
Peru at the Turn of the Millennium

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When the historian Paul Kennedy looked at the nineteenth century in England, he found a troublesome similarity between the forecasts of Malthus and the demographic explosion predicted for the year 2025. The population of the United States will grow by 25 percent but Mexico and Guatemala will grow by 88 percent. The southern European countries will gain only 5 million new inhabitants in the face of the 108 million North Africa will acquire. And in peripheral countries, it is less probable that another industrial revolution will again prove Malthus wrong. The first documentation of the future comes in the form of illegal migration, whose tentative surge has already begun to create an undertow of violence. This violence will only multiply from within and without the displaced borders. Paul Virilio reminds us that the vigilance technology used in Vietnam is now used on the Mexican border and that the wall between San Diego and Tijuana is made with steel plates left over from the Gulf War.

However, migration is not only victimization, nor is it only a neo-primitive, formless force, a mere illegible entropy. It has its own maps, strategies, resistances, and alliances, and it can convert borders into thresholds, the outskirts into other detours. Migration is already redrawing the map of citizenship and the practice of ethnic territorialization, and is helping to promote the first cultural strategy of the new century, negotiation.

However, the disciplinary models for reading and processing social life and cultural practices have become insufficient. To call oneself a sociologist or an

anthropologist is to claim the anxiety of objectivity, whose science and methodology no longer account for the new cultural objects, hybrid in nature and complex in form. And that is the central question of reading the concurrent signs of the present: the social sciences and the humanities have lost control of their field of objects. This is because the cultural objective is no longer something fixed, measurable, and classifiable; rather, it is a process of information. This condition shows the fragility of the objective and the normative as much as the changing power of meaning. New social agents outside the old agencies of party, union, or the state apparatus move in open fields, through margins and networks that they built in their nomadic social map. The question today is to figure out how to read a fluid present.

Nearly everywhere, the academic world has made itself less relevant intellectually, and much of academia suffers from a general lack of pertinence. In Peru, only professional and technical experience seems relevant. Social science no longer has the key to the “real Peru.” But even in the United States, much research seems to want only to fill up empty spaces without ever suspecting that there is perhaps a good reason why the spaces are empty. And the market dictates the values of the supposedly “recovered” voice: sometimes feminism, sometimes colonialism, and occasionally nineteenth-century nation-building. Computers are replacing field research, and I fear that the next generation of doctorates will be issued to people without *in situ* research experience.

If the model of a national Peruvian tradition has shown itself to be insufficient, it is because the future is no longer national. At the same time, globalization—whatever that may be—has not failed to solicit regional counterpractices. The future brings us ever closer together, but nations have kept their distinguishing differences. This double movement gives the lie as much to the homogenization of the market as to regressive isolationism. If the normative models suffer a crisis of legitimacy and of pertinence it is because the present is looking towards a future which demands hybrid forms upon which peoples will project their own understanding.

A suspicious reading of the past and the present—which superimposes tales of the past to the cultural objects of the present—has impoverished the better understanding of our countries because it has forgotten to look forward. I am referring to the lamentable complacency evident in images of failure, traumatic origins, and pessimism. It is a powerful model that processes, registers, and evaluates in *traumatic* terms the versions of the social and the political—as well as attempts at change. Supposedly tragic, this traditional portrayal of denial is, however, something that detracts from the present. Not a few writers have fallen back into this self-deriding indulgence, and, by thinking that they are criticizing the past, they have only propagated a kind of neo-traditionalism based on exaggerated local color. In this way, violence, frustration, and misery create a catastrophic

scenario. Today, we see this tendency in everything hearkening back to the past.

A first hypothesis is this: In order to talk of the new, we cannot rely on catastrophic future projections (a calculus of probabilities) or on redemptionist (an act of faith). In his stimulating work *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard seems to think that the poor countries of the South are falling over each other in their zeal to produce catastrophes, another raw material the North processes for its moral well-being as part of its affinity for catastrophilic cannibalism. "But it is not true that they will monopolize catastrophe indefinitely," he warns. However, this excess of catastrophe is not merely a documental penury. The truth is that Baudrillard's hyperbole is contested, more often than not, as a strategy of resistance in the South—every catastrophe generates an immediate, collective reconstruction of the social fabric. The 1985 Mexican earthquake is a good example: civil society reconstructed itself in order to place itself in control of the fractured daily horizon. The community returned to rebuild in the humanization of death, something in which Hispanic cultures have historically been experts: they humanize death as a means of repair, a way of negotiating with violence.

We require a theory of articulation that connects these margins and crosses borders. We need a reading situated in a principle of radical novelty—a fresh start, which is a link and an intermediary. This reading can only be part of a process which takes diversity into account, respecting the dynamics of hybrid cultural forms. The Hispanic intellectual is forged not in the methodology of doubt but in the entrenched opinion; he is not schooled in the fine points of dialogue but in disqualifying polemic. It is true that modernity gave the intellectual the illusion of an authority rooted in the power of his disciplinary discourse. From this authority today many promote the market as a Darwinian destiny and economics as a vision of the world. But, as some have said, given the possibility of the future, any truth becomes relative.

So how can we look at the periphery? First, we must revise our models of analytic reading, for which we seem now to have two—processing and genealogy.

The genealogical model seeks to reconstruct the origins of a discourse, text, or object. It is based on the notion that a cultural object is a product of its sources which comes into being as a causal history. Under the influence of structuralism and the "archeology of discourse" proposed by Foucault, we have saturated texts with explanations of sources to the point of converting texts into long demonstrations of what we already knew. This recomposition of another discourse in any text makes readers suspicious and converts them into semantic police—someone who confirms the typology of meaning in the signs of identity. This mechanism is unfortunate because its symmetry demands us to fill in spaces and give all the answers. And when this happens, there are no questions left, only authority, museum, and archive—the past.

The other method—reading processes—proposes to move ahead in order

to search for the new. If the first model tends to be canonical, this one is relativistic. Barthes and Lyotard have already proposed that we read texts as a process of meaning and not as the validation of a text, and to do so forward and outside. To follow the new—in its additions and subtractions, in its tentative efforts—also takes advantage of relativist practices and allows examination of fluctuating borders and theories of hybridity.

In Peru, recent writers—such as Fernando Ampuero, Alonso Cueto, Mario Bellatin, Iván Thays, and Pilar Dughi, as well as new poets like Giovanna Polarollo, Pedro Granados, Magdalena Chocano, and José Antonio Mazzotti—have given up on epochal narrative versions and global interpretation in order to propose scenarios of uncertainty, a particular analytic obsession, the immediacy of emotivity, and a frank skepticism in explicatory discourse. What is new in these and other writers is the deliberate will to restart the fable of what is alive in an irredeemable present, without a history to get out or a vision to experiment with—they occupy the vulnerable instance in which speaking takes responsibility for time. These authors are, not surprisingly, uninterested in party politics, and are mostly skeptical of politics itself.

In the splendid collection of short stories *Bicho Raro* (1966), Fernando Ampuero tells of the saga of the uncertain as the space for an identity put to the test. In his novella *Salón de Belleza* (1994), Mario Bellatin traces a moving parabola of the curse of the *fin-de-siècle*, AIDS, in order to reconstitute a solitary, marginal humanity. This documentation of anxiety, however, underlines the complementary subjectivity of the new; that is, its harassing demands of desire, the betting on a new start, and the stripping down of words to their most vulnerable center, the subject of meanings. This value of emotivity communicates the best dimension of the characters in these books: their subjectivity, pestered by mapped-out spaces. They are people looking for themselves by separating themselves from one another; who are exploring openings of consolation and pleasure, accord and dialogue; and who inscribe themselves like inhabitants of a discourse in the process of making itself. This is how these works of fiction, with their very doubtful trembling, document the construction of the border subject of this *fin-de-siècle*. They work in the borders of a society that has no civil discourse and in a degraded time—which needs to be remade as an elemental material starting from emotions they can share. This stripping-down of the act of representation opens, first of all, an outlook of anxiety and fright; and, second, it registers the force of recognition from the passionate emphasis with which the Peruvian reclaims his humanity.

Everything seems to indicate that in the arts the new is an extreme act of detachment from identities: these artists are different from the artists of previous generations, who, in order to digest violence, had to return to cultural memory, to the genealogy of malaise and to the ideologies of consolation. These new writers,

painters, and photographers strike out memory and refine the present; they look to build a symbolic body not born of disciplinary archives but of the crisscrossed borders, the open spaces between the private and the public, the immediate voice that is the expression of a new subjectivity. They are lonelier, but also freer.

When looking at the stories of the new century, we need, I think, to go beyond the common places of discipline and politics, as protective as they have been, to the sort of nomadic and unsheltered life that awaits us on the road to the new. The novelists, but also the poets, the artists, the filmmakers, and even some essayists and feature writers, have moved beyond the old propositions of a world described as conflictual but understandable (the consolation of discipline) to the new versions of several worlds in a tentative dialogue between the improbable accounting of the social world and the reductionism of authoritarian politics. The crisis today is in the limits of what we can decipher and articulate, and in the opacity of the areas that remain, for us, illegible.

In Peru, we have still not answered the question of nation and nationality. Today, we think that modernity was produced by the nationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with their reforming and emancipating spirits. But perhaps we have never been nationalist because in Peru we have never really had a nation. This “imaginary community” has been a void, a differed consensus between a mutually exclusive fragmentation of classes, ethnicities, visions, and regions. There has not been a creative unification of projects, only a prolonged struggle between powers in disagreement. The symbolic body of the nation, a rich and plural being, abounding in languages and able to provide us with a means of self-identification, does not yet seem to be a force for inclusion. In Mexico, for example, it was impossible to exterminate the Zapatistas in Chiapas, because there is a nationality which is able to legitimate the excluded and which mediates in times of crisis in order to heal the violence. In contrast, in Peru the murder of the Túpac Amaru guerrillas who took over the Japanese Ambassador’s residence was applauded; this mutilation of the excluded was not seen as a loss of nationality but as the necessary violence of civility. In the next few years the Peruvians who compare these events will try to understand our eradicating force, the intensity of this rationalized violence, whose symbolic cost is a waste.

I think that a wager awaits us not with the known but with the ignored. That is why the wager must be made and shared. To risk answering the future affirmatively confirms, in a tacit, biographical sense, the hope of remaking everything new together, and leaves alive the hope of starting anew from something born of the novelty of its own promise.

Having said that, the challenge remains to remember that the new can be found among ourselves as Peruvians, if we are willing to test the new in order to recognize ourselves as a surviving community, one able to imagine the future of the living, that promise of a restored humanity. ♀