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ON THE NEW MAN

BRAULIO MUÑOZ

We Mestizos

We have come to acknowledge that the statement "Colón discovered America" is much too strong; hence the implicit qualifier "for the Europeans." As time passes, it seems, the "discoverer" fades into the opaque background from where he came. This has been made clear again and again by the conflicting claims surrounding his very origins. However, also as time passes, Cristóbal Colón slowly but fittingly takes his place among the heroes and demi-gods of our pantheon. That his name, place of origin and lifetime are opaque only secures his privilege; for our heroes and demi-gods are all of questionable origins, figures who fade into a mysterious past. Yet it was Colón who made the encounter between two civilizations a historical reality. Therefore, to know something about him and his culture is for us not only a scholarly affair—it is a matter of self-understanding. Through him we may find out something of who and what we are. Through him we may be able to understand our past and so lay claim to our future.

Our Indian Past

Now, after many years of being lost in silence, the voices of our pre-Columbian past are being heard again. Yet we will never know enough about that past. We do not know enough, for example, of Nezahualcoyotl in order to be able to embrace him fully. We know that he opposed the Wars of Flowers, that he sought the ground of all being and thus for the meaning of life, that he refused to govern and chose to counsel instead, that he lived long as those around him prospered. But we also know that the sacrificial pyramids stood long before and after his time.

How do *we* reconcile such apparently contrary political, philosophical and religious ways of being? How do *we* grasp their inner link? And are we now willing to claim Nezahualcoyotl's deeds and wishes as our own? Are we willing to re-live the noble wish to find the roots of all being if its price is human sacrifice? And even if we were willing to shoulder the good and evil of those centuries before the encounter, could we then understand the true meaning of Nezahualcoyotl's questions? After

Colón, after all the intervening centuries, can we take seriously Nezahualcoyotl's Flower and Song and ascend and descend the crossbeams leading up to Omeyocan and down to Mictlan?

Our pre-Columbian past is weighty with both grandeur and misery; it keeps our eyes fixed on the telluric forces of this land. We know that, in order to encounter ourselves, we must look into the dark center of our past. The truth is that we seek not the answers to Nezahualcoyotl's questions but to our own. For what gives our search its sense of urgency is an existential question quite foreign to Nezahualcoyotl's Flower and Song. We seek an answer to the riddle which we are, we who straddle two irreconcilable worlds. Historically, the Indian and the European worlds sustained two different views of life and of the cosmos; they could never have come together harmoniously. And we as their result are necessarily embattled.

Thus, as we search in Nezahualcoyotl's world, we can only hope to find a partial answer to the riddle that we are. Unlike Nezahualcoyotl's, our quest is half-hearted; we continually look over our shoulders. We search in his time hoping to retrieve a piece of a puzzle, of whose value we cannot be certain while in the search, for our self and cultural understanding will only be possible as we move outside Nezahualcoyotl's time. We can never ask Nezahualcoyotl's questions in the spirit in which he asked them, for the answers would not help us. He asked about the root of being grounded in the wholeness of his culture. Our own culture, by contrast, seems to be a fragmented puzzle.

And it will not help for us to be content with the more or less accurate descriptions of Aztec cruelty and grandiosity or of Incan sensuousness and ingenuity. For we have come to understand and to feel that the search is at once necessary and endless. Ultimately, we had to see the truth behind Colón's hurried testimony: there were no Indians in this land then; the misnomer was forged in the clash of two different worlds. Unable or unwilling to abandon his cognitive map, Colón forced reality to comply with his own image of the world. Only now, after centuries, do we seem able to attempt to undo what was then inevitable. And to undo the historically necessary we must excavate layer upon layer of peoples, languages, gods, demi-gods and heroes. Behind the Incan stern empire we have uncovered Mochicas, Chimus, Tiahuanacus, Nazcas, and countless other peoples now slowly presenting themselves to our consciousness. And behind those whose culture we have managed to unearth lie unknown others whose enigmatic giants drawn on sand or painted figures on ancient rocks are the only clues to their silent influence on us.

Our European Past

That the journey to America was the successful resolution to a long European quest is clear in the utopian worlds invented by post-Copernican minds; it is clear in the wish to find the Atlantis briefly noted by Plato, Nezahualcoyotl's distant counterpart. Colón was the adventurer who finally dared to go beyond the confining security of a tripartite world in the belief that his bones would not end at the bottom of the abyss. For despite the opaqueness of Colón's origins, we can be sure he was not searching for himself as he left Puerto de Palos. Colón sought proof for something of which he was certain. The "discovery" of America meant the extension of Europe; in this colossal undertaking the European spirit found its field of action, the adequate resistance to its desired assertion.

As Edmundo O'Gorman states, America was as much "invented" as "discovered" by the European imagination. There, in that distant land across the sea, dreams of Arcadia and Shangri-la fused with the promise of paradise and redemption. The irony is that Colón and all those who followed began to destroy their promised land as soon as they set foot on it. They plundered, branded, raped, tortured, burnt and often killed the people they had found. It was as if the "Indians" had to pay for being too innocent, too gullible, too strange, too close to an earth the Europeans were learning to tame and to command. Ironically, the desperate search for El Dorado or the Fountain of Youth meant the destruction of whatever paradise already existed for those who, whether or not they heard of Nezahualcoyotl's teachings, were there before 1492. By "inventing" America, Europe all but destroyed it. We Latin Americans were born to straddle two continents in that tormenting mishap of history.

Because we straddle two worlds, we must retrace Colón's voyage, undoing in our minds the heavy fact of history. Yet, we feel dazed, perhaps as Colón himself felt as he came upon our shores. How do we undo Colón's voyage? Which road do we follow? Which one do we claim as the true path in the search for our cultural identity: the one leading to Palestine, Athens, Mecca, Gaul, or any of the countless others? Which people do we claim as our own: Galicians, Andalucians, Catalans, Basques? Are we somehow Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Atheists, Jansenists or perhaps one of those thousand others who have roamed the Europe that beckons us? Where does it all end?

The Sobering Reflection

Having searched for ourselves among ancient rocks and arid lands, jungles and ports, ruins and half-forgotten roads, rust armors and

poisoned spears, codices and alchemy treatises, inquisition records and calendrical systems, heaven and hell—having done that, we come back to our homes and brothels, governing palaces and shantytowns; monasteries and barracks, to try to decipher what it all means. And the message, like an oracle which has finally been understood, suddenly becomes transparent: we are all of that and more. We are both “Indian” and European, Jew and gentile, Christian and Muslim, Aztec and Incan, black and white . . . and more, always more. And we know that our search is endless.

We Latin Americans are indeed a people ever in search of an identity. We are the product, as Octavio Paz has noted, of the rape of one civilization by another. We are Rulfo’s Juan Preciado searching for our father even after death; we are Fuentes’ Artemio Cruz remembering the absence of the violated mother; we are García Márquez’ Buendía family founding a Macondo and losing it in the process; we are Arguedas’ Ernesto, escaping the ghost of our bloody past and praying for a stop to the violence born in that fateful conjunction of Europe and the new world; we are the “Europeans” of Cortázar showing the whiteness of our skin to anyone who cares to look. We are orphans growing up in a dizzying world and longing for our parents. But we were not always so obsessed with knowing ourselves.

The Search

The search for our identity was begun by the first *mestizo* at the dawn of the Conquest of America. We, as *mestizos*, the products of rape, are living testimony to the unequal power between two cultures and races. Initially, we knew who our mother was for she was the victim who consoled us, but we were uncertain about our father. With time, it was inevitable that we lost even the maternal certainty. For about three hundred years we were overwhelmed by the power of the triumphant European culture. Europe managed to implant itself in the New World as the only certain ground for identity and we could only ape the original. During most of the Colonial period, *mestizo* America celebrated the Spanish deed, the Quixotic success of Pizarro and Cortés.

For years we were determined to deceive ourselves in celebrating a white European culture that did not allow us to be its equal. But the deception, though necessary in its context, could not last forever. Thus the revolutionary movements of the 19th century sought not only to change the European and white monopolies of markets and social position; they also sought new avenues for discussing the past, present and future of America. And this entailed opening the shutters which had

held *mestizo* America mesmerized by the illusion of having a home across the sea.

Bolívar was in part only a vehicle for the voice of resentful wondering: no, we were not Europeans, Blacks, Indians, Asians, Jews or people of lost Atlantis; we were *mestizo*. And from Bolívar on, being *mestizo* meant that we hosted within ourselves something new, portentous, exemplary, promising—we hosted the New Man. From Bolívar on, the *mestizo* learned to overcompensate while overvaluing that which he was rejecting. That we were not Europeans could not mean that we were inferior or equal to those Colón had guided to “our” shores: we were the distillation of the good inherent in each and every race of humanity. The New Man was to be the happy historical coda.

From the moment we read our history as pointing to the coming of the New Man, we felt the search as an imperative. We immediately set out to retrieve the scattered pieces of our being, hoping to gather all of them together into a glorious, portentous mosaic. That mosaic would be the New Man, who would possess that certainty of identity we had to leave behind in Nezahualcoyotl’s and Colón’s world. Yet that New Man was for us not of the present but of the future, and in seeing ourselves in him we tried to shift the burden of our history, and thus of our responsibility, to the future. Now that the past pointed to a happy ending, we knew that ending could not be our wretched present. Hence, we pushed the happy ending ahead, to the time when the New Man would take our place. We came to see ourselves as *hosting* the New Man and continued to trade present suffering for future happiness. The New Man became our Messiah.

The New Man

The idea of the New Man, supported on the shoulders of the all-too-human *mestizo*, soared to become the apex of humanity, the hope of the future. From Bolívar’s proclamations through Vasconcelos’ cosmic race to Haya de la Torre’s Indo-America, we the *mestizos* were presented as hosting a promise amidst the wretchedness of the present. The collapse of Bolívar’s Nation, the betrayal of the Mexican Revolution, and the selling out of APRA’s heroic thrust all seemed to pale in view of the arrival of the New Man and his New World. We thus compromised action in the present by pointing to the future, and that very gesture, in turn, fueled a discontent with the sordid present which often issued in direct political action. This dialectical movement between reality and expectation has been at the core of all liberal revolutions ever since.

By the middle of the 20th century the image of the New Man became even more complex. The New Man in us was then seen by many as Socialist Man. The New Man and his world were to become reality only through a *mestizo*-socialist revolution. Once again, the winds of historical change blew from Europe to the New World. Bearded revolutionaries seemed to have triumphed against all odds, asserting once again the value of Quijote's idealism. But the New Man, it turned out, was very much like a very old man. Across the land, socialism claimed to be, in part, a return to those days before Colón's arrival; it claimed to be a civilized acknowledgment of the worth of Indian culture. And so, socialists conceived of the New Man as both communalist and cosmopolitan, earthy and rationalist, Indian and European, *mestizo* and Marxist. A great many *mestizos* have paid dearly in making room for this New Man: they have disappeared in Buenos Aires, been herded to stadiums for execution in Santiago, been hunted down in Bolivia. And many are paying for their vision today in Central America.

Recently the New Man in us has developed yet another visage. Charity—the purest form of militancy, the classic posture of those early missionaries who came to “our” shores to salvage what was being destroyed—has become the center around which the world of the New Man is to be fashioned. This is the New Man of Liberation Theology. Neither socialism nor capitalism by themselves, these new missionaries argue, can save us. Liberation will only come about with a return to the very roots of Christianity and to the moral commitments of the early Christians. Charity too has taken its toll in the lives of the *mestizos*; for charity in an unjust world entails martyrdom.

The Perspective

It is important to keep the desire for the New Man and the reality of the *mestizo* in perspective. Let us ask ourselves: What price did Europeans, Indians, Africans, Asians have to pay for our existence? As soon as we ask that question we realize that our very existence is shot through with guilt. We, the unwilling result of the violence of rape, also personify the negation of those who made us possible. Over the years, have we not learned more or less to like what we cannot change? And yet, had we the choice, would we not rather be Indian, black, Asian and particularly white? Must we desire the inevitable?

These and similar questions have undergirded much of our cultural production in this century. We have opened old wounds and looked deep into the abyss. But what have we learned? Consider *Indigenismo*, the

object lesson par excellence of the cost paid for our existence. What did *Indigenismo*, that movement which ostensibly set out to save the Indian from oppression, call for? Their own rhetoric to the contrary, both liberal and socialist *Indigenista* writers called for the abolition of the Indian and his world to make room for us and our offspring, for the New Man. *Calceamos al Indio* was the liberal motto—but to “give shoes to the Indian” also meant to de-culture him into oblivion in order to make the *mestizo* possible within a market economy. This was the program advanced by Vasconcelos, Reyes, Rojas, Haya de la Torre, Belaunde, Paz, Stenssoro; this was the price demanded for an illusory democracy that favored the whiter ruling classes.

Socialists, too, called for the elimination of the Indian's culture and world. Mariátegui's call for a return to the Ayllu was disingenuous, for at bottom neither he nor any other socialist could understand much less accommodate the Indian culture—with its evocative superstitions, its mournful magical incantations, its sacred closeness to the earth—into their system of values. Socialists wanted to destroy the evil of bourgeois society. In the absence of a strong and determined proletariat class that would destroy itself by destroying capitalism, they asked for the Indian's self-abolition to make a new society possible for the New Man. On the surface the transposition seemed natural: in both cases the meek would save us all. But the Indians did not constitute a class; they were a culture, a people. And to abolish themselves, to abolish not only their wretched present but their past and their future as well, was too much to ask. It is too much to ask of any people.

Today, the new liberationists, too, must ultimately work for the Indian's cultural death. Monotheism—and Christianity in particular—can only tolerate one image of the fountainhead. Ultimately, its enduring cultural thrust must be to either destroy completely or co-opt whatever remnants of Indian magico-mystical worldview still exist in the New World. Hence, Liberation Theology, as valuable as it is in other respects, cannot but do violence to the Indian's deeply held polytheism. Pushed along by Christianity, the Indian is being de-cultured everywhere; he now worships in Spanish, *mestizos* or whites are his spiritual leaders, the visions of paradise are strange to his worldview.

The problem with attempting to like what one cannot change is that the effort is never fully successful. Like Freudian repressed wishes, self-hatred always lurks underneath our boastful presentation of the New Man. The history of Latin American politics is an object lesson in this regard: *La violencia* in Colombia, the violence and betrayal of the

Mexican Revolution, the obstinate repression of Gauchos in Argentina, the recurrent massacres of Indians in the Andes and Central America—these and similar actions are not fully explainable through an analysis of material oppression alone. An orthodox Marxist analysis of Latin American social processes therefore has to fail. Material oppression and the psychological repression are mutually re-inforcing. Cultural processes matter.

The most recent example of the revenge of the repressed comes from Perú where the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) presents itself as the hopeful attempt to return to the old days before Colón, before the rape. This effort is suicidal and futile in the long run; it is born of utter desperation and self-hatred. The members of the Shining Path are *mestizos* who refuse their attributed entity and reject the world being claimed for the New Man. Should we wonder that neither Liberals nor Socialists nor Theologians can quite understand the quest of the Shining Path? They do not speak the same language or listen to the same voices. The necessarily temporary success of the Shining Path is grounded in the refusal to like what was inevitable.

We Mestizos

We *mestizos*—and all Latin Americans are *mestizos*—seem to have been fated to live in constant struggle with a world that denies us. Once, long ago, we learned to acquiesce to the European claims of hegemony; now we deny ourselves in the very attempt of bringing forth the New Man. Whether we are Liberals, Socialists, or Theologians, we are all too eager to build a future based on denying ourselves. As if we could drop the years of wretchedness, glory, longing, hatred . . . like a change of skin. The fact of the matter is that after all these years we Latin Americans are still unsure of ourselves. We have yet to develop a healthy self-love. We need to be less demanding and more forgiving of ourselves.

The New Man is us—whoever does not understand this can never truly understand Latin American culture. We *mestizos* must be willing to realize that the much awaited New Man is nothing but an idealized version of ourselves born in the travail of our all-too-human history. We cannot wait for the coming of the New Man as one waits for the coming of a Messiah. The New Man is here, in the present. The New Man is not in us, he is us. We must re-live the trauma of birth, work through it, if we are to emerge to face a future free of the ghosts of the past and the shackles of self-hatred. This was the enduring message of *Indigenismo*; this is the

central proclamation of the New Novel from Rulfo to García Márquez.

To work through the trauma of birth with success we must achieve a degree of cultural integration; we must be able to assert ourselves naturally, and with self-confidence. Let us no longer strive to create a New Man; let us build a just and free society for ourselves. We must realize that any new society must be built with our own dark hands—we cannot wait for the arrival of the Messiah, of the Other. *Mestizo* America must become one Nation, a home for all. Only then can Bolívar's dream of unity come alive.

But home is a resting place. The search for our identity must and will continue. Yet, we can neither ask Nezahualcoyotl's questions nor return home across the sea. We must learn to ask our own questions and make our own footprints. This all-too-human effort shall lead us to see our future in our own present. For we harbor no Messiah except ourselves, we ready no one's home except our own, we prepare no one's happiness except ours. In asking our own questions and making our own footprints we shall discover that to search for identity is to make it. The longed-for past can only ground the effort, it cannot determine it. The future belongs to those who risk seizing the present. To be sure, there will be errors made—but there will also be deserved happiness. The New Man will never be perfect, for he is us.

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