

WHAT KIND OF CRITICISM SHOULD THE INTELLECTUALS ENDEAVOUR? THE POLITICAL MAINSTREAM'S CELEBRATION OF OCTAVIO PAZ'S RUPTURE WITH THE LEFT

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Abstract: *Actually, the aim of my paper is not so much to discuss Octavio Paz's political view, than to warn against a present tendency to celebrate the idea of rupture with the intellectual support of the popular conatus and will of human dignity and joy of life.*

The modern tradition has called this support left-wing, but I am not interested to use this label, or rather I use the well-known political formulas (left-wing, right-wing) for convenience: actually, I oppose to an imaginary model of the functions of the intellectual, the political position of Octavio Paz.

First of all, this model contains, following the Enlightenment credo underlined by Kant and Hegel, criticism – highly assumed by the great Mexican poet – and self-criticism. The intellectual must have the absolute external freedom to exert the first, while he should be able to develop the second. If so, the model is pursuing professionalism as well: an intellectual ought not to express opinions that are not based on the best arguments related to the entire phenomenon (and its history and logic), and not only to its fragments. Accordingly, the model involves intellectual and human responsibility, since without it there is no manner to have a verified and verifiable standpoint.

In order to be understood, the political realm requires a scientific outlook. It cannot be approached through emotions and only through metaphors, because emotions and metaphors are related to fragmented empirical data and impressions, and their relative character is eloquent only if we emphasize the historical character of politics and its tackling.

All of these do not mean that a non-political scientist would have no right to write his political opinions. Nor that they are not important for people. They are, the more so as these opinions belong to public intellectuals. And this means that their representations and ideas must be treated with the same attention all the publicly expressed ideas deserve: especially because of their impact.

*Therefore, I do not discuss the poetical work of Octavio Paz, but I present his political ideas as they appear in *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History* (1983) and later articles*

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and declarations. My criticism arises from an analytical standpoint, which is reflective and not emotional, and concludes that Octavio Paz's political view is exemplary for the historical period when it was conceived, and for most of Western intellectuals. Octavio Paz's political conception is thus another model realized in my paper. But, while that conception reflected a historical moment when it was very difficult to surpass it in a self-criticism specific to a non-conformist political epistemology (at least because in that time the Western capitalism was not yet in the devastating global crisis it lies nowadays, and it could somehow temper its critical economic consequences), at present the obstinate brandishing of the flag of superiority of representative democracy and the separation between economic, social and political problems are strange in front of the ardent global crisis.

An intellectual is the son of his people when he really cares about it by straining the use of his own specific tools. Nowadays, the celebration of the rupture of intellectuals from their possible former support of the popular initiatives to realize conditions for a dignified human life for all, and the rupture of intellectuals from their functions as voices of the consciousness of the people, is a new postponement of the focus on alternatives, and thus a waste of people's time. But this is only an unnecessary (but for the moment inevitable) example of the historical character of ideologies and intellectual positions.

Keywords: *intellectuals, Octavio Paz, 20th century, opportunism, ideology, criticism, social conformism.*

I. Instead of introduction

The aim of my paper is not so much to discuss Octavio Paz's political view, but to use his view as a *model of an intellectual rupture*.

As we know, Octavio Paz (1914-1998) was, in his youth, left-wing (and he always considered himself as left-wing)¹. How could he be

¹ José Roberto Cisneros Duarte, 2014, *Octavio Paz, reflexiones políticas por obligación moral*, Marzo 31. Available from: <http://www.adnpolitico.com/ciudadanos/2014/03/31/octavio-paz-reflexiones-politicas-por-obligacion-moral> [August 14, 2014]: "I was educated in the cult of the French revolution and Mexican liberalism. In my youth I made my own the huge and Promethean communist attempt to change the world. The revolutionary idea was and is a generous project. My intellectual and moral affinities, even my life and my criticism, are a part of the tradition of the left".

otherwise, since he has seen with his own eyes a so deep poverty and so many injustices in Mexico: it was very clear to everyone that the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) was, beyond the struggle for power of different layers of wealthy landowners, the result of the social situation of Mexican peasants and national bourgeoisie, and their opposition to the foreign (American and Anglo-Dutch) possession of oil and other national resources. In front of this reality, the young poet could not only immerge within the poetical realm, by thinking that poetry would be the most efficient and true means to criticize the harsh existence – in fact, to understand it – but also to manifest as a *social activist*: in 1937 (so before Lázaro Cárdenas' nationalization in 1938 of Mexican Eagle Petroleum Company) he went to Yucatán to teach children of peasants, in a new and ardent Enlightenment spirit.

But then the *environment* has changed: its watchword was now “let spread the reforms” and it seemed that the inward-looking and protectionist development will – as it indeed succeeded to a certain extent – transform and improve the life of the many. Accordingly, the idealist social activism did no longer appear as the necessary path of a Romantic young man. In his deep down he was a poet, but what could he do else – the necessary supplementary – in order to survive and be really known, thus in order to accomplish man's main goals (and not only a poet's ones), to be esteemed and to self-actualize? Would he be followed only to write articles and to move in circles of writers and artists? It was not enough, the more so the political party of reforms seemed only to need professional elites which ought and were to realize its ambitious program.

Unfortunately, poets do not know economics, nor are they sociologists. Yes, in the decade after the Great Depression a strong wave of protectionism and national development of monopolies has passed over the countries, generating a deepening of international competition and contradictions leading to the WWII. And this wave seemed to be fit just for the underdeveloped countries which had a subordinated position because of the *unequal exchange* with the developed countries. Some leading economists have written about the solutions for the existent *unequal exchange*¹ (between them, the Romanian Mihail Manoilescu¹, well-known in the Raúl Prebisch's Latin America) and recommended:

¹ John Brodin, 2006, *The Bias of the World: Theories of Unequal Exchange in History*, Lund University Lund.

a) a national macro planning (possible in the frame of a national capitalism: when the relationships between capital and labour force took place only within national confines),

b) to realize the 'comparative advantage' (Ricardo) rather in production than in international trade,

c) thus industrialization and diversification of production,

d) nationalization of the main and profitable industries/companies, and

e) high state expenditures in education, transportation and infrastructure (possible just because the state ownership generates a bigger revenue than that from taxes given by private companies).

Briefly, this is the *state monopoly capitalism* economic strategy, promoted after the big crisis and it has emphasized the *phase crisis* of *monopoly capitalism*. The *state monopoly capitalism* was worldwide developed until the constitution of trans-national forces and capitalism, in the seventies of the last century.

This economic strategy was followed by Mexico too and the resulted "miracle" gave hopes to people. Nevertheless, the economic strategy is not independent from the social and political relations and values. If the dominant ideology does not contain as leading value the social equality or real, economic and social, opportunities (and not only formal political ones) for *every* citizen, only the economic freedom of entrepreneurs is not enough, and the development of state capitalism is encumbered by concentration of wealth and thus by *legal inequality*. And since it is a *state capitalism*, the state bureaucracy controlling the state resources and having deep connections with private (internal and international) companies is quite autonomous from the people and the original democratic institutions,

¹ Mihail Manoilescu: *Théorie du protectionnisme et de l'échange international* (1929) ; *Le siècle du corporatisme. Doctrine du corporatisme intégral et pur* (1934), nouvelle édition, Paris, F. Alcan, 1936 ; *Le financement des travaux publics et leur effet comme stimulant économique dans les pays agricoles, communication*, Association Générale des Ingénieurs de Roumanie, Bucarest, 1937. See also Ana Bazac, „The *Zeitgeist* at Stefan Zeletin and Mihail Manoilescu/ *Spiritul timpului la Ștefan Zeletin și Mihail Manoilescu*”, in Constanța Partenie and Corina-Ionela Dumitrescu (eds.), *Mihail Manoilescu – punct de referință în gândirea economică / Mihail Manoilescu – reference point in the economical thinking*, bilingual edition, București, Editura Economică, 2007, pp. 197-208.

and expands its power in a highly *corrupted* manner (but do not forget: the state corruption is intertwined with the private corruption). The “*Década Perdida*” of Mexico (~1970s to 1990s), when the development halted and the general standard of living decreased dramatically, was not determined firstly because of international accidents as the reduction of the price of oil as well as the fly of speculative capitals, but because of the behaviour of the Mexican political elite: when the price of oil was high, this elite did not continue to develop a diversified production but has organized mainly an oil export based economy (as the inter-war Romanian elite did with cereals, oil and ore), and when the price has fallen the only measures taken were monetary. The oil export based economy and later on together with the hosting of the American and other Western companies offering them a tax-friendly milieu and cheap workforce has showed the subordination of the Mexican political class to always the strongest capitalism – as every political class in a domination-submission society does –: after the reforms of national capitalism in a *dependent* country, to the “neo-liberal”/neo-conservative strategies corresponding to the new phase of trans-national capitalism.

Generally, the *capitalist ideology separates economy from politics*. It seemed, including to the young Octavio Paz, that if economy moves forward, people’s well-being is only a question of time, and that if in politics there are some democratic institutions, these two realms will marvellously intersect and develop. The social structure, the class interests, the *continuity* of the dominant class traditions through the *appearance of discontinuity* were not themes of the dominant ideology and so, they did not penetrate in the preoccupation of many Mexican intellectuals: the more so they were poets.

And when Octavio Paz caught the opportunity (in 1943) to study in an American university and then to enter the diplomatic service – becoming part of the new elite contributing to the modernization of Mexico – it was more and more clear for him that a revolutionary indignation and effervescence would not have been fruitful for the advancement of the country: actually, it would have been harmful. He became in his public *non-poetical writing an intellectual of the status quo: a right-wing intellectual*.

II. The tradition of rupture

This was the simple and step by step ideological shift of Octavio Paz from the left to the right. This shift as such – so not only of the Mexican

poet discussed here – is *celebrated* by the *status quo ideology*: as a banal transformation in fact, as in the slogan heard not only in Romania, “normally, a youngster is left-wing, an adult becomes right-wing”. In this ideology, this shift would be the salutary rupture with the “sentimental heresy” due to the irrational young enthusiasm. And it would be salutary, because only the maintaining of the social order would be beneficial.

The ideological rupture from the support to *the ruled* to the assistance of *the rulers* is part of the *right-wing motivation* within the entire formative-manipulative *strategy of domination-submission*. The rupture is certainly traditional in this type of society, but is more important in the *modern* one, because the *modern legitimacy* of power depends on “the people”: new social layers, intellectuals and different other popular classes (and not on the tiny stratum supporting the divine origin of the supreme ruler). Generally, the popular layers are ruled, dominated. In order to control the social consciousness of these layers it is imperious to use an ideological strategy that legitimates the capitalist domination-submission as such. One of the elements of this strategy is the theory that though people become indignant in front of the social injustice and this state of mind would conduct them to criticize and oppose the undemocratic political regimes and economic organization of society, ultimately they arrive to think in a rational manner that to destroy an “organic” continuity would be an adventure and worst than to support it.

Then between the social layers there is one which is *both* ruled – because its members are not the owners of the productive forces – and has a specific position in front of the rulers: because it has the intellectual competency able to create both its own symbolic capital and the rulers’ means of symbolic violence towards the ruled, the *intellectual* layer is rather a kind of (inferior) extension of these rulers. The intellectuals – they themselves *stratified* – constitute an intermediary *bureaucratic* stratum¹, together with all other bureaucratic strata, between the upper class, owner of the economic and political power, and the lower, let’s name with the Marx’s concept, the proletarians who, in order to gain their living, have nothing to sell except their own labour capacity. Indeed, from a standpoint, the majority of the modern intellectuals was and is proletarian and thus it has to sell itself to those buying it (and, certainly, to sell itself as

¹ Ana Bazac, “*Esprit de corps*: Old and New Values of a Significant Social Identity”, *Analele Universității din Craiova. Seria Filosofie*, Nr. 36 (2/2015), pp. 179-205.

expensively as it is possible). From another, the historical technical division of labour meant – and this was the case too during the first industrial revolution to which Octavio Paz was contemporary – that the intellectual labour force led the physical one, as the above-mentioned extension of the rulers. Concretely, the intellectuals in humanities led *indirectly* the proletarians, through their function to endorse the domination-submission relations, irrespective of the possible criticism some one of them made towards some bearers of these relations.

The intellectuals, or rather the intellectuals in humanities have specific *instruments* related to the exercise of the human reason. These instruments are *criticism*, the *logical* arguments, the consideration of both the *universals*' and the *concrete*'s diverse conditionality and historicity, the interest for the *results* of the human actions, the taking into account of both *long and short terms*, the appraisalment of *values* and *alternatives*. The intellectual view impugns the *premises* themselves, their *criteria* and *consequences*, in order to avoid both the moral relativism and the common fatalism.

But, since the intellectuals are socially conditioned, they use these instruments in contradictory and differentiated ways. Indeed, the social condition of intellectuals is which upholds their *opportunism*¹, and thus their *ideological confusion*: no less than the confusion which is of the popular classes, with all their intellectual means. Because: the most important for them is their social recognition leading to both their possible material assimilation near/within the dominant class and their materially supported presence in the public sphere. In fact, the intellectuals – already in ancient times: priests, officers and tribute collectors, let us do not idealize the writing – were from the beginning assimilated to masters/lords: the Sanskrit etymology (*dam*) of the Latin *dominus* passes through the old Greek, where δαμάζω and δαμάω means to domesticate, to master, to subdue, and the root δμη is found in δμητός – tamed, and δμῶς/δμωός – slave; in Latin too, *domare*, *domitare* – to tame, *domitor* – tamer, *dominus* – master; and are the intellectuals not tamers with their words constructing, au fond, the legitimacy of the masters to whose circle they want to belong?

¹ According to *Petit Robert*, the noun *opportunism* and the adjective *opportunist* were used in the French literature in the second half of the 19th century, describing “a politics able to use the circumstances, even by making compromises with the principles”.

There is a difference between the simple political *partisanship* and *opportunism*: these concepts have the same structural cause in the social dependence that transfigures the view of their bearers about “the general interest” and leads to a mercenary behaviour, but while the former does not require a high degree of reflection, the latter is the result of careful examination of gains and losses related to different political alignments.

Their instruments push the intellectuals to use them and to consider that this use is the most valuable thing they may do and even that may exist. But when they do not see themselves and their use of their own instruments in a critical manner – thus their arguments, reasoning, concepts – and when they do not see the phenomena which are their object as historical and social, when they think that the official truths of the moment are definitive and eternal, when they do not see through transparent lens the causes, the internal logic and the consequences of different ideas and theories in fashion and support them in order to have a bigger social visibility, they are *opportunists*.

The opportunist intellectuals pass from an ideology to another because of the above-mentioned epistemological shortcomings and social condition, but not every passing is opportunistic, not every abjuration is vile: only those which negate the genuine critical feature of the intellectuals, are.

At the same time, the powerful find that just this critical feature is harmful for them, because just this feature opposes the subdued character of the intellectuals and their use by the masters as a legitimating face of the domination-submission relations. According to the powerful, what is important from the standpoint of the worth of intellectuals is just their folding at the need of the system conservation and, concretely, of different factions of the ruling class. The more the intellectuals answer to this need, by using sophistic turnings and by selecting information according to their own oblivion of holism and consequences over *alterae partes* and obviously according to a biased refusing of criticism, the more are they gratified as “public” intellectuals. And the more the public intellectuals endorse the political class’ *status quo*, the bigger seems to be their *present* prestige. The political alignment of intellectuals, irrespective of the different parties they support, is one of the strongest means of the *continuity* of domination-submission, because the intellectuals create and are the voices of the dominant ideologies.

It's no wonder that the idea of *rupture* of the intellectuals from their possible previous attachment to the Enlightenment principles of social rights of the people (political freedom *and* economic well-being, social dignity of all, freedom of social criticism and development of the democratic content of institutions – so beyond their simple forms –) was and is cherished as a main argument, in front of both intellectual and non-intellectual strata, of the viability of the capitalist system and the egotistic “rational choice” of atomised people. No hope generated by left-wing alternatives – since these alternatives are decreed by the mainstream ideologies and intellectuals as “utopias” – are allowed to people: only the gloomy social conformism would them protect from the facts that cause them fear.

However, there were historical periods related to modernity which saw a notable progressive intellectual current (as well as some transition toward the left, irrespective here of the meaning of this last word), though this current does not necessarily mean that the majority of intellectuals would have shared the new social and moral values in the first years they were created: as in the history of science, there was and is an *inertia* of the old paradigms, manifested in inertial beliefs; but in some specific periods, the values of *reason* (critical examination of all kinds of authorities), *transformation*, *collective well-being*, *democracy and social rights*, *human dignity* and *courage* were in fashion, in that they have become the *criteria* of ideological judgements and creation and that they have more than marked, entailed the whole cultural development.

Such periods were not only the *Enlightenment*, but also the post-war “*trentes glorieuses*”, and they emphasize the connection between the societal phase of capitalism with its class structure, and the ideological currents. The first example is when bourgeoisie, the new revolutionary class, fought for power during the period of feudal system crisis, and this class could but promote *rationalism*, *social criticism*, a strong belief in *progress* and a *utopian capitalism*. The second example is that of the apex of the *state capitalism*, i.e. of the mutual strengthening of states and their internal monopolies, supporting at the same time the internal mass consumption as a ground of both profit and political consensus. And although the ideology of this period was not as enthusiastic as that of the Enlightenment – because now capitalism was no longer a promise, but a realization, and a very contradictory one – and, consequently, it was *structurally right-wing*, this

characteristic was pictured in social-democratic tones, while the aggressive right-wing values were promoted rather with the mute one.

Once more, this last image is not quite correct, since the right-wing ideology was dominant, but nevertheless corresponds to a tendency: realized through the *welfare state* rhetoric (as the *new* utopian capitalism) and the careful *separation of this rhetoric from the external imperialistic manifestation* of the Western countries. More: because of the ideological antagonism to the Eastern countries constructing an alternative model, the Western dominant ideology has included, as an element of counter-model, the element of Eastern *anti-communist dissidence* and its representatives, the anti-communist dissidents. And since through these dissidents there were some ones who have passed from their former confidence in the communist values to the negation of these values, we can assert that the *Western ideology has continued and developed the tradition of rupture*.

However, the anti-communist dissidents were part of a “different society” and “proved” the non-viability of that society: this is the reason they were very visible personages in the Western ideology. But as parts of the Western/or Western style societies, the shift of some intellectuals from the left to the right was not very celebrated. It was used, since it was useful, but it was not a topic: it was not fashionable, because the social-democratic veil and peaceful political consensus required rather the “no comment” on every sensitive subject possibly harming their triumphant ideology.

More clearly: the eventual shift of Western intellectuals from the left to the right was not a *main* vocal argument of the Western ideology, though it was one of them. In those times, capitalism had many other proofs of its superior development, sufficient for the ideological influence.

But in the present trans-national phase of capitalism, already in a crisis that is no longer phase crisis but *system crisis*, these proofs practically do no longer exist. The ideology of domination needs every aspect that might substitute these inexistent proofs. This is the reason of the revival and aggressiveness of the *conservative* ideology. And this is the reason of the celebration of “the tradition” of ideological rupture from the left (related also to Octavio Paz).

Two more remarks should be made: concerning both the celebration of tradition, and the one-sided consideration of the political rupture as arriving only from the left to the right. The first is that the standpoint concerning the *tradition as being good* in se and exterior to any historicity and historical examination belongs to the conservative mind. The other is that

there certainly are different types of ruptures, reflecting that although different political assumptions correspond to different social appurtenances of the individuals, there is a relative autonomy of the political and moral consciousness towards the class appurtenance and interests: an ability of the individual consciousness to become more or less sensitive to the direct spectacle of society. Thus, one may pass from a right-wing social conscience to left type sensitivity, though this is not determined at all by the social appurtenance.

III. What kind of rupture is Octavio Paz model of?

Actually, Octavio Paz was not, in his first manifestations, real/consistent left-wing. He was the son of a bourgeois/petit-bourgeois social milieu¹ whose “charm” (word borrowed from Bunuel’s film in 1972) one ought not to overbid. He rather has assumed a mixture of *utopian political liberalism* promoting democratic political rights and institutions (for example freedom of speech/expression and republicanism) and a *progressive radicalism*, normal in an economically and politically “peripheral” country and in a time of world phase crisis of capitalism and totalitarian dictatorships (the thirties).

And he was a poet whose interest was ardent concerning the human soul, but more than pale concerning the logic of economic and political relations. And as a poet, he used the *metaphors* as the finest instruments able to emphasize the social logic and the deep down of human feelings.

In a *time of mobilization*, the poet could be but radical. It was a *poetical radicalism*. And Octavio Paz has always considered as the main element of this poetical radicalism, the *freedom of criticism*, of debate: in fact, of thinking. Equating the left spirit with this freedom of criticism and the tradition of radical criticism, Octavio Paz has, as we know, considered himself always to be left-wing. And since the object of criticism was any type of *authority* – and, obviously, *authoritarianism* – he once more considered himself to be left-wing. Finally, if the force of the poet is to unveil and if his criticism is directed against the veils represented by any *ideology* – which is only “false consciousness” (to use Marx’s early image) and not a reflection of real situations and relations of forces, and which

¹ I do not speak about his concrete origin in a middle-class family, but about the general Mexican *Zeitgeist*.

generates only fanaticism – it results that to behave in such a manner meant to be left-wing.

Octavio Paz always has denounced the evils of the representative democracy: the privileges and the infringement of the state of law, and was never frightened to declare his refusal of the politicians and governments which have attacked the liberal and democratic values¹. At the same time, he was “only a poet”, i.e. he did not question the meanings, historicity and values of the representative democracy *as such*, and lesser he did with the

¹ See his attitude towards the Institutional Revolutionary Party when it had endorsed the Tlatelolco massacre (1968) and then, during Luis Echeverría's presidency, the repression of another students protests (Jueve de Corpus, 1971): he has renounced to his diplomatic activity in 1968, and in 1971 he has begun and fuelled a famous debate in his journal *Plural* (1971-1976) concerning the critique of the Mexican state and political elite.

Contrary to Carlos Fuentes who considered that the democratic opening initiated by Luis Echeverría's presidency in 1970 would have been attacked by the reactionary groups which have pushed to the repression and that Echeverría's strategy ought to be supported, Octavio Paz was both critical (having a “conditional and critical trust” in the regime of Echeverría, Carlos Monsiváis, *Octavio Paz y la izquierda*, Abril 1999, <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/octavio-paz-y-la-izquierda>) and resigned. He considered that the writer must be absolutely free to criticise “the state, parties, ideologies and society as such”; and this freedom meant a ‘marginalized’ status of the writer, just in order to speak against “the power and its abuses, *the seduction of the authority* as well as the fascination of the orthodoxy” (my emphasis, because the formula shows that the intellectuals were conscious about the fact expressed by it). But, at the same time, he consciously remained at the level of critique, of the negative manifestation of his freedom. “Many have thought that the moral posture of Paz will convert into a political project, and when this not happened, the scene of the present crisis was prepared” (AB, the political project is the positive manifestation of freedom). Quotes from John King, *Octavio Paz: Pasión Crítica*, <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/octavio-paz-pasion-critica?page=0,2> and <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/octavio-paz-pasion-critica?page=0,1>.

It was obviously difficult to have an alternative political project, from a historical standpoint more difficult than nowadays. Octavio Paz wanted to criticize both the neo-liberal and socialist („pseudo-Marxist”) dogmas. And this is absolutely correct. However, at least after the elections in Chile, he could have manifested in a practical manner. Was he too prudent in front of the socialist turn of Allende's country, or he simply could not choose „the lesser evil”?

capitalist relations. He really did not differentiate between those in power or in opposition – in his critique of political personages and habits –, but he was confident in the betterment of society *as a result of capitalism*.

Consequently, he was a kind of utopian liberal mixed with social-democratic strategy. Because he was not concerned with the “metaphysical” basis of capitalism, or rather he focused on this basis indirectly, through the critique of the “really existing socialism” far from Mexico, showing a bashful restraint from the analysis of the real structural situations in his own country (and in the world), Octavio Paz is not the proud model of the rupture from the left to the right. Actually and from the standpoint raised here, *he was not the model of rupture at all*. On the contrary, and despite his own characterization of himself as left-wing, he was the representative of the *conformist intellectuals criticizing the political non-democratic “excesses” of capitalism, but never capitalism as such*.

The radical poet did in his *non-poetical* public expression just what he rejected so much at others: he let the ideology he shared to interpose as a veil between his consciousness and reality. If Octavio Paz would have remained only a poet, no present mainstream would celebrate his rupture: *this one is visible only in his non-poetical public expression*.

Octavio Paz’s *radicalism* manifested as such in his *poetry*: his metaphors, irrespective of whose philosophical schools were the reverberations, suggested a radical view about man and life: and, sharply put, only the metaphorical form protected him from the mainstream attack against his radicalism. In its turn, his *social conformism*, observed in his *non-poetical* direct ideological writings and speeches, was sadly considered by the progressive Mexicans – because *the social conformism of great figures is always sad* – and with joy by the *status quo’s* gainers. And from the standpoint of the *meanings* of his poetical and non-poetical works, yes, it was a rupture, but just between Octavio Paz’s *poetry* and his *non-poetical* writings: this is the *first* sense of the rupture we may discuss concerning the big Mexican poet.

It is clear now what does rupture mean in the conservative view: it is an ideological shift – from the left to the right – directly manifested in public expression, although not necessarily transfigured in poetical/artistic works. In fact, if the shift would have manifested only in poetry, it would not have been so useful for the permanent owners of the capitalist power: because it would have been farer from the ordinary people.

But, beyond the difference between his poetical and non-poetical work with direct ideological address, can we speak about an ideological rupture in Octavio Paz? We can from another two points of view: the difference between his ideological non-poetical works and, on the other hand, his own consideration of himself as being left-wing (and this is the *second* sense of the concept of rupture related to Octavio Paz), and, the *third*, the difference between his prestige as critical intellectual and, on the other hand, his anti-Sandinista and anti-Zapatista position in the 80s and 90s.

Indeed – and the paper will stop a moment on – the *later political attitude* of Octavio Paz is more important for the promoters of the establishment, even than his basic conformism in principle. Actually, it is about a “clever conformism”, manifested through social criticism, and just the difference between the aura of this criticism and, on the other hand, the anti-Sandinista and anti-Zapatista position is celebrated by the ideological mainstream.

Therefore, as a representative of the fundamental social conformism of most of intellectuals and *irrespective of his own image about himself*, Octavio Paz does not illustrate any rupture. But, because he did not continue the left-wing sensitivity from his youth, or more correctly because he did not follow the initial moment of *promise*, he can be used as a figure of the rupture.

This use overshadows his stature as a poet. And even though he was not conformist because of personal calculations – but because of many overlapping conditions of the time – a public intellectual, and a prestigious one, should go *all the way* with his critique (something in the line of Kant’s indication in *What is Enlightenment*; and he was luckier, because he was not priest or officer, but a poet, then he could be free in both his craftsmanship, and in his public expression of his critical image about society).

IV. Case study: *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds*

The essays concerning the contemporary history and published in 1983¹ are very interesting for the present discussion about what kind of rupture was Octavio Paz representative of.

¹ Octavio Paz. (1985). *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History* (1983), Translated by Helen R. Lane, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, New York, London.

First of all, they are essays, and not philosophical analyses. Consequently, they *mix* different levels of reality and of concepts, but privileges the *values* and the development of ideas – but not the economic relations and causes¹ – and discusses them rather in a metaphorical manner, suggesting *more poetico* his ideas. More precisely, the conclusions about the better society or about the lesser evil are the result of the translation of an ignored and un-understood logic of the structural relations into the values decreed as shared by “intellectuals”.

But the concrete focus on the world history is full of true and bitter characterizations. The world is marked by two consonant processes: “the crisis of imperial democracy in the United States; its counterpart, the crisis of the system of bureaucratic domination in Russia” and, between them, the countries on the periphery, agitated by the challenge of modernization and “the revolt of particularisms”².

And while in the sixties, the result of a “political crisis, and even more a moral and spiritual one” was a “rebellion of a segment of the ‘middle class’ and a real ‘cultural revolution’”, they constituted “a libertarian movement and a passionate, total critique of the State and of authority as much as it was an explosion against the capitalist consumer society”³.

Many people can criticize capitalism, the state of things. However, *it depends what kind of critique is made, namely toward which/with what consequences*.

It seemed that the contemporary history has demonstrated to Octavio Paz that “*there is no alternative*”: “the emergence of dissidents in the Soviet Union and other ‘socialist’ countries” and their recognition in the Western world meant that “no movement of moral and political self-criticism appeared in the West comparable to that of the dissidents of the ‘socialist’ countries”⁴. Is it not risky, this conclusion? No public intellectual – and not only a philosopher – can treat his own presumptions without questioning them, because it is his responsibility to fully use his intellectual instruments and to enounce theories already falsified. The popularity of dissidents – so, of right-wing dissidents – was simply a weapon of the capitalist

¹ Idem, p. 7.

² Idem, p. ix.

³ Idem, p. 3.

⁴ Idem, p. 5.

propaganda, since their message was that “capitalism is good, communism is bad”.

The message of dissidents was clearly consonant with Octavio Paz’s former political view. Indeed, on the one hand, he always put between him and the political questions the interest for poetry, and the discussions related to art were the lens through which he received and assumed political information. On the other hand, once an impression formed, he considered it as a ground of his view and selected people, data and theories in order to fit with his ground¹. He found from some left-wing dissidents that Stalin and the “socialist” political regime were opposed to the communist principles and expectations, and from that moment he erected his utopian liberalism, believing “in a peaceful, gradual move toward democracy”²: but that utopian liberalism made him *to equate* the heroic attempts to construct a socialist society with totalitarianism, with “terror” stemming from Rousseau’s general will. He never asked himself why the lower strata supported “communism”, what did they gain from this support.

As in a banal anticommunism, Octavio Paz has *equated* the whole process with the political regime and has criticized the other intellectuals which did not do the same, as not respecting their profession of faith (criticism, examination and doubt)³: but neither has he respected it. And concerning the *left-wing anti-Stalinists* he met: *they never made the same equivalence between communism and Stalinism*⁴; in fact, they did not reduced communism to Stalinism, as the poet did, and *have criticized Stalinism from the viewpoint of communism*; for this reason, for example, Octavio Paz did not like Trotsky.

Epistemologically, Octavio Paz has assumed as a knowing pattern a banal *reductionism*, functioning both for the “socialist” countries and for capitalism. Because: he has assimilated and subordinated the destiny of

¹ Alfred Mac Adam, interviewer 1991, ‘Octavio Paz, The Art of Poetry No. 42’, *The Paris Review*, 1991, Available from: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2192/the-art-of-poetry-no-42-octavio-paz> [August 15, 2014].

² Ibidem.

³ Octavio Paz. (1985). *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History*, p. 11. Octavio Paz, *On Poets and others* (1986), Translated from the Spanish by Michael Schmidt, N Y, Arcade Publishers, 1990.

⁴ David Rousset, known by Octavio Paz and cited, was not an anticommunist. See his *La société éclatée*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1973.

lower strata from his country to the *democratization of the political regime*. But this democratization – i.e. according to the Western representative model – did not and does not lead *per se* to the well-being, dignity and culture of the majority of the common people.

Octavio Paz has reminded the readers the anti-Stalinist left-wing thinkers of the time in order to uphold his standpoint about the USSR: the communist model concretised by this country would have been without hope, ill and malignant¹. But neither at peripheries, with so many revolts, there was no resurrection. And since the Western capitalism as such had many problems, what was to be done?

Though capitalism, i.e. “Western democracy”, was for him the best because of its dialogical character, the poet proved to be impotent: he cherished criticism as the only force of the intellectuals; but there is criticism and criticism. Why was he socially impotent? Just because he *did not transpose himself into the position of the ordinary people*, he only *assumed to speak in their name, instead of them*. For this reason, he considered society only as a play of the random individual manifestations: “all times the principal cause is the personal element”². Not grasping why the social conflicts would exist, he said that it would be “the ambiguity is us as human beings”³. His intellectual calmness resulted, therefore, from his reduction of the social complexity to simplifying presumptions and the approximate understanding of the “essay”⁴.

The impotence of the intellectuals generates, *au fond*, a *conservative* view. Because: the reduction of ardent social problems and antagonisms to the message of clever criticism suggests that it is the *only* manner to oppose or behave towards a pre-determinate, already given forever sole social

¹ Octavio Paz. (1985). *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History*, p. 193.

² Idem, p. 196.

³ Idem, p. 205.

⁴ A Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica, has observed that the good essays are made on the basis of previous rigorous research and science of the objects one popularize through the essays; if this condition is not realized, it is about a “fiddlerism”, Constantin Noica, „Modelul Cantemir în cultura noastră sau memoriu către Cel de Sus asupra situației spiritului în cele trei țări românești”, in *Despre lăutărism*, București, Humanitas, 2007, pp. 33, 35. [The Cantemir model in our culture or factum to the Almighty about the situation of the spirit in the three Romanian lands, in *About fiddlerism*].

model and way of life; and only the “excesses” should be banned. But this means that if, ultimately, capitalism is the best of all possible worlds, namely the peoples *ought not to search for alternatives*, not even the consequences of the domination can be annulled, because this domination follows only the logic of the rulers.

V. Position in the 90s

The book of essays in 1983 explains Octavio Paz’s attitudes in the 90s and till his death. Not once has he carefully underlined that his critique of the communist parties did not mean the support of the other ones¹, or the critique of Sandinistas in Nicaragua did not mean to support the USA, since just the American policies have determined the halt of modernization and democracy in Latin America². However, this impression of “equidistant” critique is false: he opposed the Sandinista revolution because this one would have represented another “military-bureaucratic dictatorship” as those in Cuba and USSR, and because Sandinistas “received military and technical aid from the Soviet Union”³. But his standpoint *did not give any place for the effort of Nicaraguan peasants and workers to correct, according to their own interests and ideas, this possible path*: Paz’s proposition – free elections in Nicaragua⁴ – is in fact a deceit, since these elections are not really “free” (neither in the developed countries), namely they do reflect neither the independent rational choice of the individuals nor their autonomous manifestation of sentiments, because the

¹ Octavio Paz. (1985). *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History*, p. 16.

² Maarten van Delden, 2006, ““Polemical Paz”, *Literal*, 7. Available from: http://www.literalmagazine.com/english_post/polemical-paz/ [January 16, 2015].

³ “Shortly after the [Sandinista] triumph, the case of Cuba was repeated: the revolution was confiscated by an elite of revolutionary leaders. . . . From the beginning the Sandinista leaders sought inspiration in Cuba. They have received military and technical aid from the Soviet Union and its allies. The actions of the Sandinista regime show its will to install a military-bureaucratic dictatorship in Nicaragua according to the model of Havana. They have thus denaturalized the original meaning of the revolutionary movement”: Octavio Paz quoted in Joel Whitney, “Poetry and Action: Octavio Paz at 100”, *Dissent*, March 25, 2014, http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/poetry-and-action-octavio-paz-at-100.

⁴ Nicholas Caistor, 2007, *Octavio Paz*, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, p. 113.

internal economic powerful and the external ones put at stake huge material means and propaganda in order to convert the will of as many as they can in supporting just these powerful against which they opposed and oppose.

And how could the Sandinistas resist in front of the American power without an aid? Octavio Paz was pessimistic because of the “global tensions” induced by the United States and the Soviet Union¹, but he never considered the possibility to surpass these tensions through and with the *power of the peoples*. This power was for him a utopia, and thus the *law and order* – even realized in a democratic manner – was the “lesser evil”. Is this not *conservatism*? Did the Mexicans not feel this when they became mad at the poet? Paz equated the Russian tanks in Czechoslovakia in 1968 with Pentagon’s support of the Chilean generals generating the 1973 coup²: but even though politically they have the same characteristics, from the standpoint of the *structural relations* and *historical conjunctures* framing, grounding and generating these facts and their consequences – they are opposed.

And is the label “bureaucratic-military dictatorship following the model of Havana”³ not too incongruent with the real situation?

The attitude towards Sandinistas was not singular. In 1994 the same was towards Zapatistas. He criticized the government for not having resolved the problems of Chiapas, but condemned the violence of both the peasants and the government and indicated the way of “negotiations”⁴. What kind of negotiations, if all of them led and lead to the victory of the *status quo*, irrespective of the change of political personages at the top, and of some minor political concessions? Is it not incredible on behalf of a radical writer?

¹ Germán F. Albuquerque 2009, ‘El pensamiento político de Octavio Paz y Mario Vargas Llosa É América Latina en el mundo polarizado..’, *Anos 90*, Porto Alegre, vol. 16, n. 29, pp. 261-290 (p. 267).

² Idem, p. 273.

³ Nicholas Caistor, *ibidem*.

⁴ “Poca sangre y mucha tinta”, *Octavio Paz sobre el EZLN*, Enero 7, 2014, Available from: <http://larotativa.nexos.com.mx/?p=377> [August 14, 2014].

VI. Instead of conclusion

Is this analysis not incorrect since it seems to represent the point of view of the experience we passed through *after* Octavio Paz's death? So – after it is clear whose interests represented the wave of “democratizations”, and which are their consequences. No, because my arguments are not the facts occurred in the last 19 years after his death, but the opposition between Octavio Paz's radical spring in his poetry and, on the other hand, his *political backwardness*. This backwardness, *common to many intellectuals*, has determined a graver state of the Latin American countries and even of their democracy. Because this one is not tantamount only with the formal representative liberal democracy, and to not support peoples' striving for modes and alternatives towards this single model of democracy is strange for a radical poet.

Was the analysis made here too harsh? Au fond, can every man and every intellectual move on the practical realm, having practical political projects? And is it not enough for a poet to be marvellous in his poetry? Perhaps, it is. But if he nevertheless expresses his political critique, he must be consistent with the message of his poetry.

When one writes, one discovers, tries, is mistaken, but nevertheless one needs to continue to write in order to better understand. A public intellectual is a man who wants to understand; but, also, to transfer his point of view to the great public, to *educate* it. And if so, the problem is not that a public intellectual must not write political essays which do not follow a scientific research and expertise, but that he must push criticism *all the way*, that is, be consonant with the deep popular standpoint, or rather with its life interests, irrespective of the possible confused manner different layers of the people express these interests.

Since the poet is concerned with the problems of life and consciousness of man, could he not confer worth to the real possibilities the common individuals – representing the abstract “man” in as legitimate manner as the sophisticated intellectual with his unrest does – have *hic et nunc* for developing their *reason* and faculties to *dream*, to *act* and to *be more human*? If, for the poet, the lesser evil is not at all the possibility of peasants and workers to have free education and health care – but the *form* of representative democracy with its words about free elections and multi party system – nevertheless does he not have the intellectual obligation to *give time* to these peasants and workers to *construct* (and not only to fight for) a more egalitarian and just society? Is it not the intellectual obligation

of the poet to trust people, their abilities to criticize in a *constructive* manner if they have a dignified status and in order to have a dignified status?

The answers are not so simple. I put these questions rather targeting the intellectual consciousness of today: when, from the standpoint of the historical moment, it is already possible that the intellectuals cherish every man's *conatus*¹ – and the *human* one, the overlapping of the will to live and both the human restraints and brotherhood and reciprocity – more than the concepts and the prejudices. Octavio Paz appreciated Nietzsche as a pattern of criticism and, at the same time, of pessimism. He was pessimistic too. But the present intellectuals can appreciate Nietzsche for his criticism and, at the same time, Spinoza and Kant (the *human conatus*), their optimistic or open messages. The promise of the poet involved, or rather sent to an abstract *conatus*. But this abstract *conatus* is no longer related to the concrete life of the many.

Well, but is it not unjust this entire critical standpoint, however it aims at targeting the present inertia of intellectuals subordinating themselves to the mainstream's celebration of conservative attitudes towards the ordinary man?

Maybe yes, it is. Indeed, Octavio Paz "had" to think and behave in the manner he did. He was a poet, and not a social scientist. He lived during the years of aggressive reaction of the right-wing ideology against the practical attempts of socialist alternatives. He lived during the years of the crisis of "really existing socialism" and he saw this crisis through pessimistic and conservative lens. The fall in 1989/91 seemed to him the confirmation of the ideology he unconsciously assumed.

And, once more, he was a poet. He developed the power of imagination and metaphors in order to construct and de-construct the world of the imaginary. And he considered the real, political world just *through the mediation of the imaginary*, of representations, of the continuous mythical forms of cultures. He did no longer exit from this pattern of thinking. All the ideas – which au fond determine the world – were for him

¹ Ana Bazac, "Conatus and the worth of life in a time of crisis", in *Philosophy and Crisis: Responding to Challenges to Ways of Life in the Contemporary World*, Golfo Maggini, Vasiliki P. Solomou-Papanikolaou, Helen Karabatzaki, Konstantinos D. Koskeridis (Eds.), With a Foreword by João J. Vila-Chã, Ioannina: Department of Philosophy, University of Ioannina; Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017 (forthcoming), Volume II, pp. 131-147.

veils, masks, mediations, spectacle which had to be unveiled: criticized. In a philosophical interpretation, he may be viewed as having, through his criticism, a “post-philosophical” attitude, refusing the accredited systems and schools, and emphasizing the mediations of representations and language in the classical causal explanation¹. But, concerning his political attitude, he was not a promoter of “post-political” image of humankind: on the contrary; and just this justifies his celebration as a representative of the “tradition of rupture”.

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