

For a Feeling Humanism: The Political Emergence of the Emotions

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Al mēsr is the name for Egypt in Arabic. This word, which also means 'earth', comes from the same root as the word *al massēer* meaning 'destiny'. I think it is interesting to mention this play on words when approaching the possibilities for a new humanism, for we know that all discourse and perception spring from a nucleus of identity. Out of it and towards it speakers and listeners are positioned. Pascal described this nucleus as an *ordre du cœur* (order of the heart), quite possibly following Parmenides, whose 'intrepid heart', *atremes etor*, evoked a propensity to run the emotional risks presented by opposition, ambivalence and the unsayable in what is being spoken.

To talk about Africa's 'destiny' – even if we mean several possible Africas and a great variety of cosmo-visions – is to pinpoint in the word 'destiny' itself a distinction with regard to the Greek-Christian-western cultural tradition. Destiny, as thought of by Europeans, is semantically close to the idea of 'destination', arrival point, future, and so of human becoming at some future time. Ideologically certain that their unavoidable law is one of progress situated in a time that will never come, westerners rationally abandon mythological knowledge of destiny and prefer to cling to the instrumental knowledge of lived experience, in other words History.

However, *al massēer* suggests an idea of path, journey, in a space of permanence and gravity: the earth, which was there in the past, remains in the present and continues into the future like something that is always close to humans and resists dissolution. In their to-and-fro between the security of earth and the risks of crossing over, humans move forward and settle into being travellers. Thus destiny is somehow known, not because of a metaphysical description of the heavens but thanks to the intuition of a primal intention of life devoted here and now to the path unfolding on earth and revealed in myth, ceremony, ritual, the feeling areas. Destiny is the imaginary writing drawn by this journey; so it is the imaginary of an impulse to leave which, while it may be altered, pulls the traveller into the dynamic of its virtuous circles.

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As for History, it is conceived in the modern sense as an accelerated shift of states of experience. Not being anchored in the earth, it moves rationally towards a pre-determined goal. However, accepting this idea does not necessarily mean establishing a radical alterity vis-à-vis myth and the emotions. Indeed this implies the inclusion of both this History, which is so overvalued in the West, and also the mythico-religious tradition that provides the framework in traditional societies for mechanisms of thought, human conduct and even social exchanges.

Considering the emergence of a new humanism means of necessity agreeing, not only on the intellectual level (the philosophical level that performs a conceptualization and substantialization of difference), but also on the territorial and emotional level, to narrow the distances separating differences as they result from the conflict between History and Destiny, reason and passion, *logos* and *pathos*. The power of feeling – the emotions, sentiments, myths, affects – underlies emerging forms of sociality and is very often in conflict with institutions that are recognized or legitimized by state power.

In the discourse of the new humanism, feeling strategies speak for the 'intrepid heart' when there is a need to reinvent institutions and forms of citizenship with a view to a participative democracy and globalization in solidarity. But also when we need to look in various civilizing paradigms for a common thread for our thinking, the very one that leads us to suspend our supposed absolute alterities in order to seek, as in music, paths of modulation and contiguity.

And so there is prefigured, as an imperative for a new humanism, transcendence of the radical dichotomy between monovalent rationalism and the polyvalent dimension of feeling. Indeed it is a conflict that extends from the 17th century in Europe, when passion (a word that in fact covered the whole gamut of phenomena associated with affectivity) was allocated a manifestly inferior position in the order of human phenomena. Being a 'neo-Stoic', Spinoza thought human beings' subjection to passion was passive; faced with passion, reason is impotent, but understanding helps us to free ourselves from it: 'An affection that is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.'¹

In Greek antiquity this kind of judgement was connected with Stoicism (which held the ideal of morality to be *ataraxia* or imperturbability of spirit). It would re-emerge in the 17th century, following a process over four centuries and ending at its maturation in the formation of a 'quantifying' mentality, that is the instrumental rationality required by the change in modes of economic production and the new strategies of domination, where the calculating power of science begins to emerge. It is possible to talk about a universalist consciousness in European modernity – but still governed by the dimension of the *metron* implicit in the Greek *logos*.

This is why Crosby refers to the West's 'pantometric'² mission, that is, a historical tendency to the universal measurement of all things – including the planet itself. This is manifested in trade, with the replacement of the trader's memory by the meticulous checking of accounting receipts and expenditure; in music, with the graphic representation of sounds that was to transform the direction of composition and singing; in painting, with the geometric precision of perspective; in time, with the rigid chronometry of clocks; in space, with the technical organization of plans and navigational instruments.

Under the influence of this scientific and technological quantification the modern world began to be more resolutely mistrustful of feelings, a domain that was bound to spread chaos and confusion. And western Greco-Christian civilization launched into an increased control of the affections or passions, be they of life or death, a control that was guided by the universalism of values. In the face of the civilizing pressures that were bringing about the most visible material changes in the labour force and relations of production, the rational-materialist world view was strengthened, promoted in philosophy by Descartes' doctrine (*Le Discours de la méthode* is dated 1637) and based in noteworthy advances in astronomy and physics. In *Les Passions de l'âme* Descartes advocated control of the 'animal inclinations' (fear among them) by reflection, reason and will.

In the 18th century, which was still firmly Cartesian, the passions were understood in philosophy as a group of passive phenomena of the spirit. In the opinion of Descartes' followers and successors his machine-universe fitted perfectly with the physicalist or industrialist metaphor that presented the world of humans as a steam-engine system where the soul could exist but only as a (rational) principle of a thermodynamic moment, a quantity of movement set in motion in the body by animal spirits.

Placed on a pedestal, reason always had to appear in the representation and the subject, a modern word corresponding to the ancient questioning about 'being'. The subject is understood as the 'medium' or 'support', that is, an identity able to support or act as a basis for change through History: even if accidental characteristics alter, the subject remains identical to itself. Henceforth the only phenomena accepted as real are those that can be reduced to objective observation by a subject and to the rationality of the laws of cause and effect. And so, in Kant's thought, whose basic programme is the study of reason, once the preservation of the spiritual feelings was admitted (such as feeling for the beautiful, friendship, the love of truth, etc.), the moral ideal was to achieve emotionlessness (*apatheia*), where even the radicalism of the Stoic *ataraxia* was absent.

Far away from the philosophical circles of Europe this thinking, which was in theory detached from the sphere of feeling, could always be criticized from the standpoint of Hindu tradition, which was not systematized but was contained in the teachings of the greatest yoga masters. According to them the world of the *maya* (deceptive illusion) is that of mental activity detached from reality, where our projections and interpretations predominate over the affections. The Hindu outlook does not question the activity of the intellect as lucid attention, scrutiny, discrimination and deliberation, but speculative intellectualism, the kind that turns humans into a head without heart or body.³ Something in this spirit would definitely give way with romantic thought which would tend to erase the pejorative suggestion attached to the passivity of the passions, henceforth celebrated as affections indispensable to the greatness of actions.

So can we see the Hindu difference as an absolute alterity? Certainly not. For in the West too the Kantian aesthetic had found a way to welcome feeling into the house of thought:

Whenever we transmit our thoughts, there are two ways (*modi*) of composing them, one of which is called *manner* (*modus aestheticus*) and the other *method* (*modus logicus*). They are distinguished from one another by the fact that the first has no other model but the *feeling* that there is a unity in the presentation (of the thoughts), and the second follows in everything certain principles. (*Critique of judgement*, paragraph 49)

However, the hegemonic preference for reason remains indisputable. Indeed the problem of the difference between the intelligible and the felt is another way of posing both the very old problem of the difference between the 'singular' and the 'plural' and the modern problem of the distinction between knowledge and experience. Experience has always been disturbing for the primacy of rationality – even Descartes always saw a *malin génie* (evil genius), a sort of mischievous devil, in the spontaneity of experience compared with the laws of necessity and causality.

In the sphere of philosophical discourse Schopenhauer was the first to carry out a systematization of what at the time could have boasted of being an act of iconoclasm against the primacy of logical causality and absolute necessity as regards human existence. From the first version of *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) he already evinced a philosophical astonishment with regard to the idea of a causal necessity, demonstrating that, if only in the area of empirical representations, causality indeed coincides with the principle of reason. However, it cannot predominate in abstract ideas, *a priori* perceptions and 'being as willing' or will.

Denying absolute necessity – and with it intellectualist constructions that identify reality and rationality under the umbrella of the absolute Mind (Hegel) or perceive the world as 'absolute substance' (Spinoza) – Schopenhauer conceives of human existence as immersed in pure contingency, without any rationalistic interpretation, including that of all-conquering science, being able to fill the breach in causal explanation. His pessimistic indignation when faced with evil or pain stems from awareness of the lack of justification or absolute causes, that is to say something that arises in one form but could equally well appear in another completely different one.

Without illusions as to the possibility of an eventual metaphysical explanation, Schopenhauer nevertheless conceives of a substrate for the world's phenomena, physical causes and representations: *force*, a mysterious or unexplained dynamic principle in opposition to consciousness which in its global form is *will* (*Wille* in German). Will means the primacy of feeling over intellect, that is, the conditioning of the mind by the domination of what was seen in the 19th century as 'passion'.

For Schopenhauer a concrete manifestation of that affective state radically opposed to representation, indeed the purest expression of will, is music. It provides the most in-depth translation of things because, by revealing itself as the pure temporality of becoming, it does not let itself be touched by the world of space. Being able to copy the world without truly representing it, music is a radical manifestation of will.

Around Schopenhauer's main intuitions were built the foundations of Nietzsche's thinking, one of the most suggestive philosophical developments since the 19th century. Even though their inflexions are distinct, both make will prime (for Nietzsche *Will zur Macht*, will to power). But *beatitude* (in German *Seligkeit*) is the

term that, in Rosset's considered opinion, reflects Nietzsche's central theme, even if other words might do: '*joie de vivre*, rejoicing, jubilation, pleasure in being, loving reality and many others. The word does not matter.⁴ What counts here is simply the idea or intention of an unconditional fidelity to the raw experience of reality, which is summarized and distinguishes itself in Nietzsche's philosophical thinking.⁵ *Amor fati*, or the unconditional love of reality as it appears, without agonizing over the basis, is the love proclaimed by Nietzsche that makes the subject aware of the overwhelming experience of happiness, of beatific affirmation of the world.

That experience does not preclude either scepticism or suffering. In several aphorisms from *The Gay Science*, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Traveller and His Shadow* in particular, Nietzsche is at pains to show how the thought of happiness encompasses that of unhappiness and suffering. Joyful affirmation of the world and experience of pain, for which humans have to discipline themselves, go together. And no fundamental reason, that is, no essence or reality concealed beneath appearances, is implicit in the affirmative witness to existence shot through with the necessary alternation of pleasure and pain. Passion for life – not as a feeling of individual stimulation but as the objective power of the community – takes precedence over all intellectual explanations of life.

Once again in Nietzsche's work western philosophy – in danger of erring on the side of irrationalism – coincides on certain important points with some crucial aspects of eastern thought which, while acknowledging the illusory nature of appearances, affirms them as the reality of the world of phenomena. That reality is real for observers in that it appears to them as such. This is the reality that the East attempts to integrate in order to erase the separation between subject and object and attain a plenitude or a non-dualist mode of consciousness. However, this does not mean mystical fusion of subject and object but acceptance of the diversity of the real as it appears, the aim being to integrate that diversity and so reach an experience of unity which is not that of the universal 'one' but simply another name for the passion for life.

Thus, in the areas of feeling, a certain East and a certain West embrace. And we can probably extend this range of consonances as far as the African cosmo-visions which approach the complexity of the real with what we might call the 'extreme play of feeling' that is present in the behaviour of cultural continuity that is still at work within the diaspora of slavery. As an example there is the music and rhythm that are fundamental for the religious liturgy and communal development of the black descendants of the African slave diaspora, who are engaged in a fight to occupy a space of their own within a highly discriminatory society.

By introducing a temporality distinct from chronology, rhythm creates the relevant space and arouses a specific imaginary. This means that rhythm is not only a technical artifice in the context of musicality but a symbolic configuration, a kind of 'place' or synaesthetic and synergic stage on which something happens on the level of ritual.⁶

In liturgical communities rhythm is in fact a veritable technology for human togetherness. By means of dance and festival it symbolically re-elaborates space insofar as it modifies territorial hierarchies, if only for a short while, and stimulates

the body's expressive power so as to produce images peculiar to liberation and self-realization. It is from the liturgical space that the festival's flavours come, hymns, percussion beats, basic gestures and dance steps. And this rhythmic and gestural organization gives its origin to a corporal matrix that de-territorializes itself and moves about, impelled by communion and jubilation.

Indeed the domain of feeling has always been present among artists, poets, lovers, revolutionaries. Originally among inventors of philosophical rationality too, like Plato and Aristotle, for whom thought is born out of the *pathos* in feelings of fear, curiosity, concern or astonishment (*thaumazein*) aroused by the world and things. That *pathos* was given the name *disposition* or *affective situation* (*Befindlichkeit*) by both Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger, who assigned to it the fundamental role, in the exercise of thought, of connecting it to life.

Furthermore, even if Christian theology arose from neo-Platonist rationality, Christian faith, which was responsible for the Christianization of the West, has always been more associated with feelings of compassion and mercy and affective values of charity (and even the genocidal passions that impelled them to exterminate pagans) than with theological reason.

The same is true of Islam, a religion which we know is viscerally attached to the Book, the Koran, revealed to the prophet. From the first *surah*, when the prophet replies that he is illiterate, the archangel Gabriel nonetheless commands him to read 'in the name of the Lord'. The Muslim faith and reading are theoretically inextricable. However, in those regions of the world that do not have a written tradition, the 'emotion of the writing' may come more often than listening to it rationally, thus emphasizing only one of the possible modes of knowing, that of mysticism, which is bound up with feeling intuition. The sensory (the 'emotion of the writing') is superimposed on the controversy, and the content of the Book is borne in upon the believer's consciousness as something that is fundamentally emotional. In Pentecostal evangelism, which is fast gaining ground in Latin America's poor neighbourhoods, something similar can be observed.

But in fact the extent of this whole process goes beyond the religious field. Speculating on how we get to the point of saying we know or are sure about something, Wittgenstein shows that 'every verification of what is accepted as true, every confirmation or invalidation occurs within the system . . . The system is less the starting point for arguments than its essential medium.'⁷ He cites the example of the adult who tells a child she or he has already been to a particular planet. The credulous child rejects *a principio* other arguments for the opposite but, if one insists, may end by being persuaded that such a journey is impossible. Then the philosopher asks whether repetition is not precisely the way one teaches a child to believe or not to believe in God, and whether apparently plausible reasons are subsequently produced based on either belief.

Wittgenstein is not at all concerned to attribute any cognitive value to aesthetics (which he identifies with ethics). However, he would say that, in order to start believing in something, that 'essential medium' of arguments has to be brought into play, which consists not of one isolated proposition but 'a whole system of propositions' supporting each other, so that 'light is gradually shed on everything'. What enables a belief to become fixed is not an intrinsic quality of clarity in the proposi-

tion but the robust nature of the system. So it is not a question of *knowing* what we say we know, but of recognizing what we know as firmly fixed.

And why does it become fixed? From confidence in the authority of sources; because it is passed on in a certain *way*, that is, within a totality, a medium experienced as essential; because it is a source full of 'reasonableness' and feeling, and therefore conviction. He says: 'That is how I believe in geographical, chemical, historical, etc., facts. That is how I learn sciences. And of course learning depends on believing.'⁸ Saying one knows something is equivalent to thinking the thing is certain, but certainty is in the person who thus believes in an indefinite or obscure dimension – and not in the rationalist transparent basis of the belief.

The dimension of feeling has always been ideologically treated as the dark, even wild side of what appears as the glorious, luminous face of understanding, that is, the main function of reason. Elevated by Judeo-Christian asceticism and liberal-utilitarian thought, reason claims to be the partner of the mind and a stranger to the body. But we have always been aware that in certain types of human action the effectiveness of reason depends precisely on that dark side, and so on feeling. For instance, eloquence as an appeal to the emotional side of argument discourse causes Hobbes to say that 'without the powerful eloquence that ensures attention and consensus reason would hardly be effective'.

Aesthetics or aesthesia are labels traditionally applicable to the work of feeling in society. It is a kind of work made up of words, gestures, rhythms and rituals, set in motion by an emotional logic that carries dream states, emotions and feelings. Emotion is the first to emerge as a consequence of the illusion that provides a path to reach the reality of things. 'The soul knows nothing without fantasy', we are told by Aristotle (*On the Soul*), emphasizing the impossibility of the absolute triumph of *logos* over *mythos*. Even in the sciences the mythical or illusory can be expressed, just as Serres maintains: 'A knowledge without illusion is pure illusion. Where everything is lost and knowledge as well. It is something like a theorem: *the only pure myth is the pure knowledge of all myth*. I know of no others, for myths are full of wisdom and knowledge is full of dreams.'⁹

From illusion and fantasy come emotions. But the West and the East have noticed that these affections, though they are formed with a view to giving access to the real, prevent an adequate vision of the uniqueness of the real. There is no *lucidity* in emotional excess, as is attested by the thinkers of eastern beatitude or the theoreticians of more modern neurobiology, without mentioning the episodic poetic incursions into this topic. The requirement of lucidity in the feeling experience, characteristic of the Buddhist interpretative tradition, also filters into important moments of western thought.

The emergence of a new humanism seems to be drawing our attention towards new ways of exercising a lucid sensibility, not only in the limited circles of philosophical transmission but also and especially in the open field of writers, poets, musicians and cultural agitators, who make themselves the most prominent spokespeople for the contemporary spirit. This is about an exercise where difference is *felt* more than intellectually deciphered or learnt. Feeling the different is giving it neither a closed cultural identity (the identity of difference) nor an absolute alterity. Difference does not lend itself to the concept but to a challenge to the understanding

intuition and the rites of approximation. When that happens, destiny and History can run in parallel and illuminate still more the poetic irony of Khalil M. Gibran: 'Human destiny is written in lines, but with water.'

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Notes

1. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 5.
2. Crosby (1997).
3. There is little homogeneity in thought from the Hindu tradition that would allow one to hold a single position of this nature. Here I am referring mainly to a particular line of interpretation of the Advaita Vedanta text by Yogavasistha, which was probably composed between the 11th and 13th centuries and synthesizes the Samkhya, yoga, Buddhism and the Upanishads, being characterized by a pragmatic approach with modernizing tendencies extraordinarily close to exponential figures from western philosophy such as Hobbes, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. This is especially noticeable in the oral teaching of thinkers or of gurus like Krishnamurti and Svâmi Prajnanpad.
4. It is important to remember that Leibniz used the word *Glückseligkeit*, whose meaning hovers between joy and happiness, to indicate an affective regime similar to the one described by Nietzsche.
5. Rosset (1983: 35).
6. To find this theme developed at greater length see my *O terreiro e a cidade* (Sodré, 2002) and Stokes (1994).
7. Translated from Wittgenstein (1987).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63
9. Serres (1974: 259).

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