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## Notes on Modernity and Postmodernity in Latin American Culture

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**S**tarting from the vantage point of the contemporary debate about modernity, I want to discuss here some problems of Latin American culture in relation to its future.

### The Ambiguous Status of Cultural Questions

I first need to explain, however, why one should be interested in such a discussion anyway. Seized as we are by the great themes of the moment—the foreign debt and the economic crisis, unemployment and the difficulties of industrialization, the Central American conflict, and the processes of redemocratization—what capacity of attraction can cultural problems have, especially if these, as is frequently the case, tend to overflow the usual categories at hand? To speak meaningfully of culture requires that we refer to collective representations, beliefs, cognitive styles, the communication of symbols, language games, the sedimentation of traditions, and so on, and not only to the quantifiable aspects of culture: namely, to the movements of the market of cultural goods.

The Latin American social sciences have only marginally preoccupied themselves with these cultural problems, perhaps because their study does not fall high enough on the ladder of academic prestige or because they do not lend themselves easily to the prevailing methodologies. Cul-

ture, as such, still appears to us as a supplement, identified, according to an old aristocratic conception, with the fine arts, with the Sunday editions of the great urban newspapers, and with the conspicuous consumption of art works and symbols invested with an aura of prestige.

This “cultured” vision of culture, otherwise absurd in an age of the primacy of the forms and contents of mass culture, of the media and the culture industry, is also sometimes a symptom of denial produced by a deeper, and typically modern, tendency: the predominance of the interests, including cognitive, of instrumental reason over the values of communicative rationality; the separation of a technical sphere of progress that includes the economy, science, and material conditions of daily life from the sphere of intersubjectively elaborated and communicated meanings, those found indissolubly anchored in a life-world where traditions, desires, beliefs, ideals, and values coexist and are expressed precisely in culture.

This reactive negation leads easily to the extreme of affirming that culture, as a symbolic domain, is incomprehensible for analytic reason and that only an empathetic approach suits it—an affirmation that leaves a considerable part of the social sciences out of the game and encloses the debate about the cultural universe in a new esotericism, this time made up of intuitions, mysteries, and, in the best of circumstances, poetry.

The attempt to conduct our own exploration within a relatively known, and shared, frame of reference, such as modernity, has as its purpose to avoid the double danger of, on the one hand, a purely functionalist vision of culture—obstacle or promoter of modernity?—and, on the other, an esoteric vision of culture, one that resists thought and cannot be thought.

## The Problems of Modern Rationality

As a point of departure, I will begin with the report of the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), “Crisis and Development: The Present and Future of Latin America and the Caribbean” (1985). In this document, the cultural dimension of our problems, of crisis as well as of development, and of our time, present and future, is barely touched on. The most profound and vital issues of culture are not mentioned; nor are the more directly sociological, economic, and political issues that make up the organization of culture.

Instead, the report adopts the traditional behaviorist idea that culture needs to adapt itself to modernity and to produce the motivations and at-

itudes required for the optimum performance of modern systems of production, reproduction, and social rule. All this, moreover, in the context of a relatively ingenuous concept of modernity and modernization that precisely ignores the contemporary debate over these topics. Thus, the report declares: “The process of modernization is a contemporary mode of social change, of general validity, that is extended to the entire planet. It supposes a self-sustained economic growth, the total availability of social resources, the diffusion of the rational and secular norms of culture, the freedom and growth of social mobility, and the corresponding attitudinal transformations” (1985, 5).

Later, the report adds, in a similarly behaviorist vein:

In order to have modernization it is necessary that there come into play mechanisms of empathy that incorporate values, models of behavior, and aspirations originating from the most dynamic centers of civilization and that can shape demands. Nevertheless, institutions cannot be moved, they must be transformed; life-styles cannot be changed by the free functioning of the “demonstration effect”; they must be creatively adapted so that they do not cause disturbances. The capacity of adaptation is perhaps the distinctive feature of modern societies. If modernization, because of its empathetic essence, responds to exogenous influences, our societies need to internalize it with regard to their specific histories, indigenous resources, and possibilities, through the development and free exercise of creativity. It is clear, on the other hand, that adaptive and self-sustained technological development constitutes a central component of modernization, even though the latter goes beyond it as a total social process. (1985, 6)

The CEPAL formulation is typically eclectic and limits itself to glossing over the problems of cultural adaptation that it poses. Nevertheless, it allows us to make out the questions it avoids: for example, the conflict between *formal rationality* (based on the calculability provided by the market) and *substantive rationality* (directed by values and goals). Thus, the report sustains that modernization supposes the “internalization of rational norms” but immediately adds that in order for such an internalized rationality to constitute an “integrating and stabilizing force,” not destructive of those minimal prescriptive nuclei required by integration, it should “incorporate the criteria which permit it to elaborate the conflicts between growth and equity, present affluence and accumulation, social demands and the limits of expansion of supply, present and future comparative advantages.” Where do these criteria come from and how are

they made compatible with other criteria (of formal rationality) that are imposed by the functioning of the market? The rationality that the CEPAL document speaks about is not the same as the one, according to Max Weber, that is at the foundation of the processes of modernization, but rather is one that “makes implicit a comprehensive concept of efficiency in the administration of resources and opportunities,” according to the CEPAL report.

Creativity, not as a function of the market or as the incessant revolutionizing of the means of production and all social relations that Karl Marx attributed to the bourgeoisie, but as an individually or socially acquired attribute, becomes the centerpiece of this model. The CEPAL report goes so far as to speak of *creative modernization* as “the stylization of a political process of the search for social efficiency,” especially necessary in the conditions of crisis and profound transformations that affect the region. It is important, therefore, to ask about the sociological conditions of this creativity.

In modernity, one of the principles of creativity, the liberation of energies that transformed culture, was, as Jürgen Habermas demonstrates (1983), the separation of the spheres of science, morality, and art from the field of religious and metaphysical justifications and their conversion to esoteric domains of experts, a process that resulted in the penetration of these spheres by economic and administrative rationality, a rationality completely distinct from that which rules the transmission and reproduction of values and norms. Does the path of modernization in Latin America pass through these same forms of the rationalization of culture that have already proven to be efficient in the liberation of creativity? If it does, how can such a strategy be made compatible with the declared objective of maintaining the sought-after rationalism within a frame of values and goals that point to integration, “social efficiency,” justice, and solidarity? And what does it mean, in the Latin American context, to “adapt” models of behavior and aspirations capable of shaping demands from the most advanced capitalist centers, and, at the same time, to do this “creatively,” according to our “specific histories, indigenous resources, and possibilities”? If demand is not culturally autonomous—how could it be in a universe of an international market of messages and goods—can the supply of creativity and products be managed locally, and, furthermore, can it be anchored in the traditions and beliefs of the internal culture?

At heart, the CEPAL document assumes a noncontradictory conception of modernity in its supposition of an uncomplicated and “creative”

access to what it calls the “rational and secular norms of culture.” Of what culture? We know that neoconservatives stigmatize “irrationalist” tendencies in Western culture, inasmuch as these can no longer provide the values and motivations required by the economy; and that progressives, in the fashion of Habermas, denounce the contradictions between a technical-instrumental rationality, which permeates all of social life, and a communicative rationality, which is seen as interrupted by the first in a way that provokes a replacement of meanings by consumer goods. To whom do we appeal, then, to obtain the cultural rationalism that is made to appear as a presupposition of the advance of modernization? Or, is this proposal, in its cultural implications, nothing more than an ideological “bargain,” another of the many that Latin American intellectuals and technocrats have produced in recent years in their eagerness to appropriate a modernity that does not adapt itself to their models and forecasts?

The question at hand involves, perhaps, a double misunderstanding. First, about the nature of rationality itself. What, exactly, does the CEPAL report mean when it stipulates a rational and secular culture as the foundation of the processes of modernization? The rationality of the market, for example, is very different from the rationality of politics, and both differ, in turn, from technobureaucratic rationality. In each case it is a matter of personified rationalities, institutionally mediated, tied to interests that habitually interact in a conflictive manner. In culture, these rationalities imprint cognitive styles, define values, introduce habits, and stimulate varied personality structures. Therefore, there are no “rational norms” that can be so outside of their context: the laboratory, the competitive market, the noncompetitive market, the state, the parties, et cetera. A complex culture accepts, out of necessity, these various types and forms of rationality that, according to one’s adopted point of view, can also be stigmatized as irrational.

The second misunderstanding has to do with the acquisition of these rationalities. The CEPAL document emphasizes an adaptation and internalization of norms that would come initially “from outside” but, once appropriated, would form rationally oriented values, motivations, and behaviors. How will this process of transference and acquisition of rationality happen? It is easiest to imagine the process as taking place through modes of collective learning based on life experiences that condition this learning: the market, education, the multiple bureaucratic or quasi-bureaucratic structures of civil society, corporations, and unions, et cetera. But it is precisely these situations of learning, of existing, that

will socialize individuals and groups in contextually conditioned and, therefore, by necessity, diversely situated “rationalisms.”

In other words, there does not seem to be anything like a homogeneously rationalized culture.

### Cultural Heterogeneity

As we understand it, Octavio Paz’s critique of modernity points precisely to this *voluntarism of the ideologies* of modernism and modernization in Latin America (1974, 148–64). And Paz is not the only one who has made this point; its antecedents can be traced far back in the history of Latin American thought. What, then, is expressed by the relative malaise with modernity that recurs in the region with almost the same frequency and force with which new modernizing projects are launched? We can answer this in the following way: What produces the malaise is the periodic conflict of those forms of modernization whose supposition is invariably the adoption and extension of rational models of conduct with what, for lack of a better term, we may call the *cultural heterogeneity* of Latin America.

This is not the same thing as supposing that our societies are formed by a superimposition of historical, cultural entities in the manner of geological layers that slide on top of each other, every once in a while producing breaks and great telluric upheavals. It may be that some compelling images in Latin American literature still function within this logic, habitually departing from the even more basic opposition between nature and culture. In this sense, the whole cycle of Pablo Neruda’s poetry represents better than any analysis the drama of a culture that seeks to entreat nature on its own behalf, making it participate in the loves and sorrows of individuals and peoples at the same time that it reflects as culture a superimposition of histories that have not arrived at a complete synthesis.

The notion of cultural heterogeneity refers us instead to a kind of regional postmodernism *avant la lettre* that, nevertheless, is fully constitutive of our modernity. Carlos Monsiváis, in a prose collage, has insightfully captured this:

Cable television. Superhero comics. Quick and poorly translated humor. An infinity of products which satiate, invent, and modify necessities. Television programs whose weekly apotheosis is nourished by the victories of the North American system of justice. Books (best-sellers) where the mechanics of success program the imagination and writing. Extremely refined technologies. Videocassettes. Satellite communication. The ideology of MacLuhan’s global village. Video-

discs. Strategies of consumption whose implacable logistics destroy all artisanal perspective. The “philosophy” of the biggest seller in the world. Movies which have globally imposed the rhythm, themes, and point of view of North American industry. Software and hardware. International news agencies. Contempt for the history of each nation. Homogenization of “desirable” life-styles. The imposition of a global language. A circuit of ideological transmission which goes from publicity to pedagogy. Control of the “computer revolution.” Magazines which distribute “femininity.” The periodic reordering of the life-styles adjustable to technological changes. (1983, 75)

The cultural heterogeneity reflected in this collage, in the “postmodernist” grafts and allegories of our modernity, is, like this modernity itself, a product of the international market. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, our identities no longer appear as such but rather as sectors of the international market, especially in the area of culture. There subsist infinite local cultural exchanges that form the framework of our daily life, that mass of more or less direct interactions in which customs, use values, images, and beliefs accumulate. But through and above this framework—can we still call it national?—flow and are articulated messages and institutions and circuits fully incorporated into a modernity whose heart is far from the heart of “our” culture.

Cultural heterogeneity, therefore, refers to a double phenomenon: (1) of segmentation and segmented participation in this global market of messages and symbols whose underlying grammar is North American hegemony over the imaginary of a great part of humanity (I will return to this point); (2) of differential participation according to *local codes of reception*, group and individual, in the incessant movement of the circuits of transmission that extend from advertising to pedagogy. What results from this double and explosive, segmented and differential participation is something similar to what is proclaimed by certain representatives of postmodernism: a de-centering, a deconstruction, of Western culture as it is represented by the manuals; of its rationalism, its secularism, its key institutions; of the cognitive habits and styles it supposedly imposes in a uniform way—something that resembles Monsiváis’s collage; something that “generates meaning,” but a meaning out of place, taken out of context, a graft onto another culture.

Cultural heterogeneity thus means something very different than diverse cultures (subcultures) of ethnicities, classes, groups, or regions, or than the mere superimposition of cultures, whether or not these cultures have found a way of synthesizing themselves. It means, specifically, a

segmented and differential participation in an international market of messages that “penetrates” the local framework of culture on all sides and in unexpected ways, leading to an implosion of the consumed/produced/reproduced meanings and subsequent deficiencies of identity, yearnings for identification, confusion of temporal horizons, paralysis of the creative imagination, loss of utopias, atomization of local memory, and obsolescence of traditions. Thus, Monsiváis concludes, “Its values substituted . . . by others which basically modernize appearances and take advantage (for the market) of the innovations of the age, a collectivity can no longer manage to confront its experiences or verify its legitimate goals” (1983, 76).

### A Multiplicity of Logics

What precise, specific meaning can the invocation of rationalism in culture and society have, then, in this “postmodernism” that characterizes Latin American modernity? Modernity cannot be read, in the fashion of Marshall Berman, as a singular collective experience of the modern, nor as variations of that same experience that in the long run tend to converge. If we were to proceed that way, we would have done no more than to transpose the conception of modernization through stages to the conception of our modernity.

What seems more reasonable is to imagine modernity as a trunk from which numerous branches and sub-branches extend in the most varied directions. In the case of Latin America, as we noted, the motor of modernity, the international market, provokes and then reinforces an incessant movement of heterogenization of culture, employing, stimulating, and reproducing a plurality of logics that act simultaneously, becoming interwoven. Logics that, from a Eurocentric and Enlightenment point of view, we could properly call modern, such as those of secularization, formal rationality, bureaucratization, individualization, futurism, alienation, et cetera. Logics of the collective imaginary, at the same time shaped by a local historical memory (which is itself sometimes varied and contradictory) and by the seductions of the mass media, as occurs with the *telenovela*. Logics of identification based on economic, social, and cultural positions; social logics of differentiation in a world where consumption distributes, at the same time, signs of status; sacrificial logics of giving, expenditure, and fiestas, which, by themselves, do not manage to resist the commercializing force of the market; political logics of articulation and mobilization, which are not immune to the internationalization of militancies; renewable modern logics of terror and fear



in a universe of the disappeared, torture, state and private terrorism, and of the marks left on society by repression.

For this reason, proposals for modernization, whether traditional or new, that do not assume as a central fact of their “efficient” operation this cultural heterogeneity in which they are called upon to materialize themselves condemn themselves to remain on the terrain of ideological voluntarism.

### Endogenous Creativity

We consider it a sign of the times that global proposals, in the manner of great laboratory tests that claim to design, on the basis of totalizing rationality, the modernization of this or that society, are not in favor, at the moment, in Latin America. On the other hand, more modest proposals for the local or partial rationalization of society are being introduced into the debate, such as CEPAL’s strategy for the formation of “endogenous nuclei of technological dynamization.” The CEPAL report notes apropos the future of Latin America:

One starts from the premise that creativity is a complex process in which a wide range of agents and motivations participate: large industrial plants tied to small and medium ones, institutes of technology, institutes of basic science, the organisms which prepare qualified personnel at the different levels, the mass media, and the central state ministries and organisms which define policies and norms. . . . The interaction between these agents and their motivations is decisive for the process of creativity. (1985, 72)

This is a strategy of local rationalization that contains elements of the state and the market, of endogenous creativity, and of the appropriation of external dynamics; that supposes complex interactions between the economy, politics, the administration, and culture; that valorizes, by overlapping them, both instrumental efficiency and communicative rationality. More than the design of a modern society, or even of its economy, it is the outline of a system of relations wherein creativity encounters sociological conditions of operation.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the institutions of culture, the means of communication, institutes of training and centers of formation, research laboratories, universities, and so on, are in a condition to be incorporated into an enterprise of this sort (with an “inward” orientation, so to speak), when for a long time they have danced to the rhythm of the requirements of their differential integration into international

markets. For example, universities in Latin America have been, more than anything else, enterprises of intellectual criticism, of professional certification and social mobility, leaving their participation in *enterprises of accumulation* to the mediation of complex international circuits. Their function has consisted of growing, in a sense, *against* the market, preserving at the same time, where possible, their independence from the state, under the supposition that only as such could they aspire to be the “conscience of the nation.” Their politicization, not at all surprising under these circumstances, reflects a typically antimodern feature of Latin American modernity: a low level of autonomy, in general, of culture and of its institutional sphere, and, in particular, of the sciences, which runs parallel to a high degree of autonomy of politics and ideological creation.

The “new” proposals of development, which attempt to escape the globalism of certain previous designs and which insist on local rationalizations of “nuclei” that combine institutional segments of the economy, the administration, and culture, seem to better understand the fragmentary conditions of regional modernity; but at the same time, they can find themselves involved in the heterogeneity of culture and in the sometimes perverse effects that this provokes in the development of local cultural institutions.

### The Social Uses of Religion

In a very different register, we know that some authors have posited a supposed tension between modernization and the “Catholic substratum” of Latin American culture. In reality, the problem proves to be more complex.

In the midst of the cultural heterogeneity that is the salient feature of our regional modernity, this religious “substratum” fulfills a variety of functions, only one of which corresponds to the supposed delegitimization of a modern work ethic. Moreover, it has already been shown that in very few parts of the developed world does the (puritan) work ethic play a key role any longer in individual motivation and performance. Everywhere, even in socialist regimes, there is an *uncoupling* of ethics and performance, and the market itself increasingly conditions directly economic behavior and performance.

On the other hand, the “Catholic substratum” continues to operate, in many parts of Latin America, as a symbolic foundation for popular religious practices and, what is more interesting, renews the exhausted deposit of symbols and desires capable of mobilizing radical (revolution-

ary) behaviors on the social and political plane. In many societies of the continent, a prophetic, testimonial, and revolutionary current is nourished by religion, around which are continually renewed ties of solidarity, seeds of communal life, and the principle of rebellion against the established order. The struggle in Nicaragua between the Catholic hierarchy and the “popular church” over the control of this deposit of revolutionary/counter-revolutionary legitimizations, for example, precisely emphasizes the discussion of the “uses” of this “Catholic substratum,” whose importance is increasingly political, ideological, and cultural more than economic or (work) ethical.

The proposal of Puebla to evangelize Latin American culture partially recognizes this situation, but it supposes, at the same time, that the cultural heterogeneity of the region can be overcome through the elaboration of a new synthesis, wherein the dimensions of the modern could recuperate a sense of the sacred and the transcendental via a recoupling with a Christian ethic capable of interrupting the process of functionalization and “degradation” of secularized values. The proposal of Puebla imagines the “gestation of a new civilization” that, beyond modernity, “integrates the values which it has contributed but in the frame of (this) new civilization” (CELAM 1978).

Seen from the perspective of the question of modernity and modernization on the continent by the year 2000, what progress, new opening, or “solution” does this attempt to “rebaptize” Latin American culture in Catholic religious terms offer? Neoconservative proposals, following Daniel Bell’s argument in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, situate the religious question in the center of developed societies in terms of a diagnosis of the contradictions that have arisen between economy and culture in late capitalism, whereas Latin American neo-Catholic proposals, such as Morandé’s (1984), still seem to reflect the classic struggle between traditionalism and modernism, secularism and religion, positivism and Catholicism. Is there not entailed here, perhaps, under the educated guise of civil tolerance, a total rejection of modernity, of its inherent dynamics and values? Is there not the risk of a new “totalizing” proposal that, precisely by ignoring the radical fact of Latin American cultural heterogeneity, seeks to base itself on religion in order to establish a cultural continuity torn to pieces long ago? And what can this proposal imply in the area of development, the economy, the new political system, the emancipation of private life, the generation of a mass culture based on the cultural industry, and the currently accepted principles of social integration and control?

## Societies without Consensus

Nevertheless, as we have had the opportunity to see, the question of modern secularism is not an issue that only concerns the church or a few Catholic intellectuals. It is internationally related to various currents of neoconservatism and, in Latin America, to the not at all marginal concerns of sociologists such as Gino Germani. Even among figures originating from Marxism, such as Leszek Kolakowsky, the modern “disenchantment” of the world and the subsequent “demolition” of taboos constitute the neurological point of any critical philosophy of modernity.

We find ourselves confronted here with a reactive sensibility to modernity that is widely disseminated and that, in different forms, gives rise to a critique of cultural modernism involving a range of issues, from the loss of values, the renunciation of ethics in social relations, and the erosion of national identities to the destruction of artistic canons.

As Habermas has pointed out, however, this critique is surely misguided, since it is not possible to impute to culture, and to the professionalized agents of culture, intellectuals, the effects of a secularism that has resulted from the more or less successful development of capitalism in the economy and society. The problem, in reality, is better formulated by Germani when he wonders whether, on the basis of the new conditions created in the economy and society, once their repercussions in the cultural sphere are known (i.e., secularism), it is still possible to guarantee the minimum of consensus and integration required by the functioning of democratic governments. The alternative, according to Germani, are the modern authoritarianisms, namely, regimes that impose through force a total resocialization of the population, integrating each individual into a militarized culture.

Clearly, the underlying hypothesis is that societies cannot function, indeed run the risk of disappearing altogether, without this minimum of consensus, “an agreement over foundations,” as Laski put it in a phrase Germani likes to quote. Thus: “It is not surprising that the philosophy of history usually locates the beginning of the decadence of the great civilizations precisely in the phases of acute secularization, even if the latter is limited to the elite. Toynbee, Spengler, Sorokin, and others give clear examples of this theoretical orientation” (Germani et al. 1985, 31).

It is not our interest to explore the philosophical-historical implications of this thesis but rather to take up its sociological nucleus in the light of what we have said. In this sense, Germani’s thesis is clear: Modernity generates serious problems of normative integration that weaken

or make impossible democratic governments, leading to catastrophic solutions in the guise of authoritarian regimes of total resocialization. Modernization reduces the validity of certain traditional forms of social integration and, by pushing toward an ever-increasing secularization of culture, reduces the bases of the traditional “prescriptive nucleus,” weakening the old forms of legitimization based on religious beliefs. This does not mean, however, that modernization does not generate its own forms of integration, over a full range of positions from “moral” to “organic” solidarity.

The question, especially in Latin America, is whether the cultural heterogeneity constitutive of its own specific modernity, in which a motley collection of traditional and new forms of normative prescription are mixed, still makes possible the functioning of social systems in an increasingly secularized world. This question refers us in turn, at a higher level of abstraction, to the question of the necessary degree of consensus and normative integration social systems need in order to function. If one were to go by the specialist literature on this issue, it would appear no system of society should be able to function in Latin America, so scarce are the principles of integration and agreement over foundations in the region. One could argue that precisely because of this, these societies resort with relative frequency to authoritarian regimes in order to secure their government, although not their integration.

On the other hand, it would seem possible, indeed almost obligatory, to argue that, in spite of everything, the kind of societies we have characterized by a high degree of cultural heterogeneity actually do maintain and reproduce a sufficient degree of integration, but on the basis of local and partial forms of consensus that involve only limited and differentiated areas of society. Authoritarianism would, in this perspective, be a form of “governing,” of controlling this plurality of forms of consensus whenever they tend to align themselves in a catastrophic manner, polarizing society.

Such a perspective might allow us to consider our societies as societies without the need for a basic consensus, without an agreement over foundations, with scarce possibility (and necessity) of conceiving themselves as “totalities”; as societies that, more than consensus, need to organize conflict and give rise to agreements of interests; as societies that, more than recuperating a political system legitimized by a nucleus of values, need to construct and live with a necessarily unstable one, which reflects agreements over the rules of government capable of inspiring mutual respect and of avoiding the war of each against all.

## Political Disenchantment

The other aspect of Germani's thesis, according to which a constant erosion of the minimum prescriptive nucleus required for social integration makes democracies vulnerable, also needs to be discussed in relation to the political future of Latin America. As Norbert Lechner has recently stated (1995), the threat of the dissolution and atomization of the social order brought on by modernization (secularism and marginalization) caused and exacerbated an "ideological inflation" in the Latin America of the sixties, favoring revolution as the means of national liberation, social integration, and economic development, as opposed to what was seen as capitalist "development of underdevelopment." The revolutionary proposal implied, as Lechner demonstrates, a messianic and fundamentalist style of doing politics, which carried within itself a germ of antiseccularism in culture. By contrast, in the present climate of democratic recovery, the opposite tendency finds itself reinforced, namely, the reappraisal of secularism in culture. In opposition to what Germani sustains, Lechner suggests that secularism can be beneficial for democratic recovery in the region, relieving politics of ethical-religious compromises, disseminating values of civil tolerance, and producing a certain spirit of negotiation, a "cooling-off" of values, motivations, and affects. A new kind of realism, one that values, in Lechner's words, "the institutions and procedures, or in other words . . . the forms of doing politics over its material contents," would point in this same direction.

What is suggested here is the possibility of a profane, "disenchanted" notion of politics that restricts it to specific areas, taking away its omnipotence and freeing it from its anchorage in absolute principles in order to make it more flexible and adjustable to immediate challenges. Such a concept resonates with certain tendencies, themes, and attitudes of postmodernism, as Lechner makes clear: In both, there is a criticism of the idea of complete subjects, an abandonment of the "master narratives," a conversion of time into a continuous present, a reduction of politics to an exchange of material and symbolic goods. The risk involved for Lechner, however, is that this postmodern movement of contemporary politics in Latin America may abandon the notion that society can construct itself in a deliberate manner and that the reduction of politics to a "political market" may exclude interests and goods that cannot be exchanged in the market: human rights, roots, the sense of belonging, the desire for certainty, the need for transcendental referents. Secularism then presents itself ambiguously: It reinforces tendencies that seem necessary, or at least inevitable, in the present phase of the recuperation and consolidation of

democracies; but, at the same time, it generates a *deficit* of meaning, motivations, and collective construction of the social order that would impede the elaboration of a democratic culture.

These postmodern features of political culture in Latin America should be included, as I noted before, less in the context of a critique of modernity than as a consequence of the regional form of our modernity, which has tended precisely in the direction of a secularization of the area of power. The “disenchantment” of and with power in Latin America necessarily passes through a dis-dramatization of power: a reduction of its symbolic-expressive aspects and an increase in the instrumental capacities of its gestation; a loss of ideological aura in favor of the practical interests of actors, which are lost and found in the political market; in short, a greater autonomy of politics because of its differentiation and specialization. This means, of course, that politics no longer aspires to construct social identities, reserving for itself the colder terrain of changing political loyalties; that it loses its character as a “movement” in order to be reduced to “parties” that are “organization and program” but not an existential community nor an ideological-transcendental vanguard of society; that it no longer provides references of certainty nor commitments to principles, limiting itself to processing the uncertainties within a game of stipulated rules; that it retreats from the commanding heights of revolution or restoration in order to assume, in a disenchanted world and in a reality without too many illusions, the sphere of the administration of scarce means, of the negotiation between forces in conflict, of the persuasion of a public of citizens who do or do not vote.

### The National as a Revolutionary Force

There is, logically and historically, an alternative to Germani’s thesis about the catastrophic and authoritarian outcomes of the states of disintegration caused by the process of secularization: that of a “national-popular” revolutionary articulation tied to divergent projects of socialization and integration capable of being politically and institutionally expressed. In situations of extensive cultural heterogeneity, the very notion of *national collectivity* finds itself questioned and permanently put into tension, since there exists a latent conflict between diverse proposals of national integration. Each of these proposals resorts, for its legitimization, to a different interpretation of the national past; each mobilizes a distinct constellation of national symbols; each imagines the international insertion of the country in a different way; and each is based, in the last instance, on insufficiently secularized principles of the construction of the

nation. These proposals can be mobilized indiscriminately by political parties, the armed forces, intellectual elites, leadership groups in civil society, armed revolutionary groups, charismatic leaders, and churches or sects. In each case, it is a matter of barely secularized, exclusive, and totalizing proposals. Each contains, for that very reason, a project for the socialization and resocialization of the population, under the hegemonic control of a class, group, leader, or belief.

Faced with the reality of a “disintegrated” nation, devoid of a basic or minimal consensus, permeated by the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts caused by its heterogeneity, this kind of nonsecular, quasi-religious proposal, which appeals to total commitment and mobilizes around transcendental values and goals, or around a leader who embodies these, can prove to be very powerful. These proposals habitually offer the project of a national modernization tied to a nucleus of values (the nation, the class, past splendor, liberation) that offers the minimum prescriptive nucleus around which to organize the processes of resocialization and the ceremonies and rites of integration.

As in the case we looked at earlier of the neo-Catholic proposal for Latin America’s future, these are antiseccular projects in the field of culture that take advantage of the diffuse, but at times extensive, criticism of modernity, of its overrationalism, its ethical pluralism, its individualism, its alienation and cultural imperialism, et cetera. Perhaps for this reason, revolutions in Latin America routinely happen in a national context: They are national-popular—national-liberation, national-security, or national-development—movements. Symbols of the *national* cover a wide range of political and strategic options, but in the end, they all seek the same thing: to overcome the cultural heterogeneity constitutive of society and its “internationalist” dynamic; to curb the effects of secularism; to cancel the forms, formalities, and “games” of democracy; and to reestablish a governing principle of integration through which the majority can be resocialized.

## A Peripheral Modernity

One of the threads that runs through the debates about modernity and postmodernity in Latin America (but not only there, as we will see), is that of the changing poles of the modernization of the world, and of the differentiated modes of participation in modernity. Fernand Braudel studied this matter, starting from the dynamics of capitalism in the production of the modern world-system, what he called the development of a “world-economy.” He found that since the fourteenth century, a con-



tinuous “partition of the world” into concentric zones, “increasingly disfavored inasmuch as one moves away from their triumphant center,” can be observed. The “long durations” are precisely processes of the centering, de-centering, and re-centering of the world-economy:

The splendor, the wealth, and happiness of life are united in the center of the world-economy, in its very nucleus. That is where the sun of history gives brilliance to the most vivid colors; that is where are manifested high prices, high salaries, banking, “royal” manufactures, profitable industries, and capitalist agriculture; that is where the point of departure and arrival of the extensive foreign trade is situated, along with a superabundance of precious metals, of solid coins, and of titles of credit. All advanced economic modernity is concentrated in this nucleus: the traveler realizes this when he contemplates Venice in the fifteenth century, or Amsterdam in the seventeenth, or London in the eighteenth, or New York in the present. (1985, 102–3)

Farther out, in the circle of intermediate countries, which are “neighbors, competitors, or emulators of the center,” this modernity, this level of life, decreases, and the dynamics are no longer the same as those of the center. Finally, in the marginal and dependent zones, geographically far removed from the center, “the life of men evokes purgatory, when not hell.” Their subordinated integration into the division of labor and their segmented participation in the international market drags them in the wake of a modernity that only benefits them contradictorily, that penetrates them from all sides, causing unexpected, and sometimes perverse, effects, creating and multiplying the heterogeneity that ends up being their characteristic condition of life and the barely perceptible sign of their identity. Recall Monsiváis’s collage.

In the world-economy of contemporary capitalism, “North Americanization” appears as a feature inseparable from modernity. From there come the impulses of modernism; there will end up the modernists and modernisms that happen to originate in the periphery. To oppose this reality with a nationalism tied to traditions and values from the past, to a notion of national identity prior to any cultural contamination is, to say it in Monsiváis’s own words, to declare that the resistance to cultural penetration finds itself defeated in advance” (1983, 76).

The question is, however, whether it is still meaningful to speak of cultural penetration in any case, since there is no doubt that in the present configuration of the capitalist world-economy, the center retains, in addition to the control over economic and military dynamics, a conclusive cultural hegemony. The “intermediate” countries, according to

Braudel's nomenclature, see it this way. Jean Baudrillard, referring to the relation of Europe to America, has said: "It is not only a question of a disjuncture, it is an abyss of modernity which separates us." Or again: "The United States is a realized utopia" (1985).

We have been accustomed to think the cultural problem in Latin America within the parameters of dependency theory. Cultural penetration? Dependent culture? What we observe, rather, is that modernity, as a differentiated experience in the capitalist world, has a center, which radiates a zone of marginal and dependent peripheries where this same modernity creates and re-creates a cultural heterogeneity, which, in turn, in all of its fragments, breaks, folds, collages, and displacements continues to be tied to the hegemonic center. The very identity of these peripheral zones is partially constructed with the image of this other, in the same way that its culture is elaborated with fragments of this other culture. In all fields of culture—science, technology, art, utopias—the important modern cultural syntheses are first produced in the North and descend later to us, via a process in which they are "received" and appropriated according to local codes of reception. This is how it has happened with sociology, pop art, rock music, film, data processing, models of the university, neoliberalism, the most recent medicines, armaments, and, in the long run, with our very incorporation into modernity.

## Conclusions

It should be clear that these notes have no way of concluding. It is rather a question of initiating a reflection whose larger coordinates are the ongoing debate about modernity, modernism, and modernization. At a time when a confusing fog of "posts"—postmodernism, postpolitics, posthistory, postvanguard—hovers over modernity, it becomes necessary to recover the specific character of modernization in Latin America. Here, among ourselves, the malaise in culture does not, could not, spring from the exhaustion of modernity. On the contrary, it arises from an exasperation with modernity, with its infinitely ambiguous effects, with its inevitable intentionalism, with its distortions, and with the problems that it bequeaths for the future of the region, some of which I have briefly discussed.

Condemned to live in a world where all the images of modernity and modernism come to us from the outside and become obsolete before we are able to materialize them, we find ourselves trapped in a world where not all solid things but rather all symbols melt into air. Latin America: the project of echoes and fragments, of past utopias whose present we

can only perceive as a continuous crisis. This sensation of the permanent crisis of everything, of the economy, institutions, political regimes, universities, art, public services, private enterprise, the armed forces, poorly and barely hides the fact that we live and think in the middle of a modernity in the process of construction, whose dynamic is increasing the heterogeneities of our very perceptions, knowledges, and information.

What happens to us is exactly the opposite of what happens in that postmodernity in which, according to Baudrillard, “things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason” (1982, 7). For us, it would at times seem that it is the meaning, words, and experiences that have found a way to escape a dialectic of things that bored them: infinitely proliferating, self-empowering, self-essentializing in a game of extremes and mirrors, carried along by a senseless reason . . .

But neither is it useful to exaggerate. Here, between words and things, ideology and society, symbols and instruments, there still tend to be fragile connections that permit a “coming and going” behind this dream of modernity that, only half accepted, has nevertheless already permeated the society and culture of this part of America.

The future of Latin America will not be, for this reason, very different from its present: one of a peripheral modernity, de-centered, subject to conflicts, whose destiny will depend, to some degree, on what these societies manage to do with this modernity in the process of producing it through their own complex and changing heterogeneity.