

The Problem of National Culture

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla

Like Octavio Paz, anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1935-1991) believed that Mexico suffers from a crisis of identity. However, for Bonfil the nature of that crisis is quite different. For the earlier thinkers, the Indian remained a shadowy presence who constituted a "problem," the only apparent solution to which was assimilation into the Westernized culture of the dominant, usually urban groups. By contrast, Bonfil Batalla argued that the true Mexico, which he labels "*México profundo*," is represented by Indians, rural mestizos, and a portion of the urban poor, whose culture is Mesoamerican. The values of this culture are incompatible with those of the elite, who have consistently sought to imitate the culture of Western Europe and to deny the social realities of their own country. Far from an inert mass, Mexico's Indians remain the bearers of a true, alternative civilization which needs to be reclaimed rather than denied or suppressed.

Bonfil Batalla was among Mexico's most distinguished anthropologists. He served as director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), founded and directed the National Museum of Popular Culture, and directed the Center for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology (CIESAS). In 1975 he helped to organize Mexico's first National Congress of Indian Peoples, which reflected his conviction that Indian peoples would profit more from autonomy and self-determination than from efforts, however well intentioned, at assimilation or social welfare.

What explains the absence of a common Mexican culture is the presence of two civilizations that have never fused to produce a new civilizational program. Neither have they coexisted in harmony, to each other's reciprocal benefit.

To the contrary, the groups of Mesoamerican origin and the successive hegemonic groups dominant in Mexican society, with their versions of Western civilization, continue to be opposed. There has never been a process of convergence, but, rather, one of opposition. There is one simple and straightforward reason: certain social groups have illegitimately held political, eco-

nomic, and ideological power from the European invasion to the present. All have been affiliated through inheritance or through circumstance with Western civilization, and within their programs for governing there has been no place for Mesoamerican civilization. The dominant position of these groups originated in the stratified order of colonial society. It has expressed itself in an ideology that conceives of the future only in terms of development, progress, advancement, and the Revolution itself, all concepts within the mainstream of Western civilization. Cultural diversity and, specifically, the omnipresence of Mesoamerican civilization have always been interpreted within that scheme in the only way possible. They are seen as an obstacle to progress along the one true path and toward the only valid objective. The mentality inherited from the colonizers does not allow perception of or invention of any other path. Mesoamerican civilization is either dead or must die as soon as possible, because it is of undeniable inferiority and has no future of its own.

The presence of two distinct civilizations implies the existence of different historical plans for the future. We are not dealing simply with alternatives within the framework of a common civilization, proposals that might alter current reality in many ways but that do not question the ultimate objectives or the underlying values that all share as participants in the same civilizational project. We are, rather, dealing with different projects, which are built on different ways of conceiving of the world, nature, society, and humankind. They postulate different hierarchies of values. They do not have the same aspirations nor do they understand in the same way how the full realization of each human being is to be achieved. They are projects that express two unique concepts of transcendence. Throughout, attempts at cultural unification have never suggested unity through creation of a new civilization that would be the synthesis of the existing ones. Rather, unity has been attempted through the elimination of one (Mesoamerican civilization, of course) and the spread of the other.

The colonial enterprise engaged in destroying Mesoamerican civilization and stopped only where self-interest intervened. When necessary, whole peoples were destroyed. On the other hand, where the labor force of the Indians was required, they were kept socially and culturally segregated. Indirectly and in a contradictory fashion, the minimum conditions for the continuity of Mesoamerican civilization were created, in spite of the brutal decline in population during the first decades after the invasion. This decline was one of the most violent and terrible demographic catastrophes in the history of humanity. Its intrinsic nature prevented the colonial regime from posing a project of cultural fusion that might have amalgamated the Mesoamerican

and the Western civilizational planes. The ideology that justified colonization was that of a redemptive crusade, thus revealing the conviction that the only path to salvation was that of Western civilization.

The Westernization of the Indian, nevertheless, turned out to be contradictory, given the stubborn necessity of maintaining a clear distinction between the colonizers and the colonized. If the Indians had stopped being Indians in order to be fully incorporated into Western civilization, the ideological justification for colonial domination would have ended. Segregation and difference are essential for any colonial society. Unification, on the other hand, whether by assimilation of the colonized to the dominant culture or through the perhaps improbable fusion of two civilizations, denies the root of the colonial order.

The birth and consolidation of Mexico as an independent state in the turbulent course of the nineteenth century did not produce any different plan, nothing that deviated from the basic intention of taking the country along the paths of Western civilization. The struggles between the liberals and the conservatives reflect different conceptions of how to achieve that goal, but those struggles never question it. The new nation was conceived as culturally homogeneous, following the dominant European conviction that a state is the expression of a people with a common culture and the same language and is produced by having a common history. Thus, consolidating the nation was the goal of all groups contending for power. They understood consolidation as the slow incorporation of the great majority to the cultural model that had been adopted as the national plan.

The ruling groups of the country, who make or impose the most important decisions affecting all of Mexican society, have never admitted that to advance might imply liberating and encouraging the cultural capacities that really exist in the majority of the population. . . . In this way of thinking about things, the majority of Mexicans have a future only on the condition that they stop being themselves. That change is conceived as a definite break, a transformation into someone else. It is never conceived as bringing up to date through internal transformation, as liberating cultures that have been subject to multiple pressures during five centuries of colonial domination.

The constitutional history of Mexico is an example that illustrates this schizophrenic posture in a striking way. In all cases it has led to the juridical construction of a fictitious state from whose norms and practices the majority of the population is excluded. . . . We must admit [that it is] a great dominating fiction. Otherwise, how do we explain a system of democratic elections based on the recognition of political parties as the only legitimate vehicles for electoral participation in a country in which an absolute majority of the

population does not belong to any party or exercise its right to vote? One would look in vain for a single example demonstrating an intention to understand and recognize the real systems that various groups use to obtain and legitimize authority. One would look in vain for an attempt to structure a national system in which local political forms would have a place and in which, at the same time, they might encounter the stimulus and the possibilities for progressive development. There are no such examples. The country must be modern right now, made so by virtue of law, and if reality follows other paths, it is an incorrect and illegal reality.

This schizophrenic fiction, manifest in all aspects of the country's life and culture, has grave consequences, which do not seem to worry the proponents of the imaginary Mexico. In the first place, the fiction produces the marginalization of the majority, a marginalization that is real and not imaginary. . . . This is not . . . a marginalization that is expressed only in reduced access to goods and services, but, rather, a total marginalization, an exclusion from one's own way of living. Many Mexicans thus have a choice: they can live on the margin of national life, related to it only by the minimal, inevitable relations between their real world and the other, which appears as different and external, or they can live a double life, also schizophrenic, changing between worlds and cultures according to circumstances and necessities; or, finally, they can renounce their identity from birth and try to be fully accepted in the imaginary Mexico of the minority.

The notion of democracy was established two centuries ago as one of the central aspirations of Western civilization. However, upon being mechanically transplanted into a postulate of the imaginary Mexico, it converted itself into a series of mechanisms of exclusion, whose effect was to deny the existence of the population. It is a curious democracy that does not recognize the existence of the people themselves, but, rather, sets itself the task of creating them. Afterward, it would, of course, put itself at their service. It is a surprising democracy of the minority, a national program that begins by leaving out the majority groups of the country. It is a project that ends by making illegitimate the thoughts and actions of the majority of Mexicans; the people themselves wind up being the obstacle to democracy.

A second consequence is also inevitable. By making reality a blank page, one chooses not to make use of the greater part of the cultural capital of Mexican society. It becomes an absolute impossibility to recognize, appreciate, and stimulate the development of the extensive and varied cultural patrimony that history has placed in Mexican hands. The old colonial blindness remains, the notion that here there is nothing with which a future can be built. If the people have to be created to substitute for the nonpeople who exist, it follows that

a culture also has to be created to substitute for the existing nonculture. The elements that ought to constitute the core of the new culture are not here, and they are important: ideas, knowledge, aspirations, technology, what to do and how to do it. Once more we find the dishonest task of substituting for reality instead of transforming it.

Does It Mean Anything to Be Mexican?

Roger Bartra

The classic writings on "lo mexicano" have been heavily criticized in recent years for their tendency to generalize about what is unarguably a vast number of people. Relatively few of those people, we might surmise, conform to the image of the eternal adolescent or the wounded, angry macho described by the likes of Octavio Paz. Nor may it be helpful, beyond a certain point, to generalize, in rather dichotomous fashion, as Bonfil Batalla does, about the existence of two Mexicos inhabited by circumscribed dominant and subordinate groups. Some have suggested that these pensadores (grand thinkers), whatever their motives, have only created and perpetuated stereotypes of the Mexican that have been manipulated for political ends. Anthropologist-sociologist Roger Bartra takes the argument a step further, suggesting that the stereotype of the *pelado*, as featured in Mexican popular culture, serves the interests of the Mexican state. Bartra finds this popular stereotype exemplified by Mario Moreno, better known as *Cantinflas* (1911-1993), the beloved comedic everyman of the Mexican cinema.

Roger Bartra received his doctorate in Sociology from the University of Paris and is currently an investigator with the Institute of Social Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). For many years he was the editor of *La Jornada Semanal*, one of the nation's most prominent literary magazines. Bartra has been a pioneer in the field of Mexican cultural studies and is the author of many influential writings on the intersection of culture and power in both rural and urban Mexico.

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. —Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The deplorable conditions in which the working classes are born and raised have for a long time inspired a feeling of horror and revulsion in the bourgeoisie, who are afraid to recognize the proletariat as creatures they themselves have created. Although no one can deny that they are a necessary and inevitable result of industrialization, they continue to be seen by the dominant class as "a malignant chance on the flanks of modern society," according to Albert Dandoy in a noteworthy book on the French working class published