state. For North Americans, the nation antedated the state.

Another difference: In those small colonial communities, a fusion

had taken place among religious convictions, the embryonic national consciousness, and political institutions. So harmony, not contradiction, existed between the North Americans' religious convictions and their democratic institutions; whereas in Mexico Catholicism was identified with the viceregal regime, and was its orthodoxy. Therefore, when, after independence, the Mexican liberals tried to implant democratic institutions, they had to confront the Catholic Church. The establishment of a republican democracy in Mexico meant a radical break with the past, and led to the civil wars of the nineteenth century. These wars produced the militarism that, in turn, produced the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The liberals defeated the Church, but they could not implant true democracy—only an authoritarian regime wearing democracy's mask.

A no less profound difference was the opposition between Catholic orthodoxy and Protestant reformism. In Mexico, Catholic orthodoxy had the philosophical form of Neo-Thomism, a mode of thought more apologetic than critical, and defensive in the face of the emerging modernity. Orthodoxy prevented examination and criticism. In New England, the communities were often made up of religious dissidents or, at least, of people who believed that the Scriptures should be read freely. On one side, orthodoxy, dogmatic philosophy, and the cult of authority. On the other, reading and free interpretation of the doctrine. Both societies were religious, but their religious attitudes were irreconcilable. I am not thinking only of dogmas and principles but of the very ways in which the two societies practiced and understood religion. One society fostered the complex and majestic conceptual structure of orthodoxy, an equally complex ecclesiastical hierarchy, wealthy and militant religious orders, and a ritualistic view of religion, in which the sacraments occupied a central place. The other fostered free discussion of the Scriptures, a small and often poor clergy, a tendency to eliminate the hierarchical boundaries between the simple believer and the priest, and a religious practice based not on ritual but on ethics, and not on the sacrament but on the internalizing of faith.

If one considers the historical evolution of the two societies, the main difference seems to be the following: the modern world began with the Reformation, which was the religious criticism of religion and the necessary antecedent of the Enlightenment; with the Counter-Reformation and Neo-Thomism, Spain and her possessions closed themselves to the modern world. They had no Enlightenment, because they had neither a Reformation nor an intellectual religious movement like Jansenism. And so, though Spanish-American civilization is

to be admired on many counts, it reminds one of a structure of great solidity—at once convent, fortress, and palace—built to last, not to change. In the long run, that construction became a confine, a prison. The United States was born of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. It came into being under the sign of criticism and self-criticism. Now, when one talks of criticism one is talking of change. The transformation of critical philosophy into progressive ideology came about and reached its peak in the nineteenth century. The broom of rationalist criticism swept the ideological sky clean of myths and beliefs; the ideology of progress, in its turn, displaced the timeless values of Christianity and transplanted them to the earthly and linear time of history. Christian eternity became the future of liberal evolutionism.

Here is the final contradiction, and all the divergencies and differences I have mentioned culminate in it. A society is essentially defined by its position as regards time. The United States, because of its origin and its intellectual and political history, is a society oriented toward the future. The extraordinary spatial mobility of America, a nation constantly on the move, has often been pointed out. In the realm of beliefs and mental attitudes, mobility in time corresponds to physical and geographical displacement. The American lives on the very edge of the now, always ready to leap toward the future. The country's foundations are in the future, not in the past. Or, rather, its past, the act of its founding, was a promise of the future, and each time the United States returns to its source, to its past, it rediscovers the future.

Mexico's orientation, as has been seen, was just the opposite. First came the rejection of criticism, and with it rejection of the notion of change: its ideal is to conserve the image of divine immutability. Second, it has a plurality of pasts, all present and at war within every Mexican's soul. Cortes and Montezuma are still alive in Mexico. At the time of that great crisis the Mexican Revolution, the most radical faction, that of Zapata and his peasants, proposed not new forms of social organization but a return to communal ownership of land. The rebelling peasants were asking for the devolution of the land; that is, they wanted to go back to a pre-Columbian form of ownership which had been respected by the Spaniards. The image the revolutionaries instinctively made for themselves of a Golden Age lay in the remotest past. Utopia for them was not the construction of a future but a return to the source, to the beginning. The traditional Mexican attitude toward time has been expressed in this way by a Mexican poet, Ramón López Velarde: "Motherland, be still the same, faithful to each day's mirror."

In the seventeenth century, Mexican society was richer and more

prosperous than American society. This situation lasted until the first half of the eighteenth century. To prove that it was so, one need only glance at the cities of those days, with their monuments and buildings—Mexico City and Boston, Puebla and Philadelphia. Then everything changed. In 1847, the United States invaded Mexico, occupied it, and imposed on it terrible and heavy conditions of peace. A century later, the United States became the dominant world power. An unusual conjunction of circumstances of a material, technological, political, ideological, and human order explains the prodigious development of the United States. But in the small religious communities of seventeenth-century New England, the future was already in bud: political democracy, capitalism, and social and economic development. In Mexico, something very different has occurred. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Mexican ruling classes—especially the intellectuals—discovered that the principles that had founded their society condemned it to immobility and backwardness. They undertook a twofold revolution: separation from Spain and modernization of the country through the adoption of new republican and democratic principles. Their examples were the American Revolution and the French Revolution. They gained independence from Spain, but the adoption of new principles was not enough: Mexico changed its laws, not its social, economic, and cultural realities.

During much of the nineteenth century, Mexico suffered an endemic civil war and three invasions by foreign powers—the United States, Spain, and France. In the latter part of the century, order was reestablished, but at the expense of democracy. In the name of liberal ideology and the positivism of Comte and Spencer, a military dictatorship was imposed which lasted more than thirty years. It was a period of peace and appreciable material development—also of increasing penetration by foreign capital, especially from England and the United States. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 set itself to change direction. It succeeded only in part: Mexican democracy is not yet a reality, and the great advances achieved in certain quarters have been nullified or are in danger because of excessive political centralization, excessive population growth, social inequality, the collapse of higher education, and the actions of the economic monopolies, among them those from the United States. Like all the other states of this century, the Mexican state has had an enormous, monstrous development. A curious contradiction: The state has been the agent of modernization, but it has been unable to modernize itself entirely. It is a hybrid of the Spanish patrimonialist state of the seventeenth century and the modern bureaucracies of the West. As for its relationship with the United

States, that is still the old relationship of strong and weak, oscillating between indifference and abuse, deceit and cynicism. Most Mexicans hold the justifiable conviction that the treatment received by their country is unfair.

Above and beyond success and failure, Mexico is still asking itself the question that has occurred to most clear-thinking Mexicans since the end of the eighteenth century: the question about modernization. In the nineteenth century, it was believed that to adopt the new democratic and liberal principles was enough. Today, after almost two centuries of setbacks, we have realized that countries change very slowly, and that if such changes are to be fruitful they must be in harmony with the past and the traditions of each nation. And so Mexico has to find its own road to modernity. Our past must not be an obstacle but a starting point. This is extremely difficult, given the nature of our traditions—difficult but not impossible. To avoid new disasters, we Mexicans must reconcile ourselves with our past: only in this way shall we succeed in finding a route to modernity. The search for our own model of modernization is a theme directly linked with another: today we know that modernity, both the capitalist and the pseudo-socialist versions of the totalitarian bureaucracies, is mortally wounded in its very core—the idea of continuous, unlimited progress. The nations that inspired our nineteenth-century liberals—England, France, and especially the United States—are doubting, vacillating, and cannot find their way. They have ceased to be universal examples. The Mexicans of the nineteenth century turned their eyes toward the great Western democracies; we have nowhere to turn ours.

Between 1930 and 1960, most Mexicans were sure of the path they had chosen. This certainty has vanished, and some people ask themselves if it is not necessary to begin all over again. But the question is not relevant only for Mexico; it is universal. However unsatisfactory our country's situation may seem to us, it is not desperate—especially compared with what prevails elsewhere. Latin America, with only a few exceptions, lives under military dictatorships that are pampered and often supported by the United States. Cuba escaped American domination only to become a pawn of the Soviet Union's policy in Africa. A large number of the Asian and African nations that gained their independence after the Second World War are victims of native tyrannies often more cruel and despotic than those of the old colonial powers. In the so-called Third World, with different names and attributes, a ubiquitous Caligula reigns.

In 1917, the October Revolution in Russia kindled the hopes of millions; in 1979, the word "Gulag" has become synonymous with

Soviet socialism. The founders of the socialist movement firmly believed that socialism would put an end not only to the exploitation of men but to war; in the second half of the twentieth century, totalitarian "socialisms" have enslaved the working class by stripping it of its basic rights and have also covered the whole planet with the threatening uproar of their disputes and quarrels. In the name of different versions of "socialism," Vietnamese and Cambodians butcher each other. The ideological wars of the twentieth century are no less ferocious than the wars of religion of the seventeenth century. When I was young, the idea that we were witnessing the final crisis of capitalism was fashionable among intellectuals. Now we understand that the crisis is not of a socioeconomic system but of our whole civilization. It is a general, worldwide crisis, and its most extreme, acute, and dangerous expression is found in the situation of the Soviet Union and its satellites. The contradictions of totalitarian "socialism" are more profound and irreconcilable than those of the capitalist democracies.

The sickness of the West is moral rather than social and economic. It is true that the economic problems are serious and that they have not been solved. Inflation and unemployment are on the rise. Poverty has not disappeared, despite affluence. Several groups—women and racial, religious, and linguistic minorities—still are or feel excluded. But the real, most profound discord lies in the soul. The future has become the realm of horror, and the present has turned into a desert. The liberal societies spin tirelessly, not forward but round and round. If they change, they are not transfigured. The hedonism of the West is the other face of desperation; its skepticism is not wisdom but renunciation; its nihilism ends in suicide and in inferior forms of credulity, such as political fanaticisms and magical chimeras. The empty place left by Christianity in the modern soul is filled not by philosophy but by the crudest superstitions. Our eroticism is a technique, not an art or a passion.

I will not continue. The evils of the West have been described often enough, most recently by Solzhenitsyn, a man of admirable character. However, although his description seems to me accurate, his judgment of the causes of the sickness does not, nor does the remedy he proposes. We cannot renounce the critical tradition of the West; nor can we return to the medieval theocratic state. Dungeons of the Inquisition are not an answer to the Gulag camps. It is not worthwhile substituting the church-state for the party-state, one orthodoxy for another. The only effective arm against orthodoxies is criticism, and in order to defend ourselves against the vices of intolerance and fanaticism our only recourse is the exercise of the opposing virtues: toler-

ance and freedom of spirit. I do not disown Montesquieu, Hume, Kant.

The crisis of the United States affects the very foundation of the nation, by which I mean the principles that founded it. I have already said that there is a *leitmotiv* running throughout American history, from the Puritan colonies of New England to the present day; namely, the tension between freedom and equality. The struggles of the blacks, the Chicanos, and other minorities are an expression of the dualism. An external contradiction corresponds to this internal contradiction: the United States is a republic and an empire. In Rome, the first of these contradictions (the internal one between freedom and equality) was resolved by the suppression of freedom; Caesar's regime began as an egalitarian solution, but, like all solutions by force, it ended in the suppression of equality also. The second, external contradiction brought about the ruin of Athens, the first imperial republic in history.

It would be presumptuous of me to propose solutions to this double contradiction. I think that every time a society finds itself in crisis it instinctively turns its eyes toward its origins and looks there for a sign. Colonial American society was a free, egalitarian, but exclusive society. Faithful to its origins, in its domestic and foreign policies alike the United States has always ignored the "others." Today, the United States faces very powerful enemies, but the mortal danger comes from within: not from Moscow but from that mixture of arrogance and opportunism, blindness and short-term Machiavellianism, volubility and stubbornness which has characterized its foreign policies during recent years and which reminds us in an odd way of the Athenian state in its quarrel with Sparta. To conquer its enemies, the United States must first conquer itself—return to its origins. Not to repeat them but to rectify them: the "others"—the minorities inside as well as the marginal countries and nations outside—do exist. Not only do we "others" make up the majority of the human race but also each marginal society, poor though it may be, represents a unique and precious version of mankind. If the United States is to recover fortitude and lucidity, it must recover itself, and to recover itself it must recover the "others"—the outcasts of the Western world.