

Introduction

MODERNITY IN THE BALANCE, THE “TRANSGRESSIVE” ESSAY, AND DECOLONIZATION

Must we always fixate on progress and “building the future,” never stopping to consider why we are going through a crisis in the historical project of modernity? Aren’t we facing a historical impasse because we have no map to tell us which routes to the future might work? Aren’t “peripheral” societies—the ones that the dominant systems of knowledge have forgotten or left in the dust—precisely the societies that now reject, sometimes violently, the moral and philosophical systems that modernity thought were universal? Doubt seems to have corroded and dissolved every certainty that once shored up our lives and conveniently blinded us so we could go on living in a world that had lost its aim, its sure direction.

What can we do in the face of such pervasive doubt? Dissociating ourselves from humanity would mean forgetting that we are never so human as when we regret it. What holds us in doubt now is not so much the death of the old era as the birth of a new one, an event we can no longer look forward to with the same confidence we had when we waited for modernity to finally arrive. For vast groups who have found their voice in the key of voicelessness itself, consciousness has arrived uninvited, mired in virtual reality, rejoicing in the empty plenitude of a self, an identity that must negotiate the thorny pathways that will lead it to delve into a “ruinous” past, into a “self” that predates the modern self. There, in that space—better yet, in that space-time—will be what E. M. Cioran called “the light of pure anteriority” (Cioran 1970: 48). Unable to take refuge in animal howling or mineral senselessness, we humans find ourselves forced to

come up with a new project inspired more by the past and by a continuing, constantly expanding present than by a perfectible future. Its “rhythm” demands a new state, a new disposition of the soul, not conditioned exclusively by the philosophical assumptions of Western temporality, particularly those that govern the modern philosophy of history. Today, social dynamics in our countries has destroyed the prestige of many of our formerly cherished concepts and has forced us to reconsider the space-time structure of our thinking. It isn’t that we should be indifferent bystanders, just watching the problematic historical time that it has been our lot to live through. Quite the contrary: we must be observers free of all illusion, critics of the utopian goal of modernity. Since we can no longer refrain from questioning it, I think it useful to cover some controversial aspects of this goal that we now find dubious.

1. MODERNITY IN THE BALANCE

Seen from the European perspective, from the point of view of supposedly universal thought, modernity—the historical project that began in the Renaissance with the “discovery” of America—acquired its philosophical foundations with seventeenth-century Rationalism and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

If we stick to dictionary definitions and call anything referring to Greco-Roman antiquity “classical,” it is clear that the seventeenth century, which is taken to be foundational for modern culture and modern civilization, was France’s classical century, given that, while its great writers wanted to continue imitating the Greeks and Romans, its scientists, followers of Galileo, made progress the basis for Western culture and civilization. It was precisely the notion of change, of progress, that influenced science so profoundly. Thus, the modernity of Descartes was based on the imposition of a mathematical model founded on the principle that only logic, with its forms and categories, was capable of deciphering the world. Thanks to this model, long chains of reasoning arose that made it possible to have, on the one hand, deductive philosophy, and, on the other, observations of measurements on which an inductive science could be built. Thus, the application of the Cartesian method had a revolutionary impact on progress and on change.

But could the dominated, the subjugated, peacefully accept a rectilinear modernity that was imposed on them from the outside, that defined them without caring about the particularities of their own being? Compli-