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The problem of historic cities

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Translation by Valerie Magar

The problem is extremely serious. It is pressing for the entire Old World and part of the New one when it received, like Latin America, a cultural legacy that was a projection of European civilization through the filter of Hispanic civilization. However, what remains of Mexico, Lima, Caracas, Quito, Salta and so many noble cities that honored an entire civilizing process? Almost nothing. From their looted ensembles rises the lugubrious sound of a heartbreaking requiem.



LIMA. Image: Pedro Rojas, 1978.

We could grieve for the ingratitude of our children, and we would have the authority to do so if we ourselves had set the example. However, the opposite is actually happening. In the worst sense of the word, we are the ones who are becoming American, and by doing so, we are showing approval of their folly.

On the one hand, contemporary Spanish society treats its ears with patriotic slogans of the most outdated style and, on the other, denies what it says with its acts of vandalism. Our acts are passions and not good reasoning, and with our acts, we deny much of what we say. In the end, the old saying that you will be known through your acts will be fulfilled.

We have said it repeatedly in books, articles, conferences, private conversations and technical and academic reports; we are saddened by the degree of the indifference of today's society regarding everything that implies values of the spirit, culture, art, tradition, of the historical and racial essence of our human, geographically landscaped world. It seems that an uprooted and new population has fallen on Spain, indifferent to everything, without connections or lines of continuity with the past, in short, like a foreign society occupying a house that is not that of its ancestors, auctioning it off with the cruelty of a predatory economic appetite. Today's Spanish society seems to say, "What can I get out of all this that I have inherited and with which I have nothing in common! Is it worth selling? Well, let's sell it and let the Americans, or whoever, take our altarpieces, our paintings, our old belongings and give U.S. dollars with which to acquire the exciting gadgets of a technological world before which we prostrate ourselves in adoration, like new savages." The man who prevails today quantitatively, the often-mentioned mass-man, the one who runs desolate in a car throwing evil glances, loaded with comical and disproportionate threats, couldn't care less, among other things, about the city he has inherited. Actually, he views the city as an obstacle and sees with joy when the barrier falls and leaves his path clear, a path that even he does not know where it leads. This latent plebiscite, through which the majority condemns the city without knowing what it is and what it means, is what can put an end to one of our most fabulous spiritual riches, and with one of the most fragile deposits that a multi-secular and uninterrupted civilization has placed in our hands.

The system that can neutralize this mass-man as much as possible, consciously poisoned by a series of myths that flicker before his eyes like the glasses with which he bought the will and wealth of savages, is none other than education. The system is slow, but humanity, since time immemorial, has not found another.

But we will return to this later. Now we are going to see how this mass-man acts. The first thing to say is that this mass-man is not reduced to certain class strata, to certain socio-economic classifications specified in the figure of the classical proletarian. Now the entire society, from top to bottom, acts with the appetites of the mass-man and, of course, with a primitive and crude system of values.

Ortega described a society of this type with an energetic brushstroke when many years ago, he faced one of these great modern metropolises: Buenos Aires. "In Corrientes and the nearby streets filled with banks and offices, this atrocious factory fauna pulses. They are the men who have come to their own business, with an urgent appetite, who dislocate your shoulder as they pass along because they are speeding to finish their business. With barren imagination, their hunger is all the more ferocious; they do not want things they have imagined and would have to create, but what is already there in the store window. They need to buy a car, a gramophone, a radio and a refrigerator. They are splendidly endowed with the three necessary qualities for such a specific need: boldness, rudeness and haste."¹

Make no mistake, this type of society is the one that has risen to the fore in our world today; this society is the one that plays the leading role, the one that imbues everything, imposes its tastes and behaviors, creates the current climate, and sets the tone for everything.

¹ No reference to this quotation was provided by the author. Note from the translator.

Who is opposed to the banking company that combines its wealth and power with insolence? Who is opposed to even the most modest merchant who measures his cravings by the length of his shop windows and the opaline glow of his fluorescent tubes, one of the many illusions of progress for weak people who no longer believe in themselves?

This mass-man mentality transcends all sectors and classes; it is the one shown by the aristocrat, who tries by all means to dispose of, in the international market, the Greco or the Goya, which he had the undeserved fortune to inherit; who demolishes his palace to transform it into a plot of land, the true philosopher's stone of modern alchemy, who has made a long-standing dream come true: to transform stone or clay into gold.

This mentality is the one found in the high clergy who takes advantage of the *pro domo sua* conciliar provisions and who, oddly enough, is one of the most typical mass-men of our time. What a bitter experience one has had arguing with prelates, canons and archpriests, who have been scandalized because we have defended a baroque church, an altarpiece or some solid and noble church pews! His usual argument: "But what value do you give to this if it is nothing more than a relic? What I care for is heating the church and opening a cafeteria in the parish center." And then we have seen those altarpieces, those images and those pews in the nearest antique shop. Because deep down, even deceiving themselves, they realize that they have a value, but, of course, a value that can be turned into money. The fact is that the mass-man has incarnated in them, as in the ancient evil powers.

This mentality is that of the political world, eager for easy and popular success, is a faithful vassal of the pressure groups that persistently and constantly rule from the shadows. The complacent politician who does not want problems, who does not want confrontations, who wants to spend his days, as many as possible, in a comfortable armchair. The politician, often filled with good intentions but paralyzed by a tangle of interests that, in the end, offer him the *dolce far niente*. And not doing anything, in this case, is equivalent to allowing what should not be done. Ah! But it is irremediable..., it is the sign of the times, we cannot oppose the world we live in. We live in the 20th century. With this comfortable robe of pretexts, apparently so plausible, how much selfishness is hidden.



LA DÉFAITE DE L'INVINCIBLE ARMADA. Philip James de Loutherbourg, 1796.
Image: National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, public domain.

The technician of our days has the same mass-man mentality, with an urgent and peremptory appetite. But that technician also has infallible weapons. We live in full technolatriy; when we find ourselves without spiritual resources, without a true consciousness of being, without common desires and without programs of collective action, we appeal to technique as a magical resource. The governments of technocrats are the panacea of difficult times, and although the technician leads us to a devaluation or crisis, the technician has never been wrong. The technician is an anointed person, and he has foreseen to everything well and, in the face of catastrophe, he always has the haughty and stoic response of Philip II in the shipwreck of the Invincible Army: "I did not send the army to fight against the elements." How should a technical economist like this lower himself, for example, to consult the good sense and healthy experience of a hardened farmer in contact with the earth when he has to create his planning schemes loaded with bookish science.

Elsewhere I said that if one adds the condition of a bureaucrat to a technician, we will obtain a centaur, in which self-esteem and executive force will be united. This hybrid will not easily condescend to dialogue or let anyone influence his determinations. Taking into account all the honorable exceptions you wish, the egocentric technician abounds more every day, and every day he has more influence on group behavior.

Nowadays, there has been a very curious case that is worth analyzing. In countries, especially authoritarian ones, the technician has replaced the intellectual. The intellectual is a dangerous being for the simple reason that he thinks. Furthermore, the intellectual can be wrong, and it is he himself who recognizes this; therein lies his greatness. The technician does not think; that is not his mission. The technician applies formulas that he has not had the need to think about, but has accepted with a fanatical reverence based on his system of myths, axioms and taboos.

The axiomatic character of the technician does not cause the politician any concern; it does not immerse him in a fluid and variable world like that of the intellectual. The technician delivers achieved results and serves as an invaluable shield. With him, he can be calm.

In matters of municipal action, the authorities have at their service some priceless technicians. These are the town planners. If a mayor has an urban planner or planners at his side, his back is always covered. "The technicians have said it, "I have followed the technicians' report; the technicians cannot be wrong." The technicians do not need to explain what they do. They cannot descend into dialogue with ordinary mortals. They are there, like the magician of the tribe, to inspire the action of politicians, and with this skillful pairing, any problem of public opinion is avoided.

Another mass-man of our time is the journalist, the simple and naive journalist who, at best, follows the prevailing slogans with the most remarkable docility, the one who stamps the providential measures of the leaders, politicians and technocrats who are going to build a happy and progressive world for us. They will be enthusiastic and announce the joyful news of that old house that has disappeared, of that great road that is being opened, of that polygon that will solve the housing problem, even if that polygon is poorly planned and lacks any urban sense, etcetera, etcetera.

I have only pointed out a few of those mass-man social types that make up the vast majority of our society. We could add many others, especially in the vast field of speculators and usurers, etcetera, etcetera, but this is enough to show us in whose hands lies the future of our cities.

I regret to have to present before you such a bleak panorama that would lead us to the fatalistic position of total resignation. If the enemies of the cultural deposit of our cities are so many and so powerful, let us abandon the fight with resignation! However, I do not think such is true. I think we have to fight to the last breath and not skimp on anything we can do, even men who, like me, are virtually homeless.

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So far, we have seen the enemy, the terrible enemy. We will now review the defensive forces. The first impression we have is also disheartening. Faced with armored divisions, powerful formations, modern tanks and weapons, what do we find? A meager, divided, hesitant army, lacking morale and spirit, almost without arms and with soldiers who are often old, decrepit and always poorly paid.



EMILIO CASTELAR SQUARE, MADRID. *Image: Public domain.*

The headquarters of this army of defenders lies in the General Directorate of Fine Arts.² What is the General Directorate of Fine Arts? Simply a residual phenomenon, a kind of bureaucratic mummy.

The General Directorate of Fine Arts thus constituted was adequate for Spain in 1920. At that time, our large cities did not exceed 700,000 inhabitants. In our country, there had not been a demographic explosion, nor the exodus from rural area, or the congestion of large cities. The Industrial Revolution was something that was studied in books, but it had not crossed our borders. The Director-General was in charge of a few museums, some schools of arts and crafts and the care of a few monuments of venerable antiquity and archaeological prestige. Everything was easy, simple and modest. But suddenly, this small administrative machine has to face an avalanche: cities that grow vertiginously, a history that disintegrates and sinks,

² Dirección General de Bellas Artes.

monuments of the past that are destroyed, tourist invasions that must be channeled and oriented, new artistic demands that exceed the old pictures of the scholars of yesteryear, masses of disgruntled students who do not find a gifted, agile, lively and prestigious education.

The poor General Directorate of Fine Arts, like a residue of the past, is increasingly powerless. The Director-General is submerged by the new positions and state hierarchies that are emerging from all sides. He needs to be able to keep his head above this tremendous swell in order to see, and for that, we need his position to be raised. Spain can no longer have a Director General of Fine Arts; it needs a Minister of Culture or a Minister of Fine Arts and Tourism or whatever they want to call it.

The least that needs to be offered to the person who holds this position is authority. In a country going through a cultural crisis, whose education and tastes are so deficient, whose institutions are so precarious, in the end, there comes a time when the last argument is authority.

Nowadays, the Director-General of Fine Arts is hierarchically equal to a Civil Governor, to an important Mayor, and he cannot, most of the time, impose his authority. If there were a Minister in charge of these things, it would be different. If a Minister of Culture arrived, for example, in Granada, he gathered the local authorities, asked them why they have consented to do this and that, why this and that palace has been demolished, those authorities should react in a very different way. The first thing that happens is that those who defend historical, cultural and artistic values do not have any authority, and they already do enough by navigating cautiously so as not to cause any storms, not to raise the hunt and not to lose everything in a battle in the open field.

This crisis of authority makes those who defend these values always do so with timidity, fear and subterfuges so as not to arouse the ire of the powerful and not to be seen as naive and laggards. Everything is asked as a favor, as if out of pity, putting forward affirmations that they do not feel. "Yes, we agree, what is important is important, but if we could save this façade at least." And this desire is shown almost with shame. This state of affairs, frankly, cannot go on like this.

The dependent organisms are as outdated and as fossilized as the central organism: sad commissions of monuments that are almost buried and only partly trying to resurrect. But those who compose them do not participate in the modern spirit that these institutions should have. They are historians, local scholars, archaeologists and teachers who, without a vision of the problems of our time and without the strength to face them, take refuge in their libraries, their archives, their museums, and in the best of cases, they publish a scholarly magazine that is only read among themselves. I have the utmost respect for the local scholar, among other things because he is disappearing, and he is a fundamental piece of our culture, but his mission is another one. When asked to fight, I remember the insolence of Don Juan Tenorio when, before the admonitions of Don Diego and Don Gonzalo, he said with a harsh laugh: "It is like threatening a lion with a bad stick."

Archaeologists, in particular, scare me. They tend to have a professional deformation that leads them to settle with rescuing an old stone, a capital to take to their museum, or demolishing a building in the hope of excavating an area of alleged archaeological interest.

The same things we have said of the Commissions of Monuments can be applied to the Academies. They may be venerable bodies, but are constantly unheard and virtually inoperative. These scholarly institutions vacillate between maintaining their credit by saving appearances and running the risk of being increasingly held back.

I would also like to say something about the architects in charge of looking after the monuments and the historical-artistic ensembles. I am not referring to the architects who are on the enemy's side; we already assume that their interest is to demolish in order to build, and most of the time to build going with the trend. I am referring now to the others, to those who are on this side of the lines, the so-called *conservation architects*. In a country where the task is so enormous, so fabulous, we could say that they can be counted with our fingers. Some come from the old structures, and among them, there are highly esteemed figures with a long record that honors them. We cannot say the same of others, for they have never shown true mastery or true devotion. Others have arrived somewhat at random and have held these positions just as they could have held any other professional rank. The team is, in short, as scarce as it is poorly qualified. Today some young people have joined these tasks, among who there are very valuable, competent and courageous people. But what worries us most is that, as so often in Spanish life, the reverse selection does not occur, that the best do not get discouraged by a hostile climate, by the tricks of the society with which they have to fight, by the skepticism of their elders, who should serve as an example and support, and that only those who are accommodating, bending to everything and navigating in all waters, remain.

But how are we going to encourage young people to commit to a task that offers them so few possibilities and in which so many troubles await them? The first thing that we cannot provide these young people is adequate training. The schools of Architecture in Spain are the ones that devote the least amount of attention to humanistic, historical and artistic education. It seems implausible in a country of our monumental wealth, past and characteristics, but it is flagrantly so.

In the entire career of an architect there are only two deteriorated courses: one is Art History in general, which is not even a cinematographic vision, and another is the History of Architecture. An attempt at diversification was included in the 1957 curriculum by creating specialties: urban planning, structural calculation historical architecture and the restoration of monuments. But later, the State decided that this was superfluous and it abolished those specialties. Preparing future conservators and restorers is something that our State does not care about; it is apparently trivial and superfluous. On all sides, we relapse into the same thing: total disinterest, lack of awareness of our historical condition.

If at school the young aspiring architect already realizes what little value is given to these things, what can we ask of those students who, once they graduate, will spread through all the towns and cities of Spain to practice their profession? What example and what education are we giving them?

What value are they going to attribute later to monuments, to a history, to a past that they do not even know by hearsay?

I don't think it is even worth insisting on. We have already reviewed the two contending armies. How can we be surprised by the victory of one and the resounding defeat of the other?

But nevertheless, it is everyone's task to try to the best of our ability, if not suddenly, at least little by little, to balance the competing forces. To make one army diminish and weaken and the other grow and strengthen. I would like to instill in the brave members who, as disjointed guerrillas, fight from all parts of Spain to save our artistic heritage, courage and hope, but at the end of my article, I suspect that I have done just the opposite and plunged them into deep pessimism. I do not know. But I am one of those who believe that the first thing to stop an evil is to analyze it, to make the diagnosis, even if it is cruel, and then devise the remedy. That remedy should lead us to establish a decalogue of what the unshakable principles should be to save the heritage of our cities, one of the most precious we have.

I, albeit provisionally, would establish the body of this fundamental law as follows:

1. All the old parts of our cities must be frozen. By old town, I understand urban perimeters as they were in 1900. The areas of historical and artistic interest that are defined in the future must coincide with these limits. In these centers, which will be increasingly less important on their surface with respect to the total area of the city, there should be a progressive decongestion with a view to reducing its density. Instead of being massive, the old city will have to become more and more porous, taking advantage of each occasion to enrich it with a garden, a square and a courtyard.
2. The increase in built volumes should be prohibited in these old centers. No building located within them must exceed the maximum height of five floors.
3. In these cores, there should be strict stylistic control. No project should be authorized without this prior control, absolutely prohibiting the current aggressive architecture, its flights and raucous structures, its modules and contradictory proportions, textures and surface treatments that contradict the local accent.
4. There should be strict control of demolition in these areas, authorizing these only in extreme cases and trying, if possible, to salvage façades and courtyards.
5. All chronological discrimination should be eliminated, considering that, from the most remote antiquity to the 19th century inclusive, buildings should not be treated differently based on their age.
6. There must be scrupulous respect for all road elements, pavements, statues, fountains, lighting lanterns, etcetera. We consider trees as a fundamental element of road physiognomy, and this should be the object of very special attention. Some trees and arboreal assemblages are as crucial as the monuments themselves and should be listed as such.
7. The development of the modern city should be directed towards the periphery with streets, parks, boulevards, gardens, etcetera, that seek the essential differentiation of environments.
8. In the cases of city-landscapes, this peripheral development should be done with even more caution, preserving essential points of view and leaving sufficient perspectives for intact façades of the entire or partial aspects of the city.
9. Public and representative, State and public institutions should occupy old and noble buildings that are restored and dignified.
10. Tax exemptions will be established for all owners who inhabit or maintain and restore palaces, noble houses, gardens, etcetera.

If this charter or decalogue were to be signed one day by all the mayors of Spain, that would be a day of joy for those of us who believe in the future of Spain; but, alas, we see it so far away that it seems like a dream, an unattainable utopia.

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