

# The Destiny of Utopia as an Intercultural and *Mestizo* Phenomenon

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'A well-bred man is a compound man.'  
Montaigne, *Essays*<sup>1</sup>

In the recurrent and monothematic discourse of anti-globalization, focused almost exclusively on its economic and financial aspects, there has been an increasing tendency to overlook important distinctions linked to the historical process of cultural globalization and its civilizing effects, as it has evolved in the modern age. In that vast and sweeping process, numerous 'isms' have converged over the centuries, resulting in a kind of crossroads between the universalist aspirations of the Christian religion and western civilization; the *internationalism* exemplified by the Socialist International; and the political, humanistic '*worldism*' that led to the universal recognition of human rights and the creation of international organisms, non-governmental organizations and solidarity networks, all of which were based on a set of universal values and principles.

Reclaiming the positive elements of that internationalized dimension of politics, of social and ecological problems, and of what Leonardo Boff calls the 'planetary ethic', might be one of the most effective methods of confronting – in its own territory – the ideology of *globalism* that the neo-liberal market dictatorship has imposed upon our world. This process of reclaiming the positive may help us to distinguish between two phenomena that people tend to confuse: on one hand, economic-financial globalization and on the other, the accelerated *technotronic* transformation that connects information and communications networks in an irreversible real-time process of exchange and interchange.

This essay is an outgrowth of the belief that the only way to break through the presently polarized debate regarding *globalism* is to create alternative – if not utopian – strategies and projects that take into account the integrative, internationalizing and universalist vocation of western history, in which Latin America has always played a fundamental role. 'If the Iberian expansion of the 16th century were better under-

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stood, there is no way anyone could possibly call globalization an unprecedented contemporary phenomenon,' Serge Gruzinski observes in *El pensamiento mestizo*,<sup>2</sup> in which the author goes on to remind us that following the impact of the conquest and colonization a new, *mestizo*, mixed-race, multicultural reality emerged in America, giving way to reflections about alterity that marked the beginning of contemporary international law.

This is a new American reality that, we should note, was also present at the origins of the utopian discourse. That initial, traumatic experience was what sparked the emergence of alternative ideas, the subversive imagination, and different approaches to envisioning reality. It is a truly fascinating endeavour to study them and learn their lessons, especially now, as it is becoming more and more urgent to somehow find a way out of the dead-end alley of the globalization debate. Thinking about these things will allow us to formulate proposals to 'baptise ourselves with the name that clearly states its belief: that another world is possible'.<sup>3</sup>

This is the goal of my essay.

### The globalization of the Spirit

It may well behove us to recall that the word 'global' derives from the Latin *globus*, a term from the military lexicon that meant 'squad', a circular formation that the men of the Roman Legion employed whenever they found themselves surrounded by the enemy. The emperor Caracalla adopted this form of *globus* as a symbol of the Roman Empire. After being rediscovered by the Visigoths, the Christian princes added a cross, creating the image of the sphere crowned by a cross that went on to appear in religious iconography for centuries to come, especially in the hands of the infant Jesus. The first globe to be recognized as a representation of the Earth once again, in the 15th century, conveys the idea of Christian universality, an identification of globalism as the spatiality and incarnation of power, which Philip II invoked whenever he boasted that the sun never set on his empire.

All analyses of contemporary globalization should be considered through this perspective, which conceives of it both in the sense of rupture and continuity – an outgrowth of the expansion that began in the 16th century, when people were first made aware of the existence of a New World – a reflection and a consciousness that, not coincidentally, finds its way into Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516. It is a utopian discourse predicated on the recognition of otherness and the proposal of alterity, in which the element of nostalgia for the unity of the world before the tower of Babel, according to the version in the Bible, and the platonic vision of a Republic of universal validity, hover above as a justification and explanation of the utopias that will subsequently occur. At that moment, the various signs indicating that the West would bring the world into the modern age were roundly rejected in various parts of the world. The autocratic isolationism and the sealed borders of 18th-century Japan is one glaring example of this reaction; as is the example set by the various indo-Christian utopian proposals brought forth in the Americas, by Bartolomé de las Casas in Verapaz, the bishop Vasco de Quiroga in Michoacán and the Jesuit missionaries in Paraguay. As they began to emerge on the periphery of the empire,

these models for alternative societies presented a direct challenge to hegemonic power and its centralization-based ideology.

Though this particular kind of globalization was initially sparked by trade, it quickly turned into a globalization of both culture – after all, when we speak of ‘universal literature’ aren’t we really talking about the European classics? – and the Christian religion, which from the Middle Ages onward had been torn apart by the ‘problem of universals’. The humanistic values of western culture which slowly began to be regarded as ‘universal’ were not insignificant in this univocal expansion. Despite the aggressive nationalisms that stymied imperial expansion (the more radical expressions of which are felt to this day), this discourse has only continued to gain the geographic space that it now controls.

Ever since its ‘discovery’, America has been an important field of experimentation for this process, and we must not overlook some of the important modern repercussions of this fact. The Spanish empire, which initially clung to a self-sufficient (if not autistic) brand of territorial sovereignty, found itself forced to surrender to the universal vision, upon which the temporal and spiritual unity of the City of God rested, of a world whose limits had expanded beyond the *ecumene*. Within this framework, Francisco de Vitoria and Grotius formulated their first outlines for what would become an international body of law that would supersede the laws of the nation-states. Vitoria’s efforts were directed toward envisioning a legal body that might govern transportation and immigration; international commercial law, a ‘natural order’ that established the relationships of communication and mutual dependence between nations. For Grotius, the freedom of movement and the community of the seas (*Mare liberum*) were what give the earthly globe its greatest significance. The same was true of the rivers and the laws governing the vessels that travelled on them.

In the foreshadowing and formulation of the cosmopolitan spirit, the Enlightenment went even further by proclaiming that free interchange is in fact something that creates values. The notion of individual freedom, they said, is complemented by the ability to travel, communicate, and do business freely. Scientists, inspired by this vocation for the universal, established the first networks of information and interchange between travellers through publications devoted to creating inventories of those areas of the new world visited by these travellers.

We should also keep in mind that, ever since the Enlightenment, there has existed a *worldism* based on the infinite, blind progress of humanity, a notion that has remained in force almost to the present day. Brimming over with enthusiasm as *Sputnik* blasted off in 1957, Marshall McLuhan continued to defend his categorical faith in progress, of which electricity was the fabric that united, across vast distances, the disparate parts of a giant whole, a network that permitted a decentralization of the very advantages that it fomented. ‘Electricity does not centralize, but decentralizes,’ he declared with confidence.

The international organisms that resurrect the philosophical proposal of Kant’s ‘perpetual peace’ initially posit *worldism* as a movement in support of the unification of human societies. This notion of a ‘United States of the World’ is made manifest through the creation of the League of Nations that President Wilson championed in the 20th century, invoking Kant’s ideas. The system of the United Nations, with its

specialized agencies (FAO, WHO, UNESCO . . .) established after World War II, is its logical and ideal successor.

The universalist ideal of universal reconciliation and fraternity among peoples is at the heart of a number of other utopian notions of global integration that have marked the history of western expansion: Condorcet and his concept of a Universal Republic of Science; Saint Simon's positive reorganization of the world through the universal association of industry; and more recently the organicist thought in its biomorphic representation of the world as a vast organism of which all its myriad parts are unified through solidarity.

The *planetization* and the responsibility of the 'mass of humanity' in the immanent 'cosmic totality' about which Teilhard de Chardin prophesied in *Le Phénomène Humain* gave way to the notion that the world had become a theatre without spectators, a world in which everyone was an actor. This belief is echoed in Buckminster Fuller's metaphor about 'spaceship earth', where all human beings are crew members and not just passengers. A planet that is 'everyone's house'.

### The signs of a 'second' globalization

Despite these precedents, the current economic and technological globalization has still not managed to generate a political, social, cultural or ethical globalization on the same scale. Nevertheless, though it is still too early to speak of a globalization of spirits, there is a notion of worldism that clearly differentiates itself from the notion of ideological globalism, which demonstrates the complex interdependence of the world we live in.

In effect, the demographic, economic, social and ecological problems of our world are globalized in a very real way, and can only be confronted on a planetary level. The issues are many, and include the ecological mega-themes of the environment (pollution, recycling, global warming, holes in the ozone layer, deforestation and the progressive extinction of various animal and marine species); the shortage and the administration of water and other non-renewable resources; and the issue of the quality of urban and rural life. These issues can only be approached from a global perspective; they represent many of our general concerns regarding the fate of our planet and are the subject of countless conferences, declarations, statistics, letters and conventions that aspire to attain some kind of universal validity. Among them are the Convention on Climate Change of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, currently being questioned by the administration of US president George W. Bush.

In the middle of the Cold War, the Chernobyl catastrophe proved to the world that the territorial borders and the walls that separated countries of opposing political systems could all be eliminated by a nuclear threat permeating the winds that blow freely over Europe. Since then, people everywhere have grown acutely aware of the fact that we inhabit a terribly overburdened planet with limited natural resources and an environment that is decomposing before our eyes. As such, most people agree that to avoid a catastrophe in the foreseeable future, we must establish a set of rules for our coexistence and in the interest of protecting our common spaces: oceans, seas and coastlines; the atmosphere, mountains, forests and jungles. This

awareness of the globality of earthly phenomena and the interdependence between the various components of the biosphere has given rise to an increasing trans-disciplinarity of knowledge – knowledge that was previously separated into distinct disciplines between which there was no communication at all.

Thanks to this intermingling of knowledge and information new disciplines have emerged, though the defenders of compartmentalized thinking have not surrendered entirely to the notion of shared intellectual space, given that now we can all clearly see that the globalization of knowledge only allows economic globalization to extend even further. From there we can begin to speak of a ‘second globalization’ that is under way, and its components are not related exclusively to the economy but rather to civilization, culture and citizenry, and its immediate result should be to evaluate, halt and reorient the oligopolizing and mercantilizing processes in all the aspects of life they affect.

In confronting the diversity of planetary problems, we should not simply be thinking of the process of economic globalization but rather the multiplicity of globalization processes, which encompass political expressions (in the form of integration and regionalization processes) and cultural expressions that have slowly created a consciousness about common problems, much like the general awareness of ecological and demographic problems. The problems are many and include issues such as drug trafficking, international lawlessness (mafias, pederasty and prostitution rings, etc.), illegal immigration organizations, and transnational cults that have begun to assert themselves in the very heart of the financial globalization process, using the most sophisticated technological resources.

Another key aspect of this plural globalization and the tools it professes to implement is the renewed priority of human rights and the gravitation toward a universalizing ethic that was originally championed in the first Declaration of Human Rights, in the framework of the French Revolution. In 1948, the Universal Declaration served as a legal instrument at the beginning of the first generation of human rights, and now, as this so-called ‘second generation’ emerges, it bears both a social purpose and a collective responsibility. It offers a true conscience for the citizens of this planet, invoking the ‘rights of the nations’, and helping to broaden the declaration of individual human rights by appealing to citizens of the future that are more interdependent, more motivated by solidarity, but no less free because of those qualities.

In this context, we witness the emergence not only of the moral indignation inspired by problems like torture, disappearances, genocide, and ethnic and religious wars, but also the efforts to internationalize the legal proceedings necessary to condemn them, eliminate them, and ensure that the laws against them are enforced and applied. The creation of the International Criminal Court, an organism of universal scope that was ratified by 120 states in Rome in 1998, confirms this growing sensibility, the best-known examples of which include the arrest of Pinochet in London, the orders issued by Judge Baltasar Garzón to extradite Southern Cone war criminals, and the Milosevic trials. The world is clearly changing now that human rights, formerly the caboose on the train of globalization, have emerged with all the force of a locomotive, despite the fact that, in the wake of 9/11 (the destruction of the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001), we have witnessed something of

a regression in this sense – two examples of this are the US's rejection of the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction and the 'legal limbo' in which those detained at Guantánamo Bay now find themselves.

### Utopia as alternative and rupture

Nevertheless, according to all indicators, in the 21st century a new set of coordinated, joint structures should be put in place at the international level to handle the majority of the problems facing the planet. This will require a new definition of the autocratic and isolationist vision of the classical utopia, which in today's world is quite hard to imagine within the context of the internationalization of the world's problems – political, economic and ecological. It calls for the opening up of an essentially interdisciplinary, complex space upon which the utopia of the future ought to operate, especially in a region like Latin America, whose culture is by nature *mestizo*, of mixed races, and whose utopian tradition is indisputable.

This notion of utopia as an alternative and as a rupture encompasses, to a large degree, the history of utopia in Latin America, and the proposals set forth below are oriented in this same direction, though it would behoove us to remember that because of the nature of utopian itineraries, in all their varieties and variations, we must not view their vocation as rupture as variants of the same chimera. The invariable, immutable structure of utopia is no longer possible. Only the utopian intention can be considered invariable, beyond the models through which it manifests itself. All utopias have their itineraries. The 'utopian intention' is defined as the capacity to detect the corrections that a given social order needs. It is not about 'anticipating' but detecting. When they are reactive, utopian projections are precarious and provisional, different from and even contradicting one another on occasion. In their role in history, utopias are eruptive, active virtualities lying beneath the deeply encrusted cortex of historical events, the latent subversion that pushes and activates social catalysts, utopian propensities at the heart of social change.

Utopia cannot be limited to a single category. The Latin American experience tells us that the continent's history has been characterized by the utopian function, from the initial 'encounter' to the discovery, conquest and colonization all the way through to the present day, passing through the ideas that emerged during the period of Enlightenment and independence. As such, any future utopia should reclaim both this historical legacy as well as its experimental character, which is intimately linked to the political, social and literary-artistic evolutions that took place as well. More than any other region, utopia in Latin America has been and will be multifunctional and interdependent, intercultural and *mestizo*.

This essentially mobilizing image of utopia as possibility and guiding light for Latin American historical *praxis*, as a critical analysis of the existing reality, capable of creating fissures in the established order, ought not only to help create alternatives to financial and economic globalization on a regional scale, but to create alternatives that will be equally useful for the rest of the world.

But these ideas are not worth anything unless we engage them in debate, and a common reflection, so that we may clear the path to be taken and establish the

appropriate procedure for socializing ideas, generating consensus and building bridges between theoretical concepts and concrete actions.

This perspective offers the following cultural considerations.

### **Intercultural dialogue and plural recognition of alterity**

The great majority of the populations of Latin America, like those of Africa and Asia, find their roots in cultures that are linked to specific geographical regions, and that have their own particular history, values and beliefs. For this reason, any analysis of the kinds of utopias that may be able to administer complexity and globalism, sources from which to draw for a sustainable future, must not ignore the cultural dimension of the specific and the regional. In any event, we are wise to remember the great historical lesson of the 20th century. Cultural changes are far more complex and difficult than the political changes proclaimed by triumphant revolutions. In the initial enthusiasm for new political structures inaugurated with optimism and hope, in the wake of radical changes imposed by revolutionary governments, there is a tendency to forget that cultural transformations are slower and more complex. Customs, habits, prejudices and traditions have had the power to paralyse the implementation of many legislated changes, in a voluntary and categorical manner.

Utopia, traditionally construed as a political or social model, has long existed without that cultural dimension. For that reason, if utopia is to be at all possible in the future, that reality should not be excessively emphasized. At the very most, it should be strained, as an expression of dissatisfaction that takes into account the rhythms of various different social groups, their customs and their beliefs. Utopia cannot ignore the complexity of the cultural realities threatened by economic and financial globalization. Most definitely, cultural changes are the only kinds of changes that may offer permanence and stability to political changes.

This becomes even more important when, as a result of the disorientation caused by the annihilation of a system that offered rules, referents and simplified explanations for everything, some people succumb to the temptation of seeking refuge in an idealized past, or in closed, autocratic modes of thinking. A legitimate manifestation of indigenism, for example, can slide toward a kind of fundamentalism, through a facile discourse that appeals to reductionism, victimism and exclusion. Anti-ethnocentrism can also give way to new forms of ethnocentrism, as Agnes Heller<sup>4</sup> warned, given that by favouring the difference of peripheral cultures, it is possible to fall prey to an 'inverse vindictive irrationalism'.

The search for and the emphasis placed on cultural diversity need not amount to a denial of the idea of a shared global responsibility, nor should it be a synonym for a closed, parochial spirit. This is obvious, because the modern world threatened by globalization was no more and no less homogeneous or coherent in the past than it is today. A similar process of contacts and influences has always occurred in the heart of every culture. Even the so-called 'primitive cultures' – the ones that cultural-studies apologists try to present as pure, archaic societies that must be preserved at all costs – have important *mestizo* components.

Everything seems to suggest that they will become more and more *mestizo* as time

goes by and, as such, identity-based utopias that support the discourse that questions the centrifugal logic of globalization will have to open up to interculturality, to the possibility of multiple loyalties within one identity that has lost some of its territorial referents. And if the days of unique, immutable, monolithic identities have given way to pluralism and the varied intercultural expressions encouraged by contemporary life, then similar paths should be opened up in the area of utopian reflection. In a world that strives for greater freedom and at the same time must confront the problem of ever-increasing inequality, this perspective is essential.

The dilemma is not an easy one, because the process of globalization tends to be challenged by the exaltation of local identities; ethnic or linguistic nationalisms that demand the restoration of borders that clash with those of recognized states; and religious or political fundamentalism. In these local and community-based affirmations there is a struggle – often radical, occasionally violent – to obtain recognition for the collective identities that refuse to surrender passively to the process that is already under way. The people who belong to this opposition group are those who propose to preserve the cultural diversity of autochthonous communities and populations in closed, stagnant compartments, removed from all foreign contact or influence, like the exotic, ancient relics of a lost paradise. This perspective insists upon specificities and differences, jeopardizing all the things that connect one culture to another, close or far away, and favouring the rhetoric of alterity and multiculturalism that defends the coexistence of separate groups categorically turned toward the past, who need protection from any and all contact with ‘the others’. With these postulates in mind, we should be careful to avoid falling into the trap of fetishizing words like ‘identity’ or ‘culture’, which tend to become absolute, categorical terms, and we would do well to work toward a continuous, irreversible movement of cultural connections and associations, in which each collection of connections and associations represents a ‘phase of no return’ that ‘precludes the regression to origins’.

There is a risk involved in all this. Some utopian models have gone from being constructive and revolutionary to conservative and limited in scope, preserving tiny spheres of private happiness and sometimes defending outright isolation. The utopian function behind many large-scale projects is dedicated to strategies for care, recovery and protection. This is perfectly evident in the conservatism of certain environmentalists, in the indigenism of certain anthropologists, and in the attribution of cultural ‘differences’. Nevertheless, there are several signs that in the face of autocratic systems and invocations of the cultural purity of certain ‘origins’, America already has several centuries of integrated multicultural manifestations to look back on – they are not without their asymmetries but they are still integrated within a cultural framework founded upon diversity. In the annals of Latin American thought there is a tradition of pluralism that has not only enriched the region’s culture but has allowed it to imagine, in the syntheses of which it has been and continues to be capable, the possibility of creating something unique to Latin America, something that will help keep it from falling into the atavism of the past. In addition to and beyond its specific problems, Latin America has proven itself to be receptive to all kinds of intercultural relationships. Its people as well as its ideas have been more open-minded about the ‘other’ than the people of those regions of the world



characterized by closed civilizations. I find it hard to overstate this point, especially at this moment in time when the temptation to fall back on oneself is a threat that hovers over many a conscience.

This cannot be underestimated: Latin America has been and is an open, receptive continent. We cannot overlook the fact that nations with a colonial past have been the first to expand freedoms and cultures, in the most crucial manner, and have also been the first to defend, through use of force, the right to sovereignty and self-determination. The countries of America have been pioneers in the fight to recognize cultural and ethnic diversity and in the affirmation of their plurality and unique values, of non-western origins. This is America's greatest treasure and is to be defended with conviction now more than ever when these values are under the greatest threat.

While the universalist inclinations of specific cultures are evident, globalism also fosters a more fragmented world, split up by groups with special interests or affinities that communicate amongst themselves. The classic utopian discourse that promulgated, in its most ideal version of modernity, the triumph of reason over passion and the different collective 'subjective' traditions, must now reconcile the universal values of reason with passions, differences, fragmentation and cultural diversity. At the same time it should take into account the growing role of immigration and the multicultural nerve centers in large cities based on a multi- and intercultural perspective. This is because the rejection of absolute cultural uniformity and the multiplicity of differences (themselves mutually exclusive) is in fact what lies at the core of the constant battle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces operating within Latin American society, and between these forces and other societies. In reality it is only possible to speak of cultural wealth and polyvalence, of cultural identity as the result of these movements, the real diastole and systole of American thought.

In light of this simultaneous, double motion of integration and fragmentation, aperture and closure, which characterizes the world we live in, utopia should make an imaginative leap in favour of diversity and cultural particularities, yet never forgetting to remain open to the possibility of an interculturality that can exist on a planetary scale. Universalization does not imply an expansion of ourselves, but rather a dialogue with other traditions, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt reminds us. His proposals in defence of an intercultural philosophy that can be contextualized historically and regionally make an effort to better understand and share the polyphony of the world's cultures so as 'to be able to reorganize, from a position of plurality, the old ideal of a real *ecumene* among peoples'.<sup>5</sup>

In reality this is something akin to José Martí's ideal notion of 'grafting the world into our trunk', breaking the circle of conflict-ridden dialogue between the universal and the specific. 'The trunks particular to every culture', he says essentially, 'are concrete universals. There is neither particularity nor universality; what we have, rather, are historic universalities.'<sup>6</sup> As such, each cultural trunk should function as a platform from which to formulate a way of viewing the world both to express what is particular about us, and to learn how to 'contrast' that with other ways and perceptions. For this, we must cast aside any and all 'monocultural definitions' and remain open to the idea of 'relearning how to think' critically and from the polyphony of diversity. In short, we are talking about creating and multiplying the utopian spaces for mediation and *mestizo* integration.

### Creating utopian spaces for mediation and mestizo integration

Beyond the initial excesses that occur in all conquests, the colonization of America introduced innovative variety and unexpected adaptations and metamorphoses to the inequalities and asymmetries that separated the conquerors from the conquered. Thanks to this phenomenon, both groups went through a process of change and created a polymorphous reality based on these new situations. These people were neither assimilated nor absorbed; they were in fact originators of hybrid cultures and forms of existence whose perpetuation and vitality depended on their own abilities to improvise in the most unstable of situations. This experience, in turn, set the stage for the *mestizo* phenomenon, the mixing of cultures that may also be understood as an effort toward recomposition in a world that had been shattered into tiny pieces. At the same time, however, it was also a local attempt to adapt to the new framework imposed by the conquerors and by the initial relationship of unequivocal domination, characterized by imbalance and asymmetry. Both movements would eventually become inseparable. Despite the 'oppressed perspectives' that translated many of their expressions, and despite the self-proclaimed universality invoked by the western world as part of the extrapolation movement to which the oppressed cultures were subjected, an intercultural dialogue inevitably did emerge. This fascinating lesson in American history is worth recalling, especially at a moment when the continent once again must face the great challenges of globalism and its imperial pretensions.

Without a doubt, the term *mestizo* carries many of negative connotations. All that is hybrid is necessarily impure, and the idea of *mestizo* evokes promiscuity and contamination. Intellectual habits tend to prefer monolithic groupings over intermediate spaces, those 'spaces for mediation' that evolved from colonization as a way to transform two supposedly authentic traditions, the western and the Amerindian, into a new reality. The idea of men and cultures commingling in this way was initially rejected by both conqueror and conquered, 'monstrosities' that, as Leopoldo Zea<sup>7</sup> recalls, would become legitimized to the point of becoming the very epitome of the Latin American identity.

The result of this first globalization was a culture that would live in a perpetually 'unstable equilibrium' in which different sensibilities would be reconciled and processed together. Multiple identities in constant mutation, of which the Caribbean region offered perhaps the most exotic expression, they comprised a rich panorama that was as varied as it was contradictory. The phenomenon of 'copying' styles, ideas and doctrines, along with the subsequent American acculturation that invaded almost every aspect of life from Mexico to Paraguay, passing through Peru and Bolivia, soon became the very original expression of the American Baroque. Paintings, frescoes, sculptures, syncretic religious hymns and musical instruments, representing the polyphony of an entire continent that discovered its own American expression through the impact of the conquest, are among Latin America's greatest legacy. At this very moment, as it confronts the issue of globalization in this new millennium, Latin America would do well to recall the extraordinary creative reaction that characterized its traumatic entry into the realm of western modernity and in which the utopian function played a fundamental role.

The first phase of American art after the conquest was based on the notion of copying European models. Nevertheless, though the copies executed by the indigenous people may have seemed mimetic, they were in fact a great source of cultural combination and invention. In these copies, artists digressed, modified or incorporated other elements of the culture that was being reproduced, giving free rein to an array of interactions, juxtapositions, amalgams or encounters that were new and very often unexpected. The copy was never faithful or exact. The tiny errors that the copies inevitably contained revealed more than differences – these errors were signs, hints of a far more original future that lay ahead. This originality owed much, as well, to the astonishing American capacity for creativity: the indigenous people's tremendous mimetic ability introduced subtle changes that were able to process new cultures in a way that could not simply be reduced to a mere reproduction of defeat.

Throughout Latin America, without exception, European models were copied and interpreted freely, since the notion of having to remain true to European traditions, schools or criteria simply did not exist. This was the reason for the proliferation of combinations and discoveries that characterize America's wide variety of cultures. In the realm of art, different styles were brought together in a haphazard, synchronic form: the Romanesque and the Gothic, the neoclassical and the Spanish-Morisco; the Iberian and the Amerindian. This, in turn, gave way to the very original forms of expression that came to be known as the American Baroque.

A similar phenomenon occurred in the realm of ideas, in which aesthetic and literary modes, just as in the realm of the successive utopian models, repeated the pattern: the copy, the double, the reproduction and the imitation rapidly acquired unique traits of their own. In literature, the Baroque and the Neoclassical gleefully superimposed themselves upon each other, and then the nationalist-inspired Romanticism merged with the scientific pretensions of positivism. Fragments imported from truncated beliefs, from concepts that were removed from their original contexts and poorly assimilated, eventually became promulgators of richly textured, unique and totally American expressions. Oscillations and insecurities that explain the complexity and diversity and emblematic syncretism into which this alternating pattern of stretching and doubling and folding is translated.

The Amerindian way of thinking was adept at capturing all the things that, to the European mindset and sensibilities, tended toward the hybrid. From the imitation of clothing, musical instruments (violas, flutes, harps, organs) and textile and pictorial techniques, to contemporary literature, encompassing every kind of artistic expression imaginable, including the musical, the history of Latin American culture is that of a continuous and creative *mestizaje*, a true blending of cultures in which copies and influences cannibalize one another with facility and ability. '*Soy un tupí que tañe un laúd*' (I am a tupí that strums a lute), wrote the poet Mario de Andrade, in what was his way of summarizing that epicurean, indulgent anthropophagia that Brazil championed as a cultural movement and proclaimed as an aesthetic in the 1920s.

In this way, creations born out of this cultural fusion developed their own dynamic which liberated them from the aesthetic habits and intentions of their authors. These mixtures gave birth to obligations and virtualities, antagonisms and compatibilities that evolved in surprising configurations. This freedom to combine and intermingle was the source of innovation and creation. This, in turn, opened the

door to technical inventions and stylistic discoveries that proudly defended the notion of the hybrid, celebrating verbs like mix, juxtapose, adapt, cross and melt – not as a way of justifying the movement from homogeneous to heterogeneous, but to underscore the fact that every culture, even the ones that claim to be the purest, are miscible and can be combined almost endlessly.

And while the opposing elements of two or more cultures in contact tended to be mutually exclusive, all the same they did tend to penetrate, combine and identify with one another, as well. This confrontation is what facilitated the emergence of new and unexpected cultural expressions in Latin America, born of interpretation and a conjugation of opposites. This has been the greatest result of the *mestizo* phenomenon, and the broad, varied panorama of contemporary narrative is one of its most impressive and expressive consequences. The same can be said for the magnificent utopian vocation that has engendered so many alternative projects beneath the motto that was coined by one of the first American utopians, Alfonso de Valdés: '*Quisiera hacer un mundo nuevo*' (I would like to build a new world).

As we battle the overwhelming pessimism provoked by the tyrannical empire of contemporary globalism, it is well worth our efforts to recall that unique and exclusive historical experience – the very first, brutal experience of world-ization embodied by Spain's conquest and colonization of America. By recalling this violent historical moment, we may also contemplate its fascinating consequences – the *mestizo* phenomenon and the birth and evolution of new cultures starting in the 16th century – and apply it to the present day, by envisioning an intensified intercultural dialogue and new forms of cultural interchange. It is possible to discern the signs of new *mestizo* encounters and 'corruptions' in the hybridization that occurs nowadays through the artistic, literary and musical expressions that unify so many young people today and connect them with the emblematic American universe of the 16th century. On television, computer and movie screens; in literary genres of a re-awakened anthropological vocation; in musical experimentation; in the American-style appreciation of the plastic arts and in the fields of knowledge that are increasingly trans- and interdisciplinary, we are witnessing a heretofore unheralded *mestizo* explosion of cultural interchange that is limitless because 'the *mestizo* lands are immense and invite us to embark on new explorations . . . The *mestizo* phenomenon is never a panacea; it is the expression of a battle that never has a victor, a battle that inevitably repeats itself. But it offers people the privilege of belonging to various different worlds in one lifetime.'<sup>8</sup>

All of this, of course, is a concept that Montaigne, one of the first Europeans to anticipate the potential of the New World, summarized in the maxim: 'A good man is a compound man,' a good intercultural combination that seems to support, from the Renaissance through to the present day, all the things that concern Our America – including the utopia of so many intersecting signs and paths that has followed us down the road of history and that is more crucial than ever at this very moment.

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## Notes

1. From Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, translated by Charles Cotton.
2. Gruzinski (2002).
3. Vidal Beneyto (2001a, 2001b).
4. Agnes Heller, author of *Everyday Life, Postmodern Political Condition*, and *The Theory of Need in Marx Revisited*, stated the following to the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* (Madrid, 23 October 2001): 'In the beginning, we are all foreigners. We come into this world by accident and from the very beginning of our lives we have had to adapt ourselves to the environment. If not we would not survive . . . culture emerges from an assimilation of environment. For this reason, to be a foreigner, to test one's capacity for assimilation, is a very good thing . . . Until the modern age, being a foreigner was an exception. Territory and blood determined the culture a person inherited, and for that reason, everything foreign was generally regarded with suspicion. But now everything is different. Now we are all a little bit foreign and the slogan "we are all born free" has created a kind of revolution.' According to Heller, the present world, with globalization and mass immigration, is going through a process of de-assimilation. 'Immigration belongs to the period of de-assimilation. I would say that the figure of the other is something that is created. We all need a referent in order to forge our own identity, we need to see something different to know that there is also something that is exclusively ours.' The philosopher of Hungarian roots concludes with a message of respect and peaceful coexistence between peoples: 'We cannot compare cultures, because each culture is unique, impossible to quantify. All human groups deserve recognition in the exact same measure.' Heller deems education as the best path for creating a more tolerant world: 'Children need to hear positive opinions about all the ethnic and social groups in their environment.'
5. Fernet-Betancourt (2001: 14).
6. Fernet-Betancourt (2001: 65).
7. Zea (1970).
8. Gruzinski (2002: 334).

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