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Postcolonial Reconstruction: A Sociological Reading of Octavio Paz

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Introduction

Postcolonial Deconstruction

A few years ago, the sociologist Sérgio Costa posited a distinction between what he calls "postcolonial deconstruction" and "postcolonial reconstruction" (see Costa 2011). I find this conceptual distinction useful and will follow it. Although in this book I might not be using these terms exactly in Costa's sense, I hope I am not distorting his ideas too greatly.

"Postcolonial deconstruction" refers to a *critique* of geopolitical power relations and their impact on the way in which we produce knowledge in the social and cultural sciences. There are three basic topics that are central to all postcolonial theories, and all three profoundly challenge the understanding of modernity held by modernization theories.

1. Against the idea that modernity germinated in Europe and, especially, that it then spread from there thanks to "European expansion" and was brought to the "Rest" of the world, postcolonial theories argue that modernity represents a planetary condition that began to change the face of the world—and that means the entire world in the sense of the planet Earth—only after the intercontinental networks established by colonialism started to become effective. Modernity and colonialism are thus intrinsically related. Decolonial thinkers like Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo have set out to show that modernity has "a terrible and hidden underside" that, quite distinct from the conventional picture, is intimately linked to the "logic of colonialism" (Mignolo 2011: ix). Therefore,

   [t]he basic thesis […] is the following: 'modernity' is a complex narrative whose point of origin was Europe; a narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while simultaneously hiding its darker side, 'coloniality'. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity –there is no modernity without coloniality (*ibid.*: 2–3).

2. One particularly important aspect of the critique of modernity from the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial thinkers is its refutation of the *teleological* understanding of modernity as a universal condition that only a few

societies have reached, and that most others, especially formerly colonized ones, are still awaiting. Postcolonial and decolonial criticism oppose this "temporal logic" of the conventional understanding of modernity by re-introducing the concept of space. They are not interested primarily in processes of succession—as are modernization theories—but in the "entanglements" among the different societies, cultures, or civilizations located in the different parts of the world that began to form economic, political, social, and cultural constellations in which colonialism must be seen as a dominant factor. In this sense, the "post" in "postcolonialism" may be misleading, since it does not refer to something that, in terms of temporal succession, arrived only after colonialism. Robert J.C. Young proposes a different name that helps us to better understand that "postcolonialism" is all about recognizing a planetary constellation of places and the power distribution among them, and *not* about temporal processes. He writes:

> [P]ostcolonialism –which I would prefer to call tricontinentalism– names a theoretical and political position which embodies an active concept of intervention within […] oppressive circumstances. It combines the epistemological cultural innovations of the postcolonial moment with a political critique of the conditions of postcoloniality. In this sense, the 'post' of postcolonialism, or postcolonial critique, marks the historical moment of the theorized introduction of new tricontinental forms and strategies of critical analysis and practice (Young 2001: 57).

The term "tricontinentalism" clearly manifests a spatial connotation instead of the primarily temporal meaning implied in "*postcolonialism*."

3. The geopolitical distribution of power, privileges, and so forth, involves other topics of interest for "postcolonial deconstruction." Hence, it is important to understand that ideas and theories do indeed have places of origin. One of the commitments of the deconstructive strand of postcolonialism thus consists in working to associate places with the theories, narratives, and discourses that inform our ideas about modernity and globalization. One of the main critical energies of deconstructive postcolonialism stems from the effort to demonstrate that ideas produced in Europe are, first and foremost, European ideas which are not necessarily valid for all human beings just because they were spawned on the European continent. It is in this sense that Dipesh Charkrabarty's famous *dictum* to "provincialize Europe" must be understood.

However, just as important as recognizing the geographical—indeed: geo*political*—distribution of knowledge-producing power is understanding that the spaces of colonial reason are not strictly of a geographical nature but of an epistemological one. This means that colonial and postcolonial reason is not produced only in the former colonizing countries but can also be generated in the formerly colonized countries themselves. I will come back to this point below.

Postcolonialism Reconstruction

As important as it is, I contend that postcolonial deconstruction can only be a first step toward a transformation of social and sociological thought that genuinely seeks to overcome Eurocentrism. The deconstruction of Eurocentric discourses and theories must be complemented by efforts to discover different ways of conceiving the world that we all share. I understand the current call for a "global sociology" clearly as a potent exclamation of the desire to turn sociology into a discipline that not only registers the multiplicity of voices in our current world but that, at the same time, and more importantly, wants sociology to become an arena in which those voices find expression. Seen from this perspective, postcolonial deconstruction challenges and, indeed, lays bare the Eurocentric tradition of sociology, making it receptive to other sociologies. But this needs to be followed by efforts to make those other voices heard. I sustain that this is the task of what we might call "postcolonial reconstruction."

An important thrust in this direction has come in recent years, especially from Raewyn Connell's book *Southern Theory* (2007), where the author sets out to demonstrate that "[…] colonised and peripheral societies produce social thought *about the modern world* which has as much intellectual power as metropolitan social thought, and more political relevance" (*Ibid.*, xii; emphasis in the original). Connell is interested in academic social theory, but realizes that "[…] theory does emerge from the social experience of the periphery, in many genres and styles" (ix). In other words, research directed toward reconstructing colonial and postcolonial experiences in and with modernity must take into account cultural texts and not limit itself to only academic works in the social sciences and humanities. It has to turn to literature and the arts in general, as well as to social practices that may take the form of more or less organized social movements. The challenge is to make the multiple experiences (Kozlarek 2014) with, and within, the modern world visible.

In the case of Latin America, it is especially necessary to look into the essayist tradition. I argue in this book that what makes this imperative is the longstanding and sophisticated tradition of the essay in this region of the world, which spans an important social space that overlaps with the social sciences and humanities and is situated in the interstice between academic institutions and the public political sphere (see Weinberg 2007). But the essay is not only an object of study for Latin American sociology, for it is also a form of writing that is particularly relevant in the social sciences and philosophy.

It might be argued that this situation creates disadvantages for the academic social sciences and humanities in Latin America when compared to those in Europe or North America. After all, does the essay not lack the academic rigor that defines scientific forms of thinking and writing? I argue, however, that the tradition of the essay in Latin America has created an intellectual practice that makes it possible to challenge the boundaries of the academic disciplines, allowing interesting alternative ways of conceiving the world that are often more radical and daring than the products of academic disciplines. In Mexico, Octavio Paz can be seen as a

paradigmatic example of this intellectual practice. As will be explored in this book, his "poetic" understanding of the world and the human being in it permits not only a different epistemology, but also a distinct sociology that I call a "poetic sociology."

However, in order to challenge the limits of the academic disciplines they must engage more systematically with the essay, leaving behind their fears that this might water down their own scholarly ambitions. Just how this can be done is an issue yet to be explored. Perhaps this book will help pave the way.

Additional challenges for a reconstructive postcolonial critique lie in how it succeeds in revealing alternatives to the problems that postcolonial deconstruction encounters in Eurocentric sociology, as mentioned above. The following questions can be seen as a kind of orientation grid for this new kind of research. What is the nature of reflections on the fact that modernity is historically linked to colonialism? Is "modernity" still a valid category? What can be said about the temporal and spatial regimes of colonial and postcolonial societies? What kinds of new "epistemologies" and "ontologies" can be extracted, and how do they account for the imposition of the teleological conception of time that the conventional understanding of modernity and modernization champions? Finally, what does it mean to speak or write with the awareness of speaking or writing from a certain place of enunciation, and how does this concretely affect the ways in which we conceive the world in its entirety?

In this book, I present what may be a first step into this still novel field of research that I propose to call "postcolonial reconstruction" by—precisely—reconstructing some ideas taken from the pen of the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz.

Why Octavio Paz?

Paz' work interests me for various reasons:

1. In different parts of his writings—most importantly in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*—Paz expresses a genuine sociological interest and develops ideas that could be of interest to sociology, especially contemporary social theory, theories of modernity and, more generally, to the developments that today are gathered under the label "global sociology," and, last but not least, to postcolonial sociology (see also Kozlarek 2009, 2013).

It is in *The Labyrinth* that Paz' sociological ambitions emerge most clearly. As will be explored further in this book, Paz was influenced by a peculiar type of sociological research conducted in the late 1930s by the so-called *Collège de Sociologie* (see Santí 1997a; also Moebius 2006). Upon reading Paz from a sociological perspective and taking into account the influence of the *Collège* it becomes clear that its "sociology" *must* have been critical to conventional sociology and, especially, to the kind of sociology that can be identified with modernization theories.

Paz firmly believed that modernization was something that his country, Mexico, was experiencing, and he also very clearly realized that modernization in Mexico was different from modernization in other countries. However, in contrast to contemporary historical sociology and, particularly, the so-called multiple modernities approach, Paz did not attempt to trace the differences back to some remote pre-modern time that Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, following Carl Jasper's philosophy of history, called: "axial time" (see Kozlarek 2012). For Paz, modernity represented much more a kind of new civilization that, while clearly global, exists in many different forms simultaneously. The plurality of modernities stems from the variety of concrete historical experiences with, and within, the processes of modernization. It is in this sense that Paz insisted, time and again, upon the necessity for a rigorous scrutiny of the historical conditions and preconditions of modernity in each specific case. According to Paz, understanding modernity in Mexico could only be achieved by tracing it back to colonial times.

Against the tendency that seeks to understand modernity and modernization primarily from an economistic perspective—the one favored by modernization theories and Marxist approaches—Paz was more interested in culture. He did not conceive of modernization as a homogeneous process grimly headed toward one inevitable, universal *telos*, but as an ensemble of complex cultural processes that vary from society-to-society despite certain affinities. Guided by the sociology of the *Collège de Sociologie*, Paz was particularly interested in what conventional research about modernity would perceive rather as vestiges of premodern conditions. In his *The Labyrinth*, Paz followed the myths upon which modern Mexico is based.

However, Paz also felt himself normatively committed to modernity, an aspect that from a perspective of postcolonial critique might well raise suspicions. But his commitment to modernity was not the result of an acritical copying of European or US ideals. Rather, it was the consequence of a *conscious decision* that Paz took, in the company of other Latin American thinkers. The British historian Nicola Miller discovered in an interesting study of intellectual life in Latin America during the first three decades of the twentieth century that the fact that "most Latin American projects of modernity have had an external referent does not necessarily imply that they were all derivative" (Miller 2008: 20). This can also be said of Paz' "project of modernity." One integral aspect of his modern critique of modernity is his critique of what today could be called Mexico's postcolonial condition.

2. For Paz, colonialism is so deeply entrenched in Mexican social and cultural life, even two centuries after Independence, that it is impossible to correctly understand the country's present without appreciating how a certain cultural and social heritage from the colonial era is still active today. From a sociological perspective, it is interesting to see his ongoing efforts to identify the cultural and social mechanisms that link Mexico's colonial past to its postcolonial present. His methodology is that of an extremely meticulous form of cultural critique, a kind of "dense description" that enables him to make visible the concatenations of historical, social, and cultural realities, and the perpetuation of cultural and

social forms that transcend politico-historical ruptures, such as independence. By making these continuities visible Paz became an early voice in the critique of the postcolonial condition, a critic with a keen eye for the historical particularities that colonial and postcolonial situations establish.

In his *The Labyrinth*, Paz describes "postcolonial" Mexico as being burdened by "social pathologies" that are not limited to institutional power structures alone, but are deeply rooted in the very fabric of social relations in daily life. His diagnosis is based on an anthropological idea that sees human beings basically as creatures who suffer from loneliness and, therefore, engage in social relations in order to escape this existential feeling. "Solitude" is thus not only a problem with which Mexicans have to grapple, but part of the human condition itself. What makes cultures and societies different is the way in which they deal with this and, especially, how they strive to defeat the existential anxiety that solitude produces. Paz perceived Mexico as a society in which forms of social interaction have been perpetuated that continue to make it very difficult to engage in human relations that are satisfying and, as such, capable of assuring a fulfilled life.

Certainly, Paz' diagnosis has received severe criticisms. The anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (1992), for example, stated in a study of the construction of Mexican cultural and national identity that Paz had somehow missed the point. "What Paz saw as a culture of individual atomization through solitude, closure and formality is, in fact, a hierarchical culture in which dominant classes and genders 'mute' other classes and groups" (ibidem. 312). While I believe that Lomnitz is correct to insist upon the need to consider the hierarchical structure that dominates class and gender, as well as race and cultural constellations, Paz' work can be seen precisely as a complement to this kind of social analysis because it shows how these structures have been burned deeply into the fabric of daily social relations, following specific cultural codes. It is in this sense that what we might call Paz' postcolonial critique closely resembles a kind of cultural sociology that is not only interesting for the content of social and cultural problems it discusses, but also for how it understands the relation between social action and culture in a non-functionalist, indeed "dialectical," manner.

3. There is yet another understanding that Paz embraces warmheartedly, namely that modernity represents a new reality in which, for the first time in human history, all human beings, all cultures, and all civilizations find themselves challenged to join a common "project." In *The Labyrinth*, Paz wrote: "[…] history has recovered its unity and become what it was at the beginning: a meditation of mankind" (Paz 1985a: 172).

I think that this modern task which Paz signals in this sentence and that expresses an acknowledgment of the fact that humanism is becoming real or "concrete," as Hannah Arendt has put it (see Arendt 1958), is often neglected in postcolonial deconstruction. There are, however, exceptions. Edward Said would be one. He clearly saw that global modernity meant that "all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily

differentiated, and unmonolithic" (Said 1993: xxv). Along with other prominent postcolonial thinkers—like Frantz Fanon or Sylvia Winter (Fanon 2004; Wynter 2003)—Said also pleads for a kind of postcolonial humanism. I think that this label could also be tacked on to Paz' ideas concerning the notion that the world is becoming more and more a singular place of humanity.

Paz' humanism relativizes culture and identity. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is commonly understood as an essay on Mexico's cultural and national identity, but a thorough reading shows that it is also—and perhaps more importantly—a critique of identity in favor of humanism. It describes moments in which cultural "masks" crack, allowing us to look behind them and realize that what lingers beyond culture is the desire to be "only human." Although Paz was looking at the world from a particular point of view, a singular "place of enunciation," he was very much aware that the final destination of thought can only be humanity as a whole.

Now, whatever we may think about these ideas today, to read Paz in the context of contemporary postcolonial critiques shows that colonialism has produced highly complex historical, social, and cultural realities. This book argues that postcolonial reconstruction could be a way to bring this complexity to light.

This Book

In Chap. 1 of this book I sustain that in order to understand the creation of sociological ideas in Mexico, it does not suffice to look only at academic sociology, but that it is also necessary to examine extra-academic intellectual realms, most importantly among them the tradition of the essay, where sociological ideas have been cultivated. I argue against the Mexican sociologist Fernando Castañeda Sabido (2004), who laments the lack of academic professionalism in his country's sociology, by recalling Latin American modernization and dependency theories as significant theoretical endeavors after WWII. However, I also strive to demonstrate that the critique of positivism in Mexico, especially, spurred a different tradition of social thought, one expressed essentially in the philosophical essay. This tradition not only imagined a new way of relating to the world, but has sought a normative orientation in a "new" kind of humanism. It is my contention that this second tradition of social thought was actually followed by Octavio Paz after WWII and can be seen as an alternative to the then-dominant modernization and dependency theories.

Chapter 2 offers a brief review of some earlier studies that were interested in Paz's work from a sociological perspective. It will become evident that they were, however, especially interested in political issues. In contrast, I will argue that Paz is not only an interesting object of study for political sociology, but that in parts of his work he himself expresses a sociology and that this sociology is inseparably linked to the historical experience of the Mexican Revolution. However, his criticism of the conventional forms of sociology can only be properly understood when it is contrasted to models of sociologies that had a positive influence on his work. Here

it is important to mention, above all, the influence of the aforementioned *Collège de Sociologie*. The group of French intellectuals that went under this name proposed a consequent parallel reading of hard social facts and culture that captured Paz' interest. In fact, Paz' most important book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, can be seen as an exercise in just the kind of research that the *Collège* stood for. Another important idea that Paz shared especially with Roger Caillois was that of the poetic experience.

Chapter 3 seeks to show how poetic experience turns into what could be called "poetic sociology." The first two sections of this chapter are dedicated to reconstructing the epistemological and ontological dimensions of poetic experience, while the third section deals with the reconstruction of the poetic sociology of global modernity which materializes, once again and especially, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. The common interpretation of this book is that it is a treatise concerned primarily with identity, but I argue that this is inaccurate and that the principle focus of *The Labyrinth* is global modernity.

Chapter 1
Two Sociological Traditions in Latin America

Abstract In this chapter, I sustain that in order to understand the creation of socio-logical ideas in Mexico it does not suffice to look only at academic sociology, but that it is also necessary to examine extra-academic intellectual realms, most impor-tantly among them the tradition of the essay, where sociological ideas have been cultivated. I argue against the Mexican sociologist Fernando Castañeda (*La crisis de la sociología académica en México*. Miguel Ángel Porrúa, Mexico City, 2004), who laments the lack of academic professionalism in his country's sociology, by recalling Latin American modernization and dependency theories as significant theoretical endeavors after WWII. However, I also strive to demonstrate that the critique of positivism in Mexico, especially, spurred a different tradition of social thought, one expressed essentially in the philosophical essay. This tradition not only imagined a new way of relating to the world, but has sought a normative orientation in a "new" kind of humanism. It is my contention that this second tradition of social thought was actually followed by Octavio Paz after WWII, and can be seen as an alternative to the then dominant modernization and dependency theories.

Keywords Octavio Paz · Postcolonial critique · Mexican sociology · Poetic sociology · Modernity modernization theories · Dependency theory

1.1 *De*provincializing Social Theory

The work of Hans Joas on North American pragmatism document, among other important elements, the parochial character of some important representatives of German philosophy and social theory. Joas especially reproaches the members of the group of social scientists known today as the Frankfurt School who, during the time they spent in the United States—seeking refuge from German national socialism—wasted the opportunity to evaluate North American pragmatism as a theoretical alternative (cfr. Joas 1999: 96ss.). According to Joas, those represen-tatives of the Frankfurt School could surely have learned from that peculiar

current that was emerging on the other side of the Atlantic; at the very least as a means of becoming aware of the deficiencies of their own diagnosis of modernity.

> While at that time the Frankfurt School in its critique of instrumental reason sought impotently an objective reason or became entangled in the ambiguity of the concept of reason in a presumed dialectics of the Enlightenment, American pragmatism had surpassed all philosophies of history, of metaphysics, of reason by developing a theory of the inter-subjective constitution of values experienced as significant and obligatory (ibid.: 103).

Nonetheless, the problems that Joas strove to pinpoint are not only of a theoretical order. They also involve the attitude that those Frankfurt scientists adopted towards their U.S. colleagues. They isolated themselves much more than other exiles, and in their isolation cultivated a double prejudice that they had brought from Europe[1]: first they believed that pragmatism was nothing more than a kind of acritical positivism; and second, that their own thought and the entire European tradition upon which it was founded, constituted the only path to a true critique of global modernity. But the members of the Frankfurt School are not the only ones who have undervalued North American thought. It is possible to demonstrate similar "misunderstandings" with numerous other German social and cultural scientists (cfr. Joas 1999).

For a long time European arrogance with respect to the U.S. was not reproached but, in contrast:

> In the United States, the overvaluation of Critical Theory impeded a connection with its own traditions while reinforcing feelings of the superiority of European theory (Joas 1999: 97).

Joas states that his objective is to refute the myth of the inferiority of North American pragmatism (cfr. ibidem). He is aware that because the atmosphere began to change after World War II he would be accompanied on this trek by important fellow-travelers (cfr. Joas 1999: 137ss.). In spite of all the specific theoretical differences that might exist among them, in this context Joas mentions Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas time and again because, in his view, they made special efforts to take pragmatism seriously in Germany.

But also in the U.S. attitudes towards their own tradition began to be transformed after the Second World War, as Americans' submissive view towards Europe was replaced by a newfound theoretical pride, though one that did not necessarily remit in the direction of pragmatism but, rather, to sociology, and whose most important calling card consisted in theories of modernization.

I mention this phase of the evolution of post-war social theory because it is often forgotten that up to relatively recent times one could not set out from the naturalness with which the presence and participation of the North American voice is perceived in almost all debates concerning the social and cultural sciences. Joas insists, quite rightly, that this was an extremely important step, given that it not only deprovincialized thought in Europe, but also contributed to a better understanding of our current 'global modernity' (Schmidt 2014).

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[1]Exceptions that Joas recognizes include Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann and Erich Fromm.

But upon understanding modernity as global modernity it must be made abundantly clear that it does not suffice to incorporate the North American point of view into this situation that unites us all. Rather, we must ask how modernity and globalization are conceived in other parts of the world. And here we must not fail to take into account opinions and valuations from Africa, Asia and Latin America, for they are places where modernization has provoked *experiences* that could not be expressed in the same way in European or North American social theory. Indeed, U.S. pragmatism was criticized in this regard as well: while it had justifiably striven to distance itself on some important points from European thought, it simultaneously came to consider its voice as the only valid expression of American thought in the continental sense, setting aside for the moment the fact that other areas of the American continent also produced impressive theories inspired by their distinct experiences (cfr. Maldonado-Torres 2007: 153).

It is probably no longer necessary to demonstrate in each specific case that the knowledge of Latin American experiences within the theories of modernity formulated in recent decades in Europe and the U.S. continues to be insufficient. Suffice to cite the few extremely rudimentary and misleading observations that appear in the works of certain authors: for example, Jürgen Habermas' affirmation that the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz was an "advocate of modernity" (cfr. Habermas 1990a). While it could be argued that this statement is not incorrect, the issue becomes trivial in relation to the complexity that characterizes the critique of modernity formulated by Paz, and the fact that it ultimately negates the originality of his judgment of modernity. How is this superficial treatment by Habermas to be explained? After all, that German social philosopher always thought it important that the most diverse voices regarding modernity be expressed. His reconstructive method has become, in a certain sense, the distinguishing feature of that polylogue aperture.

One possible cause might be that Paz was not a recognized social scientist or philosopher. But for reasons that still need to be defined in greater detail, our valuation of sociological thought in Latin America will always turn out to be deficient if we search for it only in the spaces assigned and institutionally marked for this purpose inside universities. As long as our gaze remains fixed exclusively on academically-institutionalized sociology in Latin America, a prejudice of inferiority will soon be demonstrated in comparison to other countries in other regions. More than anything else, this reflects the fact that the processes of institutional consolidation of universities developed quite distinctly there compared to Europe or even North America.

But these particularities also led to the formation of extra-university spaces where ideas of interest to social theory or philosophy could be articulated. In this context, we must emphasize literature and, even more, essayism. In what follows, I limit my comments to the case of Mexico. While there are indications that Mexico's situation may be comparable to that of other Latin American nations, confirming such an assumption would require going beyond the framework of the present study.

1.2   The Limits of "Academic Sociology" in Mexico, and Why They Must Be Transcended

A couple of years ago, the Mexican sociologist Fernando Castañeda Sabido published a book in which he analyzes the situation of "academic sociology" in that country. The book's title, *La crisis de la sociología académica en México* (*The Crisis of Academic Sociology in Mexico*) clearly belies its conclusions, but in no way suggests that the crisis of sociology is an exclusively Mexican problem. To the contrary: in the first two chapters, Castañeda writes that a similar situation can be seen in other countries. The discipline is losing its "identity". Wherever one looks it is possible to diagnose a "destructuring" of sociology that makes it impossible to recognize it as a clearly identifiable discourse. Of course, sociology has never been the only discourse that articulates the topic of society, but this should not lead to the conclusion that everything that is said or written about society is sociology (Castañeda 2004: 6).

Though Castañeda states that sociology's loss of identity is a global theme, he directs his warning, first, at Mexican sociology, because his attention is drawn to the fact that it "includes writers, essayists [and] social thinkers who cannot distinguish between sociology and other discourses" (ibid.: 7). This situation demands "defining precisely what it is that we understand by sociology" (ibid.: 9). Castañeda insists that this discipline can only recover its identity by distinguishing itself as the "language of a community", where the announcing "subject" is committed to articulating itself such that the "conditions of validity" of the discourse can be reconstructed at all times (ibid.: 84).

The necessary condition for this, naturally, is to first "delineate and define" the "language", or "discourse" of sociology and to constitute it as a unit in the sense of a "specialized" and "professionalized" discourse. Once accomplished, this discourse must be transplanted and cultivated in "a very complex institutional framework" (cfr. ibidem: 10s.). But this is far from natural. Castañeda affirms that, while Mexico does have universities, some with faculties or institutes of sociology, a poorly-kept secret is that "many sociologists do not know the traditions of sociological theory" (cfr. ibid.: 9). This explains why they end up using non-sociological languages.

In addition to the loss of identity, especially in Mexican sociology, Castañeda also laments a second serious problem, one that must be understood as political. In this context, he adopts a historical vision that takes as its starting point the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917). This is not at all inappropriate, because that historical event constituted a watershed in the cultural domain as well. It is commonly assumed—though not uncontested—that the Revolution was not prepared by intellectuals but, rather, broke out as a series of spontaneous protests by disadvantaged sectors of the population (cfr. Knight 1991); though there is no question that its political transformations were accompanied by a cultural movement that proposed creating a new culture in which leading intellectuals of the time would participate.

Castañeda considers that the most important characteristic of this cultural turn was nationalism and the strengthening of the central role of the State, since the

post-revolutionary State became the protagonist of cultural changes. Here Castañeda perceives the problem of an "interrupted revolution,"[2] for "Mexican culture was freed from the Church, but not from the 'King'." This meant that:

> The post-revolutionary Mexican State organized not only workers, entrepreneurs, peasants, and popular sectors, but was also the organizer of culture and intellectuals (ibid.: 112).

This is especially applicable to the academic social sciences. José Luis Reyna adds:

> It is […] hard to understand the birth of the Mexican institutions dealing with the social sciences without the presence of political power, [and] overt support from the government (Reyna 2005: 411).[3]

For Castañeda, Mexican universities are so heavily politicized even today that the only valid premise is that they cultivate political, instead of academic, values. He devotes much of his historical reconstruction of Mexican sociology to the lost opportunities to "professionalize" (i.e., achieve "academization") the discipline, and pays ample attention to the famous polemic between Antonio Caso and Vicente Lombardo Toledano in the 1930s (cfr. ibid.: 127ss.). He concludes that this debate—originally centered on university "autonomy"—confused two fundamentally distinct values: academic freedom *versus* freedom of speech more generally. That debate ended with a call for freedom of speech in universities that Castañeda explains as follows: given the lack of civil rights and the consequently weak position of the public sphere in Mexico, values that belong to the domain of social-political reality were adopted by universities.

> The university became the only place with true freedom of speech. It was also the arena for opposition, dissidence and the State's alter-ego. A place not of academic freedom, but of freedom of speech. The university became a space more for public opinion than academic expression, and so differences, as in the polemic between Caso and Lombardo, are resolved politically and not academically (ibid.: 145).

The prevalence of political values and virtues inside Mexican universities would continue to determine, time-after-time, the agenda and contents of the Social Sciences. In this regard, Castañeda recalls dependency theory. While Mexico was not a key center of that theory, some scholars there did champion it. One of the most important figures in this regard was Rodolfo Stavenhagen, who in the 1970s under the aegis of dependency theory wrote about the situation of academic institutions in Latin America, attributing their deficiencies to an "internal colonialism" (Stavenhagen 1984a: 21) that generated the urgent need to "decolonize" universities in Latin America together with the knowledge they generated (cfr. Stavenhagen 1984b).

Castañeda, however, detects an ideology in the workings of such argumentation, one to which he imputes "postcolonial" roots (cfr. Castañeda 2004: 279, 296). He uses the term "postcolonial condition" to refer to a nation's search for national

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[2]Concept taken from of Adolfo Gilly (1978).

[3]Some years ago, Nicola Miller also demonstrated the magnitude of the State's influence in the intellectual sphere in Latin America (cfr. Miller 1999).

identity that, especially in Mexico, has produced, time and again, a profound provincialism that stigmatizes as 'foreign' and 'threatening' anything that is not clearly identified as its own. Also, the excessively simple formula of dependency theory—"center/periphery = good/bad"—is very comfortable for politicians in "dependent" countries because it allows them to attribute every internal problem to external causes. Castañeda reminds us that this pattern of thought, based on dependency theory, was behind the political discourse of former Mexican President Luis Echeverría:

> Echeverría adopted the most nationalistic currents of sociological discourse, converting them into a discourse that made foreign relations a question of internal convocation of a national character, and internal politics a problem of international responsibility (ibid.: 187).

Castañeda insists that sociology must overcome this parochial character. The appropriation of the traditions of this discipline demands, if you will, looking beyond frontiers—understood here in the geographical-political sense—because the sociological tradition was born of "other cultures" that must be appropriated, even though this involves, to some degree, the cultures of former colonial powers.

In the 1980s, it became possible to discern this new aperture in Mexican sociology. Thus, the sociologists Lidia Girola and Gina Zabludovsky described that period as:

> […] a decade of searching that entailed, on the one hand, a revision of previously-accepted schemes and, on the other, avid readings of authors who, for one reason or another, never entered Mexico (Zabludovsky/Girola 1995: 173).

Castañeda also recognizes this aperture, considering its obstinacy against the nationalism and regionalism of dependency theories, though he laments that this obduracy has been lost in "meta-theoretical, epistemological and philosophical" debates (Castañeda 2004: 188s.).

Of course, this is not a pretext allowing Castañeda to demand the nationalism that he condemns. To the contrary, he is drawing our attention to the fact that ideas from other areas of the world only become significant when translated. But how are we to develop a research perspective oriented towards the future from such a situation? According to Castañeda, the "crisis of academic sociology" in Mexico seems to be determined primordially by two problems: the loss of identity, and politicization/ideologization. Thus, his book ends on a defeatist note: deriving alternatives is only possible *ex negativo*.

1. Naturally, with regards to the concern for the loss of identity one can object that this is an age-old problem. Perhaps the issue of whether or not this discipline can, or should, define itself through a unitarian language is even more controversial today than 100 years ago, when the process of institutionalizing sociology began. It is precisely when we come to understand sociology as a device for reflection with which modern societies pretend to explore themselves that the idea of a unitarian language, like Castañeda's, requires explanations more than ever, in view of the current awareness of differences and contingencies. So, instead of demanding that sociology subject itself to the form of a singular, relatively

homogeneous language, I propose understanding it as a kind of meta-language that mediates among different specialized languages. In this context, translated works would once again find themselves on center stage. In fact, this understanding seems to be imposing itself in some areas of sociology, especially, so-called *global sociology*.

2. Castañeda's critique of a Mexican nationalism that was strengthened, above all, after the 1910 Revolution and that spanned all cultural domains imaginable is clearly justified. But here we must also consider the monopolization of academic sociology by the State as a particularly serious problem. Clearly, it is precisely this understanding of the limitations of academic sociology in Mexico that must propel a systematic search for alternatives. And this, in my opinion, cannot leave out the essayists from whom Castañeda wishes to distance himself too rigorously. It is my contention that we are only now coming to appreciate the relevance for current sociological issues of their works that express "sociological thought", especially with references to theories of modernity (cfr. Miller 2008).

These alternatives must be taken seriously because their "anti-American" character—which Castañeda laments—could be part of a strategy directed, above all, against North American tendencies to institutionalize sociological approaches (cfr. also Portes 2004). This means that academic "deficiencies" are not simply assumed but, rather, caused deliberately.

In the next chapters we continue along this path by focusing principally on the works of Octavio Paz. The reasons for adopting this approach are diverse: (1) I am convinced that Paz' essays convey a kind of sociological thought that can, and wishes to, be understood as an alternative to North American-style academic sociology; one that presents itself as a critique of modernization theories, but also dependency theory, notwithstanding Paz' commitments to a modernization project. (2) Paz' "project of modernity" can be understood as humanist modernity. He connects his idea of modernity with the humanist tradition of Mexican (perhaps Latin American?) thought. (3) In this context, Paz' writings can be read as one of the most complete proposals for a distinct modernity from a Mexican perspective.

Paz argued in a fashion similar to that of Castañeda. He was clearly convinced that Mexico had not achieved modernization through its own efforts, for it had failed to initiate political transformations that harmonized with "modern" ideas and discourses. Mexico's independence from Spain (1810) was followed by very diverse modernization projects—at least in their tenor—championed by intellectuals and politicians. Most important among them were liberalism, positivism, and, finally, after World War II, modernization theories. While all these ideas and discourses were reproduced in Mexico, they were never transformed into a reality that functioned for that society. The tragedy of Mexico can be understood, Paz writes, as follows:

> Here I shall only repeat that since the great rupture from Spain – the crisis of the late 18th century and its consequence: Independence – we Mexicans have adopted various projects of modernization. [But] they all turned out to be not only unsuitable but also disfiguring (Paz 1999: 429).

But in this way Mexico succeeded in, "dressing in modern style the survivals of the colonial system" (Paz 1994: 127), though these were able to perpetuate themselves behind the "masks" of modernization. The price that the country had to pay for this desultory modernization was high indeed: "The political lie became ensconced […]" (ibid.) firmly in political culture, and all that remained of the diverse modernization projects were "beautiful inapplicable words" (ibid.: 171).

Like Castañeda, Paz saw the cause of this situation not in the fact that the ideas and discourses, with all their promises of modernization, came from abroad, but that they did not germinate in the humus of Mexico's political and social reality. Despite the coincidences in the diagnosis, the strategies that resulted were distinct for Paz and Castañeda. While the latter supports academizing sociology, Paz opted for a cultural critique that in principal overflows the ambits of academic sociology.

I now wish to delimit the framework in which debates in "academic sociology" regarding modernity and modernization developed in Latin America, and then go on to show how Paz chose an entirely different path, one that led to another sociology that I will call a "poetic sociology" (see Chap. 3). But first I must present a brief review of Latin American theories of modernization and dependency theory.

1.3   The Geographic-Epistemic Shift in Gino Germani's Theory of Modernization

Some years ago, Walter D. Mignolo lauded Immanuel Wallerstein's work because it introduced "an epistemic shift that, though almost imperceptible, was most important" (cfr. Mignolo 2004: 117). He was referring to the introduction "of the Third-World perspective into intellectual debate" (ibid.). Mignolo does not conceal the fact that Wallerstein owed his change of perspective, not least, to his knowledge of dependency theory that resided principally in Latin America. But I go one step further to adduce that this change of perspective was already expressed in Latin American modernization theory. One of the most important examples of this is found in the works of the Italian-Argentine sociologist Gino Germani.

At the outset we must recognize the obvious: that the influence of modernization theories in Latin America was considerable:

> They put forward the idea that Latin America was in transition from traditional society to modern society and that the very advanced (North American or European) industrial societies were the ideal model which backward countries would inevitably reach (Larrain 2000: 118).

Gino Germani,[4] an emigrant from Italy to Argentina, was one of the most influential modernization theorists in Latin America. His attitude towards modernization theory was quite unconditional, as shown especially by the uninhibited way in which he adopted the categorical framework of modernization theories in his

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[4]Germani's daughter, Ana Alejandra, published biographical details (2004) of one of most multi-faceted figures of Latin American sociology.

own sociology to construct a framework that would later be strongly criticized, and for good reasons—especially the dichotomy "tradition/modernity" (cfr. Chap. 3). For Germani, Latin American societies were examples of the *transition* from tradition-to-modernity (cfr. 1968: 195ss.). In this process of "transition" Germani distinguished different stages. Like all modernization theories, Germani's also holds that the goal of the process enjoys universal validity among all societies on the planet. In principal, the expectation is for "greater unification and interdependence" as a result of modernization (Germani 1969: 26). Germani also presented himself as a committed advocate of the *normative* pretensions of modernization:

> […] he does not lose faith in the inevitability of the process of transition and argues that despite many problems it is taking place at a quicker pace than in the past (Larrain 1989: 93).

This brief review of Germani's theory of modernization allows the conclusion that, like all other such theories it too insists on the idea of progress that triggers global processes ultimately oriented towards a growing convergence in the "international system" (Germani 1969: 26). This means also that we are dealing with processes from which no society can, or should, withdraw. Therefore modernization is to be understood as a process of the construction of a real global society.

However, in Germani's theory of modernization we find understandings that would be expressed with greater clarity later in dependency theories. Despite all the promises and tendencies towards unity formulated by modernization theories, the respective previous conditions they contain are very different. However trivial this understanding may appear at first sight, it is important because of its consequences for the epistemological foundations, since we can perceive the emergence of that "epistemic shift" that Mignolo found in Wallerstein and dependency theorists.

In his attempt to visualize the distinct processes of modernization, Germani analytically breaks down the "global process" of modernization into a series of sub-processes oriented less by abstracts models than by problematics that he believed can be recognized in some Latin American societies, beginning with Argentina. This leads him to identify the result as a very complex system of processes that develop very different "velocities" due to certain braking mechanisms: (1) population growth; (2) urbanization; (3) subsistence of archaic patterns; (4) tensions resulting from differences between the modernized and backwards sectors of each society; (5) subsistence of economic, social, cultural and political marginalities, especially in the countryside; (6) growth of the tertiary sector; (7) aspirations to achieve "modern" forms of consumption; (8) "lags" in the development of "modern attitudes" even among intellectual elites; (9) simultaneity of processes that in "Western" countries occurred successively ("for example, the emergence of mass societies in large cities, accompanied by the persistence of 'traditional' marginality in the backwards regions and rural areas inside each nation"), (10) political and social mobility—particularly relevant for the South American experience–; and, (11) subsistence of patterns of military intervention in political processes (cfr. 10s.). The interaction among these different evolutionary processes and braking mechanisms that Germani observes

leads him to attribute to them an "asynchronic" character. And this is what distinguishes his theory from other theories of development: i.e., a much greater consciousness of differences: "One of the essential features of change is its asynchronic *character*" (Germani 1968: 21).

The discovery of asynchrony in social change in the so-called developing countries challenges the habit of classifying these societies *terminally* as "underdeveloped" or "traditional". To the contrary, "traditionality" and "modernity" are *tendencies* that seem to mutually influence one another in *all* societies. According to Germani, what is important for sociology is to determine each unique constellation that generates different processes—which partially annul each other—in distinct societies.

Clearly, this idea opposes the linear conception of time that modernization theory championed and that translates social differences into temporal differences. Simultaneously, Germani prepares the way for a broader, more inclusive concept of modernity. In this approach, the universal model of modernity cannot simply be applied to every concrete case (Larrain 2000: 121); rather, the results that can be articulated on the basis of the contradictions between the cases studied and the universal model modify that model by opening it and, in doing so, making other "modernities" imaginable. "Modernity" is, as a result, something that already exists in many societies that more conventional theories of modernization would consider simply "traditional". But this did not lead the diverse societies in the process of modernization to converge; rather, new differences are produced as a result of the conflictive relations between modernization processes and braking mechanisms; thus propitiating the formation of distinct modernities distributed geographically over the planet.

While this interpretation is possible based on a reading of Germani, it simultaneously goes beyond his vision, for what still prevails in Germani's writings is the normative idea of modernization, oriented by a unitarian *telos*. However, it is precisely the Latin American experience that through discussions with modernization theories has produced other theoretical models, which can be understood as a more severe critique of earlier ones. In this context it is important to mention, primarily, the so-called dependency theory.

1.4 Dependency Theory: An Incomplete Critique of Modernization Theory

As we shall see below, the critique of modernization theories from the Latin American perspective cannot be reduced to a sociological debate, though it did have an important starting point in academic sociology: namely, the so-called dependency theory, well-known far beyond Latin America's borders. Jorge Larrain wrote that "Modernization theories reduce the study of sociohistorical processes to the construction of abstract models of universal applicability" (Larrain 2000: 121, cfr. Chap. 3).

One criticism that dependency theories directed at modernization theories expressly objected to their high degree of abstraction or, as the Brazilian dependency theorist Theotonio Dos Santos put it: their boast of elaborating a "general macro-sociological theory" of the tendencies of civilizing development. Dos Santos sustains, in contrast, that "procedures […] must be adopted or created in concrete situations" (Dos Santos 1974: 20). To state his conviction that development processes in different societies may have very distinct properties, Dos Santos presents an interesting metaphor—that development is "an adventure of peoples" (ibid.). This Metaphor conveys the idea that development cannot be understood as an institutionally pre-established program that will produce the same results in all countries.

Dependency theory also refuted the economistic orientation of modernization theories by insisting that *cultural* processes had to be taken into account to a much larger degree. And it is precisely the exploitation of the cultural dimension that allows Dos Santos to connect with the context of the discussion—as rich in traditions as it was complex—that absorbed so much intellectual energy in Latin America during the 20th century; i.e., the issue of whether Latin American culture in all its forms of expression—not only artistic but also academic and, finally, institutional—was no more than a "simple repetition of the dominant culture of cultural centers" (ibid.: 25). If this assumption is correct, it generates—he writes—an epistemological problem especially for the social sciences that seek to understand Latin American realities; for it would mean that social scientists perceive their nations "from the perspective of the metropolitan centers, as a function of the interests, patterns and values of the metropolis" (ibid.). Regarding the problem of underdevelopment this would imply that the scientific theories used to analyze this problem and offer solutions are useless because they manifestly lack the conditions—as evidenced by the example of modernization theories—to understand Latin American particularities.

Here one can discern an awareness of differences that simply cannot be found in modernization theories, for they recognize only *one difference*: "modern" *versus* "traditional" societies. But the perspective of dependency theorists was expressed with even greater clarity in their critique of the homogenous and linear time conception of modernization theories: "[…] underdevelopment is not a state of backwardness prior to capitalism, but a consequence of it and a particular form of its development […]" (ibid.: 41). In the strict sense, this means that there is no such thing as a unique or ideal capitalism, or a unique, ideal modernity. Rather, modernity and capitalism emerge in very distinct forms that, however, mutually condition and enable each other. Thus, concerning the so-called "Third World" countries it is incorrect to adduce that they have 'not yet arrived at modernity', but that modernity has provoked their distinct experiences. Differences, therefore, not only mark the limit between interior and exterior, but also exist within modernity itself.

While it would be difficult to deny that dependency theories owed some of their essential theoretical instruments to Marxism (cfr. Larrain 2000: 123), it would also be wrong to infer that they were bulwarks of Marxist demagogy. This was manifested clearly in dependency theory's absolutely critical view of Marx. For example, Celso Furtado, a key figure of dependency theory, wrote:

A persistent interpretation, from Marx to Hicks, holds that the explanation of economic
processes in countries further advanced in industrialization suffices to understand what
occurs in economies with retarded development. If this were so, then *backwards* countries
would have no choice but to follow those well-traveled paths, benefitting from the experience
of those in more advanced *stages* (Furtado 1999: 4).

This critique of the temporal logic expressed here as a moment of suspicion
regarding Marx, is based on an acknowledgement of co-existing geographically-
distributed differences.

However, dependency theories failed just like modernization theories. One of the
essential causes of this resides in the aforementioned residues of a language still
focused on mainly economic processes that as a result, and despite all its accurate
intuitions, was incapable of understanding the complexity of *cultural* processes that
are inseparable from economic ones. As Ramón Grosfoguel observed (2000: 366):

Dependentistas developed a neo-Marxist political-economy approach. Most *dependentista*
analysis privileged the economic and political aspects of social processes at the expense of
cultural and ideological determinations. Culture was perceived as instrumental to capitalist
accumulation processes. In many respects *dependentistas* reproduced some of the economic
reductionism that had been criticized in orthodox Marxist approaches. This led to two prob-
lems: first, an underestimation of the Latin American colonial/racial hierarchies; and,
second, an analytical impoverishment of the complexities of political-economic processes.

Another cause of the downfall of dependency theories is that despite important
glimmerings of a more differentiated vision of the world, they were unable to over-
come the "center/periphery" dualism. And this, far too coarse, differentiation made
them susceptible to a regionalist and nationalist demagogy. We have already seen
that this was the starting point for the critique by the Mexican sociologist Fernando
Castañeda (cfr. Sect. 1.2).

Finally, one more element must be added to the list of issues that caused depend-
ency theory to fail: the fact that it was also a theory of modernization (cfr. Grosfoguel
2000: 361). While clearly articulating a critique of the linear time conception and
demanding a greater capacity of geographic differentiation, its ability to criticize
remained imprisoned in the semantics of modernization theories. Overcoming this
dependence on modernization theories requires developing another language, one
much more sensitive to the different experiences in, and with, different processes of
modernization. But dependency theories did not achieve this, perhaps because they
perceived their own tradition in Western social sciences whose language they
adopted—though not acritically—instead of returning to their own Latin American
traditions, including literary ones, in order to create a differente language.

One especially abundant source for the experiences of Latin American societies
in the modernization process resides in a wealth of essay writings that have been
explored only superficially from the sociological perspective (cfr. Larrain 2000).
Those who recover this tradition will discover discussions and issues that remained
hidden from both sociological theories of modernization and dependency *and* their
detractors. Far from being oriented towards a unitary *telos* of modernity—that basic
assumption of both modernization and dependency theories—the criticisms of

modernity that they articulated, above all, in essay form reveal original and complex "projects of modernity" that may even enrich the social sciences (cfr. Miller 2008).

However, these debates emerged not only out of the abstract discourses that made their way to Latin America from Europe or the United States, but were also unleashed by other cultural, as well as academic, experiences that modernization propitiated in the 19th century in this part of the world. In this context, the critique of positivism is particularly important.

1.5   Positivism as Ideology

If we assume that freedom from the tutelage of religion is an essential characteristic of modernity, then a glance at the history of Mexico reveals that this country must have been set on a path towards modernization from the 19th century. Liberalism which in that century could flourish although in a limited form as a political-social force declared war on religion and its most important institution: the Catholic Church. In that 'war', liberal forces in Mexico succeeded in reducing the Church's influence, though many knew that—despite this loss of institutional influence—it continued to be very strong "in the minds of Mexicans" (cfr. Villegas 1992: 12). For this reason efforts were made to implement educational reform as a key weapon in the struggle against the Church. Mexican President Benito Juárez (1806–1872) decreed this reform and Gabino Barreda, a professor of medicine and philosophy (1820–1881), organized it and provided its fundamental ideas. Similar to other parts of Latin America,[5] positivism was to supply the guiding orientation.

Positivism imposed a way of thinking oriented by a strict scientism and nourished by diverse sources, most important among them Haeckel's biologism, Spencer's evolutionism and, especially, the doctrine of Auguste Comte (cfr. ibid.: 15). It is precisely the realization that political and social processes can be analyzed and controlled through scientific methods that explains how Comte's sociology attained such a key position. This turn towards positivism involved not only abandoning the Catholic Church, but also a strong emphasis on humanism. In this regard, Gabino Barreda wrote: "Nature is no longer a series of concepts but a vast laboratory whose agent is Man […]" (cfr.: 13).

Paradoxically, however, this humanism was soon undermined by the very positivism that had spawned it. Justo Sierra (1848–1912) was among the first to realize that through its glorification of scientific reasoning positivism also generated a new kind of "myth". Sierra was not so sure that the production of knowledge oriented by the natural sciences was the only valid kind because it reduces the understanding of Man to only his rational capacities.

In addition to these cognitive and epistemological reflections that derived in a critique of positivism, there were also political motives. During the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1880, 1884–1911) positivism became a State ideology. Waving

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[5]It is important to mention, first, countries like Argentina, Brazil and Chile.

the banner of *Order and progress*, Díaz justified the dictatorship that would eventually trigger the 1910 Revolution. In the 1940s, the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea expounded—in an important book on positivism in Mexico (here Zea 1968)—that this became an 'ideological instrument' of the new dominant classes, with which they intended to unify Mexico's extraordinarily heterogeneous society. But results on the ground were very distinct, for between a Europeanized urban elite, on the one hand, and, on the other, the impoverished, largely indigenous, rural population, there opened an enormous gap both social and cultural in nature. By the late 19th century—according to Zea's diagnosis—positivism and its associate, achieving "order", had roundly defeated liberalism, a tendency reflected as well in the institutions of higher education. Zea wrote: "Liberalism had completed its mission; Mexican youth formed in the ideas of positivism wanted nothing other than order" (Zea 1968: 179).

Also interesting in this context is the fact that through the prism of positivism oriented by evolutionary theory and a radical teleology of progress, political thought began to be determined by a logic that shaped the social and cultural differences among the diverse groups and social strata into a temporal logic similar to the one we find later in modernization theory. It was in this sense that Andrés Molina Enríquez (1865–1940), for example, argued that Mexico's different ethnic groups were living in distinct stages of Mexican evolution. Despite his criticism of the Díaz regime, Molina Enríquez believed that a dictatorship was necessary to level out those differences (cfr. Molina Enríquez 1999; Villegas 1992: 16s.).

Against these and other ideas that positivism awoke in Mexico the first half of the 20th century produced various volleys of criticism. In this regard, the Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro—like Zea, a member of the so-called *Hiperion*[6] group—wrote in 1953, in a clear critique of the homogenous and linear conception of time that Molina had introduced into positivism: "Historical events have nothing to do with natural occurrences; they originate in the temporal unfolding of existence, not in the measure of time of the world" (Villoro 1977: 9).

It is important to note at this point that the critique of positivism gave rise to ideas that soon profoundly impregnated Mexican thought, anticipating a critique of many aspects of later modernization theories. Positivism and, above all, the critique it propitiated, led Mexican thought along a trajectory that eventually adopted a very peculiar form. The agglomeration of ideas that surfaced would prove to be of no small importance for sociology or, perhaps better, for "sociological thought", in Mexico, as they combine anti-positivism with a "new" humanism and the vision of a different modernity as "world consciousness" (see Kozlarek 2011).

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[6]A group of young philosophers formed in Mexico in the late 1940s.

1.6   Towards a New Culture Under the Sign of Humanism

The Mexican Revolution did coincide with the founding of a group of intellectuals and academics known as the *Ateneo de la Juventud*. The relation between this group, which included among its members writers and philosophers, and the true agenda of the Revolution is at first sight distant. Though some members temporarily expressed political ambitions and came to occupy important positions in the administration of the post-revolutionary State, it appears that their interests were far removed from the everyday affairs of politics and the bureaucracy, and focused much more on the domains of theory and reflection; in short, on culture (cfr. Quintanilla 2008). Although the *ateneístas* (i.e., the members of the *Ateneo*) were concerned with social and political transformations, in their opinion these could only be achieved if accompanied by corresponding cultural changes. Abelardo Villegas explains that the *ateneístas'* social concerns "were determined by a peculiar focus, that of morals and culture, and more importantly, of culture as a moral instrument" (Villegas 1992: 36).

This means that the *ateneístas* aspired to a new culture that, first of all, had to distance itself from positivism. They found the coordinates that would guide this program of cultural renewal principally in an explicit humanism, as well as in a world-consciousness that recognized itself equally in a multicultural "cosmopolitism" and in the conviction that human actions and thinking form an indissoluble nexus with the world. In what follows, I discuss some of the ideas of members of the *Ateneo*. It is my contention that Octavio Paz can be seen as one of the few who rescued the project of the *Ateneo* during WWII and after in a time in which modernization theory became more and more influential.

Antonio Caso (1883–1946) was a philosopher in a country and at a time in which philosophy did not yet exist, as Susana Quintanilla recently reminded us (Quintanilla 2008). At the same time, he was one of Mexico's first sociologists. On two occasions he held the position of Rector of the country's largest university (the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico*, 1920, 1921–1923), and his complete published works fill eleven imposing volumes. It matters not whether we prefer to consider Caso as a philosopher, sociologist or government functionary, for in all these occupations he never ceased to be a humanist. In some passages from his writings we find direct evidence of this; for example, in a programmatic text entitled *The New Humanism* (*El nuevo humanismo*).

Caso considered that one of humanism's tasks consisted in distancing itself from the "intellectualism" that in his opinion had begun with the philosophy of Descartes and culminated in positivism "in the philosophical traditions of the Modern Age" (Caso 1973: 66). What disturbed him about this tradition was its inability to understand man in his totality. The separation of spirit and body, or subject from object, so essential to Descartes' philosophy, was based—Caso wrote—time and again on the idea of the separation of man from the world. He, in contrast, believed that it is not possible to understand man separate from the world.

Caso also reproached philosophers who followed this tradition for assuming that truth existed beyond man, and deemed positivism an extreme example of this.

Countering the excesses of positivism he affirmed that it was absolutely impossible to know truth independently of man and that truth is always revealed through, and for, man. In this sense, "The fundamental truth of all philosophy is an anthropological truth […]" (ibid.: 66), which also means that "[…] every philosophical system is, rigorously, humanist" (67). Clearly, Caso advocated a philosophy that concretely returned man to the center, but one that could not understand man in the absence of his link to the world.

One determining element of Caso's belief in the indissoluble nexus between man and the world is the understanding that human beings are always actors *in* the world. Conceiving of man and the world as separated one from the other is absurd given the primacy of an action-centered anthropology like the one that Caso found in the philosophy of North American pragmatism (cfr. also Joas 1999). He saw his humanism as a double discovery: "a discovery of man and of the world" (ibid.: 68).

Another essay by Caso, *Our Human Mission* (*Nuestra misión humana*, 1976), contains two complementary phrases that not only announce the man-world nexus, but also deduce from it moral consequences. The first phrase says: "The world is not yet fully made/The construction of the world not yet finished" (55), while the second adduces that: "man is not yet fully made/The construction of man not yet finished" (ibid.: 60). According to Caso, neither man nor the world are finished products but, perhaps better, are still on the path towards perfection. And this conviction that man is, and must be, striving to achieve his perfection forms part of the fundamental ideas of humanism (cfr. also Fromm 1981). What stands out in Caso's humanism, however, is that it links man's aspiration to perfect himself to the perfection of the world.

But what provides the orientation for these two intertwined processes? Caso's answer is: morality. In a perfect world with an equally perfect man, morality would be superfluous, but because we are living in a still unfinished world and striving—still imperfectly—to fully realize our human quality, we require a morality that shows us the way.

The question asked of all moral philosophy is: Where do its normative pretensions find their orientations? In a short article published on October 22, 1943 in the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*, Caso offers a clear answer. Citing Johann Gottfried Herder, he admits that his humanist moral philosophy is instructed by a historical example: Jesus Christ. When he says of Herder: "His humanism becomes Christianity!" (cfr. Caso 1985a: 243) we can, with no doubt whatsoever, set out from the assumption that this Mexican philosopher seeks to emulate his German forebear, in whose conception religion and humanism are interlaced in a most peculiar way: humanism is neither fragmented by Church dogma, nor does it postulate a radically anti-religious attitude. The life of Christ becomes, to the contrary, a historical example around which all human beings can orient themselves if they wish to make the humanness imbued in them reality.

Caso wrote that taking the *biography* of Jesus Christ as the ideal of humanism offers the advantage, compared to the universalist philosophy of history, of allowing "the universal" to be represented "in the singular" (cfr. Caso 1985b: 248). Although he chose to follow Christ's example, Caso clearly recognized that other people could also be examples to follow on the path towards man's perfection. It is important to

note in this context that this path coincides with its goal. Caso did not believe that humanism could, or should, establish something like a clearly definable universal *telos*. Rather, he wrote, the aim is to not abandon the path of humanism.

Similar to Caso, the writer and essayist Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959) belonged to the generation of cultural reformers in Mexico whose anti-positivism and anti-intellectualism were compacted into a *sui generis* humanism. Reyes also recognized the need to link humanism to the understanding of human action, stressing that the idea of "humanism" must not be condensed into any pre-determined content: "More than a specific content, it is understood as an orientation. The orientation consists in placing all our knowledge and all our activities at the service of human wellbeing" (Reyes 2000: 403).

Humanism is not only a theoretical and spiritual attitude but, first and foremost, action; thus, humanism is always principally practical. For Reyes, the understanding of the practical quality of humanism entails recognizing that man must not conceive himself as independent of the world. "Man is not alone, suspended in nothingness, but is placed in the world" (ibid.: 406). Reyes makes no effort to conceal the ambiguity of the concept "world", despite the fact that it is precisely there that its virtue lies, because all the different worlds to which he alludes manifest the innumerable facets of the human quality. Hence, the understanding of man is linked to the distinct concepts of the world. If there were but one world or but one concept of the world, the margin for defining man would likewise be reduced. Reyes wrote that for man the "world" is "a second person" (ibid.: 414), the world is all that which man is not. But this also means that man is everything that the world is not. World and man exist in a mutually-conditioned dialectical relation.

But the "world" is relevant to Reyes' humanism in yet another sense. Like many other Latin American intellectuals, Reyes was a citizen of the world to whom traveling and studying foreign cultures came naturally. Consciousness of the need to know the world is intimately linked to the cultural self-understanding of mestizos. This is characterized by the idea that Mexico is a kind of melting pot of at least two cultures: one autochthonous and pre-Hispanic, the other European. When the cultures of Europe and America mixed in the New World the result of this cultural miscegenation (*mestizaje*) was a new trans-Atlantic culture that transcended spaces. The issue of *mestizaje* is among the most important constants found in the works of Latin American intellectuals, for it is only from this perspective that the world takes on another aspect, no longer the space where each one can withdraw into his own field, his own country, his own culture. It has become an abundant wellspring of ideas and cultural wealth in the generation of which all human beings can potentially participate while it is simultaneously available to all. Appropriating elements of "foreign" cultures thus becomes a virtue, and knowledge of the deficiency of one's own culture a kind of fundamental experience (cfr. Ette 2001: 317ss.; Miller 2008: 109ss.)

Reyes stands out primarily for his knowledge of the culture of ancient Greece. Now, one might well argue that this did not necessarily correspond to an interest in "foreign" cultures but, rather, to the fact that European culture was considered the hegemonic culture in Latin America and that Helenocentrism was part of the

reproduction of Eurocentrism in the New World. However, this suspicion is invalidated by Reyes' handling of the legacy of ancient culture: not only did he yearn to embrace the originals with devotion, he also utilized them to reflect through them his own Mexican reality.[7]

One example of this creative appropriation is presented in Reyes' drama entitled *Cruel Iphigenia* (*Ifigenia cruel*), which he based not only on Greek material but also its assimilation by Goethe, out of which that German poet thought he had created something "infernally human". Reyes utilizes Goethe in an analogy of the ancient model to reflect on his own historical experience. The result, as the Romanist Ottmar Ette has stated (cfr. Ette 2001: 317ss.), is a work of cultural creation that consciously connects with universal themes and attempts to continue revitalizing them with current ones. That which began in the Old World endures in the New. Ette writes: "Mexican history also eventually flows into a historical progression, a locomotion that, according to Alfonso Reyes, commenced with the humanization of man in the eastern region of the Mediterranean" (ibid.: 342). Reyes and other Latin American humanists conceived their mission precisely in this continuation of world culture. It is primordially in Reyes where Nicola Miller perceives awareness of the possibility that Latin American culture could be understood as a "culture of synthesis" (cfr. 2008: 125ss.). For Reyes this meant, first, that any form of cultural essentialism is fundamentally flawed, or even absurd, "in the current situation of expanding communications networks and geographical leveling" (cited in: ibid.: 125).

Especially interesting for our context is Reyes' critique of the homogenous and linear conception of time. Reyes refuted, very much in the style of postcolonial arguments, Hegel's "geographic fatalism" (Miller), which assumes that the societies and cultures of America were on a lower rung of the civilizing process of humanity, compared to those of Europe. Anticipating as well current postcolonial theory, Reyes was convinced that modernity began with the conquest and colonization of America (cfr. ibid.: 118s.). Seen from these two fundamental convictions, most European philosophies of history appeared to Reyes to be totally imperialistic, for they mainly proposed arguments that justified the final contingent of that history which would lead to European domination of the world (cfr. ibid.: 120).

These reflections did not induce Reyes to file away the concept of progress, though he was convinced that history should be understood as an integrally-contingent

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[7]The essayist and literary critic Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884–1946), Dominican by birth, combined some arguments in favor of fostering the study of classics of European thought in Mexico. On the one hand, he considered this an important counterweight to the positivism mentioned above. However, in a speech entitled *The culture of the humanities* in 1914 he also stressed that teaching those classics entailed warning of the "narrowness" of one's own thought (Henríquez Ureña 2001: 598). But for the Latin American reality of the early 20th century—he said—this meant as well that the study of the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome had to be complemented, for reasons of congruence, by the study of "Spanish, French, Italian, English and German literatures" as well as by updating the wisdoms of the "Aryans, Semites, Indians and Chinese" (598s.). The task consisted in "incessantly judging, comparing, searching and experimenting" (599) in order to approach the "perfection of man". Henríquez Ureña saw "perfection" in the unity of man, which can only be achieved in a true world culture that no longer suppresses particularities and differences but that focuses the universal through them.

process that in no sense includes any guarantee of progress. Miller summarized Reyes' ideas as follows: "History was not entirely arbitrary, then, in his view, but it was capricious" (ibid.: 121). Nonetheless, these reflections did bring Reyes very close, in another sense, to certain strands of postcolonial arguments, for he believed that the thought of his time committed the fatal error of thinking principally in temporal categories. Reyes, in contrast, defended decidedly the need to once again unite time and space. In America especially there is a series of *places*—Mexico City was one for Reyes—that cannot be comprehended except by recognizing, he wrote, that it is inside them that identities are formed which provoke a very unique simultaneity among past, present and future (cfr. ibid.: 124s.).

In 1940, the philosopher Samuel Ramos (1897–1959) affirmed that: "In no epoch as in ours is the affirmation of the unity of man more opportune, for now, more than ever, it is lost" (Ramos 1990: 73). This phrase is from a book pretentiously entitled *Towards a New Humanism* (*Hacia un nuevo humanismo*) in which Ramos seeks to convince his readers that the increasing fragmentation of humanity cannot be counteracted except, precisely, by a "new humanism", one that recovers the "central position of man" (ibid.: 72).

But Ramos also understands that this is no easy task. In his view we inhabit a deceptive "civilization" that simulates being good for man, but "could well appear […] as a monster that, once its chains are broken, threatens to destroy its very masters and creators. […]." Ramos ends his critique adducing that humanity "arrives at the paradoxical situation of needing to defend itself from its very own civilization" (ibid.: 69).

This brief paragraph from his works suffices to show that Ramos was strongly influenced by European cultural criticism. Here, as elsewhere, he mentions Nietzsche and, especially, Simmel as his sources. But it is noteworthy that Ramos avoids falling into the traps of nihilism. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, his firm belief in the human being, his humanism. But to understand this characteristic we must once again take into account the historical and geographic backdrop: although Ramos published his manifest in favor of a new humanism in 1940—during the period in which a new World War was brewing in Europe—he penned it in Mexico: a country that at the time was understood as a kind of safe haven, as well as a creative laboratory for the world culture that originated in Europe. In this sense, Ramos believed that Europe had lost its authority in questions of humanism, and that the baton was being passed to the "New World".

Many more such examples could be added. Some years ago, the Mexican philosopher Alberto Saladino García published a hefty two-volume anthology that reconstructs the humanism of virtually all the important 20th-century thinkers of his country (cfr. Saladino García 2004, 2005). In my comments here on Mexican humanism I have sought to emphasize that it is deeply rooted in the history of ideas in that country, and that Mexico's rush towards the 20th century, which began with the first great revolution of that century, was based on the decision to undertake a cultural re-creation founded upon humanism. This humanist re-birth reverberates profoundly in the works of Octavio Paz, which also sketch the profile of an interesting sociology of modernity, as I will show in the following chapters.

Chapter 2
Octavio Paz: A Critique of Sociology or a Critical Sociology?

Abstract The chapter offers a brief review of some earlier studies that were interested in Paz's work from a sociological perspective. It will become evident that they were, however, especially interested in political issues. In contrast, I will argue that Paz is not only an interesting object of study for political sociology, but that in parts of his work he himself expresses a sociology, and that this sociology is inseparably linked to the historical experience of the Mexican Revolution. However, his criticism of the conventional forms of sociology can only be properly understood when it is contrasted to models of sociologies that had a positive influence on his work. Here it is important to mention, above all, the influence of the aforementioned *Collège de Sociologie*. The group of French intellectuals that went under this name proposed a consequent parallel reading of hard social facts and culture that captured Paz' interest. In fact, Paz' most important book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, can be seen as an exercise in just the kind of research that the *Collège* stood for. Another important idea that Paz shared with some members of the *Collège*, especially Roger Caillois, was that of the poetic experience.

2.1   An Approach to the Sociology of Octavio Paz

It is difficult to overlook the fact that most published studies on the works of Octavio Paz discuss his poetry and aesthetics, although the large majority of his opus consists of essays and papers on diverse topics, many of them of interest when read from the perspective of the cultural sciences.[1] One possible explanation may lie in the fact that in his essays Paz often took polemical positions that differed from the conventional opinions of intellectuals and politicians on both the left and right, and that this

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[1] The monumental edition of Paz' works edited in Mexico by *Fondo de Cultura Economica*—which was overseen by Paz himself before his death in 1998—consists of 15 volumes, but his poetry—curiously—fills only two.

disaccredited his thought in general (cfr. Rodríguez 1996: 14ss.). Another reason may be that Paz repeatedly voiced his wish to be recognized principally as a poet. In this section, however, I intend to demonstrate that his preference for *poetics* did not entail devoting himself to purely aesthetic pursuits, but that his works reflect a very particular way of exploring the world; one by no means incompatible with sociology (cfr. Sect. 3.2). Whatever the case, in recent years this curious abstention from examining Paz' other writings seems to have been overcome to some extent and his essays that elaborate a social, political and, in the broadest sense, cultural, diagnosis of modernity seem to be receiving the attention they deserve.

This process reveals that Paz' works are surprisingly no longer of interest only to literary scholars, but are being read from the perspective of various disciplines: philosophy (Astorga 2004), political philosophy (Arriola 2008), political science (Grenier 2001; Söllner 2009), and cultural anthropology (Weinberg 2009), as well as sociology (Rodríguez 1996; Capetillo 2005, 2009; Kozlarek 2009). These pioneering works that seek to analyze Paz' essays through the lenses of different social and cultural sciences is of great importance, for they have opened an intellectual terrain that went unnoticed not only in Europe and the United States but also in Mexico, setting aside a few early initiatives that failed to produce significant results.[2]

Now, by focusing interest, especially, on the appropriation of Paz' essays by sociology, we can distinguish three earlier attempts that I would like to outline briefly:

1. For his 500-page Master's thesis (published in 1996), the aforementioned Xavier Rodríguez Ledesma undertook one of the broadest attempts to date to read the works of this Mexican poet from a sociological point of view, though the title does not reflect this: *The Political Thought of Octavio Paz* (cfr. Rodríguez 1996). In his thesis, Rodríguez discusses why, in 1996 at the *Faculty of Political and Social Sciences* of Mexico's National University (UNAM), he had to defend the merits of presenting a thesis on Octavio Paz to obtain his Master's degree in sociology; a justification based principally on two strategies. The first emphasized similarities to Lewis Coser's definition (see Coser 1972) of the relation between literature and sociology; while in the second Rodríguez argued that, as a sociologist, he was justified in analyzing the writings of a man of letters because they offer reflections on topics of great interest to sociology as well.

In this regard, the three central chapters in which Rodríguez presents his analysis of Paz' works are seen to be oriented by three sociological themes. The first focuses on Paz' relation to Marxism and socialism; the second—which also pertains clearly to the field of political sociology—analyzes Paz' critique of Mexico's political system; and the third discusses the concept of modernity. At times Rodríguez struggles to convince the reader that his work is really sociological, because issues and topics that evidently related to political science often dominate his argumentation.

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[2]One of the best-known is probably Habermas' affirmation that Octavio Paz is "an advocate of modernity" (cfr. Sect. 3.3).

Rodríguez' second strategy does little to substantially modify this. He elucidates this strategy in the first chapters where he explains that his sociological interest in Paz is justified, above all, by the social function that Paz performed as an intellectual. On the one hand, the sociological view of intellectuals makes it possible to explore the "cultural life" of a society (cfr. 9); but Rodríguez emphasizes, on the other, that the institutional interpenetration of intellectuals with "political power" is relevant to understanding Mexican society: "In [Mexico] touching any topic in the intellectual domain necessarily entails awareness of the relations established between the intellectual world and power" (ibid.: 10).

Here once again, Rodríguez seems to return to political science; after all, does the relation between intellectuals and "power" not belong more to this discipline?

Other works that have undertaken a similar task discuss in alternate ways how to thematize the social-practical aspect of intellectuals—that is, their specific mode of social action—and how this allows us to transform reflections by intellectuals into a sociological topic. One good demonstration is Alex Demirović's attempt to describe the "praxis of intellectuals" using the example of the members of the Frankfurt School (Demirović 1999). While striving to develop a sociological argument, Demirović underlines the difficulty of distinguishing between the disciplines of sociology, on the one hand, and political science, on the other (cfr. ibid.: 18). In the end, he succeeds by determining the intellectual's place of action. In this regard he writes: "Habermas pointed out, correctly, that the sphere of the intellectual—the public sphere—does not coincide precisely with the State, but complements it" (ibid.: 18s.). For Demirović, the intellectual's arena of action is precisely this public domain or, better, the "civil society", as he also calls it in allusion to Gramsci.

This fixation on the action of intellectuals in the public sphere allows separating the social from the political and, therefore, the domain of sociology from that of political science or, better, political theory. Might Rodríguez' book have achieved greater sociological acuity had he focused on the *social action* of intellectuals in the public realm instead of the relations between intellectuals and political power? Although Rodríguez does not discuss this issue explicitly, there are indications that lead us to suppose that the reality of public opinion in Mexico is quite distinct from that of Germany. For example, when Rodríguez stresses that however strong Paz' influence may have been on "public sphere" it never came close to rivaling the primordial influence of Mexico's powerful television networks (cfr. ibid.: 35).

In this sense, the blurry distinction between sociology and political science could be understood as a problem that reflects the difficulty of differentiating between the political domain and a clearly definable social sphere in Mexico. As mentioned above Fernando Castañeda has pointed out that this supposition may be one reason why "academic sociology" in Mexico is understood quite naturally as a political space that makes up for the absence of any real political public sphere (cfr. Castañeda 2004).

But these circumstances do not limit Rodríguez' sociological pretensions in his analysis of Paz whose works, he argues, do in principle permit a sociological approach. We concede that Rodríguez is correct in writing that "[…] as sociologists we have something to say on what Octavio Paz thinks and writes, though he was not

a sociologist, political scientist or philosopher" (ibid.: 60). It is clearly possible to identify in his works topics that are of interest, especially, to a sociological perspective; themes that lead us to comprehend Paz in his role as an intellectual, and describe in sociological terms how he fulfilled it. But this does not exhaust the possibilities for sociological analyses of Paz' works.

The case of Octavio Paz opens the opportunity to explore intellectual activity in public opinion in yet another way: this one based on the instruments that he developed and applied to achieve results in his public activity. Here we must recall that Paz served as Editor of two important journals: *Plural* (1971–1976) and *Vuelta* (1976–1998). In his *Prologue* to the first issue of *Vuelta*, he wrote that while the aim was to create a literary journal, literary pretensions could not be separated from critique, and that the latter was not limited only to literature, but was to be understood always as political as well. Paz summarized this compensatory interaction between literature and politics as follows:

> True, literature does not save the world; [but] it does, at least, make it visible: represents it, or, better, presents it. Sometimes it transfigures it; at others it transcends it. The presentation of reality almost always includes its critique (Paz 1976: 5).

The academic processing of these journals under Paz' editorship, their influence on public opinion and politics, and the cultural and political polemics and debates they spurred and in which they sought to intervene, constitute an as yet largely unexplored field for research.

2. Some years ago, the Canadian political scientist Yvon Grenier published a "cultural-sociological" analysis of Paz' political essays that is also relevant to this overview (Grenier 2001). His focus can be understood as that of an action theorist for it is impregnated with the idea that social actors always act through the medium of a culture that, while clearly influencing them, does not absolutely predetermine their options for action. The cause of this—he writes—is the creativity inherent in all human action. As we shall see, this idea is totally consistent with Paz' reflections on this issue; therefore, Paz not only acted creatively, but was actually aware that he was doing so. Grenier emphasizes that artists, intellectuals and scientists all make conscious use of the resource of creativity:

> […] it is tempting to postulate that the indeterminacy of human beings –their capacity to change their environment and change themselves– is particularly pronounced in their most creative activities: arts and science (ibid.: 4).

Referring to Margaret Archer's theory of culture, Grenier then demonstrates the clear anti-functionalist orientation of his understanding of action through culture. However, his intention is to strengthen not only his argument of action theory but also a political argument, for he considers the functionalist idea of the relation between culture and action basically as a consequence of the political necessities of the Nation-State: "The very concept of 'culture' emerged to designate a largely top-down construction of a public space by the nation-state elite" (Grenier 2001: 7).

Grenier writes that this signaling of the creativity of human action within and through culture challenges the culture of "national" reproduction by establishing on first principles that cultures cannot simply be *re*produced. He holds that the creativity in the action of artists and intellectuals is characterized in this political context also by a particular accentuation, one that entails weakening any kind of dogmatics, be it that of the political *status quo* or of certain opposing cultures. Thus, it is to be expected that the postures of artists and intellectuals will always be "non-conformist" or "critical" to the highest degree.

Assuming that Paz has this fundamental understanding of non-conformist action, Grenier seeks to explain why this Mexican intellectual lost, time and again, the sympathies of both political officials and leftist oppositors. Grenier sustains that, in principle, Paz' political opinions are "incredibly slippery" (ibid.: xi) and therefore cannot be wedged into simple dualist schemes.

But does this mean that Paz was an opportunist, a relativist bereft of normative orientation? Grenier anticipates such suspicions. In his view, Paz' complex and often ambivalent postures are a result of not only his creativity but also of the fundamental cultural coordinates that he followed during his lifetime in an ambivalent, reciprocal relation: on the one hand—Grenier writes—the Enlightenment, on the other, Romanticism.

> […] Paz draws inspiration from both the ideas of the Enlightenment (especially its liberal incarnation) and from those of the romantic age, two rival intellectual movements. This inspires interesting speculations on the flexibility and adaptability of liberal (and romantic) thought (ibid.: x).

But what Grenier's focus on the sociology of action and culture primordially visualizes is, ultimately, an anthropological-humanist horizon that nourishes both his concept of culture and Paz' thought. It is this anthropological-humanist orientation that, counter to all biases, places the non-determinist nature of human action in the very center. Thus, it is valid for the sociological understanding of both culture and Paz' works in general; a notion that Axel Honneth and Hans Joas expressed in their attempt to redefine the anthropological foundations of the social sciences:

> Anthropology should not be […] misunderstood as the doctrine of the constants of human cultures that are maintained throughout history or of an inalienable substance of human nature but, rather, in the sense of a query as to the previous inalienable conditions of human variability […] (Honneth and Joas 1980: 13).

This is to say that Grenier's proposal to explore Paz' essays in terms of cultural sociology and action is not just a methodological instrument used to unseal this author's works from outside, but a vehicle that allows the interpreter to penetrate into the most intrinsic aspects of those writings. What prevails here is the unquestioned comprehension of the inexhaustible creativity and liberty of human action condensed into an anthropological-humanist understanding: "Such an approach ultimately rests on a philosophical conception of the human

experience that is also central in Paz's thought: human beings are condemned to be free" (Grenier 2001: 11).[3]

3. Grenier's proposal clearly transcends a sociological analysis of Paz' works by going on to identify aspects of social theory—mainly those of the creativity of human action in, and through, culture—that Paz seems to confirm in his writings, sometimes passively, at others, explicitly. This essential equality of sociology and literary works brings to mind the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman (cfr. Bauman 2000). But they must be followed by the question of whether we can go so far as to attribute to Paz' work something like a sociology of its own. Some attempts to answer this question exist.

Many opine that while Paz' writings were unquestionably inspired in part by cultural anthropology, psychology and, of course, sociology, this does not mean that they develop, effectively or explicitly, an anthropology, social psychology, or sociology. However, some authors—and I would include myself—insist on this point, for they hold the view that Paz' works do indeed contain a sociology.

One of the first authors to make this understanding explicit was the Cuban literary scholar and Hispanist, Enrico Mario Santí. Chapter IV of his book, *El acto de las palabras*, entitled "Introducción al *Laberinto de la soledad*", presents one of the best orientations to Paz' classic book yet penned (cfr. Santí 1997a: 123–231). Santí's "Introduction" is especially interesting because it places the diverse topics discussed in the book in a systematic context, while also reconstructing the multiple methodological and theoretical pretensions that so often intersect and complement each other. Indeed, he devotes a whole sub-section to Paz' sociology, which he interprets as a "sociology of the sacred" (cfr. ibid.: 196ss; also: Lafaye 2013).

At first sight, this term may seem rather overwhelming. Why should Paz' sociology be understood as a "sociology of the sacred" when so many other sociological topics jump off the pages of *The Labytinth of Solitude*? But Santí is not concerned so much with extracting sociological topics and analyses as with demonstrating the influences that lay behind Paz' sociology. And it turns out that they can be traced back to the sociology of the sacred and the *Collège de Sociologie*, rooted in the Durkheimian school; a source that was especially fruitful for Paz.

Santí reminds us, justifiably, that one particular member of the *Collège* exerted a special and long-lasting influence on Paz: the French scholar Roger Caillois (1913–1978). Caillois would surely have caught Paz' attention even had he not been well-versed in French culture (cfr. Ruy Sánchez 1991: 14), for he was exiled in Argentina during World War II and wrote in the journal *Sur* that Paz not only read with passion but also to which he contributed essays (cfr. ibid.: 196; Moebius 2006: 361). Later, from 1945 to 1951, Paz lived in Paris, where he had contact with members of the *Collège* (cfr. Santí 1997a: 198).

In addition to these biographical coincidences, we can identify coincidences of content. For example, like some *Collège* members, Paz articulated an interest in highlighting the "sacred" motivations behind social action in modern societies.

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[3]I will return to this point later.

Finally, we can add the fact that Paz explicitly expressed his admiration for the kind of social research found in the work of Caillois, specifically, and the *Collège* more generally.

Of course, Santí notes that: "It would be an exaggeration to reduce the entire analytical enterprise of *El laberinto de la soledad* (at least the first part) to a mere updating of the agenda of the *Collège de Sociologie*" (Ibid.: 196); but it would be naïve to argue that the *Collège* in no way influenced Paz' thought. I analyze these coincidences and differences in greater detail below; here I only wish to demonstrate that we can, in effect, assume a pretension of sociological research in at least some of Paz' essays, a sociology oriented by a pre-existing program of sociological research (cfr. Sect. 2.4).

Santí further observes in his chapter, though only in a footnote, that perhaps the entire thematic approach of *El Laberinto*, with its focus on the idea of solitude, coincides with other sociological constructions of the time; citing as an example David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

Other authors have stressed other possible sociological influences on Paz: for example, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce's attempt to see *El laberinto* primordially as an application of the "formal sociology" associated with Georg Simmel (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009). Evidence for this argument is less convincing than Santí's proposal to read Paz' sociology in relation to the *Collège*, but here the main goal should not be to detect the *only* sociological influence manifested in what is so clearly a literary work, but to demonstrate that Paz's essays—regardless of the sources that may have nourished them—reveal a genuinely sociological impulse, a genuinely sociological interest, and, with restrictions, methods also genuinely sociological. Paz was not a sociologist, but his works—my thesis sustains—do indeed contain a sociology. But before attempting to reconstruct some aspects of this sociology, I must first clarify how this affirmation meshes with the fact that Paz criticized academic "sociology" frequently and vehemently.

While my proposal is based on those outlined above, it seeks to go beyond them. While it would not be incorrect to say that Paz was guided by European sociologists who today occupy a peripheral position in the lineage of the discipline, it is equally clear that Paz' sociology is hardly understandable if we ignore the influences that acted on him in the Latin American and, more importantly, Mexican, contexts. In this regard, one determining factor is how Paz positioned himself relative to the "traditions" of "sociological thought" discussed previously. Clearly, he was critical of many conventional sociologies—not only modernization theories but also the dependency theories so key to Latin America—so his critique of modernity must be understood more as a critical cultural sociology that was not only oriented by the anti-positivism of post-revolutionary thought in Mexico, but that sought to replace it with a "sociology of experiences" that has never been appreciated in Mexico or elsewhere as a valuable and meritorious contribution to sociology.

This sociology finds protagonists not only in theoretical and intellectual contexts but also in concrete historical experiences, especially the Mexican Revolution.

2.2   The Mexican Revolution and the Experience of a Postcolonial Modernity

Sociology is the self-reflexive discourse of modern societies, but this process of self-reflection is always impregnated with concrete historical experiences. Revolutions play a decisive role in the self-understanding of modern societies. As Hannah Arendt observed:

> For the modernity of the revolution there is probably nothing so characteristic as the fact that it vindicates beforehand defending the cause of humanity (Arendt 1994: 10).

The understanding of modernity found in Octavio Paz' writings was also impregnated, and essentially so, with the historical experiences of a revolutions: especially the Mexican Revolution of 1910. But the historical experience of that revolution revealed a different modernity to Paz, one that I call "postcolonial modernity".

Paz was also aware, however, that particular historical experiences are complemented by the experiences that all human beings make: "Although each individual is unique and all peoples different, everyone passes through the same experiences" (Paz 1993: 30). What Paz refers to here are not contingent historical experiences but those that reside in the *human condition*. I will comment in greater detail below on these "anthropological experiences" that Paz deemed a kind of interpretative pattern for the historical-contingent experiences. Here I only wish to foreshadow that discussion by pointing out that Paz believed that all human beings are exposed to the experience of solitude, and that it is precisely this experience which motivates them to bond to other people. He understood this dialectic of "solitude" and "communion" as the motor of history in general; thus he wrote that historical experiences are "intimate and collective", one's own but at the same time "of everyone" (cfr. Paz 1993: 22).

This means that personal experiences in historical situations constitute a legitimate way to access the social and cultural realities of distinct historical moments. And this is valid even when the historical experiences are not one's own. In this regard, Paz' book *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* is most revealing. At first sight, it appears to be the biography of a nun and poetess in New Spain and, hence, a work relevant, in the strict sense, principally to the literary sciences. But what Paz set out to accomplish in this book does not end there, for he wished it to be understood as a work on the colonial history of Mexico (cfr. ibídem: 29), based on a method he called "restitution". Enrico Mario Santí detected—justifiably—in this "restitution" a methodological focus that seeks specific access to the past by ceding the word to voices long-disappeared (cfr. Santí 1997b: 132ss.). I would add that it is an effort to reconstruct the *experiences* made by concrete individuals with, and in, historical situations, in order to make history comprehensible for the present precisely through their *experiences*.

But Paz also cited his own experiences to access history, and not only that of Mexico. It would be difficult to separate his profound awareness of the great importance of the Mexican Revolution from his biography. He arrived in the world in 1914

to a country convulsed by Revolution. Because his father Octavio Paz Solórzano supported the revolution, Octavio spent most of his childhood with his mother at his grandfather's country home in Mixcoac—today part of Mexico City, but at the time a small town on its outskirts. But his father's activity was not the only factor that led Paz to identify with the Revolution, for in it he perceived nothing less than the possibility of constructing a new society and culture, one to which in a certain sense he would devote his entire *opus* (see Krauze 2011; Domínguez 2014). In homage to the group of intellectuals who from 1938 to 1941 accompanied him in the journal *Taller*, Paz wrote:

> […] for us, poetic and revolutionary activity were intertwined… the same thing. Changing man required, first, changing society… [This meant] the imperious need, poetic and moral, to destroy bourgeois society so that total man, poetic man, finally owner of himself, could appear. This position […] can be summarized thus: for most of the group, love, poetry and revolution were three burning synonyms (cited in: Monsiváis 2000: 35s.).

Now we may ask, what was the nature of the understandings that Paz extracted from the experiences with the first postcolonial revolution of the 20th century, and how did they influence his sociology? To answer this we must clarify why we could describe that historical event as "postcolonial". The reason is that the Mexican Revolution was a movement that sought not to liberate the proletariat—like the later October Revolution—but to resolve problems whose roots lay in the country's colonial past. Although Mexico had been independent for two hundred years, Paz believed this had been a "great fiasco" (cfr. Paz 1999: 623), lamenting the fact that unequal social structures emerged virtually unscathed from the ashes of the colonial period. But the deepest reason for the continuity of colonial structures was not so much a desire to maintain injustice and inequality, but the *lack* of any willingness to create something truly new from the stock of Mexico's own traditions. Paz felt that the colonial era had ended less because of the new forces that emerged to oppose it than the simple exhaustion of its cultural energies. In *El laberinto* he declares that independence actually pertained much more to the *conquest* than to an order that had clearly freed itself of its colonial legacy:

> Conquest and Independence seem to be moments of flux and reflux in a great historical wave that formed in the 15th century, spread to America, achieved a moment of beautiful equilibrium in the 16th and 17th centuries, before finally withdrawing, though not without first shattering into a thousand pieces (Paz 1994: 125).

If the end of the colonial era that Paz narrates with such sensitivity in his book on Sor Juana can only be described as agony (cfr. Paz 1991, 1998: 119), for it extinguished all remaining cultural, social or political vitality: then the period of "official" independence, destined to last exactly 100 years up to the outbreak of the Revolution, was a time of "postcolonial" rigidity.

This was expressed—Paz wrote—in the fact that nothing new was generated. Of course, this was not always easy to understand, for the languages of the new elites were always "modern": "an echo of the French revolutionaries and, especially, the ideas of North American Independence" (ibid.: 126), later of "liberalism" (131) and, finally, of "positivism" (133ss.; cfr. also Sect. 1.5). But for Paz all those languages

simply constituted "masks" that concealed reality instead of revealing it or fostering deep social and political changes. He wrote in 1950:

> The moral damage has been incalculable, penetrating deeply into zones of our being. We move in the lie with naturalness. For over one hundred years we have suffered authoritarian regimes that serve feudal oligarchies, though they use the language of freedom (ibid.: 127).

Here Paz argues that one characteristic of the postcolonial situation in Mexico was that the seeds of "modern" discourses fell upon infertile soil, while the gap separating social from political reality in those discourses continued to widen. It was the Revolution that so abruptly modified that situation: "The Mexican Revolution is a fact that broke into our history as a true revelation of our being" (ibid.: 137), the pinprick that burst the postcolonial bubble by forcing the political and social imagination to return to reality. It is above all this "realism" that Paz evokes time and again. He saw the Revolution as an act that overcame postcolonial lethargy only because people embraced each other, as at a party; bonding to others in a "communion" that was, for Paz, the saving grace of the Revolution.

> The Revolution barely has ideas. It is an explosion of reality: revolt and communion, a stirring up of long-dormant substances, a release into the air of many ferocities, many tendernesses and many refinements concealed for fear of being. And with whom does Mexico commune in this bloody fiesta? With itself, its own being. Mexico dares to be. The revolutionary explosion is a portentous fiesta in which the Mexican, drunk with his own being, finally comes to know, in a mortal embrace, the other Mexican (ibid.: 146).

No nationalist passion is expressed here; to the contrary: the normative horizon to which Paz always felt linked was that of humanity in its entirety. But he also knew that there was no one path to that universal. Rather, the path to man in general passed through very concrete experiences that people make in their own, respective historical circumstances. The Mexican Revolution was one experience of this kind; the experience through which Mexicans discovered themselves as Mexicans and, simultaneously, as human beings. "Being Mexican constitutes no special privilege or condemnation. The privilege and condemnation consist in being humans", Paz declared in 1967 in an interview with the Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis (Paz and Monsiváis 2000: 109). The Revolution constitutes the rediscovery of the human being, which can be replaced by no abstract knowledge, but can be produced only through "communion" with other human beings.

The Mexican Revolution thus performed a dual movement: on the one hand, a return to oneself, on the other, an approach towards "the other", the other *human being*. While revising the ideas that had concerned him in *El laberinto* in an autobiographical essay entitled *Itinerario*, Paz wrote:

> The revolutionary movement evolved in two directions: the encounter of Mexico with itself, where its historical originality and its fecundity reside; and, parallel to this, it was, and is, the continuation of different attempts to modernize the country [...] (Paz 1993: 100s.).

For Paz, "modernization" had different meanings; but in this case it constitutes, above all, a dialectical counterpart of itself. Modernization is, therefore, a movement towards a "communion" with the whole world and the human beings that inhabit it.

But one definitive aspect of this movement is that it cannot be separated from the consciousness of one's own traditions, as modernization theories sought to achieve. Paz entrusted the task of exhuming those long-buried traditions to intellectuals in modernizing societies, because only thus could the respective path towards one's own modernity be revealed: "Our tradition, if it was really alive and not just an inert form, would rediscover for us a universal tradition into which ours would be inserted, prolonged and justified" (1994: 149).

At this point it is important to establish the following: the experience of the postcolonial condition in Mexico and the manner in which the Mexican Revolution responded to it led Paz, with many other Mexican thinkers, to develop a notion of modernization decidedly distant not only from that of North American modernization theories, but also from revolutionary ideas derived from Marxism. In the Mexican setting it is particularly interesting that this approach was explicitly understood as a critique of the rectilinear time conception in those theories of modernization and revolution; a view that Paz developed in the late 1960s in a clearly sociological argument.

The text to which I refer was written in 1967, while Paz was serving as Mexico's ambassador to India, a place of origin that is in no sense unimportant. Paz lived in India for almost a year in 1952 and again from 1962 to 1968. Despite all the differences he detected and recognized in his comparisons of Mexico and India (see Domínguez 2014), he also understood the affinities that resulted from the colonial history of the two nations. He argued that an essential coincidence was that both were postcolonial societies seeking their own paths towards modernity, and that another was how in this process both were searching to connect with their own respective traditions. "Neither Indians nor Mexicans renounce their past; they recover and repaint it" (Paz 1995a: 148).

In this text, Paz further examines the idea of revolution and, especially, the importance it seems to hold for the self-understanding of modern societies. "The revolutionary is a philosopher or, at least, an intellectual: a man of ideas"[4] (1996a: 590). However, this understanding of revolution differs from that of the Mexican "Revolution", which was much more a spontaneous "revolt" that came into contact with ideas only later, in a second phase. But Paz' interest in this text centered not so much on historical differences but, as mentioned above, the *idea* of revolution and its importance for modern society. His allusion to the philosopher contains a reference to a defining particularity of the concept of revolution: "Universal like reason, it admits no exceptions and ignores both arbitrariness and mercy. Revolution: a word of the just and of those who administer justice" (ibid.).

But the real problem with this concept of revolution resides, Paz argues, less in the moralism of the fanatics of justice or, perhaps, in the universalism of the philosophers that seems to admit no exceptions, than in the conception of time that lends legitimation to this concept. To clarify this, Paz compares the conception of time that characterizes the concept of revolution today with the original form. And this

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[4]These ideas are influenced by the reading of Albert Camus's *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1953). On the important influence that Camus had on Paz see also Lafaye 2013.

leads him to conclude that "*re*volution" initially meant a movement directed towards the past. However, current *use* has forgotten this etymological particularity, so the logic of time that defines revolution now sees it moving in a straight line towards the future.

> The new meaning destroys the old one: the past will not return and the archetype of occurrence is not that which was but that which will be. In its original meaning, revolution was a word that affirmed the primacy of the past […]. The second meaning postulates the primacy of the future […]: the preeminence of the future, the belief in continuous progress and the perfectibility of the species, rationalism, disaccrediting tradition and authority, humanism. All these ideas fuse in that of rectilinear time: history conceived as a march. The irruption of profane time (ibid.: 591).

It is precisely this idea of revolution upon which Paz centers his critique, though he strives to clarify that this *idea* cannot be reduced to events that may be called "revolutions" in the strict sense. Rather, he defines the self-understanding of modern societies in general, though this gives rise to various problems.

First he mentions the disappearance of the individual. According to the philosophers of history who define the modern idea of revolution, its motor force is the "progress" of the entire human species. This implies that:

> […]individual man loses the possibility of perfection, for the subject of eternal progress is not him, but all humanity. The species progresses but the individual is lost (ibid.: 592s.).

A second problem with repercussions for society as a whole that is manifested in the idea of revolution was identified by Paz in his concept of social acceleration.

> To the change in the orientation of men's activities and thoughts there corresponds a change of rhythm: rectilinear time is accelerated time (ibid.: 593).

It was in the late 1960s that Paz addressed a topic that is discussed today primarily by Hartmut Rosa in one of the most original proposals for a critique of modernity. Rosa summarizes this theme as follows:

> As a guiding hypothesis [we may take] […] the assumption that modernization is not only a complex process *in time* but one that also denominates, first and foremost, a very significant transformation in structural and cultural terms of the temporal structures and horizons themselves, such that the most adequate way to understand the *direction of change* is through the concept of social *acceleration* (Rosa 2005: 24).

Those who conceive "social acceleration" as a central and criticable aspect of modern society simultaneously signal a disposition to subordinate other phenomena to this *social* circumstance. Here, Paz leaves no doubt that in his opinion the supposed "technological revolution" must be understood, above all else, as a consequence of social acceleration:

> Technology was not the creator of speed: the establishment of modern time made the speed of technology possible. This is the meaning of the common phrase: life is so much faster today. Acceleration emerges because we live facing the future, in horizontal time, in a straight line (ibid.: 593).

It is also in this context—in the next chapter I present more examples—that Paz formulated a biting critique of the sociology of his time. If acceleration is an essential characteristic of our time then, according to Paz, we require "a dynamic image of society as a contradictory totality" (ibid.: 596). But in Paz' view sociology offers something quite different for it has apparently chosen to increasingly understand the social as communication. Paz considers that this evolution of social theory is not independent of a technological "revolution": that of the electronic means of communication (cfr. ibid.: 604). Here he discusses at some length the ideas of the Canadian theorist of the mass media, Marshall McLuhan whose famous phrase, "the medium is the message", Paz finds problematic not only because it deflects our attention from the meaning that people exchange regarding the media they use to communicate, but also because it categorically attributes the lack of content of the medium to the content of the messages.

> By saying that the medium is the message, McLuhan affirms that the message is not what we say but what the medium says, in spite of us, or without us being aware of it (ibid.: 602).

Paz reaches this conclusion: "The media become meanings and produce, automatically and fatally, their own meaning" (ibidem). He not only protests vociferously against the supposition that technology—in this case, communication technologies—is autonomous, he firmly declares that, in his opinion, it is fundamentally wrong. Also, he writes that the technology that man utilizes must be understood as "the product of a society and concrete men" (ibidem). Human beings cannot be subjected absolutely to the supposedly independent unfolding of time; to the contrary, man must always take *decisions*—regardless of the state of technological development in which he exists.

With this, my reconstruction of Paz' "critique" of revolution in modern society comes to its end. Additional points could be mentioned: for example, the "revolution" of consumption and, above all, the meaning of revolution in the world of ideas of the Marxist left. Paz touched briefly upon these issues, but it should be clear by now that with his critique of the idea of revolution in the self-understanding of modern society he desired, mainly, to call attention to a certain understanding of time, which conceives time as a rectilinear process directed towards the future that produces permanent ruptures with the past.

However, this idea of modernity is not the only possible one for Paz, who elaborates his critique of modernity on the basis of his experiences with another modernity; one that I propose to understand as postcolonial modernity. In this context, his experience with the first postcolonial revolution, the 1910 Mexican Revolution, acquires special importance. Paz considered that conflagration the very antithesis of that modernity impregnated by the concept and *idea* of revolution. The concept of revolution is, according to Paz, truly misleading when applied to the Mexican "Revolution", and should be replaced by the term "revolt". Paz observed: "The word revolt was displaced by revolution; now revolution, true to its etymology, returns to its ancient meaning, to its origin: we live the revolt" (Paz 1996a: 636).

Paz understands the Mexican "Revolution" as the classic example of a revolt. Even in the 1960s he held that this example would continue or, perhaps better, be repeated, in the postcolonial world (cfr. 1993: 100). While this hope would prove incorrect, Paz never ceased to believe in the veracity of the model. In it he perceived the possibility to reconcile modernity with tradition: the possibility to determine the destiny of modernity through our own means, equivalent to bonding with the world without having to abandon oneself. Paz supposed that this path towards modernity, which he associated with different peoples' respective traditions while not establishing any particular one as absolute, would open the postcolonial world through revolts. Nonetheless, he also recognized that most attempts—including a Mexican Revolution petrified in bureaucracy—failed to take advantage of this possibility.

What we are left with from the experience of the Mexican Revolution are, ultimately, elements for a critique of modernity with enormous potential for social theory, whose horizon constitutes a critique of the rectilinear conception of time that sustain modernization theories, and a normative commitment with a humanism that considers inter-human relations the maximum realization of a humanely dignified life.

2.3   A Humanist-Sociological Critique of Sociology

I recognize that one needs patience and goodwill to detect in Paz' opus a commitment to sociology or, more generally, the social sciences, for time and again we encounter statements like the following one, which at first glance seem to express a hostile attitude towards these academic disciplines:

> In general, economists and sociologists see the differences between traditional and modern society as an opposition between development and underdevelopment: the disparities between the two Mexicos are quantitative in nature so the problem is reduced to determining whether the developed half can absorb the underdeveloped half. Now, while it is normal for statistics to omit qualitative descriptions of phenomena, it is not normal that our sociologists fail to discern that behind these figures there lie psychic, historical and cultural realities that are irreducible to the gross measures that census are forced to utilize (Paz 1994: 303).

Such affirmations clearly anticipate a profound critique of, especially, post-war sociology, the principle lines of which challenge certain aspects of modernization theories while also questioning their temporal logic characterized, as it is, by a lineal understanding of time, and the conception that social and cultural processes can be described and understood on the basis of quantitative, empirically measurable data. Paz does not deny here that quantitative research is "necessary", or that modernization constitutes a reasonable goal, even for societies like Mexico's, but he does question whether modernization theories are in a condition to adequately comprehend processes of social change because of their exclusive dependence on quantitative data.

Paz perceives a central problem in the assumption that *all* societies go through exactly the same process of civilizing development, a mode of thought that

presupposes—erroneously, he says—that there exists but one *unique* human civilization, and that "western" societies are its ideal model (cfr. Paz 1985b: 43). He had formulated these reflections in the *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* presented at Harvard in 1972, so it is interesting to note that the current sociological debate on modernity is oriented by certain key ideas that are quite similar to what Paz expounded some 40 years ago. In this regard, Shmuel Eisenstadt expressed clear doubts regarding modernization theories from a sociological perspective in the 1970s; doubts that at some important junctures coincide with Paz' diagnosis (cfr. Eisenstadt 1973). Eisenstadt's influence made itself felt, above all, in the debate on *multiple modernities* and current sociological discussions on the theory of civilization (cfr. Eisenstadt 2000). Given these evolutions one could argue that Paz' critique of sociology in the 1960s was not anti-sociological, to the contrary, it pointed in a direction that sociology itself would eventually take. Was Paz, then, a misunderstood pioneer of sociological thought?

To me, this supposition does not seem to be farfetched, for in another field into which sociology is only beginning to penetrate we can also detect traces of Paz' thought. In the 1960s and 70s he combined his critique of sociology with arguments with which this discipline is only today coming to grips in postcolonial theory. In this case as well, obviously, the geographical place from which Paz judged the modern world is a determining factor. From the perspective of Mexico, whose society—according to modernization theories—would be categorized as "underdeveloped", the assumption that there can be only two types of society—"developed" and "underdeveloped", "modern" and "traditional"—could not be considered as anything but a gross simplification. Paz writes:

> The adjective *underdeveloped* belongs to the anemic and castrated language of the United Nations […]. The term has no precise meaning in the fields of anthropology and history: it is not a scientific term, but a bureaucratic one (Paz 1985b: 43).

Here, the problem to which Paz wished to call attention was that a technical-administrative jargon expels languages more sensitive to complexity from the social sciences; differences from "Western" society's paradigm of modernization and progress are now declared simply as "underdevelopment" or "backwardness" (cfr. Paz 1985b: 41s.). In the early 1980s in his book *Time and the Other* (Fabian 2002), the cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian expressed a similar reproach, as he attempted to demonstrate that translating differences among societies into the temporal terminology of "advanced" and "backward" serves but one primordial objective: to justify and vindicate the domination of non-western societies by the western powers. Fabian's argument has an important function for some authors who sympathize with postcolonial theory. In this context we should mention the works of Walter Mignolo, who sought to apply current postcolonial ideas to the specific conditions of Latin America (cfr. Mignolo 1995, 2005).[5]

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[5]However, it is surprising that Mignolo does not even mention such important contributions to the understanding of modernity from the Latin American perspective as the one elaborated by Octavio Paz. This applies, at least, to three of Mignolo's most important books (Mignolo 1995, 2000, 2005).

Now, Octavio Paz is interesting in this context, because he strove to explain the ideological bias that prevails in the distinction between "western" and "non-western", "developed" and "underdeveloped" societies, and because he insisted in pointing out just how misguided the arguments elaborated on the basis of these opposed concepts really are. In this regard, Paz reminds us that one of the key criterion of "development", or "underdevelopment", was the kind and quality of food of different societies. The premise was that consuming sufficient amounts of rye and wheat was a sign of a high level of development, while eating other kinds of cereals—e.g. corn and rice—was interpreted as a clear indicator of under-development (cfr. Paz 1999: 287). Paz exposes the lack of seriousness of such notions by satirically exaggerating the argument: "This criterion condemns Japan to underdevelopment for all eternity, for rice is less nutritious than wheat and no less 'traditional' than corn" (ibid.: 288). Paz arrives at the following conclusion:

> Development has been a veritable straitjacket. A false liberation: while it has abolished many ancient and senseless prohibitions, in return it overwhelms us with exigencies no less terrible and onerous (ibid.).

The sociological analyses and political strategies that derive from this are not, in principle, unviable, but must be more precise. Modernization must be understood in concrete, individual, social and cultural contexts as an extraordinarily complex process. Greater awareness of complexity requires, Paz wrote, greater sensibility to cultural differences, something that is sorely lacking among sociologists of modernity theories.

> There are leaps and collisions, changes and restorations that are resolved in the only thing that matters: works. All else pertains to the domain of history and sociology, the first the kingdom of the particular and the second of ideological fog (Paz 1994a: 19).

Once again, it seems that Paz emits an intransigent judgment of sociology. However, in this citation he refers, first, to sociology which remains obdurate before the "works" created by a society; that is, its culture.

Paz, once again, does not dismiss sociology per se, but seeks to recall the cultural aspects that the conventional sociology of his time failed to take into account, arguing that cultural sensibility is required to understand modern societies. Perhaps Paz sympathized more with Simmel's sociology of culture than with that of moderniza-tion theories (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009), and probably even more with the sociology of culture of the *Collège de Sociologie*, as we shall see in the following chapter. But what is clear is that a sociology lacking in cultural sensibility ignores something he considered to be of great importance: namely, that which is truly human. For Paz the study of culture is not an end in itself but a means of accessing human beings that sociological theories of modernization and development seem to have abandoned long ago. Therefore, Paz demands that:

> We conceive models of development that are viable and *less inhumane*, costly and insensi-tive than current ones. I said before that this is an urgent task: in truth, *it is the task of our time*. But there's more: the supreme value is not the future but the present; the future is a fallacious time that always tells us 'the hour has not yet come', thus denying us. The future

is not the time of love: what man truly wants, he wants *now*. He who builds the house of future happiness constructs the prison of the present (Paz 1998: 212; *emphasis added*).

Here Paz is not promoting some Dionysian hedonism but, rather, the idea of focusing interest, including that of social research, on the here, above all, the now of *human* needs, yearnings and passions.

In a reflection on Paz' *Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro wrote:

> *The Labyrinth of Solitude* does not pretend to be a scientific investigation that inquires into, for example, the determinant economic or social causes of historical processes (Villoro 1995: 31s.).

But Villoro is correct here only if by scientific investigation he refers to what Paz criticized, as we have demonstrated in this chapter: that is, the quantitative, empirical social research that justifies the normative framework of modernization theories. Villoro errs if he refers also to a qualitative program of cultural sociology, whose characteristic methodology resides in interpreting the cultural conditions of modern forms of life.

2.4   The *Collège de Sociologie* and the Heterological Sociology of the Sacred

Despite his critical attitude towards the sociology of his time, especially modernization theories, we can discern in Paz' works traces of the sociologies that inspired him, but because his writing style does not respect the academic rigor of citing sources these connections must be deciphered with philological and hermeneutic meticulousness. As mentioned earlier, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce spares no effort to demonstrate that the thought of Georg Simmel exerted an important influence on Paz, one that is especially visible in *The Labyrinth* (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009). However, as mentioned above, in his important study of *The Labyrinth* Enrico Mario Santí brings to light another significant sociological influence: that of the so-called *Collège de Sociologie*, a small group of French thinkers that proposed a critique of modern society that mixed surrealist forms of expression and representation with the ideas and methods of sociology and cultural anthropology (cfr. Santí 1997a). Since Paz actually refers to this group in *The Labyrinth* (cfr. Paz 1998: 50; 55), I believe we must follow up on this lead.

Unfortunately, my search through manuals of sociology for background on this creative, experimental initiative was fruitless, for it seems that the *Collège de Sociologie* is not recognized as having made any serious contribution to the history of sociology. Thankfully, some years ago Stephan Moebius conducted a thorough study of the history of the *Collège* and the influence that its unconventional thinkers achieved (cfr. Moebius 2006). Anyone who has read his book and knows *The Labyrinth* could hardly ignore the evident affinities.

The nucleus of figures that comprised the *Collège*, which existed for only three short years—from 1937 to 1939, when World War II broke out in Europe—included George Bataille (1897–1962), Michel Leiris (1901–1990) and, of special interest for our argument, Roger Caillois (1913–1978). The sociological influences that inspired this group derived, first, from the "Durkheimian School" that included Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, Robert Hertz and George Dumézil. The driving force was Durkheim's sociology of religion, though the members of the *Collège's* distanced themselves from some of the key points of that approach. Similar to Paz, they harbored an interest in the "sacralizing energies of collective excitation, reduced and placed under control by the civilizing process, but still present in the deep strata of the social" (Moebius 2006: 14), and assumed that these energies endure even in modern societies. In part, those religious "survivals"[6] were cleverly mobilized by fascist movements, though that was only possible because most of the cultures of modern societies already considered that they had been eliminated. The fact that modern culture is so insensitive to such survivals of the sacred even though they continue to act upon people in modern societies, was due to a mistaken or, better, incomplete, conception of the human being. The *Collège's* desire was, precisely, to correct this circumstance:

> In the center was […] the 'total phenomenon' of man, which cannot be reduced to a *homo oeconomicus* or an *animal rationale*, but must be studied in relation to foreign cultures (ibid.: 359).

This anthropology, which takes the sacred and irrational seriously even under modern conditions, was the foundation of the "sociology of the sacred" that the *Collège* sustained; that is, the program of sociology of the sacred was understood as a key to the study of modern societies, one that would unlock the alcoves of the phenomena of human existence that were excluded from conventional, modern social research. Moebius defines the concept of the sociology of the sacred as follows:

> It was oriented by the resuscitation and study of the vital elements of communitarian links and collective experiences and effervescences –stimulated by rituals, fiestas or games– in modern society (Moebius 2006: 13).

Seen in these terms, the *Collège* was clearly *not* focused on a reactionary anti-modernism that sought to regress towards pre-modernity, as occurred with the conservative "cultural critique" in Germany (cfr. Breuer 1995). Moebius emphasizes that the members of the *Collège* saw themselves as leftists, despite their many reserves regarding Marxism. Clearly, such dualist classificatory schemes as 'left/right' lack the precision required to adequately define the *Collège's* position on the political spectrum (cfr. Moebius 2006: 15).

In contrast, there is no question but that the *Collège's* political intentions focused on fighting fascism, complemented by an understanding of the need to radically

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[6] Tylor, Edward, 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J. P. Putnam's Sons. I would like to thank Paul Kersey for making me aware of this idea in Tylor.

change society. In this sense they deemed it particularly important to form new communities with new myths (cfr. ibid.: 13); not with the goal of abandoning modernity and changing direction towards a pre-modernity, but as a reminder that modernity had not eliminated or replaced the archaic but, in the best of cases, had made it reflexive or, in the worst, misunderstood it as if it had been overcome.

A quick look at the social ontology of the *Collège* clarifies what all of this may mean in concrete terms. This is interesting in the context of the "debate on communitarianism" of the 1990s, for the social ontology of the *Collège* cannot be reduced to either the position of liberalism or that of communitarianism. The *Collège* argues against "liberalism" only because it disagreed with both contractualism—which maintains that social solidarity is constructed through purely rational means—and individualism, to which it attributed social fragmentation. Against "communitarianism" it could be alleged that from the perspective of the *Collège's* members a given community is not justified only by being considered the continuation of an inherited cultural inventory. In the face of such "de facto communities" the *Collège* advocated the possibility of forming *new* communities. Moebius explains: "For the *Collège* '*decisions* by the community' are important […]" (ibid.: 151). The community is understood, ultimately, as a social process: "The community is constantly in *recurrent praxis*; neither substance nor subject, but a *sharing* in praxis" (ibidem).

The preceding sections bring to light some important lines of ideas that can be re-discovered in the social thought of Octavio Paz. He railed against the modern obsession with the *tabula rasa* of reason, against the lineal understanding of time that inclines towards the future, and he championed a conceptual world of modernity that is not questioned but enriched, if not enabled, by the respective traditions. That is to say, Paz attempts to complement a precipitated modernizing effort through evocations of the "integral phenomenon of man".

The *Collège's* sociology of the sacred can be subsumed as well under the concept of heterology, which unites in a theoretical sense all that which in social reality contradicts the processes of social homogenization; for example: the sacred, the emotions, sexuality, etc. (cfr. ibid.: 14). In a more methodological sense, heterology is understood as a "science of the non-assimilable, of the concealed rest, and of that which is marginalized from reason and the homogeneous order" (ibid.: 16).

Paz felt an especially deep attachment to one member of the *Collège*: Roger Caillois. In some autobiographical reflections he recalled how Caillois first drew his attention: "In 1940 a book by a young French writer came into my hands […] The author was Roger Caillois and the book *Le Mythe et l'Homme*" (Paz 2001: 23). Paz immediately felt a "spontaneous affinity", and his subsequent reading of other works by Caillois strengthened his conviction that they contained "the beginnings of a method that would lead him […] to edify diaphanous buildings of concepts-images" (ibid.: 24). What Paz appreciated specifically in Caillois and his method was that, though founded upon the idea of the "unity of the world", it was at the same time immune to the error of wishing to press this unity into some conceptual or figurative mold. "Through the diversity of matters Caillois proposed to discover the unity of the world. He did not intend to demonstrate that unity; for him it was conclusive evidence: it did not need to be proven, but revealed" (ibid.: 25).

But it was another aspect of Caillois' thought that excited Paz even more. In his studies Caillois did not limit himself to demonstrating one fact or another by presupposing the unity of the set in general, but strove to reveal "the network of invisible relations and secret correspondences among the worlds that compose this world" (ibid.).

Caillois' method showed not just coincidences with Alexander von Humboldt's "world-science" (*Weltwissenschaft*), but actually appeared to be based on a very similar "world-consciousness" (see Ette 2002, 2004; Kozlarek 2011). According to this approach, everything in the world is connected to everything else, a conception that found expression in the notion that it is valid even for the relation between stones and the world of human ideas. Paz, enchanted by this idea, wrote: "The stone and the work of imagination are the two extremes of the universe" (Paz 2001: 23), referring to the ideas that Caillois formulated in his *Pierres réfléchies* (1975).

Paz extracted several consequences from those ideas. One of the most important is probably the thesis that the language which can best express these universal relations is poetry; a point confirmed by Caillois. Paz wrote:

> According to Caillois, *poetry* is not a particular phenomenon of human language but a property of nature as a whole. There is a kind of unity and continuity between the physical, intellectual and imaginary worlds; that unity is of a formal order and is constituted, as in a poem, not as a deductive series of meanings but as a system of echoes, correspondences and analogies (Paz 1994b: 469s.).

The primacy of poetic language in no way meant that Paz thought that knowledge is transmitted only in poems, but it did mean that in all possible milieus, for example sociology—as Caillois had demonstrated (cfr. 1994c: 468)—knowledge must be guided by "poetic experience". Paz expressed his meaning in a letter to Caillois:

> In my judgment, your experience approaches more closely to what is called the "poetic experience", which consists in seeing the world as a system of correspondences, a tapestry of accords […] (Paz 1994d: 468).

Paz felt it was possible for human beings to experience this universal communion because he was convinced that all man's aspirations are founded upon the certainty that it is possible to re-establish original unity. The clearest signs of this he saw in love, a sentiment that can also be understood as a yearning for the original union.

To summarize: there are two substantial points where Paz surely detected a profound affinity with the *Collège de Sociologie*: 1. Heterology, as the "science of the non-assimilable, the concealed rest, and that which is marginalized from reason and the homogeneous order" (Moebius 2006: 16), corresponded to his *experiences as a poet*: the poet is always in intimate contact with everything that moves human beings, not only with that which desires to admit only part of humanity. It is in this sense that in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956) he affirmed: "The poem founds the people because the poet retraces the current of language to drink at the original fountain." (Paz 2003: 41) Here he is not dealing merely with an exclusively aesthetic experience; to the contrary, Paz knows how to interpret this experience as social:

In the poem society confronts the foundations of its being, its first word. […] The poem is mediation between society and that which founds it (ibidem).

Paz considers that this social function of poetry is threatened when the poet is converted into a "propagandist" for political ends (cfr. ibidem). But it would likewise be endangered if the poet were to devote himself to poetry for merely aesthetic purposes. Paz always vehemently rejected this "pure poetry".

2. The second affinity with the *Collège* and, above all, with Roger Caillois that Paz detected is the idea of the universal connectivity. Caillois' works reveal a profoundly *poetic experience* as their fundamental epistemological orientation that Paz also wished to utilize in his diagnosis of the epoch in terms of the social sciences (cfr. Paz 1994d: 468; also Sect. 3.1). In the next chapter, I demonstrate how Paz develops a poetic sociology of modernity based on the poetic experience.

Chapter 3
From Poetic Experience to Poetic Sociology

Abstract This chapter seeks to show how poetic experience turns into what could be called "poetic sociology". The first two sections of this chapter are dedicated to reconstructing the epistemological and ontological dimensions of poetic experience, while the third section deals with the reconstruction of the poetic sociology of global modernity which materializes, once again and especially, in *The Labyrinth*. The common interpretation of this book is that it is a treatise concerned primarily with identity, but I argue that this is inaccurate, and that the principle focus of *The Labyrinth* is global modernity.

Keywords Octavio Paz · Postcolonial critique · Political sociology · Models of sociologies · Modernity · Mexican revolution

The objective of the preceding chapter was to demonstrate that Paz was motivated by genuinely sociological ideas and pretensions, but I will now argue that his sociology cannot be understood separately from his poetry and the *poetic experience*.

In this context, the aforementioned *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (cfr. Paz 1985b) are, once again, particularly enlightening. They begin with a discussion of the concept of modernity from a perspective proper to the social sciences that centers, in the first two chapters, on Paz' critique of rectilinear time that impregnates thought and action in modern societies. Through an impressively elaborated comparison of cultures, Paz convincingly establishes not only that the modern conception of time is just as contingent as those of other cultures and civilizations, but also exactly where the problems with it lie. These he relates, once more, to the apparently unstoppable tendency of social and historical processes to accelerate (cfr. ibid.: 23), causing an insatiable demand for historical transformations—"revolutions" in the classic-modern sense, as explained earlier (cfr. Sect. 2.2)—that cause a radical rupture with the corresponding past and tradition. But it is in those very historical ruptures, which became habitual, that Paz supposes a tradition in itself: "the tradition of rupture". In this sense, modernity is fundamentally indistinguishable from other civilizations: behind their explicit negation of one tradition there lies, actually, only the construction of another.

In the second chapter, Paz discusses the consequences of the modern conception of time for theories of modernization and development. He insists that modernity does not constitute the only or *unique* universal civilization, for it is "exclusively Western" (ibid.: 46). But this relativization of modernity is not to be understood as an argument in favor of some radical cultural relativism. To the contrary, what emerges here is Paz' pretension to "provincialize" "Western" culture pursuing a motivation expressed also in current contexts of postcolonial argumentation which strives to show that "Western" modernity is no more universal or particular than any other culture (cfr. Chakrabarty 2002).

But Paz takes a decisive step beyond this argument. Instead of conforming to the "deconstruction" of "European universalism" (Wallerstein 2006), he recognized that there had to be alternatives, understanding clearly that no culture or society existed independently of others. In this context he refers, time and again, to two historical experiences: "the Discovery of America that set the unification of the planet in motion" (Paz 1994e: 21); and, once more, the Mexican Revolution which posited, above all, the question "of [Mexico's] place in the modern world" (ibid.: 25). Paz wished to raise awareness of the de facto unity of the modern world because "We are, for the first time in our history, contemporaries of all men" (1998: 188). Nonetheless, he was also aware that the understanding of the unity of the modern world is meaningless unless based on the consciousness of Mexico's historical experiences.

Paz was troubled by the failure of the illusion that Western modernity could become the *only* civilization of all men. For him, this produced one of the most pressing challenges of our time: "Like all the rest of the planet we are living a decisive and mortal conjuncture, orphans of the past with a yet-to-be-invented future. Universal History is a shared task. And our labyrinth is that of all men" (ibid.: 169).

As a "mortal", Paz must have understood the tendency that began to emerge in the 1960s and 70s. He observes that instead of the great revolution that would attempt to construct a new universal society, social movements worldwide were distancing themselves from ideological pretensions to be increasingly interpreted as expressions of conflicts that materialized out of cultural differences. It is important to recall that some 20 years later Samuel P. Huntington would disseminate a similar theory in his well-known thesis on the *Clash of Civilizations*. However, in contrast to Huntington, Paz was not concerned with establishing cultural differences as absolute, but with explaining that cultural conflicts must be understood, above all, as "struggles for recognition" (Paz 1985b: 218), an idea that made him a precursor of another thesis, one that would gain prominence 20 years later; i.e., Axel Honneth's attempt to reformulate Critical Theory (cfr. Honneth 1992). Finally, in his efforts to explain these struggles for recognition, Paz anticipated current postcolonial theories by affirming that the detonator of these conflicts was the cultural humiliation that so many societies had suffered during colonization.

Ultimately, he wrote, this is not about creating a new society but of distributing more equitably the "spaces" (of participation) of an already globalized society while creating, at the same time, space for cultural differences (cfr. Paz 1985b: 216–218). Therefore, the great contemporary task consists in converting the world into a

creative experiment for a new creation, one where each human defines the meaning of his own life-world within this shared one (cfr. Chap. 1).

But Paz felt that modern scientific rationality on its own would prove incapable of guiding such a project to a successful conclusion. Its universalism—he wrote— is too abstract and loses sight of man's true needs (cfr. Chap. 2). To re-create consciousness of those needs, Paz turns to the *poetic experience*:

> In their dispute with modern rationalism, poets rediscover a tradition as ancient as man himself […]. I refer to analogy, the vision of the universe as a system of correspondences, and the vision of language as the universe's double (ibidem.).

In the following chapters I seek to demonstrate that the poetic experience fulfills epistemological, ontological, anthropological and, last but not least, normative, functions that condense into a poetic sociology of modernity that Paz expressed above all in his *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

3.1 The Epistemological Dimension of Poetic Experience

The compiler of an anthology of selected prose and poems by Octavio Paz, Ricardo Cayuela Gally, remarks that reflections on poetry constitute one of the true "constants" in Paz' thought (cfr. Cayuela 2008: 15). In fact, Paz must also have deemed them of such importance that he himself collected the texts that express those reflections in Volume 1 of the 15 impressive volumes of his *Complete Works*, leaving his poems to volumes 11 and 12. In light of this, the fact that up to his final days Paz wished to be considered, above all, a poet, undoubtedly requires explanation. And Paz did not deprive his readers of one, for in the *Introduction* to Volume 1 he states that:

> Very soon the act of writing poems –both mysterious and quotidian– began to intrigue me: why and what for? Almost at once this question, always intimate, morphed into a more general query: why do men compose poems?; when did they begin to compose them? Reflections on poetry and the distinct ways in which the poetic faculty manifests itself became second nature [and] the two activities were, from then on, inseparable (Paz 1995b: 16).

As a poet Paz was not concerned only with writing poetry. His passion for this activity was soon complemented in the course of his life by an eagerness to understand the secret of poetry. He was firmly convinced that the reflection on the ability to compose poems made it possible to obtain, ultimately, the knowledge of man's nature that modernity has lost but must somehow recover.

Paz's poetry is not limited, therefore, to explaining the phenomenon of creating poetry in the strict sense; to the contrary, it gradually consolidated into an extremely solid theoretical foundation that allowed him to attempt to respond to questions of man, of the world, and of the relation between these two. In this regard, his *theoretical* ambitions are guided by a critique of modernity inspired in the Enlightenment and Romanticism that seeks to achieve the confluence of two distinct forms

of knowledge: creative imagination *and* understanding. At the center of his cognitive self-comprehension, where Paz was guided also by his sociological ambitions, we find the "poetic experience".

In an early but—as Paz affirmed in various moments—pioneering essay, entitled *Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión* ("Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion", Paz 2008 [1943]), he offers a first attempt to describe this; manifesting from the outset what he understands by "reality":

> all that we are, all that envelops us, sustains us and, simultaneously, devours and feeds us is richer and more changing, more alive, than all the ideas and systems that strive to contain it (ibid.: 93).

Here, Paz clarifies that, in his view, this was no undifferentiated holism where world and human beings exist in harmony and conflict-free, an idea he never accepted, partly due to his commitment to modernity which seeks to be understood, precisely, as the liberation of humans from the tutelage of the world; but in part as well because he was skeptical of the idea that at some point in time man and world had been effectively united. It is above all his cultural sensitivity that impedes him from taking the idea of holistic harmony seriously: "Something appears in human society that does not exist in nature: culture" (Paz 1994f: 477). This aperture of the theory of knowledge to a "philosophy of culture" reminds us of the philosophical-cultural turn that Cassirer wrought on Kant's *Critique* (cfr. Cassirer 2002). Cassirer was also convinced—after studying works on the cultural anthropology of myth at the Warburg Library—that the relation between man and the world, subject and object, etc., must have been problematic in all human cultures and that, in consequence, the idea that this tension is only latent in Western modernity, was false.

Hence, the question is not whether the difference between "world" and "man" is experienced, on principle, as such but, rather, *how* different cultures deal with this understanding. Modern sciences are, for Paz, just one among many possibilities. For them—he writes—the figure of the physicist is paradigmatic. Paz perceives in this paradigm, primordially, the desire to subject "reality" to man. The "physicist's" interest, and perhaps that of modern science, is to cultivate the idea that it is possible to decompose reality into material objects, thus making the world appear in an "artificial purity" that, as such, can be more easily manipulated. True, this attitude towards the world had been expressed in pre-modern times in magic, but in modernity it has no equal. In this context, the role of philosophy cannot be ignored, because efforts to construct a world based on concepts culminates within her. Although Paz recognizes that concepts are inserted into the materiality of language, he criticizes the language of modernity because it is reduced to the function of producing concepts. Therefore, language is comparable to a construction box filled with manipulable blocks that are reorganized in accordance with needs. Paz arrives at the following conclusion: "It is no exaggeration to call this human attitude an attitude of domination" (Paz 2008: 94).

Facing this, he outlines a second form of man's relation with the world, one where "disinterest" replaces the desire for domination. Here, the aim is not to manipulate and dominate reality, but to discover forms of harmonic co-existence between people

and the world. At this point Paz insists that he could only achieve his objective by toppling the modern linear conception of time that runs full speed towards the future, by proposing that the vector of an alternative conception of time veers toward the past. The objective is to recall the "primordial" unity of man with the world. Although that unity never actually existed, many cultures are based on—at least—the *idea* that such a "paradisiacal" state must have prevailed at some time. Hence, Paz' goal is not to return to some historical moment of harmony but to recall the allusions to such an epoch deposited in cultures so as to be able to extract from them those forces that make a harmonious relation between man and the world at least *imaginable*. For Paz, the most important of these forces is love.

While the first attitude—"magic-scientific"—before the world tears man from it, the second—oriented by love—constitutes the possibility of *imagining* man and the world in harmonic equilibrium. The first attitude produces "solitude", the second tends towards "communion".

Paz had no desire to continue polarizing these two attitudes. To the contrary: just as he situates his own activity in the complementary dialectic of reflection and imagination, in his 1943 essay he advocated combining the scientific and poetic attitudes before the world. However, achieving this requires, he wrote, constraining the modern radicalization of divisive, isolating thought.

That early article shows that Paz does not want to understand poetics and epistemology separately from the consciousness of social reality; the latter understood, as by many of his contemporaries,[1] as a tendency towards increasing isolation. While for Paz the experience of solitude constitutes an anthropological constant, it might be possible to identify differences among the diverse ways in which distinct societies deal with the sentiment of solitude. Based on this possibility of comparison, Paz issues *modern* societies a most unsatisfactory result: "It is not strange that for certain sensitive souls the only possible vocations in our time are solitude or suicide" (Paz 2008: 100).

It was against these tendencies that Paz led his campaign, since poetry represented for him two things: critique and utopia. However, "bourgeois" society was no longer capable of an identification with poetry, interested as it is, above all, in conserving what has been achieved and maintaining it unmodified (cfr. 99). Poetry, in contrast, is always subversive, evoking that which opposes that which has already been achieved. Understood *as* critique, poetry confirms the solitude of the poet. But this does not make poetry asocial; to the contrary, acting within her activates a dialectic that compensates the experience of solitude with the reflection of a search for a new unification with the world: that is, the interhuman and "natural".

Poetry is the search for "communion". Here Paz uses the religious concept, though without thereby evoking religious authority. Unification with other human beings and with the world does, however, seem to him in some sense sacred. Paz reproaches most religions because, captives of processes of "bureaucratization", they have lost sight of the sense of what is truly "sacred"; i.e., that which lies in union with "the other" (cfr. 98). Thus, it falls to the poet to rescue the possibility

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[1]It is important to recall here, for example, Erich Fromm (2001), as well as David Riesman (1967).

of overcoming solitude through communion. This is precisely where Paz situates the utopian potential of poetry.

In this early essay Paz not only follows the trail of poetry or, perhaps better, of the *poetic experience*, towards a synthesis between modernity and the "primordial human", but employs it in a highly original critique of modern society. An important step in this direction is his book *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956).

Paz connects this book with his 1943 essay by, once again, addressing the question of the meaning of "reality". Here he attempts to demonstrate that the Cartesian model errs in its thesis that "reality" must be understood as something "external" that can only be grasped through "consciousness" (cfr. Paz 2003: 161). This separation between interior and exterior, subject and object is for Paz artificial, as evidenced by his understanding that the human world always depends on language. Here we must remember Heidegger and his definition of language as the "house of being" (cfr. Heidegger 1976: 312), for Paz mentions that philosopher as an important source of keywords for his 1956 book.[2] Following Heidegger's idea, Paz explains language as the world of man from which "we cannot escape" (Paz 2003: 31). Here Paz' anthropological intentions are manifest, as he states: if language must be understood as the world of man, then "the study of language […] is one part of a total science of man" (ibidem.). Thus, it is not possible to understand "reality" independently of language; that is, independently of the human.

However, this affirmation is linked to the question of which type of language is more adequate for the reality that is transmitted to man in, and through, language. Paz had no doubt that it had to be that form of language which man has used throughout time; namely, poetic language. This is where reality pronounces itself:

> The poet does not choose his words. When one says that a poet is searching for his language, it is not that he roams through libraries or markets to gather twists both ancient and new, but that, hesitant, he vacillates between the words that truly belong to him, that are inside him from the very first, and those others learned in books or on the street. When a poet encounters his word, he recognizes it: it was already inside him. And he was already inside it. The poet's word is confounded with his being. He is his word (ibid.: 45).

The poet does not use words; rather, he *serves* them: "He is their servant" (ibid.: 47). Reality speaks in, and through, the poet. But this is only possible if the poet is at the same time part of reality.

Paz would later emphasize that this is especially valid for the historical and social reality of man, which led him to argue against the Marxist philosophy of history by sustaining that man is not determined by history. History is not "a unitarian and total reality that encompasses all works" (ibid.: 188). But this does not place the poet

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[2]Paz time and again stated that Heidegger exercised an important influence (cfr. Paz 2003), as he recognized, perhaps most clearly, in his 1987 interview with César Salgado when he said: "In my book *The Bow and the Lyre* (1957) traces of Heidegger are visible. […] I was interested in Heidegger's ontology as a foundation—or more exactly: as a starting point for the elaboration of a poetology" (Paz and Salgado 2003: 532). However, Paz' 1943 essay is testimony that he had designed that poetology before reading Heidegger; for as he recalled in the same interview, it was José Gaos' translation of *Sein und Zeit*, published in 1951, that led him to Heidegger (cfr. ibid.: 531).

above historical and social realities; rather, he is united to these realities through language, for poets do not invent a totally new language, but write poetry in one that already exists. Although poetry will go beyond that language and the reality constituted through it to open "other worlds", it will always set out again from the given. "The poet speaks of the things that are his and of his world, though he speaks to us of other worlds" (ibid.: 189). Further on he writes: "The poet does not escape from history, even when denying or ignoring it. His most secret or personal experiences are transformed into social, historical words" (ibidem.). These reflections are the key to the sociological importance of Paz, which we examine below. The poetic exploration of the world in and through the *poetic experience* of reality thus permits a kind of "immanent critique", a critique of reality from within, energized by the contradictions of that very reality. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* constitutes, as we shall see, a critique of modernity founded upon this understanding.

Paz then compares this conception of poetic language and its relation to reality and man with non-poetic language: prose. While poetic language is what human beings have always used, prose is a more recent achievement, one that originated, Paz assumes, in the Roman Empire, characterized in that context also by an "imperialism of discourse" that would continue, once again consequently, in modernity (cfr. ibid.: 73). Under the regime of discourse, reality is separated from language and from man, broken down into small conceptual pieces that seem manipulable at will, as Paz sought to clarify also in his essay from 1943.

This operation, he says, in no way serves the unfolding of rationality. To the contrary, it is not that reason reminds man of his limitations, but that man seeks to transcend them. Propelled by "super-human" ambitions, he wishes to dominate reality by appropriating language (cfr. ibid.: 77). The death of God is compensated by the deification of man. But this has paved a road towards a *false* humanism, one in which man does not become conscious of himself but, rather, is deified.

Contrary to this tendency, Paz places his faith in the poetic experience that, as he says, "does not differ essentially from the experience of identification with the 'reality of reality'" (ibid.: 112). In contrast to the modern discourse constituted upon abstract concepts, the poetic experience allows us to grasp reality in images. "This, reputedly unutterable, experience is expressed and communicated only in the image" (ibidem.). What differentiates this from modern discourse, scientific treatise, etc. according to Paz, is that: "The image does not explain: it invites [one] to recreate and, literally, revive it" (ibid.: 113).

Here, Paz once again insistently exteriorizes the importance, for him, of the critique of the modern understanding of time. The poetic experience is resolutely opposed to this. If poetic language is the primordial tongue of man, if poetry is more primary than discursive prose, if poetic speech in images is more originary than the conceptual architecture of modern discourses, then the poetic experience brings to memory a time that preceded modernity. But notions like "pre-" and "re-" are, strictly speaking, already products of that modern linear concept of time from which Paz seeks to distance himself. They presuppose that modernity does indeed constitute an epoch that has surpassed previous eras and their particularities. But Paz affirms, always reflecting in his thought principally on man, that the ambition

of epochs—especially modernity—ultimately blinds us to the fact that the archaic continues to endure in man. The *poetic experience* comes to actualize, time and again, the primordial treatment of language by man and the comprehension of the world expressed therein. "The poetic experience is a revelation of our original condition" (ibid.: 154). The "poetic experience" is, therefore, an actualization of the primordial in man and, in consequence, of man as he is in reality.

The possibility of, and need for, this *actualization* indicates which dimension of time is most important for Paz. It is not the future—object of the anxiety associated with the linear conception of modernity—nor the past—which would be just an inversely-vectored conclusion of that same understanding of time—but the present. "Poetic praxis" always constitutes an *actualization*. Paz explains:

> The poem is mediation between an original experience and a series of later acts and experiences that only acquire coherence and meaning in reference to that first experience consecrated in the poem. […] Chronological time –the common word, social or individual circumstance– undergoes a decisive transformation: ceasing to flow, ceasing to be succession, an instant that comes after and before others identical, and is converted into the beginning of something else. In this here and now something commences: a love, a heroic act, a vision of the divinity, a momentary awe […] (ibid.: 186s.).

Paz' objective is not to regress to the past, but to celebrate the present with the possibility of a beginning. It is the intrusion of "the other", made possible by the poetic experience. Paz summarized his reflections on time in an interview with Juan Cruz in 1992:

> […] I prefer to emphasize that one trait distinguishes our time or, more exactly, the time that is beginning: its critique of modernity and of linear time. We are living the twilight of the cult to the future. My conviction, I have said many times, is that the central figure of this new vision of time is the now, the present. Not in a vulgarly hedonistic sense; I see the present, today, as a point of convergence of the three times and of the two currents of existence: one somber, the other luminous, life and death. Everything passes and today is an *always* (Paz and Cruz 1995: 495).

However, the revelation of the present through poetic experience and the possibility of beginning is also profoundly modern. Paz manifests this in his *Charles Eliot Norten Lectures*. Discoursing once again on the topic of social acceleration, he explains:

> Naturally, I am not saying that the years and days pass more quickly today but, rather, that more things transpire in them. More things happen and they all happen at the same time, not one after another, but simultaneously (Paz 1985b: 23).

Paz attributes a synthetic value to this profoundly modern experience: "Acceleration is fusion: all times and all spaces converge in a here and now" (ibidem.).

The modern implosion of time in the present also has, finally, consequences for the notion of space. The present that hurls all things into its interior is the present that all humans share, wherever they may be on this Earth. So for Paz, modernity is characterized, above all, by the following situation: it constitutes the irrevocable union of all places on Earth. And although he perceived the differences of culture and civilization as clearly, perhaps, as anyone else, he was convinced that they are

neutralized in the unity of man: "[…] the oppositions between civilizations may well shroud a secret unity: that of man" (ibid.: 25).

Thus for Paz modernity meant, decisively, the growing union of the world, currently captured by the keyword 'globalization'. Here, Paz sees a parenthesis in universal history whose greatest challenge is to understand humanity, but not as the simple "abstract concept of the humanists" but as a "really existing unity" (Hannah Arendt). The experience of man as man, and the experience of humanity uniting in global modernity constitute for Paz complementary experiences that, nevertheless, pass through the *poetic experience*. For Paz what is determinant here in normative terms is the experience of the other, which is also manifested in the poetic experience.

3.2   The Poetic Experience as Experience of Otherness and Its Normative Consequences

Xavier Rodríguez Ledesma wrote:

> For Latin Americans, it is not only that otherness configures our everyday horizon, but also that we, in turn, constitute otherness as this is perceived from the vantage point of modernity (Rodriguez 2009: 236).

Modernity, seen from the perspective of the "periphery", repeatedly emphasizes– Rodríguez says—the "indomitable" other. It seems that Paz also sensed this thematic centrality. In an interview with Braulio Peralta, published two years before his death, he observed:

> All my writings are in relation – even co-existence – with that which is sometimes called *otherness*. In my most intimate poems, in which I speak with myself, I speak with the *other* that I am; in my erotic poems, with the *other* [female]; in my writings that touch upon themes of religion, metaphysics or philosophy, I interrogate the Other. Men and women always live *with* others and *before* the Other (Paz and Peralta 2003: 393).

In this quote, Paz names the different dimensions of human life in which the "other" manifests. These are the experiences of *oneself*, of *man as man* and, finally, the experience of man as a *social* and *cultural being*.

The other reveals something that is not external to the individual. All human beings bear *within themselves* the experience of the other. This is a precondition for experiencing oneself. When Paz wrote "the I is not you and the you is my I" (Paz 2003: 282), He recognized the irreducible rest of the other person, but expressed at the same time that experiencing the I is only possible through experiencing the "other". In other words: all human beings experience the other *within themselves*. The understandings that Paz conveys here remind us of Kant but, at the same time, transcend him. For Paz it is not only the faculty of reason that all men experience within themselves and that, therefore, also orients relations among men in ethical terms, but also the experience of something that always exists though it does not fit integrally into the "I" and that, nevertheless, we experience within ourselves. Here,

Paz manifests his critique of thinking on identity that, as we shall see, finds expression in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

At the same time, the experience of the "other" is for man *as man* a *constitutive* experience. *This* experience of the other was so essential for Paz that he even believed he would be able to explain the experience of the sacred by means of it. Once again, its instrument of revelation is poetry, an idea that emerges clearly in his early essay "Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión" (Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion). Paz responds to the question: what is the end that the poet really pursues with his poems? as follows:

> He does not attempt to beautify it [sc. life], as the aesthetes and literati think, nor make it fairer or better, as the moralists dream. Through the word, through the expression of his experience, he seeks to make the world sacred; with the word he consecrates the experience of men and the relations between man and the world, between man and woman, between human beings and their own consciousness (Paz 2008: 97).

Most religions fail to comprehend this self-sacralization of man. They seek the sacred not in man but in transcendence or mysticism. In his reflections on the poetic experience Paz disinters, in contrast, access to the origin of the experience of the sacred and reveals that man is not only the receiver of the sacred but also its cause:

> Man is man thanks to language, thanks to the original metaphor that made him the other and separated him from the natural world. Man is a being that has created himself by creating language (Paz 2003: 34).

Finally, the yearning for the other is constitutive for the cultural and social worlds that men and women create. All cultures, civilizations and societies can be understood as the result of the human experience of the other. This reminds human beings of their imperfection, while simultaneously awakening in them an existential yearning for the other. Paz discusses this theme time and again from very diverse perspectives by speaking of the dialectic relation between "solitude" and "communion" (cfr. 1998: Chap. IX). Men and women experience themselves as solitary and are motivated by this to seek union ("communion") with other people. This fundamental anthropological determination produces all those constellations of human sociality *and* culture that have left testimony throughout the history of humanity. As distinct as the concrete *configurations* of these forms may be: they all share the reality that they regulate interhuman relations and the relations of human beings with the extra-human world.

This attempt to explain human sociality *and* culture distances itself interestingly from other proposed explanations: for example, from the idea sustained by Jan Assmann and others that culture must be understood as the result of human consciousness of death (cfr. Assmann 2000). Certainly, Paz defends a quite similar idea; for example in his book on Claude Lévi-Strauss, where he argues that the consciousness of death must be constitutive of culture (cfr. Paz 1996b: 515). Nonetheless, I believe that the consequences of his thought can be interpreted in another way. In this regard, that which is constitutive of culture is *not* the consciousness of the loss of life but, rather, the sensation of solitude and the yearning for the other

that it produces. Ultimately, this striving towards the other makes it necessary to regulate relations with other people and with the world as the other. This is precisely where one of the essential functions of culture lies.

But for Paz the poetic experience is not "an explanation of our condition, but an experience in which our condition itself is revealed or manifested" (Paz 2003: 192). It is a dynamizing experience that Paz understands as dialectic. This is due, he writes, on the one hand, to the experience of deficiency that consists in the incomplete condition of the individual and, on the other, to the aforementioned yearning to unite with other human beings and with the world. Paz does not avail himself of these two primary experiences to advocate a return to pre-modern forms of life; to the contrary, for him they also explain the origin of integrally modern values:

> The poetic experience is nothing other than the revelation of the human condition; that is, of that endless transcending in which, precisely, his essential freedom resides (Paz 2003: 191).

Transcending oneself as a result of the poetic experience and, above all, the experience of the other, is modern for Paz only because it entails experiences that are constitutive of the possibility of *critique*. Of course, Paz–like Adorno—links this to language. Adorno also knew that critique is not possible in an "old language", so for him critique meant also a continual critique of language (cfr. Adorno 1997c). As is well-known, Adorno was inspired by modern art. In this context Hauke Brunkhorst comments:

> What is determinant is that critique follows art, *not* theory. [Critique] arrives at the experience of contradictions and antinomies, complex, uncontrolled situations and impulses, to which it is exposed, becoming lost among things, entangled in them, behaving in such a *performance* of the critique in an ascetic manner before the pre-fabricated *solutions* of theory, which it finally makes penetrable as mere appearance and false absolutization (Brunkhorst 1995: 127).

"Critique" also implies for Adorno a consciousness of the "non-identical", what Martin Seel explains as the "heterogeneous", the "strange", the "different", the "singular", and the "particular" (Seel 2004: 23). However, he insists that in all of this an *individual presence* of things and people is revealed (24). Therefore, critique is inseparably linked, for Adorno as well, to the experience of the "other".

Now, Paz deduces his concept of critique from the poetic experience. He discovers in poetry a sensitivity for cultivating the "non-identical", the "other", and for resisting, above all else, the temptation to conform oneself with that which exists.

> Critique is, for me, a free form of commitment. The writer must be a sniper, must cope with solitude, know that he is a marginal being. The fact that writers are marginal is a condemnation that is also a blessing. Being marginal can give validity to our writings (Paz and Fell 1994: 258).

The poet constitutes the organ of otherness. Or: "Otherness finally shows itself and speaks through the mouth of One" (Paz 1996c: 35).

One of the determinant concepts in Paz is, as we have mentioned, communion. We have also seen that Paz uses this concept to denominate man's aspiration to unite with other people and with the world. One could assume that from the perspective

of social theory the concept of communion would open a path towards a kind of communitarianism. Indeed, a text by the Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro, published in 1949, speaks in favor of this, in the very year in which the first drafts of Paz' *Labyrinth* appeared. The title of that text—*Soledad y comunión* (*Solitude and Communion*, Villoro 2008 [1949])—reveals an obvious closeness to Paz' thought. Villoro proposed a critique of modernity focused on the growing individualization and solitude of human beings. For Villoro, "communion" represents an antidote that can be extracted from the great energies of interconnection of the community. But Paz' ideas could hardly be more foreign to this kind of communitarianism. For Paz, the concept of communion possesses, as we have mentioned, first, a social function, despite its religious tradition: it designates the *telos* of yearning, of the human being who feels alone. Communion is union with the "other". However, Paz is aware that this union can never be anything but provisional; that is, we are not dealing with a final condition, but a process.

Love provides the clearest notion of what this perpetual human yearning means: the desire to "fuse" in the other, to "be in the other" (Paz 2008: 94). However, Paz sustains that there is virtually no possibility of institutionalizing this experience. No community can guarantee satisfaction of the desire for communion. And this judgment does not exclude religious communities, not even the institution of marriage. With reference to the religious community, Paz wrote:

> It is in communion that the poet seeks to discover the secret force of the world, that force which religion attempts to canalize and utilize, if not extinguish, through the ecclesiastical bureaucracy (ibid.: 98).

Thus, the longing for communion is the impulse of all social and cultural processes. These processes can be crystallized in communities, societies, institutions, and, later, also in cultures and civilizations, though what is determinant for Paz is not these configurations but, rather, the very cultural and social processes that continue occurring and never stop, propelled, time after time, by the yearning for communion, the yearning for "the other" whose horizon is love.

Therefore, *love*, *critique* and *freedom* constitute the normative values that Paz deduces from the poetic experience. But, we must ask, how can the understandings obtained from the poetic experience be melded into a critique of global modernity?

3.3 The Poetic Sociology of Global Modernity

Also in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* Paz assumes the central character of the experience of the "other", as is revealed with total clarity in the epigraph:

> *The other* does not exist: so says the rational faith, the incurable belief of human reason. Identity = reality, as if, when all is said and done, everything must absolutely and necessarily be *one and the same*. But the other does not allow itself to be eliminated; it subsists, persists; the hard-to-gnaw bone into which reason loses its teeth. Abel Martín, with a poetical faith

no less human than the rational faith, believed in *the other*, in 'the essential heterogeneity of being', as if to say in the incurable *otherness* that *the one* suffers (cited in: Paz 1994: 45).

We might say that this quotation from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado is in lieu of an introduction to the book. Paz seems to have found there the substrate of the topic he sets out to discuss in the ensuing chapters from very diverse perspectives which can be classified in three broad themes: (1) the question of modernity and modernization; (2) the question of the "dialectics of solitude" that would allow him to inquire into the *conditio humana*; and, (3) the question of the *Mexican condition*; that is, the experiences of Mexicans with modernity. Paz analyzes these three issues with the sensitivity of the poetic experience, but never abandons his sociological pretension. In one of his final interviews, conceded to Enrico Mario Santí, Paz insists, once more, in relation to *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that:

> It is a book on a society. A society is not only that which men think, rather it is what they speak and think among themselves. The word *among* is fundamental because society is, above all, relation, and the word *among* is, above all, just that: relation (Paz and Santí 2005: 18).

The poetic experience—Paz must have thought—offers privileged access to that relational world of the social, because human beings live, above all, in a world that consists in language: "We cannot escape language. […] words do not live outside us. We are their world and they are ours" (Paz 2003: 31). Here, Paz strays far from any concern with the formal logic of these relational linguistic-formal structures, as we mentioned above with respect to his critique of Marshall McLuhan. Recall, briefly, that Paz rejected McLuhan's apologetics regarding the mass electronic communications media and reproached him for his failure to understand that despite their importance for modern societies the mass media are also a "product of a society and of some concrete men" (Paz 1996a: 602). Paz' program for a critique of modern societies is motivated by an unconditional respect for "concrete human beings" and, moreover, is realized through the attention he pays to *what* men concretely say when referring to one another and while they produce, together, the meaning with which they equip the world in which they live.

However, Paz did not conceive himself as an impartial observer. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* represents in this regard a particularly challenging enterprise. There, Paz proposes intervening in the processes of giving meaning to the modern world in all three dimensions of experience: the experience with global modernity, the experience of man as man, and the experience of Mexican modernity.

(a)   *La condition moderne*

Some years ago, the historian David Brading described *The Labyrinth* in the following terms:

> The central postulate of this study was the existence of the Mexican 'being', incarnate in the nation with which [Paz] fervently identified himself, evoking always the 'collective we' whose mental voyage he wishes to map through time (Brading 2002: 37s).

This affirmation clearly situates Brading's interpretation of *The Labyrinth* in the tradition of those who consider it a contribution to the many works that seek to describe the "essence", "ontology", "psychology", "character", "condition" or even "sexuality" of Mexicans.[3]

However, the objective of all these efforts would be lost if sought exclusively in the attempts to determine Mexico's national or cultural identity through an inward-looking vision. In all these strivings towards a self-encounter a particularly important role has been played, at least implicitly, by the question of the place that Mexico occupies in global modernity *compared* to that of other nations, peoples or cultures. Therefore, comparisons among *different* options of modernization also always carry weight (cfr. Miller 2008).

And is it not true that the question of modernity and modernization always demands comparisons among all societies and peoples that find themselves irrevocably immersed in the complex mesh of inter-linkages and interdependence of global modernity? Or to phrase it differently: is not the comparison among diverse forms of insertion into the modern world the real question for modernity, in the face of which all other issues descend to a secondary plane, including those regarding achieved rationality, democracy, urbanity, etc.? "Modernity", understood in this way, would not be limited to the characteristics of "western" modernity. Rather, in principle at least, it would be possible to imagine other modalities of relation among people, societies, peoples, cultures and civilizations. In Mexican debates on identity one absolutely encounters responses to the question of types of alternative modernities beyond the model of the *cosmopolis* (Toulmin 1992).

Paz was well aware that the question of national identity cannot be separated from that of the relations with the respective "others". He understood, decades before Ulrich Beck and others undertook their campaign against "methodological nationalism", that it is not possible to understand modern societies by observing them through the categorical framework of the Nation State. Paz applied three strategies to break this framework: (1) comparisons with other societies—particularly important is the comparison with the United States in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (cfr. also Monsiváis 2001); (2) an appreciation of transnational dynamics as we understand them today thanks, especially, to research on migration; and, (3) an understanding of modernity as the irrevocable global interlacing of *all* human beings.

It would be difficult, indeed, to underestimate the influence that Paz' attempt to understand the United States had on *The Labyrinth*. We cannot ignore the fact that at the beginning of this book Paz states that many of the reflections it contains were born during a two-year stay in that country (cfr. 1994: 49). That period—1943–1945—coincided with the epoch in which that North American nation cemented its status as a world power, a situation that would be analyzed time and again by leftist intellectuals during the postwar years. In many Latin American countries where the search for more just models of society continued after World War II, many intellectuals and activists were led towards an ideological rapprochement with the Soviet Union and the socialist option it represented; simultaneously the United States came

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[3]Keywords taken from an anthology on this topic published by Bartra (2002).

to embody everything they rejected; namely, neo-imperialist expansionism that supported corrupt dictatorships and military regimes in the so-called "Third World" countries in the name of a consumption-focused capitalism that served to repress the liberation movements that in Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua or El Salvador were striving to construct new societies based on the socialist model.

While Paz's position to this current of North American foreign policy was never acritical, he opposed the idea that a highly-complex society should be judged exclusively on the basis of foreign policy decisions taken by its governments. His two-year stay allowed him to get to know North American society and its culture more closely. In his autobiographical essay, *Itinerario*, he recalled the impressions he gathered there: "In Spain I learned fraternity in the face of death; in the United States cordiality in the face of life" (Paz 1993: 26). Searching for explanations, Paz strove to eliminate widely-held prejudices. The cultural particularities of the United States are not traceable to Puritanism, as is often supposed; rather, it was more a

> Universal sympathy with roots not in Puritanism that, maniac of purity, is an ethics of separation, but in the romantic pantheism of Emerson and the cosmic effusion of Whitman (ibidem.).

These words reveal Paz' method. Instead of congealing his view on the institutional structures and pragmatic decisions of politicians, he seeks sedimented experiences, information on the social reality of the society, in the "density" of culture. He finds it in philosophy and—it could not be otherwise—in poetry. But it was not the modernity of the United States that Paz wished to question through these subtleties of cultural sociology, but the traditional criteria, especially those of the social sciences, that sought to demonstrate modernity empirically. For Paz, economic "wealth", "democracy", "capitalism", "industrial revolution"—all those criteria generally considered indicators of modernity—are important but prove insufficient when the goal is to compare different societies.

> As deep and determinant as the influence of the productive system may be for creating culture, I refuse to believe that the possession of heavy industry and living free from economic imperialism could suffice to make our differences vanish […] (Paz 1994: 55).

For Paz "Modernization" was a necessary evil that he had no desire to deny to his own society, but he was equally well aware of its negative implications as its benefits. In 1993, he observed retrospectively:

> Modernization, a word not yet in fashion, was at one and the same time our condemnation and our tablet of salvation. Condemnation because modern society is far from an example […] salvation because only a radical transformation of society, through a true democracy and the dismantling of patrimonialism […], could give us the confidence and strength to confront an unruly and merciless world (Paz 1993: 40).

Paz joined knowledge of the ambivalence of modernization with an awareness of the fact that neither one unique modernization nor one unique modernity could exist. His comparative approach clearly contributed the idea that modernity can, even must, adopt many different forms.

In this sense modernity can be understood only as an "empty name" (Paz 1994a: 19); that is, a challenge that each society confronts and strives to deal with in its own way. "What is modernity? Above all, it is an equivocal term: there are as many modernities as there are societies" (Paz 1994g: 35), Paz wrote categorically. But this affirmation indicates that Paz also set out from the idea that modernity is the common fate of *all* societies. In other words: the term "modernity" expresses the fact that today all societies, all human beings, share a common destiny. In the strict sense, then, the goal would not be modernity, but establishing ourselves in this common world shared by all mankind. Why should we not call this circumstance "modern"?

This meant that instead of inquiring into the characteristics of a modern society and then repeating acritically, in response, the ideas disseminated by modernization theories, Paz sought to identify the cultural particularities of U.S. American society and explain why those particularities constitute the—presumably universal—characteristics of modernity. Today we would say that in so doing Paz attempted to "provincialize" the self-understanding that U.S. Americans held of their modernity.

One such particularity that must have impacted him deeply while in the United States was the "security and confidence of the people". He linked this to "their apparent conformity with the world around them" (Paz 1994: 55), and this led him to think that this could only mean that there were no great discrepancies between the ideals of that society and its reality: "[…] the United States is a society that wishes to realize its ideals […]" (ibidem). This feature must have drawn his attention mainly because of his conviction that postcolonial Mexico had been living exactly *the opposite experience* ever since Independence. In Mexico, he wrote, abstract discourses of liberty, liberalism, positivism or socialism had always remained just that: abstract, never entering the country's political and social reality. In contrast, in the United States the meaning and talent required to make modern values and ideals reality were recognized. The supposed "realism" that can be attributed to the United States is, he affirms, actually an idealism, but one so strong that it is effectively capable of influencing reality. It is not a question of "knowing reality" but of "utilizing it" (ibidem.).

But it is precisely this strong faith in their own values and the conviction that these values can effectively govern reality that produced the "positive"—read "acritical"—attitude that U.S. Americans adopt towards reality: "From childhood, men and women are subjected to an inexorable process of adaptation […]" (ibid.), a process oriented by "brief formulas" repeated endlessly.

At this point, one might affirm that this model is justified by its evident success. However, this begs the question of the criteria used to measure this "success". Paz held firmly that the only criterion that can determine the success or failure of social models is man himself. Seen from this perspective, his judgment of the U.S. American model seems less intransigent. Paz understands the forced adaptation that appears to characterize U.S. American society so strongly as a "conspiracy" against human life:

> The benevolent, attentive and empty mask that takes the place of the dramatic mobility
> of the human face, and the smile painfully fixed there, show to what degree intimacy can

be devastated by the arid victory of principles over instincts. The sadism that underlies almost all forms of relation in North American contemporary society may be nothing more than a way to escape from the petrification imposed by the morality of aseptic purity (Paz 1999: 65).

However, what Paz perceives above all in the North American model, and in Mexico's, are attempts to confront the existential task of establishing a modality for the relation between man and the world. The decision to adapt man to the ideal conditions of the world does not seem to Paz an adequate solution for it fools man into thinking that he lives in a world that does indeed correspond to his ideals: it "is his mirror" (ibidem). But one who looks only for himself in that mirror is closed to the other and fails the *conditio humana*. Who can deny that this incapacity to perceive the other is maintained in sociological theories, especially theories of modernization?

We have mentioned that Paz' interest does not concur with that of those who seek answers to the question of national or cultural identity. It was in this regard that he wrote, alluding to the Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga and his attempt to formulate an "ontology of the Mexican": "As for me: I did not wish to make either an ontology or a philosophy of the Mexican" (Paz and Fell 1994: 243s.). In *The Labyrinth* he assumes that he was inspired by the ideas of Samuel Ramos, who provided important keywords to the debate on identity in Mexico by attributing to Mexicans a "closed character" (cfr. Ramos 1990), a quality that Paz also diagnosed in a certain sense. Nonetheless, this manifests simultaneously that his "method" sought to distinguish itself from the one that Ramos employed (Paz 1994: 153). He declares himself more united to Jorge Cuesta who, instead of speculating on the "psychology" of Mexicans, posed the question of the "meaning of our tradition" (cfr. ibid.). This alludes to a program of cultural critique with which Paz was, actually, deeply committed. But that program differed from the debate on identity due not only to its method but also its results. In contrast to all those attempts to penetrate into the "essence" of Mexicanness in order to explain its specificity, Paz was more interested in the possibilities of the *transformation* of identities on the horizon of global modernity.

This specific interest explains why in the first chapter of *The Labyrinth* Paz examines a rather marginal group of Mexicans; namely, the sub-culture of immigrants in the United States that during the 1940s was centered mainly in Los Angeles: the so-called *pachucos*. Like all genres of urban sub-culture, the *pachucos* drew people's attention primarily by their clothing. Their characteristic garments were the so-called *zoot suit*, which consisted in an extremely broad-shouldered jacket that reached down to the knees, and loose pants tied at the ankle, usually accompanied by a broad-brimmed hat (*pancake tando*) and a long gold chain that hung to the knees. What Paz found in this style of dress was not so much a response to the search for an identity in the positive sense but, rather, an attempt to mock the typical clothing of U.S. Americans by emphasizing comfort and expressing a kind of distancing.

But the *pachuco* wished to distinguish himself not only from U.S. American culture but also from the culture commonly understood as "Mexican". Paz wrote:

Rebels by instinct, more than once have they been railed against by North American racism.[4] But the *pachuco* is not vindicating his race or the nationality of his ancestors. Despite the fact that his attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical, willingness to be, this willingness affirms nothing concrete except the decision – ambiguous, as we will see – to be unlike the others around them. The *pachuco* has no desire to return to his Mexican origin; nor – at least in appearance – does he wish to meld into North American life (Paz 1994: 50).

For Paz this meant the *pachuco* had a stubborn yearning to "want to be distinct" (ibid.: 51). And it is precisely here that he seems to discern the workings of a principle of culture more amenable to him than the idea that cultural identity is linked to some, presumably invariable, essence. "Identity" represents, for him, nothing less than "clever subterfuges of our creative impotence" (ibid.: 48).

But from the modern perspective it is possible to understand Paz' interest in the *pachucos* as an early example of what might, in contemporary social research and following Ludger Pries, be called "the sociology of transnational social spaces" (cfr. Pries 2008). Mexican migration to the U.S. is a classic topic in modern research on migration, and Paz' reflections in this regard can undoubtedly be considered an early basis of this field of research. But it is also a theme that contributes weightily to revising our understanding of modernity, for it clarifies that it is not possible to reduce the modern social space to the territorial limits of Nation States.

As mentioned already, in a now famous passage, Habermas called Paz an "advocate of modernity" (cfr. Habermas 1990a: 37). When he wrote this he must have perceived a kind of kindred spirit. However, the differences between Habermas' and Paz' understandings of modernity are difficult to ignore and—I trust—have been made clear. Habermas posited the conception of a modernity that has no place for "the other", while for Paz it is precisely this boundary region with "the other" that defines the place of modernity in his thought. If only for this reason it would not be inaccurate to call Paz a "border-crosser" (*pasafronteras*) of modernity, for he constantly transcends frontiers: between countries, cultures, epochs, between the proper and the foreign, or frontiers that seek to separate the sciences from other areas of knowledge. Crossing frontiers, especially those that separate countries, cultures and languages, is something that more and more people are doing in our current global modernity. In this context, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* constitutes one of the first diagnoses of modernity from the perspective of a border-crosser, one who dares to penetrate the difficult and complex world of modernity by attempting to understand it from the point of view of the frontier.

The urgency of such an epistemology of the frontier stems from the transformation of the modern world. Paz wrote that the world is about to lose its centers:

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[4]Here, Paz probably alludes to the *zoot suit* riot that broke out in Los Angeles in 1943. This was not a rebellion by *pachucos* but attacks by U.S. soldiers on people wearing *zoot suits* motivated by their style of dress which set the *pachucos* apart. When wartime brought restrictions on the use of textiles, those flamboyant suits with excessive material were seen as a provocation, although deeper motives rooted in racism and xenophobia obviously lay behind that argument.

> Today the center, the nucleus of world society, has been disaggregated and we have all been converted into peripheral beings, even Europeans and North Americans. We are all on the margins because there is no center (Paz 1994: 161).

This entails as well that we all find ourselves on the frontiers of a no-man's land. Modernity is a frontier way of life. This is why Paz, the border-crosser, is so thoroughly modern. And the fact that this situation is much clearer in the global Modernity of our days (see Schmidt 2014) makes Paz' Modernity astonishingly current.

(b) *Conditio humana*

In her contribution to an anthology on 20th-century Mexican humanism, Liliana Weinberg observed that Paz combined the critique of modernity with a "critical humanism".

> In the case of Paz […] it is important to point out that in his work the presence of a fundamental, existential element stands out; an element that can be traced back to his childhood memories: the original intuition of the tearing apart of the human being and the world, a separation between the individual and the original community. It is here where Paz sees later the *conditio humana* which he reformulates in his solitude-communion chapter that becomes the real matrix of his thinking (Weinberg 2004: 373).

However, Paz' anthropology is distinct from the innumerable attempts to determine "the essence" or "nature" of man. For Paz it was a simple fact that all human beings experience the *conditio humana* through interpersonal relations. Just as the poet does not choose his words, but the words look for him, our experience of ourselves as human beings must be produced by the revelation of the other within ourselves. Perhaps the fact that the *conditio humana* is being problematized is a warning sign, for it indicates that the experiencing of ourselves as human beings is so rare. Philosophical anthropology would thus be a symptom of a crisis in which human beings seem to lose their human quality, although it would, by the same token, constitute an attempt to counteract this process of dehumanization.

But in his book on Claude Lévi-Strauss Paz declares that he distrusts the strategy behind philosophical *theories* that strive to define "the essence" or "nature" of man: "[…] the philosopher's vision is a whole that lacks many things" (Paz 1996b: 527). Instead of this strategy of reasoning Paz opts for rehabilitating the *experience* of man as man through the poetic experience.

It was likely the decomposition of the world, announced so dramatically by the two World Wars of the past century followed by the Cold War and the "North-South conflict", which led Paz to insist upon detecting things we share in common, above and beyond political and cultural differences. If these could be found, then humanity would take an enormous step towards realizing its human character through all those crises. Paz expressed his enthusiastic tone in *The Labyrinth*: "History has now recovered its unity and returned to what it was in its origins: a meditation on man" (Paz 1994: 162). Although this program could barely develop as manifestly as Paz would have wished, one can argue the validity of the normative pretension it contained, even for the current phase of global modernity. The conflicts we see in

every area of the world can only be resolved if we are in conditions to apply a universal pattern oriented by the human condition we all share. Paz must have been referring to this when he wrote: "The destiny of each man is no longer distinct from that of Man" (ibid.: 205). For Paz, the modern world was one that spanned the entire planet; but for this Mexican poet that meant, first, that we were dealing with a world whose opportunity and mission consisted in re-inventing itself on the basis of the consciousness of our shared human condition. His thought inevitably reflects a confluence of cosmopolitanism and *humanism*.

These understandings are, for Paz, far from abstract and theoretical; rather, he deduces them from his observations gained from cultural critique that he practices in *The Labyrinth*. Time and again, he encounters people who, ultimately, are striving to fulfill their human mission; for example, the *pachuco*, whose desire to be "different" shrouds his yearning to be just human: "In each man there beats the possibility to be or, more precisely, to become again, another human being" (ibid.: 29).

We have already said that Paz' was interested less in determining the Mexican identity than in what can be said about Mexicans as human beings. He considers the desperate search for one's own identity to be an obstacle, for it can lead to the adoption of attitudes that ignore what we all share as human beings (cfr. 49). Indeed, Paz insists: "The Mexican wishes to be neither Indian nor Spanish. Nor does he wish to descend from them. He denies them. Nor does he recognize himself as mestizo, but as abstraction: he is a human being" (ibid.: 102).

Now, while reflections on one's own tradition are by no means insignificant, Paz knew that problematizing tradition is an absolutely modern characteristic. In consequence—he wrote—the conflict between "tradition" and "modernity" proclaimed by modernization theories does not exist. By necessity, all human beings must have a tradition. Paz thus attributes to the so-called "traditional societies" that "[…] more than having awareness of their traditions, they live with them and in them" (Paz 1985b: 26). On the other hand, he affirms that what characterizes modern societies is not that they suppress traditions but that they problematize them. Modern societies cannot exist without traditions, but they must "invent" their own traditions, and they can do this consciously (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In view of the multiplicity of options that have not been decimated in modern societies despite determined attempts to replace cultural diversity with a homogeneous national culture, Paz believes that choosing one's own respective tradition entails making decisions. While in Mexico this process of "inventing" its own tradition may be difficult and is still unfinished, Paz took for granted that the guiding function of the process was always "an idea of man" that could be realized only "by sacrificing our national particularities" (Paz 1994: 192).

The mission that Paz deduced from his observations consists, primordially, in reconciling the universal with the particular. Again: the goal is not to invent a national identity, but to find one's own path towards the humanity. Thus, the decisive question is: "how to create a society, a culture, which neither denies our humanity nor converts it into a vain abstraction" (Paz 1994: 176). Paz knew that this question has been posited not only for Mexicans but for all human beings united in global modernity.

Nonetheless, the question of the *conditio humana* is not only inseparably intertwined with the question of the *condition moderne*, but also with that of the *Mexican condition*: *la condición mexicana*. This is the hinge that gives cohesion to the different dimensions of experience in global modernity from the Mexican perspective and that provides orientation in the "labyrinth of solitude".

(c)   *La condición mexicana*: **in the labyrinth of (post)colonial experiences**

The Labyrinth of Solitude reminds me of another book that is now recognized as one of the early documents of postcolonial thought. I refer to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, published some ten years after the appearance of *The Labyrinth*.[5] There is no evidence that Fanon had read Paz' *Labyrinth*, so the affinities between these two books that we elucidate below cannot be explained by mutual influence, but must be due to the similar experiences that their authors had with, and in, colonial and postcolonial modernity.

Fanon's book was inspired, above all, by the wars of decolonization in post-World War II Africa. In it, he attempts to describe the social, political, economic and cultural continuities and ruptures of the colonial and postcolonial conditions in those countries. Like other texts by Fanon, this one also seeks a language that creates consciousness of those conditions, a language that must supersede the critical discourses of the global North. In this way he explains, for example, why liberation movements in "underdeveloped countries" must be oriented principally in accordance with the needs of the rural population, and *not* by the stratum of the urban proletariat that in those nations constitutes a privileged group (cfr. Fanon 1965: 100). The role and function of the proletariat in postcolonial societies is distinct from that of early industrialized countries, since it "constitutes, in effect, the fraction of the colonized people that is necessary and irreplaceable for the smooth functioning of the colonial machinery […]" (ibidem.).

Paz also recognized in *The Labyrinth* that the Marxist-oriented language of critical thought and, above all, official Marxism's interpretations of Marx's ideas, were incapable of appropriately articulating the situation in Mexico. Therefore–he writes—what is needed is a "linguistic" effort that will make it possible, at least, to express clearly the particularities of the situation in Mexico. Problems could not be resolved adequately if all we try to do is set Mexican society on the path of the "worldwide workers' movement", as Marxist-oriented initiatives strove to do in Mexico[6] (cfr. Paz 1994: 153).

If the liberation of the proletariat does not provide a satisfactory response to the pressing problems of postcolonial societies, then it was necessary to return to the fundamental conditions of liberation. While in this context Paz does cite

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[5]In his recently published biography on Paz, Christopher Domínguez Michael also compares Paz and Fanon (see: Domínguez 2014: 175 pp.). Despite all the affinities, Domínguez reminds us that Paz was well aware of the difference between the postcolonial situation that he was concerned with, and the problems that drove Fanon's writings (see: ibid. 178).

[6]A few years ago, the historian Carlos Illades presented interesting studies on early socialist thought in Mexico (cfr. Illades 2008).

Marx—"All radicalism, Marx said, is humanism, because man is the root of reason and society" (ibid.: 142)—he simultaneously clarifies that it is the question of humanism—that is, the question of what constitutes a humanely dignified life—that must supply the orientation of liberation movements. Paz' most general criticism of "really existing" socialism was that it had long abandoned the humanist orientation.

I insist: this humanist orientation was more important for Paz than cultural or national identities, and Fanon thought similarly: "Actually, what is lacking is a conception of man […]" (Fanon 1965: 186), or:

> Nationalism, if not made explicit, if not enriched and deepened, if not transformed quickly into political and social consciousness, in humanism, leads into a dead-end alley (ibidem).

In Fanon's thought, as in Paz', "political and social consciousness" did not mean "class consciousness", but a reflection on the fundamental question of what it means to be human. Paz would have added that all that can result from this consciousness is a post-national goal that derives in the attempt to overcome even "national solitude" by seeking to achieve the "communion" of all *human beings* on Earth.

In this regard, Fanon was more reserved, for his medium-term utopia was not yet the world of all human beings. This contention is explained by the historical circumstances that surrounded his thought. As mentioned above, they were principally the decolonization of Africa that Fanon lived directly in Algeria. It was thus clear to Fanon that the most urgent problem to resolve was racism, because it continued to fragment the colonial/postcolonial world:

> When observing the immediate aspect of the colonial context it is evident that what divides the world is, first, the fact of belonging, or not, to a certain species, a certain race (ibid.: 34).

The "unification" of society of which Fanon dreamed refers primarily to suppressing "heterogeneity […] on the basis of nation or, at times, race" (ibid.: 40). It must be made clear that from the perspective of the historical explosiveness entailed in the ongoing decolonization of Africa and Asia, this goal—though only provisional—had to take priority.

This emphasis on the concrete historical conditions in which the struggles of decolonizing liberation were occurring also explains the oft-criticized "theoretical exaltation of violence" that, some authors hold, is advocated by Fanon in the first chapter of his book (cfr. Arendt 1970). However, what I see in this is not so much a justification of violence as such but, rather, reflections that emerged from the impact of the violent decolonization struggles.[7] The violence unleashed by both parties immersed in those battles had an enormous impact on Fanon that moved him to make declarations like this:

> But let us return to the singular combat between colonized and colonizer. As we have seen, this involves open armed combat […] The existence of armed struggle indicates that people decide to trust only in violent means. The people, who have been told incessantly that the

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[7]An interesting reading of Fanon was presented in a recent book by Richard J. Bernstein (2013).

only language they understand is the language of force, decide to express themselves through force. Actually, the colonizer has always shown them the path that they must make their own if they wish to liberate themselves (Fanon 1965: 75).

Seen in this light, Fanon's chapter "On Violence" does not constitute a 'call-to-arms', nor does it express a simple thirst for vengeance. Rather, Fanon believed—like Paz (cfr. Sect. 3.2)—that he was witness to an epoch of revolutions that found its character, above all, in the struggles for decolonization. But liberation cannot be procured without cost; quite to the contrary, every instance—primordially the war of liberation in Algeria that Fanon took as his example, like Paz with the Mexican Revolution—demonstrates that it must be obtained by fighting battle. In his *Sociologie d'une révolution*, published in 1959 Fanon wrote:

> This revolution is changing humanity. In the revolutionary struggle, the immense, the oppressed masses of the colonies and semi-colonies feel that they are a part of life for the first time. Life acquires a sense, a transcendence, an object: to end exploitation, to govern themselves and for themselves to construct a way of life. The armed struggle breaks up the old routine life of the countryside and villages, excites, exalts and opens wide the doors of the future. Liberation does not come as a gift from anybody; it is seized by the masses with their own hands (Fanon 1967: 1s.).

This citation is revealing in many ways; for example, in relation to modernization theories. Against the affirmation that modernization entails primarily a certain degree of rationality which peoples in the global South have not attained, Fanon seems to insist that from the perspective of colonized, and even postcolonial peoples, *liberation* was a much more salient criterion of "modernization". And this leads to the seeds of the change that is necessary, even in the most "backwards" regions (i.e., the countryside and village), while opening the door to the future. But the posture that this "revolution" of modernity is not possible without violence or, perhaps better, that "modernization" entails "struggle", has the same relevance.

Paz also recognizes that Mexico's colonial and postcolonial history has been impregnated by excesses of violence, and the theme of violence is omnipresent in *The Labyrinth*. In his analysis of the *pachucos*, Paz recalls the *zoot suit riots* of the 1940 s in Los Angeles, where members of this group were victims of racist violence (cfr. Paz 1994: 50). At the same time, he attempts to demonstrate that the attitude of the *pachucos* towards themselves was characterized by a certain kind of violence, one that was "self-humiliating".

It also has to be remembered that for Paz, even the fiesta is a synthesis of outbreaks of violence: "Everyone is possessed by violence and frenzy", he wrote (ibid.: 74). In the world of the Mexican imagination "dying" and "killing" form a continuum, something that Paz relates to its hermiticism (cfr. 81). Finally he considers the presence of violence in all possible nuances as a predominant motive in Mexico's colonial and postcolonial culture and society. At its heart is the idea, deeply-rooted in Mexico's cultural self-understanding, that the country is the result of colonial violation; a notion reproduced daily through its corresponding linguistic resources (cfr. 94ss.). In this context, the verb *chingar* ('to fuck' in English), plays a determining function. It derives from the term *chingada*—'fucked'—that is, "the Mother opened,

violated or profaned by force" (ibid.: 97). Paz states: "For Spaniards dishonor consists in being the child of a woman that gives herself voluntarily, a prostitute; for the Mexican, in being the fruit of rape" (ibidem). Finally, Paz considered the Mexican Revolution or, perhaps better, "revolt" (cfr. Sect. 2.2), a "bloody fiesta" (cfr. Paz 1994: 146).

In the face of all these forms of violence Paz adopts an attitude perhaps not approving, but certainly not moralizing. To the contrary, he records violence through his "dense description" (*a la* Geertz) of Mexican culture as an essential part of the reality of a colonial and postcolonial society that must not be concealed. Postcolonial Mexican culture and society are infused with the everyday violence once employed to construct and defend the Colony. Violence is one of the most persistent constants of this reality. Here, Paz and Fanon coincide.

The coincidences in the observations on postcolonial modernity noted between these two authors are surprising because Paz never intended to complement his expositions of Mexican reality with a mono-causal explanation, like those conveyed by terms like "colonialism", or the more recent term "postcolonialism". At a time when leftist intellectuals sought to reduce all the problems of what was then known as the "Third World" to the "neo-imperialist" and "neo-colonial" strategies of, above all, the U.S. and transnational companies, Paz clarified in his book on *Sor Juana*—published in 1982 and still his most important contribution to the understanding of New Spain—that the current use of words like "colonialism" and "colony" lead to misunderstandings. He warned:

> Today 'colony' is used to refer to any territory that is dependent or semi-dependent on, or even subject to the influence of, a great power. The term has been transformed into a projectile. Projectiles serve to injure one's adversaries, not to understand a historical situation (Paz 1991: 35).

However, especially in contemporary postcolonial theory, it is commonly held that *subjective experiences* are more important than abstract concepts. This is exactly what Paz sought to accomplish in *The Labyrinth* and, in a complementary way, in *Sor Juana* which, more than a biography of that Mexican poetess, provides an impressive panorama of the world of New Spain, by reconstructing Sor Juana's *experiences* with, and in, that colonial world. Paz gave his method a name: calling it "restitution", and went on to explain:

> In this sense, my essay is an attempt at restitution; my intention is to restitute her world, the New Spain of the 17th century, the life and work of Sor Juana. At one and the same time, the life and work of Sor Juana restitutes the society of New Spain in the 17th century for us, her 20th-century readers (Paz 1991: 23).

In this context, "restitute" means "to give back". The idea is to submerge oneself in the depths of the past, though only to recall in the present the problems that continue to weigh upon Mexican society. Paz establishes contact with the past by dialoguing with certain historical actors whose subjective experiences in, and with, the epoch in which they lived can provide insight into the period. This method brings colonial reality to life, facilitating an empathetic understanding of the living

conditions of concrete *human beings*. He considers this procedure an alternative to the abstract understanding of history, oriented by concepts as abstract as they are hollow. Anyone who reads Paz' book on Sor Juana feels the lethargic atmosphere that New Spain experienced, as well as the inertia of a colonial culture that had lost its vitality and no longer had the strength to produce anything new.

But it is already in *The Labyrinth* that Paz narrates the history of New Spain as that of a petrified culture, a culture that, while certainly extensive in space, was no longer creative. For Paz it is precisely this cultural paralysis that survived Independence in 1810 and that still characterizes postcolonial Mexico today. But what does this mean in concrete terms? How does this continuity manifest itself in the social life of Mexico?

When describing social conditions in postcolonial societies, many authors have recourse to the continuity of dual-reference systems, primordially that of racism. In this regard, the sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel observed:

> White Creole elites maintained after independence a racial hierarchy where Indians, blacks, mestizos, mulattoes and other racially oppressed groups were located at the bottom. This is what Aníbal Quijano […] calls 'coloniality of power' (Grosfoguel 2000: 349).

But is this racist stratification all that can be said about the postcolonial situation of Mexico? I believe that in Paz' *Labyrinth* we find an alternative, not only to this dual-reference system. Paz does not deny the continuity of social stratification, but complements it with a description of the social pathologies of everyday life, proceeding in a way similar to his critique of postcolonial violence. While social pathologies are also expressed in social experiences, their roots are in imaginative, highly-complex cultural worlds of which Paz, assuming his role as an intellectual critic, constructed a decisive critique.

In any type of critique, what is determinant are the *criteria* upon which it is based. Paz' critique of the social pathologies of postcolonial Mexico is oriented by his anthropology of solitude which, as we have seen (cfr. Sect. 3.2), holds that the experience of the other person is experienced not only as deficiency of oneself, but also as the desire to unite with the other. Paz describes postcolonial social pathologies as barriers to the realization of "normal" social relations. Relations with the other are perceived as perturbed.

In this regard, Paz and Fanon once again coincide. Both describe the colonial and postcolonial situation as a condition that impedes the satisfaction of the most human of all needs; namely, experiencing the other as person, which makes it possible to experience, simultaneously, the human condition itself. Nelson Maldonado-Torres summarizes this clearly humanist aspect in Fanon's work in the following citation:

> For Fanon, the subject becomes human by leaving itself and relating to others. The fatal aspect of racism is that it tries to limit this practice or make it impossible for subjects whose skin or customs are understood as being inferior (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 161; cfr. also Gilroy 2010).

At the end of his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses cases of "psychic perturbations"; that is, the stories of individuals who, in one way or another,

were victims of the violence of war in Algeria. These cases once again evidence how directly Fanon's ideas are impregnated by the impact of violence; a fact that distinguishes him significantly from Paz. Certainly, as we have seen, decolonizing "revolts" in general, and the Mexican Revolution in particular, were also historical events with which Paz identified. But the fact that his thought was not impregnated to the same degree as Fanon's by the force of those events, is probably due to Mexico having had experienced over a century-and-a-half of *postcolonial* experiences. Claudio Lomnitz (2005: 30) goes so far as to say that: "[…] Mexico, compared with other countries, has the deepest and earliest world-historical experience of itself as a postcolonial and postimperial nation".

This relatively extensive experience with the postcolonial situation makes Paz sensitive to the persistent elements of daily life whose origin is in the forms of colonial life, though they no longer possess the explosive force of direct violence. In *The Labyrinth*, Paz distinguishes four forms of social interaction to which this applies.

1. The first is denominated "dissimulation" or "simulation". "Simulation is an activity similar to what actors do […]" (Paz 1994: 70). However, there is an important difference between the professional actor and the simulation that Paz observed in postcolonial Mexico; namely, the actor delivers himself fully to the character he incarnates, while the simulator never abandons his true self. In other words: theatrical acting requires the ability to temporarily create a distinct reality; while simulation, in contrast, is a kind of lie.

   > […] he who dissimulates does not represent, but wishes to make himself invisible, to go unseen, without renouncing his self. The Mexican exceeds in dissimulating his passions and his self. Afraid of the gaze of others, he contracts, reduces, becomes a shadow and phantasm, an echo. He does not walk, but slides; does not propose, but insinuates; does not reply, only murmurs; does not complain, only smiles […] (ibid.: 70).

   Perhaps a simultaneous reading of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* by James C. Scott would help to understand that the "art of simulation" is, indeed, a typical mechanism of interpersonal relations in postcolonial societies (cfr. Scott 1990). Scott convincingly demonstrates that in such societies there exists a deeply-rooted double morality. People try to neutralize conflicts instead of confronting them directly and clearly. This neutralization is achieved principally by concealing one's own intentions. This strategy—manifested, above all, by the "oppressed"—has as its consequence that a presumed consensus derives in a distinct form of acting. An abyss emerges between "public" declarations of intentions and what really goes on.

   Paz' perception of simulation is similar to Scott's diagnosis, though for Paz simulation is not only a reaction to social inequality, but also a situation that, in turn, provokes existential problems, because it can be—and, in effect, is—raised to such a degree that true intentions become increasingly imprecise. Paz believed that this is why Mexicans tend to deny themselves (Paz 1994: 71).

2. "The mask" is a central metaphor in *The Labyrinth* (cfr. Astorga 2004) that, of course, also refers to the mechanism of simulation while at the same time evidencing the hermetic character that Paz attributes to Mexicans.

> Hermeticism is a resource of our suspicion and distrust. It shows that we instinctively consider the milieu around us to be dangerous, a reaction that is justified when one reflects upon what Mexico's history has been and upon the character of the society we have created. The harshness and hostility of the environment—and that hidden and indefinable threat always floating in the air—obliges us to close ourselves off from the exterior, like those plants of the sierra that accumulate their juices behind a spiny husk (Paz 1994: 61s.).

The "juices" to which Paz refers here are all those that nature, in her symbiosis with the environment, provides. In a metaphoric sense, they could include affection, trust and love, which the Mexican, like all other human beings, desires to share with his fellows and with the world in general. Paz was convinced that the problems of postcolonial Mexico cannot be reduced to the continuity of unjust power and property structures. While he was not blinded by them, what seemed to him a much more urgent problem was how social mechanisms could become established in society that affect *all people* and that have evidently survived the official end of the colonial epoch: "The colonial world has disappeared, but not the fear, distrust and suspicion" (ibid.: 71). The permanence of the supposed hostility of the world provokes the reflex of desiring to conceal oneself. It is in this sense that the "mask" manifests its sociocultural function in postcolonial Mexico.

3. "Nullifying" (*ninguneo*) is another term that signals a kind of simulation, but in this context it does not refer to a self that simulates being another but that simulates making the "other" disappear, by making it seem that he does not exist. This entails much more than simply ignoring the other. If we recall the enormous importance that Paz attributes to the experiencing of the other for experiencing one's own humanness, we can imagine that negation of the other is equivalent to an existential and human catastrophe. Here, once again, the dividing line between actor and victim is erased. The negated "other" suffers just like the one who is no longer capable of perceiving him, for he loses the human capacity of experiencing the other (cfr. Sect. 3.2).

4. Finally, it is important to mention once more the fiesta in this context, since it also represents for Paz a social form characteristic of colonial Mexico. After all the simulation, masking, after all the accumulated anxiety that originates from the unsatisfied desire to connect to the other, the *fiesta* constitutes a valve through which the accumulated abstention can, now and again, be discharged. Paz attributes to the fiesta an importance that is absolutely positive, discovering in it the possibility of "communion". He also understands the Mexican Revolution as a kind of *fiesta*.

> Thanks to *fiestas* the Mexican opens, participates and communes with his fellows and with the values that give meaning to his religious or political existence (ibid.: 77).

But this valorization, positive in principle, is tarnished by the following reflection:

> [I]t is significant that a country as sad as ours has so many and such joyful fiestas. Their frequency, the brilliance they achieve, the enthusiasm with which everyone participates, seem to reveal that, without them, we would explode. They liberate us, though perhaps only

momentarily, from all those impulses we cannot let out, and from all those flammable materials that we keep in our interior (ibidem).

Finally, this sudden, impulsive discharge is a sign of the violence of the *fiesta*. In any case, the *fiesta* is also for Paz a symptom of a social pathology.

However, Paz does not limit his critique of these social pathologies in postcolonial Mexico to a critique of violence. To the contrary, violence is a consequence that has its origin in the aforementioned social perturbations, the desperate explosion of the desire to unite with the other human being. This critique is made possible because it is oriented by an idea of man that understands him as a being defined primordially by his experiencing of the other and his yearning for this. The evil with which colonial and postcolonial societies exist cannot, therefore, be reduced to unequal structures of power or distribution, but acts more intrinsically: on the foundations of man's social existence.

Paz was convinced that the problems of postcolonial Mexico are not limited to political or economic aspects. He clarifies the importance of taking into consideration the cultural dimension, in which the forms of human action, of interpersonal relations, and of relations between the human beings and the world, are etched. However, recognizing the cultural nature of these social forms filled Paz with hope, for culture was his trade. As an intellectual he not only wished to make this cultural dimension of social problems visible, but also to "intervene" (Adorno) in them and change them.

In order to find an exit from this (post)colonial labyrinth it was necessary–Paz thought—to become aware of a central question. This was not for him the question of national or cultural identity, but of that for which people in Mexico, together with human beings in other parts of the world all yearn. Paz knew that today all people on the planet were asking the same question, and because of this he felt the need, but also the opportunity, of a *new* world that could become the world of all human beings:

> The object of our reflection is not distinct from the one that disconcerts other men and other peoples: how to create a society, a culture, which does not deny our humanity, but that neither becomes a vain abstraction? The question that all men ask today is not distinct from the one that Mexicans ask themselves (Paz 1994: 176).

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