

# The Disintegration of Community

*On Jorge Portilla's Social and Political Philosophy,  
With Translations of Selected Essays*

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ  
and  
FRANCISCO GALLEGOS

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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# Introduction

## *On Thinking with Portilla about Politics*

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ AND  
FRANCISCO GALLEGOS

Jorge Portilla’s (1919–1963) single most important contribution to Mexican philosophy is undoubtedly his essay “Phenomenology of Relajo,” a rich and fascinating meditation on values, nihilism, and the disruptive nature of *relajo* as a complex intersubjective mood or attitude.<sup>1</sup> This relatively lengthy text was published posthumously in 1966, three years after Portilla’s death, in a book titled *Femenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, which also included other, shorter works making up the entirety of Portilla’s known oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> Sánchez’s translation of “Phenomenology of Relajo,” included as an appendix to his 2012 book, *The Suspension of Seriousness*, introduced the English-speaking philosophical community to this remarkable essay and to Portilla as a value theorist and philosopher of culture.<sup>3</sup>

The translation of “Phenomenology of Relajo,” as well as Sánchez’s analysis of it, have been widely discussed and have given rise to questions surrounding the content of Portilla’s other works, the “*otros ensayos*” referenced in the title of Portilla’s anthology.<sup>4</sup> Overshadowed by Portilla’s masterpiece, these other essays have been largely ignored both in Spanish and in English-speaking treatments of Portilla’s work. In this book, we attend to these forgotten “*otros ensayos*” in the hopes of, one, highlighting a contribution that, while rooted in its own time, is both timely and relevant



1 to our own, and two, completing a picture of a philosophical project that  
2 benefits the history of philosophy, and, in particular, the history of Latin  
3 American philosophy.

4       What we find is that Portilla's other essays are primarily concerned  
5 with social and cultural issues. We would like to suggest that, in their  
6 content and intention, these essays constitute Portilla's "politics." In the  
7 three essays that are translated here for the first time, Portilla discusses  
8 the allure and dangers of nationalism and the weaponization of political  
9 correctness, especially in cultural criticism ("Critique of Criticism"), the  
10 cultural and political life of the United States from the Mexican point  
11 of view, and the existential roots of US American exceptionalism and  
12 xenophobia ("The Spiritual Crisis of the United States"), and the nihilistic  
13 worldview that gave rise to Nazism and still threatens to give rise to fas-  
14 cism today ("Thomas Mann and German Irrationalism").<sup>5</sup> These political  
15 meditations are unified by Portilla's central concern with community and  
16 its disintegration through attitudes that destroy communities from within.

17       The kind of community that most fascinates Portilla in these essays  
18 is that of the *nation*. Like many of his contemporaries, Portilla sought to  
19 understand the ways that nationality influences people, for good and ill.  
20 But Portilla's work stands out for both its philosophical sophistication and  
21 the extraordinary quality of his writing. Indeed, readers who are new to  
22 Portilla will be delighted to discover that his prose seems to leap off the  
23 page with one thought-provoking idea after another. Portilla's work also  
24 stands out for its deeply humane perspective. His essays are driven by a  
25 palpable anxiety concerning the possibility of experiencing genuine sol-  
26 idarity with one's fellow citizens, despite their differences and even their  
27 character flaws. The thread that ties these essays together is a question  
28 that is as urgent today as ever: Under what conditions does that which  
29 sustains our communities *disintegrate*? It is our belief that Portilla's post-  
30 War anxieties, as manifested in these "other essays," motivate deep and  
31 illuminating reflections that can help us answer this timely question.

32       In the chapters that follow, we approach Portilla's work from different  
33 angles in order to shed light on his insights and oversights, the historical  
34 context of his work, and its significance to contemporary debates on a wide  
35 range of topics—including the politics of social and cultural identity, the  
36 nature of community and nationality, and the phenomenology of moods.  
37 The chapters authored by Sánchez focus on Portilla as a *political thinker*,  
38 drawing out the political implications of his views and comparing them  
39  
40

to a wide range of figures in social and political philosophy. The chapters 1  
 authored by Gallegos focus on Portilla as a *phenomenologist* and *social* 2  
*theorist*, extracting and assessing the general principles, arguments, and 3  
 methodologies that underlie his intriguing views about how various kinds 4  
 of “affective attunements” (emotions, moods, character traits, and so on) 5  
 can profoundly shape people’s everyday lives and even alter the destinies 6  
 of nations. Our different approaches reflect some differences in our inter- 7  
 pretation of Portilla—differences that we intentionally leave unresolved in 8  
 order to provide the reader with a richer understanding of Portilla’s work. 9  
 At the root of our differing interpretations are questions about Portilla’s 10  
 methodology and the systematicity of his thinking. Gallegos argues that in 11  
 Portilla’s essays, we can discern a largely implicit but fairly well-developed 12  
 philosophical system that is grounded in his commitment to phenome- 13  
 nology. In contrast, Sánchez views Portilla’s work as less systematically 14  
 developed and less committed to any particular methodology, yet more 15  
 concerned with the importance of offering rational perspectives that can 16  
 battle the chaos of the world around him. But despite these divergences, 17  
 the authors engage Portilla in the spirit of critique and dialog. 18

In a more overarching sense, the analyses contained here attempt to 19  
 think *with* Portilla about our contemporary crises. This approach to Portilla’s 20  
 work can be distinguished from two alternatives that are perhaps more 21  
 common when discussing a figure in the history of philosophy. The first is 22  
 a strictly exegetical approach that is subservient to the original texts; the 23  
 second is an approach that exploits the original texts as a mere resource 24  
 for the authors’ own philosophical agenda. In order to approach Portilla 25  
 in a way that is neither subservient nor exploitative, we have endeavored 26  
 to think of him as though he were a deeply respected colleague who has 27  
 begun a philosophical investigation to which we are also committed. We 28  
 thus make every effort to translate and interpret his texts accurately, but at 29  
 the same time, we take liberties to agree and disagree with Portilla as we 30  
 see fit, to abandon some of his lines of thought and develop or embellish 31  
 others, according to our own (inevitably biased and partial) philosophical 32  
 interests. For this reason, we find that thinking *with* Portilla occasionally 33  
 involves thinking *after* him, pursuing independent considerations about 34  
 philosophical and political themes that, while not addressed by Portilla 35  
 himself, are addressed by us in his critical spirit. All of this is done with 36  
 the hope that Portilla’s thinking, always so vibrant on the page, may once 37  
 again animate a living philosophical investigation. 38

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## 1. Portilla's Disquiet

1  
2  
3 Who was Jorge Portilla? His biography is sketchy. He never taught phi-  
4 losophy and never received a graduate degree in the field. Although he  
5 was a respected member of the famed but short-lived philosophical Grupo  
6 Hiperión, he did not produce, during his lifetime, the sort of celebrated  
7 academic texts that cemented the philosophical status of his contempo-  
8 raries Octavio Paz, Emilio Uranga, Leopoldo Zea, or Luis Villoro.<sup>6</sup> What  
9 we know is that he was anxious and uneasy, an alcoholic, a Catholic, a  
10 depressive who, apparently, succeeded in taking his own life in 1963.<sup>7</sup>  
11 We know also that he had a formidable intellectual acuity. Juan José  
12 Reyes, whose father, Salvador Reyes Nevárez, was also a member of the  
13 Grupo Hiperión, describes Portilla as “brilliant and profound, attentive  
14 and loquacious, focused and expansive.”<sup>8</sup> Reyes reports that Portilla was  
15 feared for his ability to engage in practical and abstract criticism with  
16 anyone, anytime, but also that he was “generous with his friends,” and  
17 kind.<sup>9</sup> Although Portilla's intensity could be unnerving, it appeared to  
18 spring from a sincere search for “his own salvation and the salvation of  
19 others on the margins . . . he was given over fully to others but always  
20 inclined toward his own spiritual salvation [*al recogimiento*].”<sup>10</sup>

21 By all accounts, Portilla was, at heart, a remarkable and caring thinker  
22 who despised chaos, irrationalism, and the political games that separated  
23 and alienated people from one another, from themselves, and from the  
24 truth. His untimely death in 1963 left many questions unanswered, both  
25 about his person and about his philosophy. Here, our aim is to answer  
26 some of those questions about his philosophy and to solidify as much  
27 as possible his somewhat unusual philosophical orientation. As Portilla  
28 himself confessed to his friends: “I do not fit into any of the frames that  
29 make up Mexican philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> To us, this confession is an invitation  
30 to venture into his work without the burden of any orthodoxy or rigid  
31 interpretations getting in our way. And, thus, we venture beyond the usual  
32 interpretation of Portilla as phenomenologist of *relajo*, to speak about his  
33 social and political thought.

34 Portilla's core political values are perhaps most evident in his manner  
35 of philosophizing. It could be said that his philosophical labor was always a  
36 labor for others—or, more specifically, that it was always labor for Mexico  
37 and for Mexicans, labor that he hoped would make things better, or serve,  
38 in some way, the betterment of his countrymen. His critique of *relajo*, for  
39  
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instance, is motivated by the hope that analyzing this issue would serve  
his community. As he puts it,

[it is] worth the effort to examine this issue, not so much  
because of a Pharisee-like desire to warn the youth of the  
dangers of the lack of seriousness [*relajo*], but rather because of  
the desire to understand . . . an issue that is alive and well in  
our community and—so to speak—to take philosophy out into  
the streets (which is its natural place) by stripping it as much  
as possible of the “technical” shell that sometimes conceals it.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that the “natural place” of philosophy is “the streets” or the com-  
munity is tied to the pragmatic notion that philosophy should be in the  
service of human life itself—that if it is not in the service of the community  
or not performing a practical and liberating labor in the streets, among  
people, then it is not operating according to its nature. Portilla held firm  
to this conviction, even in his daily life, where he “never ceased to point  
out, to denounce, to reveal, those traps that get in the way of liberation.”<sup>13</sup>

Taking philosophy “out in to the streets” also meant that Portilla  
would not publish much in academic or professional journals or presses,  
thus restricting his output and largely confining his voice to conversations,  
magazines, and newspaper columns.<sup>14</sup> In order to gain a better sense of  
Portilla as a philosopher, then, let us consider a sampling of his columns,  
which originally appeared as supplements between 1958 and 1962 in the  
Mexico City newspapers *Excélsior* and *Siempre!*, and were collected in  
his posthumous anthology under the title “Quinta Columna” (or “Fifth  
Column”) and “Cuaderno de Notas” (or “Notebook”). In these columns,  
Portilla sets as his goal the philosophical education of the masses for the  
sake of Mexico, based on his conviction that “philosophy is useful for  
understanding” [January 18, 1959; 200].<sup>15</sup> We see in these writings phi-  
losophy, disguised as the journalistic exercises of a restless yet agile mind,  
unapologetically broadcasted in the streets—specifically, in newsstands,  
bookstores, libraries, and waiting rooms, sold at intersections or dragged  
listlessly by the wind through the avenues—and, thus broadcasted, sought  
to enlighten and edify the passersby, the factory worker, the thief, the  
detective, the doctor, the everyday reader who knows nothing of Marx,  
Hegel, or the philosophy of *lo mexicano*, but who cares about Mexico, his  
community, and his fellows.

1 A quick study of these columns reveals that the greatest influences  
2 on Portilla's political views are Marxism and Catholicism, and that Por-  
3 tilla is committed to a kind of socialist humanism that puts truth before  
4 ideology, community before the individual, and brotherly solidarity before  
5 nation. In many of these seemingly hurried pieces, Portilla also touches on  
6 themes that he examines in more detail in his scholarly texts. Thus, time  
7 and again Portilla targets what he views as the negative and destructive  
8 forms of human conviviality that have historically kept Mexicans from  
9 recognizing and pursuing their own excellence. Even in his first column,  
10 Portilla laments the lack of "great . . . public virtues" in the Mexican  
11 community, and he argues that this "lack" is generated by a "skepticism,  
12 to which we, Mexican intellectuals, are especially inclined," rooted in the  
13 belief that Mexico is helplessly inferior to the industrialized world, both  
14 economically and politically [December 14, 1958; 199].

15 Over time, Portilla comes to view this form of alienation as a symp-  
16 tom of a larger sickness that he refers to as "skeptical nihilism" [Septem-  
17 ber 5, 1962; 201]. Skeptical nihilism is a cultural and political disease;  
18 indeed, it the polar opposite of everything Portilla cherishes. Skeptical  
19 nihilism holds that universal values do not exist, and that the larger  
20 human community is an abstraction and thus of no value. It emphasizes  
21 a historicism bordering on relativism that says that only one's specifically  
22 situated community should matter, if anything is to matter at all. And,  
23 moreover, it says that any value that does not directly contribute to the  
24 empowerment of the individual is of no use. As such, skeptical nihilism  
25 is the closing of the mind, an abandonment of understanding for the sake  
26 of tribalism and individualism.

27 What is the antidote for the refusal of transcendence and under-  
28 standing? By the late 1950s, Portilla is preaching a variation of Marxist  
29 Catholicism that he thinks can help in the effort to combat the closing  
30 of the mind and the disintegration of community. The effort, he sug-  
31 gests, ought to target the dangerous emotional dispositions of *fear* and  
32 *hate*. "Fear of man," he writes, "engenders hate and contempt, which are  
33 characteristic passions of the right and the petite bourgeoisie" [October  
34 10, 1962; 206]. This hate—hatred of the new, of the foreign, of the other,  
35 of the strange—justifies an individual's or a community's skepticism  
36 toward the other; it justifies the nihilism of values that would otherwise  
37 promote progress and growth; it justifies, finally, *relajo*, corruption, and  
38 the lazy politics of nationalists who would rather close their ranks than  
39 understand other ways of being. Portilla insists, however, that philoso-  
40

phy can serve as a tool for the clarification and ultimate dissolution of 1  
 hate. Thus, Portilla entreats the reader, “we must comprehend our own 2  
 hate. We can literally drown in indignation and hate. So long as we do 3  
 not clarify the origin or the meaning of this passion, we cannot be of 4  
 help in anything or help anyone” [September 5, 1962; 203]. This view of 5  
 the role of philosophy reflects what we could call Portilla’s basic philo- 6  
 sophical principle, announced in one of the earliest columns: “reality is 7  
 only accessible with the truth, yet only if one is in truth can we modify 8  
 reality” [January 18, 1959; 200]. 9

One of Portilla’s greatest strengths as a writer is his ability to identify 10  
 and describe the *character types* that he encounters on the streets of Mexico 11  
 City. Almost like a contemporary stand-up comedian, Portilla calls atten- 12  
 tion to “*that guy*—you know, the guy who . . .,” naming and describing 13  
 a familiar type of person in a surprising, insightful, and humorous way. 14  
 By doing so, he gently admonishes his audience not to be like the person 15  
 he is criticizing, while also shedding light on aspects of our social space 16  
 that we may have understood intuitively but could not articulate explicitly. 17  
 In one column, for example, he targets the *mocho*, a caricature of the 18  
 modern individual, or, better, of the radical individualism of the modern 19  
 age [November 21, 1962; 210–211]. The *mocho* fetishizes production but 20  
 ultimately seeks only his own advancement, pushing forward without 21  
 respect for traditional values, cultural mores, rules, and logic. He is a 22  
 narcissist, and for this reason, he is boring, pretentious, racist, closed- 23  
 minded, hypocritical, and deceitful. 24

Portilla’s final column appeared at the end of 1962, less than a year 25  
 before his death in the fall of 1963. In it, he expresses hope that indi- 26  
 vidualism will be overcome. Retreating into his Marxist humanism, he 27  
 proclaims that “individualism’s moment has passed,” and that a return 28  
 to reason is possible [December 12, 1962; 211]. Echoing Emiliano Zapa- 29  
 ta’s famous dictum in his “Plan de Ayala” that what is important is to 30  
 follow principles rather than personalities, Portilla writes, “Our time is 31  
 no longer the time of ‘personality,’ but, perhaps, of ‘truth’” [211]. Here, 32  
 hope is inscribed in three words, “*sino, tal vez*,”—“but, perhaps”—a rare 33  
 confirmation of what careful readers already know, that, after all, Portilla’s 34  
 philosophy is a philosophy of hope. His deconstructive critiques are meant 35  
 to be uplifting, to help lay the groundwork for new kinds of intersubjective 36  
 arrangements, or, at least, to help undo ways of thinking that obscure the 37  
 possibility of new forms of being-with-others, communities grounded in 38  
 trust, solidarity, and truth. 39

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## 2. A Note on *Filósofas Mexicanas*

1  
2  
3 One salient feature common to Portilla's work, both the scholarly essays  
4 and his journalistic contributions, is his silence about issues related to  
5 gender. In fact, Portilla rarely discusses women at all. In his critiques  
6 of various character types (the *relajiento*, the *mocho*, the critic, etc.), for  
7 example, he consistently assumes that the individual he is criticizing is a  
8 man ("*el hombre mexicano*"). We find this assumption in his analysis of  
9 the *relajo individual* in the "Phenomenology of Relajo," where the *relajiento*  
10 is described as someone who is comfortable standing outside the rules of  
11 propriety, someone who is allowed by Mexican society to be disruptive  
12 and rebellious—social allowances made only for *men* in a traditionally  
13 patriarchal culture such that of Mexico.<sup>16</sup> The same holds true of the *mocho*  
14 and the critic he discusses in "Critique of Criticism" (see appendix). In  
15 fact, none of the character types that Portilla discusses are specifically  
16 female, and Portilla appears to overlook the possibility that women might  
17 participate in the roles and practices he describes (for example, as literary  
18 critics or even as *relajientas*).

19 Portilla's silence about gender, to some extent, reflected social, polit-  
20 ical, and academic attitudes typical of his time and place. In fact, most,  
21 if not all, established or recognized<sup>17</sup> Mexican philosophers in the first  
22 half of the twentieth century were complicit in this silence. Whether the  
23 writer was José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, José Gaos, Emilio Uranga,  
24 Leopoldo Zea, or Luis Villoro, the perspective was masculine and, more-  
25 over, metropolitan, that is, related to *mestizo* males from Mexico City. One  
26 clearly sees, in the texts of these authors, that a single, relatively dominant  
27 perspective is taken for granted as the most legitimate and authoritative,  
28 a practice that although not a matter of policy was certainly adopted as  
29 a sort of implicit default. This, of course, adds a problematic layer to our  
30 discussion of Portilla's thinking regarding society's disintegration. Although  
31 we touch only briefly upon these and related issues in the chapters that  
32 follow, we are convinced that it should be the focus of future research,  
33 because retrieving diverse voices that speak about social and political issues  
34 during this period of Mexican history would certainly enrich Mexican  
35 philosophy as a whole.

36 When faced with Portilla's silence about issues related to gender,  
37 some readers might assume that women philosophers were simply miss-  
38 ing from the spaces where these conversations were taking place, or that  
39 these issues were irrelevant to the topics of his inquiries. Neither of these  
40

assumptions would be correct. While there were relatively few Mexican women contributing to the philosophical conversation in Portilla's time, they were not insignificant. (A popular positive response to those who question whether or not there were any female Mexican philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century goes like this: *¡de que las hay, las hay!* In other words, there *certainly were* female Mexican philosophers, we just haven't looked hard enough to find them!) In fact, the first comprehensive study and commentary of Portilla's own work was by Rosa Krauze (1923–2003), a friend and contemporary of Portilla, student of the famed Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso, and prolific historian of twentieth-century Mexican philosophy. Krauze was one of a handful of interlocutors capable of approaching Portilla without hesitation. If her account is any indication, their conversations were mutually enriching, philosophically and psychologically, to the point that Krauze's influence on Portilla should not be hard to spot.<sup>18</sup>

Portilla would have had many such encounters with women philosophers of his day. During his time of philosophical production (1948–1963), several women philosophers had either already left their stamp on the intellectual life of Mexico or were in the process of doing so. Among them was Krauze, but also Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974), whose *Sobre cultura femenina* [*On Feminine Culture*] sought to avoid the assumptions of the male perspective in philosophy while making a case for the place of women in the production and maintenance of culture.<sup>19</sup> This work, published in 1950, had been written under the direction of José Gaos, and it was in Gaos' seminars that Mexican women philosophers began to flourish and assert their place in the Mexican intellectual landscape, including Monelissa Lina Pérez Marchand, Victoria Junco Posadas, Olga Victoria Quiroz Martínez, Vera Yamuni, María del Carmen Rovira Gaspar, and Elsa Cecilia Frost.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps due to Gaos's influence, most of these women went on to write on themes and issues in the philosophy of culture, feminism, or the philosophy of history, and often did so in ways that challenged the normativity of the *mestizo* male perspective.

Portilla's silence on issues related to gender and the oppression of women is thus not justified by "the times," and it is certainly not justified from a theoretical perspective. Portilla sought to understand the disintegration of community, and while his work sheds valuable insight on a wide range of factors contributing to communal disintegration—including diverse value inversions, mythologies, communal moods, relations of power, and ideologies—by ignoring the paternalistic and patriarchal tendencies that

1 prevailed in the social order of his day, the rampant oppression of women  
 2 and the female perspective in all things political, and the marginalization  
 3 of women in philosophy and other sites of cultural production, his work  
 4 ignores structures that clearly contribute to communal disintegration. If  
 5 this is correct, then Portilla's own silence contributed to the marginalization  
 6 of women and so to the disintegration of community, thus exacerbating  
 7 and obfuscating the very phenomena he sought to analyze.

8 We offer these assessments in the spirit of an invitation. Krauze,  
 9 Castellanos, Frost, and Zambrano are giants in the history of Mexican  
 10 philosophy, and as we move ahead in normalizing this tradition in the  
 11 English-speaking philosophical academy, their contributions should not  
 12 be overlooked. Portilla's philosophy did not develop in a vacuum; it was  
 13 influenced by the history of philosophy and the writings of his peers,  
 14 formed in a life of conversations, agreements and disagreement. As Krauze  
 15 recalls, "with him, everything was a conversation. He spoke always with  
 16 contagious enthusiasm. He didn't need an entourage; he didn't pick his  
 17 interlocutor. . . . His life was wasted in talking . . . we would've gained so  
 18 much if [he would have written things down], if his disposition would  
 19 have been different."<sup>21</sup>

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### 3. The Plan of this Book

24 The appendix of this book contains our translations of three of Portilla's  
 25 previously untranslated essays. We have selected these texts because we  
 26 believe they collectively present the essential elements of Portilla's social  
 27 and political philosophy, so that English-speaking readers may develop  
 28 their own interpretations of this intrepid Mexican philosopher. In order  
 29 to provide readers with some guidance as they make their way into the  
 30 texts—as well as offer some provocations to stimulate future discussions—  
 31 the first six chapters of this book present complementary perspectives on  
 32 Portilla's three essays.

33 In chapter 1, "The Terrorism of the Social," Sánchez provides an  
 34 interpretation of the critique of nationalism and political Manichaeism in  
 35 Portilla's 1955 essay "Critique of Criticism." Sánchez discusses the historical  
 36 context of Portilla's urgent concern with an ideological and exclusionary  
 37 form of cultural criticism that adopts an aggressively puritanical approach  
 38 to political correctness. Sánchez reflects on the relevance of this text for  
 39  
 40

our own times, and he draws out the ethical ideals that underlie Portilla's 1  
concerns and can oppose the Manichaeic attitudes that he warns about. 2

In chapter 2, "Portilla's Conceptual Framework: Phenomenological 3  
Nationalism," Gallegos argues that "Critique of Criticism" exhibits Portilla's 4  
commitment to the view that nationality functions as a phenomenolog- 5  
ical horizon of intelligibility, and in particular, that many nations are in 6  
the grip of a mood or "affective attunement" that profoundly shapes the 7  
way individuals in these nations experience themselves, others, and the 8  
situations they encounter. Gallegos locates this idea of "phenomenological 9  
nationalism" at the intersection of phenomenological tradition's ambivalent 10  
fascination with human sociality and Latin American philosophy's guiding 11  
concern with liberation from the legacies of colonization. 12

In chapter 3, "The Politics of Innocence," Sánchez turns to Portilla's 13  
1952 essay "The Spiritual Crisis of the United States," thinking through, 14  
with, and beyond Portilla about US American culture and its grounding 15  
myths. Drawing on the perspectives of philosophers including Hegel and 16  
Emerson, Sánchez reflects on what Portilla means when he insists that 17  
US Americans are "innocent" and willfully naive concerning the dark 18  
sides of human life. Sánchez then invites us to think *with* Portilla about 19  
how the myth of innocence is deployed in contemporary US American 20  
social and cultural arrangements, such as in policies that reflect a belief 21  
in "American exceptionalism" and a fear of immigrants. 22

In chapter 4, "Portilla's Method: A Phenomenological Social Theory," 23  
Gallegos examines the methodology that Portilla employs in his analysis 24  
of the US American way of being. Gallegos extracts from Portilla's essay 25  
the general methodological principles that guide Portilla's innovative use 26  
of a mood-oriented approach to the phenomenology of nationality as a 27  
means of explaining widespread patterns of behaviors and attitudes that are 28  
found in a given nation. Gallegos raises a few concerns regarding Portilla's 29  
empirical claims about life in the US, suggesting that Portilla's analysis 30  
would have been strengthened if he had acknowledged the diversity of the 31  
US and explicitly focused his critique on the sense of innocence found 32  
within the White mainstream of US society. 33

In chapter 5, "From Irrationalism to Complacency for the Death of 34  
the Other," Sánchez examines the topics of nihilism, death, and violence 35  
through the lens of Portilla's 1962 essay, "Thomas Mann and German Irra- 36  
tionalism," where Portilla examines what he calls the "the intellectual and 37  
affective climate" that gave rise to Nazism. Sánchez explores connections 38

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1 between Portilla's views and those of fellow Mexican philosophers and  
 2 others, including Immanuel Levinas. Thinking *beyond* Portilla, Sánchez  
 3 concludes by considering his remarks in light of the epidemic of violence  
 4 and death in twenty-first-century Mexico.

5 Finally, in chapter 6, "Portilla's Hope: Phenomenological Flourishing  
 6 and Affective Liberation," Gallegos argues that in Portilla's critique of Mann,  
 7 we can discern Portilla's positive political vision. This vision is grounded in  
 8 Portilla's conception of "phenomenological flourishing," a kind of wellbeing  
 9 grounded in the development of our capacities to disclose the meaning  
 10 of our experience. On the basis of this quasi-ethical ideal, Portilla's work  
 11 calls for us to do what is necessary to dissolve the rigid and problematic  
 12 moods that grip our nations, while warning us about some of the most  
 13 difficult challenges we are likely to face as we work to realize this ideal  
 14 of "affective liberation."

15 We hope and expect that we will not have the last word on Portilla's  
 16 social and political thought, and we look forward to a new generation  
 17 having the opportunity to think with one of Mexico's greatest philosophers.

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## Notes

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1. As Portilla explains, the term *relajo* refers here to the breakdown of a group activity that is intentionally brought about by individuals who refuse to take the activity "seriously"—typically by joking around incessantly. In this essay, Portilla argues that *relajo* is pervasive in Mexico and is detrimental to Mexican society. But *relajo* is also philosophically illuminating, he says, because these breakdowns in normal social cooperation reveal important features of our experience that philosophers have taken for granted and overlooked, such as the way that an individual's experience of values depends on the cooperation of others.

2. Jorge Portilla, *La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984). Originally published in 1966 by the Mexico City publisher ERA.

3. Carlos Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

4. Published discussions of Portilla's work in English include Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness*; Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Carlos Alberto Sánchez, "Serious Subjects: On Values, Time, and Death," *Spaziofilosofico* 18 (2017): 463–473; Shoni Rancher, "The Political Relevance of Kierkegaardian Humor in Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo*,"



APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy 18, no. 1 (2018): 12–16; Francisco Gallegos, “Seriousness, Irony, and Cultural Politics: A defense of Jorge Portilla,” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2013): 11–18; Francisco Gallegos, “Surviving Social Disintegration: Jorge Portilla on the Phenomenology of Zozobra,” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2018): 3–6; Andrea Pitts, “Carlos Alberto Sánchez: *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*,” *Human Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016): 645–652.

5. *La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, the anthology of Portilla’s collected works, contains a total of eight chapters. Besides “Phenomenology of Relajo” and the three chapters that are translated in this book, the remaining chapters include “Comunidad, grandeza, y miseria del mexicano” (a translation of which is included in *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings*, ed. Carlos Alberto Sánchez & Robert Eli Sanchez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)); “La nausea y el humanismo” and “Dostoevski y Santo Tomas” (discussed in Sánchez, *Contingency and Commitment*); and “‘Quinta Columna’ y ‘Cuaderno de Notas’” (discussed later in this introduction).

6. The Grupo Hiperión was an influential circle of intellectuals—including Portilla, Uranga, Zea, and Villoro, among others—who worked closely together in Mexico City between 1948 and the early 1950s, most famously addressing the question of *mexicanidad*.

7. See Christopher Domínguez Michael, *Octavio Paz en su siglo* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2015). See especially Chapter 7, “Mexicanosofía,” where Domínguez provides an excellent summary of the Grupo Hiperión and its relationship with Octavio Paz. It is here, also, where Domínguez mentions Portilla’s suicide. Domínguez’s claim that Portilla committed suicide in 1963 is unconfirmed and unsupported by the obituaries of the day or the eulogies. In any case, if true, it is an end that would cohere with other accounts of this great thinker’s reckless behavior. Most references do not mention his manner of death, only that he was a heavy drinker and somewhat reckless with his health. See, especially, Rosa Krauze, “Sobre la *Fenomenología del relajo*,” *Revista de la Universidad de México* 20, no. 8 (1966): 9–14.

8. Juan José Reyes, *El péndulo y el pozo* (Mexico City: Consejo para la cultura nacional, 2004), 66. In a similar fashion, Antonio Ibargüengoitia recalls Portilla’s “tormented yet agile thinking.” Antonio Ibargüengoitia, *Filosofía mexicana: en sus hombres y en sus textos* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1967), 254.

9. Reyes, *El péndulo y el pozo*, 66.

10. *Ibid.*, 69.

11. *Ibid.*, 67.

12. Portilla, “Phenomenology of Relajo,” in *The Suspension of Seriousness* by Carlos Alberto Sanchez (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 126.

13. Reyes, *El péndulo y el pozo*, 68.

1 14. See Reyes, *El péndulo y el pozo* & Krauze, “Sobre la *Fenomenología del*  
2 *relajo*.”

3 15. Portilla, *La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*. We will cite these  
4 pieces by date and page number in square brackets within the text to make quick  
5 reference to the newspaper columns where these appear.

6 16. Portilla, “Phenomenology of Relajo,” 132ff.

7 17. That is, those who were in the business of philosophy—teaching, writing,  
8 advocating, or promoting philosophy.

9 18. Krauze, “Sobre la *Fenomenología del relajo*.”

10 19. See Rosario Castellanos, “On Feminine Culture,” trans. Carlos Alberto  
11 Sánchez, in *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings* (Oxford:  
12 Oxford University Press, 2017), 206–215.

13 20. See Francesca Gargallo, *Las ideas feministas latinoamericanas* (Mexico  
14 City: UACM, 2006).

15 21. Krauze, “Sobre la *Fenomenología del relajo*,” 9.

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PART II

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ON “THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS  
OF THE UNITED STATES”



## Chapter 3

# The Politics of Innocence

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ

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It is never untimely to ask, What myths sustain our politics? Reflecting on what he considers “the spiritual crisis of the United States,” Jorge Portilla proposes that that which sustains and underlies US politics is *innocence*, or the *myth of its own* innocence, and that only by properly understanding what this is and how this is so can the different cultural crises affecting US culture in the twentieth century (and beyond) be properly understood and addressed. In the US, it turns out, the myth of innocence is at the root of all evil.

But what is “innocence”? Portilla appears to understand the concept of “innocence” in three different ways (although he employs it interchangeably) in the essay we are presently considering, “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States.”

When I say that innocence, that is, the *absolute unfamiliarity* of evil, is the *foundation* of the *American Way of Life*, I mean that the idea of innocence *serves* to make sense of almost every particular nuance of that way of life. [141; italics mine]<sup>1</sup>

Innocence is understood, first, in its experiential aspect, namely, as the experience of an “absolute unfamiliarity of evil.” The term Portilla uses here is *extrañeza*, which means unfamiliarity, but also strangeness, estrangement, alienation, and surprise. The idea is that Americans (collectively and individually), and by this Portilla means White US Americans,<sup>2</sup> *think of themselves* as “absolutely” or completely estranged or alienated from evil, finding it



1 strange and thus shocking or surprising on encountering it. Innocence is  
 2 understood, second, metaphysically, as that which *founds* a way of life. At its  
 3 foundation, i.e., at its ground, the “American Way of Life” is the estrangement  
 4 of evil, it is purity; the American way of life is uncontaminated. And, third,  
 5 innocence turns out to be an interpretive category, or, he says, “a capital  
 6 category for the interpretation of the US American way of life” [141].

7 These three senses of innocence—what we can call the experiential, the  
 8 metaphysical, and the interpretive—coalesce into one interpretive framework  
 9 through which the US is understood from the *Mexican point of view* as  
 10 absolutely resistant to whatever is not already internal to its own self-un-  
 11 derstanding. In other words, the “American Way of Life,” so much desired,  
 12 admired, and mythologized in our contemporary world, is seen from the  
 13 external perspective as reflecting an ignorance, alienation, and estrangement  
 14 from evil, an ignorance or estrangement that seems to permeate “almost  
 15 every aspect” of that way of life. Xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment,  
 16 anti-black racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, etc., are all cultural or  
 17 social attempts (conscious or unconscious) to protect innocence in its meta-  
 18 physical, and social, manifestations—to protect purity from contamination.

19 Of course, it is a generalization to say that a people is “absolutely  
 20 unfamiliar” with evil; after all, random massacres, rampant poverty,  
 21 exploitation of children, and other grotesque social ills are as familiar in  
 22 American life as in any other “way of life.” The point here, however, is  
 23 that in their social and political attitudes, or those attitudes familiar to  
 24 Portilla, the American way of life operates *as if* evil is a radical other-  
 25 ness that does not—and ultimately, should not—affect it. Contemporary  
 26 post-9/11 anti-immigrant social policies assume that foreigners—and,  
 27 eventually, all non-White Americans in general—introduce a heretofore  
 28 unknown evil whenever and wherever they introduce their own cultural,  
 29 political, religious, or philosophical perspective. The consequence of this  
 30 stranger-bias is that in order to “Make America Great Again” these strange  
 31 others must be expelled from the body politic. Thus, while it may seem  
 32 like an overly hasty generalization on Portilla’s part, it pays to consider it  
 33 a bit further if only to make sense of Mexico’s attitude toward the United  
 34 States, not only in Portilla’s time, but in our own.

35 The aim of this chapter is thus twofold: one, to reflect on what Portilla  
 36 means when he insists that Americans (again, White US Americans) are  
 37 absolutely unfamiliar with evil and the extent to which this is an accurate  
 38 portrayal of the American way of life; and two, to think *with* Portilla,  
 39 from a broadly theoretical standpoint, on the manner in which the myth  
 40

of innocence is deployed in contemporary American social and cultural  
arrangements, i.e., in its politics and broader social policy.

### 1. The Spiritual Crisis of America

There is a sense in which innocence is the virtue that best describes the  
American character. A sense in which everything—culture, politics, art,  
and philosophy—flows out of the virtue of innocence. This sense is related  
to the founding of America, to its landscape, to its people, both to those  
who, fleeing persecution, found refuge in a “New World” and to those  
who were already here; it is related to its promise as a place of renewal,  
rebirth, or reinvention; it is related to the Western idea that everything  
found from its shores to its interior was pure, untainted by thousands  
of years of war, greed, and culture in the “Old World”; untainted, that  
is, by European history and its politics of sin. It is related to the notion,  
articulated at its founding, of America as a “redeemer nation” that in its  
purity showed itself to have been “touched by God.”<sup>3</sup>

Jorge Portilla’s reflections on the “American Way of Life” take as their  
point of departure America’s self-understanding as this is communicated  
in mass media—in TV, radio, and magazines. Portilla was writing in  
the 1950s after a brief visit to the United States on a Rockefeller Grant,<sup>4</sup>  
and as a Mexican and from a Mexican point of view; one can’t help but  
wonder to what extent his ruminations are based on stereotypes and  
misinformation, on preconceptions and hearsay that are sure to bias his  
“philosophical” interventions. However, despite these shortcomings—short-  
comings that one can’t truly overcome due to the limits and prejudices  
of our own reason, even as information becomes more readily available  
and immediate thanks to the advent of social media technologies such as  
Twitter and Facebook—Portilla is able to attune himself to what is being  
communicated, thereby capturing an essential aspect of that which America  
believes about itself, of its political and cultural identity.

Before embarking on his analysis, Portilla tells us *why* this embark-  
ing is important. It is, he suggests, a matter of understanding a “radical  
otherness” (I quote here at length):

all Mexicans are presented with the need at one time or another,  
and by the nature of things themselves, to take a position  
that is as clear as possible regarding the historical facts of our

1 northern neighbor. The need to take such a position is based, it  
 2 seems to me, on the fact that the United States always appears  
 3 to us in the form of a radical “otherness.” . . . The ultimate  
 4 foundations of US American civilization are almost absolutely  
 5 strange to us. [139]

6  
 7 The effort to understand the peculiar American way of being is thus  
 8 imposed on us as a first step toward adopting a lucid and well-defined  
 9 attitude toward American culture, and it is on the basis of this radical  
 10 feeling of strangeness and as a result of that will to understand that we  
 11 can see the fact and breadth of the American crisis.

12  
 13 Succinctly put, we believe that what is in crisis is precisely the  
 14 very foundation of US American life as such—the foundation  
 15 of what in the US they have come to call *The American Way*  
 16 *of Life*. [139–140]

17  
 18 A full understanding of that which is radically other, or absolutely strange,  
 19 is, of course, not possible. It is to understand that which does not fully  
 20 give itself and stands beyond the subjective horizons of intelligibility.  
 21 Nevertheless, one can approximate understanding, one can approach the  
 22 radically other and the absolutely strange. This approximation, or approach,  
 23 is what the radical other demands in its very essence. So the goal, Portilla  
 24 says, is to adopt a “lucid and well-defined attitude toward US American  
 25 culture,” one that will likewise allow Mexicans—for whom the strangeness  
 26 and otherness of *el norte* appears as promise and possibility, a mystery that  
 27 beckons Mexicans northward now as it did then—to also see the “breath  
 28 of the American crisis,” of its *spiritual* crisis.

29 Portilla’s prelude to the analysis also gives us a sense into the  
 30 intimidating shadow cast by the United States in the geopolitical arena,  
 31 a shadow that is darker and heavier to those standing right underneath,  
 32 namely, its southern neighbors—Mexico and Central America. Inevitably,  
 33 anyone living under this shadow must address himself or herself to it,  
 34 affirm its presence, and respond to its strange power, to that otherness  
 35 that looms as threat or opportunity. Inevitably, if one is Mexican, Portilla  
 36 suggests, one must try to *understand* it. Understanding it thus becomes,  
 37 for Mexicans, something of a moral and political responsibility, since the  
 38 historical fate of Mexicans is necessarily tied—literally and figuratively—to  
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the US, whereby its triumphs and its crises become issues *for* Mexicans, 1  
 whether they want them to be or not. 2

Motivated to understand by that radical otherness, Portilla's reflec- 3  
 tive gaze turns north. He notices that within America's strangeness, along 4  
 with its mystery, there is something obvious and explicit that it itself 5  
 announces. This "something" is reflected in American politics, its foreign 6  
 policy and domestic agenda; the something is the illusory *self-conception* 7  
 that America is *innocent*. This illusory self-understanding constitutes for 8  
 Portilla a foundational crisis since on this illusion lays what we've come 9  
 to know as the "American Way of Life." 10

The crisis can be articulated in the following terms: The Puritan 11  
 ideal of innocence that lies in the foundations of the "American Way of 12  
 Life" does not lend itself to the reality of a global world, to the necessity 13  
 for openness or a politics of interconnection and intercommunication, a 14  
 phenomenon that undermines the positive aspects of that "way of life" 15  
 or what that way of life means to represent. Because the ideal, or we can 16  
 say the myth or ideology, of innocence ultimately grounds that which 17  
 makes the American way of life "American," a crisis of ideology is thus a 18  
 crisis of cultural and political identity. As Portilla sees it, however, this is 19  
 an inevitable crisis since any self-conception that relies on the categories 20  
 of innocence, or what's the same, uniqueness, purity, and exception, will 21  
 regard anything foreign or other to itself as a threat to this uniqueness, 22  
 purity, or exception. 23

From the Mexican point of view, however, the ideology of innocence 24  
 has fully interpellated American consciousness. In the Althusserian sense, 25  
 interpellation describes the manner in which human subjectivity is consti- 26  
 tuted by ideological forces, the manner in which one's identity is "hailed" 27  
 and thus affirmed by ideology itself.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the ideology of purity, 28  
 innocence, or estrangement from evil has constituted US American identity. 29  
 Portilla illustrates this by relating the strange case of an American funeral 30  
 director who, traveling the world in search of a painting of Christ, insists 31  
 that it reflect a "happy" and "smiling" (or innocent) Christ. The funeral 32  
 director goes as far as holding an competition where he intends to choose 33  
 the statue of Christ that best represents Christ as he understand him and 34  
*wants him to be*. In the end, he is unable to find a suitable representation 35  
 of a "happy" Christ, protesting that "all these paintings, even the smiling 36  
 ones, look sad and definitely European. What I need is a radiant Christ 37  
 who looks upward with an inner light of joy and hope; I want a Christ with 38  
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1 an American face” [140]. For the funeral director, echoing the ideology of  
 2 innocence that constitutes his own viewpoint, “joy” and “hope” mark the  
 3 “American face.” An American face, that is, will not reflect the troubles  
 4 and tribulations of other faces, such as the European face, which, even  
 5 when smiling, looks sad. The suggestion here, is, of course, that suffering  
 6 is a symptom of evil and not of innocence and purity, or radiance and  
 7 the “inner light of joy.”

8 With this example, Portilla wonders about the extent to which  
 9 Americans will hold on to the myth of innocence *in spite* of history or  
 10 common sense. As he puts it, the funeral director’s insistence that Christ be  
 11 a smiling Christ “radically ignores the difficult nuances of the relationship  
 12 between the historical Jesus and the humanity of the men who followed  
 13 him and those who killed him. It erases the *sense* of Christ’s appearance  
 14 in history, the sense of His life and His death” [141].

15 Ultimately, the crisis to which Portilla refers has to do with a dis-  
 16 connect between what is *the case* and what Americans desire the true to  
 17 be the case, with the lack of correspondence between truth and belief,  
 18 idea and reality. The reality of Christ, in the person of the Bible or as a  
 19 historical figure, is one of persecution, passion, and rebirth, acts that in  
 20 themselves are violent and not deserving of smiles or happy “close ups.”  
 21 Similarly, the claim to innocence in social life clashes with a reality of  
 22 America’s historical experience. Americans resist the truth, Portilla suggests,  
 23 because it itself is not innocent. (In our contemporary milieu we talk  
 24 about living in the “post-truth” era, one where truth is not as important  
 25 as *what feels to be true*. As Portilla illustrates, however, this is not a *new*  
 26 era at all; historically, Americans would rather live in something *more*  
 27 than true, in a more radical conception of what is true, in a conception  
 28 of life that is pure, that feels right and good; post-truth is foundational  
 29 to the very identity of America itself.) Ultimately, the cultural desire *to*  
 30 *be* innocent and to remain so clashes with the reality that innocent is not  
 31 something one can be or maintain without shutting out or expelling all  
 32 external, strange, or alien influences.

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## 2. On American Innocence

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### 37 2.1. THE DEGRADATIONS OF EVIL

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39 The case of the “smiling Christ” seems to accurately represent the manner  
 40 in which Americans assume the ideology or myth of their own innocence;

it reflects the way in which Americans are interpellated by that ideology. 1  
 It is an interpellation that manifests itself in professions of uniqueness 2  
 and exemption, where what is an ordinary fact for the rest of the world 3  
 does not apply here. In the geopolitical arena, this is known as “American 4  
 exceptionalism,” the idea that the United States is different from every other 5  
 nation on earth and thus deserves special privileges and exemptions.<sup>6</sup> In 6  
 Portilla’s account, one of these exemptions is the exemption to evil, or, the 7  
 privilege of absolute innocence. This is a radical exemption, since inno- 8  
 cence as defined by Portilla is more of an ideal than a reality. He writes: 9

he is innocent who is not defiled by evil in general or by sin 11  
 in particular. An innocent world will thus be that world in 12  
 which evil has not penetrated, where evil has not corrupted 13  
 the root of life itself. [142] 14

Depending on how we understand evil or sin, rare would be “he” who is 16  
 “innocent”; even as an “ideal” toward which to aspire, an entire people 17  
 uncorrupted by evil (or sin) would be hard to come by. Even if we con- 18  
 sider the most abstract definition of “evil,” the idea would be that *innocent* 19  
 describes a state of affairs or a person wherein all corrupting influence, 20  
 all impurities, and all that is generally disruptive to pure living “has not 21  
 penetrated” or “corrupted” that state of affairs or that person. It thus seems 22  
 like an aspirational ideal, if nothing else, making it impossible to find an 23  
 entire culture exempt from evil. 24

In spite of the funeral director’s insistence that a smiling Christ would 25  
 best represent American innocence, Portilla argues that the myth of inno- 26  
 cence is not usually manifested in such declarations of purity, incorrupt- 27  
 ibility, or perfection, but in something much more “American”: It shows 28  
 up in a belief in America’s *quantifiable* superiority. This belief is expressed 29  
 as a “tendency to identify the *most* with the *best*” [142], or with equating 30  
 quantity with quality. Thus, having the most money, the highest buildings, 31  
 the most advanced technology, is translated in the American consciousness 32  
 as factual evidence of having the *best* “way of life.” So, for example, if San 33  
 Francisco has the most expensive housing market in the Northern Hemi- 34  
 sphere, this is understood as a reflection of the quality of life there, which 35  
 is then assumed to be the best (a simplistic generalization, to be sure). 36

Behind this tendency to equate quantity with quality is the myth of 37  
 innocence and the accompanying belief—derived from America’s Puritan 38  
 roots and the Protestant ethic—that one’s blessedness is reflected in one’s 39  
 material wealth, so that the more one has, the more one’s life approximates 40

1 what God has determined as the right and good life for us. In turn, the  
 2 more one approximates God's will, the more innocent and pure one is,  
 3 and vice versa. As Portilla puts it:

4  
 5       Indeed, in a world where evil does not penetrate, any *increase*  
 6       can only be an *increase of good*. Any affirmation of quantitative  
 7       superiority is then the realization of *genuine* superiority. The  
 8       mere consciousness of a great magnitude is bound, in this  
 9       hypothesis, to the consciousness of a superior good. [143]

10 The myth of innocence can thus be broken down as the belief that “evil  
 11 does not penetrate” the American way of life, evidenced by its economic,  
 12 political, cultural, and technological superiority. We can see, then, how an  
 13 ideology of innocence operates as the engine that drives ambition and,  
 14 simultaneously, fear of the other and the foreign.

15       We can also see how these expressions of superiority play out in  
 16 contemporary political attitudes: Nativist objections toward immigrants,  
 17 segregationist social policies, exclusionary rhetoric, etc., all assume that  
 18 foreign elements, if allowed to penetrate American culture, will pollute or  
 19 degrade it, ruining its purity and demeaning its *quantifiable* superiority—  
 20 others will make America poorer, less technological, more diverse, and  
 21 less definable. Ultimately, evil is defined as that which penetrates from  
 22 the outside and, once inside, changes, modifies, or erases; all otherness,  
 23 the alien, the stranger, the foreign, is *evil* and, as such, must be kept at a  
 24 distance—marginalized, abolished, suppressed, oppressed, or destroyed—if  
 25 American superiority (that is, its innocence) is to be preserved.

26       In Portilla's time, American superiority (and its grounding myth, i.e.,  
 27 the myth of innocence) played out most prominently in popular culture,  
 28 and in particular in certain characteristic themes in American films and  
 29 literature. Portilla gives us two examples that are worth mentioning: the  
 30 hero and the detective.

## 32 2.2. CASTING OUT THE DARKNESS: THE HERO

33  
 34       The American hero always appears justified, he is the center  
 35       that determines the sense of the world that surrounds him, and  
 36       in determining this sense he becomes the lord of that world.  
 37       The “others” cannot take a point of view on him that is not  
 38       easily surpassed by the most elemental moral judgment and  
 39       precisely by a moral judgment; the others are *evil*, they desire  
 40       evil, the American hero wants the good, and it can be said that,

more than desiring it, he embodies it, this is his strength; his  
 weakness is that he sits precisely in the “outer darkness” where  
 evil has an important place and therefore can corner him and  
 put him in difficulties so serious that can only be bettered with  
 the providential arrival of steel angels, aerial fortresses, which  
 at the end of the film appear as a glorious and roaring symbol  
 of light and the good, cleanliness and order. [144]

The appearance of the hero in American cinema is emblematic of a  
 culture already obsessed with its own superiority and its own purity (its  
 innocence). The hero is the self-justified, world-constituting, “lord of the  
 world” who, as morally perfect and morally blameless, offers himself as  
 warrior against evil and darkness; those who threaten his life, his superi-  
 ority and purity, are the enemy, they are “evil, they desire evil,” and thus  
 his battle is good and “glorious.” The hero *is* American exceptionalism  
 personified. His eventual victory over the forces of evil—over the *others*—is  
 thus more than a victory of good vs. evil, it is the victory of purity and  
 light over “outer darkness”—over the outside, over the not-I.

In the fictional world of “super” heroes, the outer darkness is the  
 birthplace of villains and destroyers of worlds. In the modern world of  
 alarmist propagandists on cable news and social media, the outer darkness  
 is beyond the border of the nation, where darker skins reside, where accents  
 and the poor thrive, where the light of innocence does not shine. This is  
 likewise the birthplace of bad guys and corrupters, the unclean and the  
 impure, of them who appear disguised as Mexican immigrants, Central  
 American, African, and Middle-Eastern refugees, and other environmental  
 and economic exiles. The hero’s task is to cast these others out, to cast  
 out the dark and maintain the privilege of light.

Ultimately, the fictional hero of American cinema embodies all that  
 is essential in the symbolism of what is called the “American Way of Life”:  
 innocence (he is not evil), purity (he is clean, has a “feeling of purity  
 [*incontaminación*]” [146]), and superiority (he is *better than* because he  
 has *more than*).

### 2.3. CLEANLINESS AND ORDER

#### 2.3.1. *The Detective*

While the hero in American cinema is an embodiment of an American  
 consciousness that believes itself to be superior in *being* over all others,

1 the detective in American crime novels is the embodiment of the culture's  
2 belief that it is superior in *knowledge* and *ability* over all others.

3 According to Portilla, the American crime novel treats crime, or what's  
4 the same, social "evil," not as a general condition of human coexistence  
5 or, more particularly, as a result of social inequities or personal psychoses,  
6 but as a technical issue, one that can be solved by technical means, i.e., in  
7 laboratories, through the meticulous examination of evidence, etc. With  
8 the proliferation of crime novels, and thus with the proliferation of the  
9 myth of evil as a technical matter to which an entire science (namely,  
10 forensics) is devoted, Americans hold on to the truth of their myth of  
11 innocence, believing that through technical means they can cleanse their  
12 social life of any corruption or contamination; in other words, through  
13 the procedures of forensics, the belief is affirmed via fictional detectives  
14 that evil can be reduced to a science and, because of this reduction, the  
15 purity of innocence can be maintained. Portilla writes:

16  
17 the detective novels remind one that there is a whole scien-  
18 tific world, with laboratories full of precision instruments and  
19 perfectly trained and capable men who keep crime on the  
20 periphery of the world. [148]

### 21 2.3.2. *Psychoanalysis*

22  
23 Related to the detective novel, at least in what it represents in the Ameri-  
24 can imaginary, psychoanalysis is another way in which Americans protect  
25 their innocence. If a foundational innocence is not threatened by a real  
26 other, alien and external to the self, then the threat may very well come  
27 from an imagined, or suppressed, other *internal* to the self. This threat  
28 comes in the form of neuroses, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive  
29 compulsion, and other emotional or psychological conflicts that contam-  
30 inate one's unconscious life. Despite their immateriality, these neuroses  
31 have presence, and so their expulsion from the individual body becomes  
32 necessary to maintain the appearance of innocence in the body politic.

33 The procedure for removing this threat to one's inner purity is psy-  
34 choanalysis. According to Coriat,

35  
36 [Psychoanalysis] is the study of man's unconscious motives  
37 and desires as shown in various nervous disturbances and in  
38 certain manifestations of every-day life in normal individu-  
39 als . . . [which] influence the formation of character traits, but  
40 likewise are responsible for many forms of *nervous illness*.<sup>7</sup>



To a people obsessed with its own innocence, it is the unknown and strange (in this case, one's own "unconscious") that represents the greatest danger to one's integrity in the form of "disturbances" and "illness." Psychoanalysis promises to rid the individual of these *evils*.

Moreover, if innocence itself is the absence of guilt, and guilt is an unconscious expression of a more dangerous disturbance, then psychoanalysis, as the procedure whereby guilt is removed from the unconscious, allows Americans to stay innocent; it allows them the opportunity to renew their purity again and again in repeated acts of self-cleansing.

Both the detective novel and psychoanalysis represent the accomplishment of keeping evil on the periphery of the world. Both keep innocence intact, both keep American culture pure from contamination; both represent the work that goes into keeping American spirit *clean*. That is, Portilla conceives the American fascination with therapy (psychoanalysis) and crime solving as representing the cultural obsession with cleanliness.

Psychoanalysis and the detective novel can therefore be interpreted as a technical dressage of evil, but such domestication can only occur when an innocent world has previously been postulated. Banishing evil to the periphery of being and controlling it with psychological and police techniques, all that remains is, literally, to wash our hands. [148]

This idea that to stay clean, and more importantly, to stay *spiritually* clean, all one has to do is engage in certain techniques of self-care or self-cleansing is an American idea rooted in the not-so-humble belief in an always already superior spiritual constitution. Thus, in American cinema, the hero himself, who is always already ontologically superior to his enemies, is revealed at the end of the film to be smart, insightful into the ways of good and evil, and handsome (and, thus, impeccably clean). (We need not look too hard for examples: Mel Gibson's character in the *Lethal Weapon* series comes to mind, "Dirty Harry," and even Ethan Hawke's character in *Traffic*. [Notice that all are male, White, and "all-American."])

### 3. The Limits of Innocence

The ideology (or, we can also say, myth) of innocence is thus reproduced in popular culture through the tropes of heroism, cleanliness, and order.



1 As these tropes are repeated and institutionalized into culture and tradi-  
 2 tion, so is the belief that the greatest enemy to the American way of life  
 3 is whatever threatens that tradition; that the greatest threat is *whatever*  
 4 *doesn't work* toward the maintenance and continual justification of that  
 5 tradition; and that anything that threatens the tradition is, by definition,  
 6 evil and, ultimately, un-American.

7 Ultimately, the ideology of innocence justifies a naive view about  
 8 American life held by many who espouse the dangers of the threat of oth-  
 9 erness, namely, that when unthreatened and undisturbed, this way of life  
 10 “exists” as a homogenous and harmonious coherence of sameness. That is,  
 11 that unhindered by external influences, by alien or surprising strangeness,  
 12 Americans (again, White US Americans) *are* one people, with one culture,  
 13 innocent and great in their ways, with a supreme morality, prudence, work  
 14 ethic, and divine ability to solve problems and expose truth.

15 According to Portilla, this ideology and its corresponding beliefs can  
 16 be found at the core of American philosophy itself—that is, in *pragmatism*.  
 17 Portilla (correctly) understands pragmatism as the view that a belief will  
 18 be true when it is verified by its results. However,

19

20 [w]hat is implied in such a conception is a naive trust that  
 21 everything will go well. To refer truth to its practical results  
 22 is possible only on the assumption that the practical results  
 23 will eventually reflect the Truth with a capital “T”. That is, it  
 24 is possible only on the naive belief that man will not lose his  
 25 way. The truth depends on behavior, but the criterion of that  
 26 behavior, not expressed philosophically but revealed in this  
 27 conception itself, is the good diffused in a world where evil  
 28 has no place.

29 Pragmatism can only be sustained under the assumption  
 30 that men will propose only morally valid ends. It is only within  
 31 a community composed of substantially virtuous men that it  
 32 is possible to postulate the action of men as a criterion of the  
 33 good and of truth.

34 Pragmatism is representative, on a more respectable level,  
 35 of the same world in which we find the *Happy Ending* of US  
 36 American filmmaking. Relatively speaking, both pragmatism  
 37 and cinema respond to the most serious questions by saying  
 38 that everything will work out. [150]

39

40

As Portilla understands it, at the core of pragmatism itself is that stubborn belief in the American will to goodness, moral uprightness, and innocence. The belief that truth will be verified by the consequences it brings about—by the work it does—speaks to the fundamental belief in the goodness of the truth and the righteousness of the work. If the belief, the truth, the proposition, the act—if these are good, then so will be the work that these do, a correlation that forgets that great evil can always be the result of good intentions. As Portilla interprets it, pragmatism is an essentially American philosophy with an essentially American flavor.

In spite of the success of pragmatism as an “American” philosophy, the grounding ideology of innocence is in crisis. To highlight the crisis, Portilla turns to the work of the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

According to Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* (1952), in the chapter titled, “An Innocent Nation in an Innocent World,”<sup>8</sup> America is a nation founded on the belief that the “outside” world is corrupt and corrupting and that only here, in the US, can one find shelter from the corruption. However, as history advances, and social and economic globalization becomes more and more of a reality, the nation finds itself once again under attack by those old corrupting influences. This is America at a crossroad, *in crisis*, and Niebuhr seeks to locate “the origin of [the] fault, [the] fissure that explains the situation, that is, he undertakes a review of the spiritual foundations of America” [152]. He finds this “fault” in America’s geopolitical situation, in the role that it plays in the modern world. America’s politics is a politics of power, and a politics of power seems to run counter those values of innocence that are “constitutive of the nation,” making it “impossible to maintain the atmosphere in which they flourished” [153]. Niebuhr’s conclusion is that “the nation that at one point represented a new beginning in a corrupt world now seems to corrupt itself in the act of imposing on the world its most valued assets” [153]. American innocence, that is, is lost.

Holding on to a primordial innocence amid a complex and evolving historical reality is, of course, a fool’s errand. Innocence will be lost at the first difficulty. This explains why innocence must be mythologized, institutionalized, and codified, so that it may survive the reality of its historical decay.

Of course, neither Portilla nor Niebuhr is the first to think critically about innocence. One of the first “American” thinkers to think about America through the trope of innocence was Ralph Waldo Emerson. But

40



1 his was more of a warning than a description of the state of the American  
 2 soul. In his *Journals* he tells us that “A man is not to aim at innocence, any  
 3 more than he is to aim at hair; but he is to keep it.”<sup>9</sup> That one should aim  
 4 to “keep it” suggests that innocence is already marked on the character,  
 5 like the possibility of hair when one is forming in the mother’s womb.  
 6 Thus, one should not strive to be innocent, as one already is; one should  
 7 merely strive to hold on to whatever innocence one can, suggesting, of  
 8 course, that innocence flees and disappears in time, like hair.

9 But is Emerson telling us that innocence is a virtue proper to Amer-  
 10 icans (or North Americans)? No. Neither is he telling us that Americans  
 11 are innocent, only that one should, American or not, hold on to one’s  
 12 innocence. Why? Because in acting from innocence one is fearless, one is  
 13 unhesitatingly brutal, and direct; that is, presupposing the purity of one’s  
 14 intentions, one also assumes that the consequences, whatever they may  
 15 be, will likewise be pure—or correct, or *true*. Innocence, as I said above,  
 16 is aspirational. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes,

17  
 18 The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would  
 19 disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one,  
 20 is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour  
 21 what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible,  
 22 looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass  
 23 by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift,  
 24 summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent,  
 25 troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences,  
 26 about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You  
 27 must court him: he does not court you.<sup>10</sup>

28  
 29 This, again, points to that feeling of being *beyond*, of being superior to  
 30 both others and to nature itself. In the state of innocence of the boy, he is  
 31 irresponsible precisely because he does not need to respond to or respect  
 32 limits, which are evil and a constraint on his freedom. In this state, he  
 33 thinks he is above the rules of causality, and the more he achieves (the  
 34 more quantity he accumulates) in his irresponsibility, the more his con-  
 35 fidence grows that those rules do not apply to him and, that, moreover,  
 36 his truths are justified in their accomplishment.

37 However, Emerson does not condone such irresponsibility; he seeks  
 38 to instill in his (American) readers precisely that missing sense of per-

39  
 40



sonal responsibility, respect for causality, and an appreciation of their own  
 freedom. To act from the standpoint of innocence and irresponsibility is  
 the role of the child, not the “man.” He continues:

the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness.  
 As soon as he has once acted or spoken with eclat, he is a  
 committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of  
 hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account.  
 There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into  
 his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having  
 observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased,  
 unbribable . . . innocence, must always be formidable. He  
 would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen  
 to be not private, but necessary, would sink like darts into the  
 ear of men, and put them in fear.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Emerson highlights what happens when innocence is lost. One is  
 taken for one’s word; one is watched and judged; one is partisan and one  
 is biased; one is no longer formidable. As such, innocence is lost at the  
 first sign of man’s maturity, when he learns to make promises, to keep  
 them, and thus exposes his vulnerability to the world—he exposes his  
 human weakness, i.e., the necessity to do evil and to have evil done to him.

Philosophically, then, the idea of innocence is only that—an idea. The  
 mythology of this idea, or ideal—the ideology of innocence—is ultimately  
 a form of religious sentimentality that has no ground in actual, concrete  
 reality. Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, talks about the  
 “original state of innocence”<sup>12</sup> that could be found only in Adam’s Para-  
 dise, where purity without sin was conceived for the sake of maintaining  
 the coherence of the story. The moment that Adam and Eve are expelled  
 from Paradise, and freedom of the will enters the picture, so does *guilt*,  
 which is opposite of innocence. Hegel writes:

the state of innocence consists in the fact that nothing is good  
 and nothing is evil for human beings; it is the state of the  
 animal; paradise is in fact initially a zoological garden; it is  
 the state where there is no accountability or capacity for guilt,  
 and this is now the human state. “Guilt” means in general  
 “holding to account.”<sup>13</sup>



1 Hegel's description suggests that innocence and freedom are incompatible  
 2 in practice: If America is innocent, then it cannot be free. This paradox  
 3 is unaccounted for in America's conception of itself as innocent. In fact,  
 4 freedom is thought to be our most cherished value, that which defines  
 5 the American way of life itself.

6 But according to Hegel, innocence describes an immediacy with  
 7 being that precludes the self-awareness required to *hold (someone) into*  
 8 *account*—it precludes ethics itself. In the “original condition” where inno-  
 9 cence operates, there is a “perfect . . . unity with nature” that describes a  
 10 state of nature, without law, without self-consciousness, without separation.

11  
 12 It is only when the two are separated, when I am for myself  
 13 and things are outside of me, that things become enveloped  
 14 in the bark of sense that separates me from them, and nature  
 15 erects a screen before me.<sup>14</sup>

16  
 17 Separation, which is the actual condition of socialized being (i.e., in her  
 18 alienation from nature), is thus the end of innocence and the beginning  
 19 of ethical life. Thus, for Hegel, ethical life and innocence are ultimately  
 20 incompatible (as are freedom and innocence). Hegel's suggestion is that

21  
 22 this innocence is not genuinely human existence. Free ethical  
 23 life is not the same as the ethical life of the child, and is at a  
 24 higher level than this form of innocence; it is self-conscious  
 25 volition, a willing that determines its purpose for itself by  
 26 thoughtful insight. In the ethical realm this is the first genuine  
 27 relationship. Just by being free will, human beings have passed  
 28 beyond this state of innocence.<sup>15</sup>

29  
 30 Hegel's declaration that innocence does not represent “genuine” human  
 31 life points to the fact that innocence is assumed as always as an ideal—  
 32 something to strive for, something to seek to hold on to, as Emerson  
 33 says, but something that is, essentially, not *real*. Ethics itself requires the  
 34 loss of innocence. Thus, a nation that truly thinks itself innocent will not  
 35 have the moral vision to reach outside of itself in acceptance or care of  
 36 others—it *will lack an ethical will*. The American way of life as innocent  
 37 and pure is, consequently, a closed life, one that must reject “genuine  
 38 relationships,” and as such, is not free.

39  
 40

## 4. Innocent Superiority

Why have I titled this chapter “The Politics of Innocence”? In short, because innocence, according to Portilla, grounds the manner in which America (or, more precisely, the United States) positions itself as a geopolitical entity. The ideology of innocence dictates the political stance America takes toward its neighbors, toward strangers and friends alike. Innocence is thus political. That is, as we reflect with Portilla on innocence and its various manifestations (heroism, cleanliness, exception, superiority, etc.), we see how the ideology of innocence can ground political positions as extreme as eugenics or White supremacy.

In recent years, the issue of superiority—specifically, the question of White superiority—has re-entered the national conversation in the US. We can locate the desire to *claim* racial superiority in the narrative of innocence that says that innocence is pure and that purity must reject otherness as corrosive and corrupting; it says that otherness is not innocent, but *guilty* of some evil, and so it must be blamed for whatever befalls the innocent. This motivates Portilla to think about race and race relations in the US: “We note, however, that the basis of racial discrimination is precisely that refusal of the White man to assume his guilt” [147]. This is an important insight, as it suggests that “the White man” truly does believe that he is free from any blame that might befall him in relation to his history of oppression and slavery and that, ultimately, he is blameless (i.e., innocent).

Pursuant to this insight we can make declarations like the following: An extreme manifestation of a *politics* of innocence is White supremacy. That is, the way that innocence is forced into the social imaginary is meant to uphold a view of racial superiority that benefits the “White man,” understood as *any* individual who believes himself corruptible by otherness and difference because of a claim to an original purity.

Still, even if Americans are not *in fact* innocent, the next question is: What role does this belief play in the organization of our social and political life? More interestingly, what happens when such a contingent virtue is used as the basis for politics or for the political foundation of American culture itself?

What we get is American exceptionalism, or the belief that US culture is unlike any other, that its history is unlike any other, and that its “way of life” is unlike any other. While corruption, death, and the weakening of institution is the fate of all nations and all cultures, America thinks

1 itself the exception. This exception extends to what it can and cannot get  
 2 away with: imperialism, manifest destiny, empire—these are to be held not  
 3 as moral stains on the American cultural spirit, but as rights of privilege.

4 American innocence and American exceptionalism are two sides of  
 5 the same ideological coin. And they depend on each other. As a “real”  
 6 American, one believes oneself to be exceptional, to be an exception, because  
 7 of a fundamental innocence that can be traced back to the purity of the  
 8 American spirit in relation to Europe and to native cultures; as a “real”  
 9 American, one believes oneself to be innocent, free of guilt, *because* one  
 10 is the exception—because everyone else is guilty, or corrupt, or unworthy.

11 Daniel Bell conceives American exceptionalism as an inability to  
 12 recognize that maturity means being responsible and committed to the  
 13 needs of others and not only to the needs of oneself. Exceptionalism is a  
 14 selfishness, an irresponsible narcissism, that blinds itself to the realities of  
 15 both history and the actual world. Bell writes, “America was the exemplary  
 16 once-born nation, the land of sky-blue optimism in which the traditional  
 17 ills of civilization were, as Emerson once said, merely the measles and  
 18 whooping cough of growing up.”<sup>16</sup> This idea of being a “once-born nation”  
 19 is the one that justifies a belief in the original uniqueness of America, in  
 20 its perpetual innocence. A nation must be “twice-born”—first through a  
 21 founding and then through “reflection and commitment” born of strug-  
 22 gle—in order to enter maturity. In other words, as Emerson tells us above  
 23 in “Self-Reliance,” the innocence of youth—of a once-born nation—must  
 24 be lost in order to be born again, to be, Bell says, “humanized among the  
 25 nations.”<sup>17</sup> Without self-reflection and commitment (to others, to principles  
 26 of inclusion and justice), America will continue to exempt itself from sin  
 27 and so think itself *first*; as first, *best*; as best, *superior*; and as superior,  
 28 *innocent*. And maturity, its humanization, will be a long ways away.

29

30

### 31 5. Conclusion: Innocence in the Twenty-First Century

32

33 In the twenty-first century, the ideology of innocence continues to function  
 34 as a ground for US policy and public opinion. After the catastrophe of  
 35 September 11, 2001, which some would say represented the interruption of  
 36 the peaceful and serene progress of US history, while others would insist  
 37 was an attack on American innocence itself,<sup>18</sup> anti-immigrant sentiment,  
 38 which had been there for hundreds of years, became policy. A social  
 39 narrative took hold that said that immigrants—those among us and those  
 40

without—were intent on destroying our *way of life* and thus something 1  
 had to be done. To sway public opinion, the media and lawmakers didn't 2  
 have to do much, since all their work was ready to hand in the archives 3  
 of America's (darker) history. Anti-immigrant myths abound, and most 4  
 of these speak of what immigrants will do to the purity, innocence, and 5  
 greatness of this "once-born nation." Immigrants, the myths go, *corrupt* 6  
 what is otherwise pure and clean. What results is anti-immigrant legisla- 7  
 tion that harkens back to a fabled time of peace and flourishing among 8  
 the people and creatures of an American Eden. Immigrants, as intruders, 9  
 as uninvited guests to this (Impossible) Eden, are thus configured by the 10  
 ideology as impure, inferior, parasitic, and threatening. Immigration, says 11  
 the ideology, weakens America. A politics of innocence thus asks itself 12  
 how America can become great (which is to say, innocent) again. And its 13  
 answer is simple: rid itself of all corrupting influences—namely, immigrants. 14

The ideology and corresponding politics of innocence thus seek 15  
 to protect an innocence inscribed in America as a "once-born," young 16  
 and innocent, nation. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which 17  
 monitors hate groups all across the US, refers to those who profess this 18  
 ideology as "nativists."<sup>19</sup> This moniker directly references an unjustifiable 19  
 belief that White US Americans are somehow *original* or native to the 20  
 nation-state. The nativists that the SPLC monitors are not, of course, 21  
 the *Native Americans* of the Cherokee or Sioux Nations or the Acoma 22  
 or Laguna Pueblos, who are historically "native" to the US; the nativists 23  
 are usually US citizens who define their existential and social position *in* 24  
*opposition* to non-citizens, or immigrants. They are native in virtue of not 25  
 (currently) being immigrants. It is a weak nativism that nonetheless finds 26  
 in the immigrant other a threat to an imagined purity and innocence that 27  
 is usually associated with the historical romanticized threat to purity and 28  
 innocence that White Europeans posed to *true* Native American peoples. 29

Nativists usually espouse a litany of myths to legitimate their anti-im- 30  
 migrant ideology. Aviva Chomsky lays out 20 such myths, among them the 31  
 myth that immigrants take American jobs (Myth 1), the myth that "illegal" 32  
 immigrants have overrun the country (Myth 8), the myth that immigrants 33  
 threaten the national culture (Myth 12), and the myth that immigrants 34  
 want to take for themselves what Americans have (Myth 14).<sup>20</sup> In one 35  
 way or another, these myths are grounded on the notion of America as 36  
 superior and exceptional and thus possessing everything that is best and 37  
 desirable (Myths 1 and 14) but also innocent and vulnerable (Myths 8 38  
 and 12). If immigrants are thought to threaten the "national culture," then 39  
 40

1 this is because it is thought that they will contaminate this (presumably  
 2 “original” and pure) culture with their own, alien, culture by introducing  
 3 traditions, languages, and ways of being that are other, strange, and dis-  
 4 rupting. Moreover, if “illegal” immigrants have “overrun” the country, as  
 5 Myth 8 suggests, then not only is the national culture threatened, but so is  
 6 the law that protects it, since what we have is an infestation of illegality, a  
 7 pestilence of law-breakers running loose in our clean, pure, and innocent  
 8 cities! Both of these myths, however, are grounded on a somewhat paradox-  
 9 ical assumption, namely, that America is the greatest country in the world  
 10 and, simultaneously, that it is the most vulnerable country in the world. If  
 11 the “national culture” or the laws that support it can so easily be threatened  
 12 or broken, then this means that neither was strong nor fit to begin with.

13 Anti-immigrant sentiment in the US points to the *fear* that the  
 14 “national culture” will lose the privilege of its innocence. And this fear,  
 15 Portilla suggests, points to guilt—a guilt, prominently inscribed in history,  
 16 related to not taking responsibility for its own behavior, for the lives of  
 17 others outside its borders who should remain anonymous but who, on  
 18 “illegally” crossing the border, lose their anonymity and become real,  
 19 flesh-and-blood human beings *who must be faced*. The myths are meant to  
 20 de-realize the immigrant, to objectify them, to mask their faces. But this  
 21 guilt also points to the means whereby America can become responsible  
 22 for itself and others. Portilla writes:

23  
 24       There are good reasons therefore to assume that if US Amer-  
 25       icans now consider themselves vulnerable *as Americans*, this  
 26       is certainly a sign that the assumption of innocence of the US  
 27       American world, if not completely gone, at least is beginning  
 28       to lose its efficacy. I do not mean to say, then, that the main  
 29       tenet of US American life has ceased being innocence and has  
 30       become guilt. This would not be a crisis but a conversion. [154]

31  
 32 Such a conversion would mean that America is now “humanized among  
 33 the nations,” as Bell puts it. But Portilla doubts that such a humanizing  
 34 conversion can ever take place. Thus, he writes by way of conclusion:

35  
 36       It remains alien to our purpose to point to solutions or ways  
 37       out of the crisis.

38       What we can say is that if the resolution of the crisis is  
 39       understood in terms of America’s participation in that guilt

40

common to all humanity, a guilt that would be fully accepted by  
that nation, then we can also say that such a solution involves  
a conversion capable of subverting the very foundations of  
that culture, and, of course, this seems highly unlikely. [156]



The ideology of innocence that Portilla diagnoses is one that obscures  
truth and reality. The politics of innocence, the policies and behaviors  
that emerge from the ideology, are likewise blind to the realities of our  
modern world. If assuming a sense of guilt is the way out of this false  
self-conception, then this would mean that America (US White America)  
would have to assume responsibility for what it has done in the name of  
innocence: It would mean taking responsibility for those it has harmed  
on its way to achieving its self-proclaimed greatness. However, as Portilla  
points out, and as we can readily see today, this ideology and its politics is  
deeply ingrained in our social imaginary—purity, incorruptibility, heroism,  
strength, and greatness are still ways of describing the US American way  
of life and still provide reasons to protect it. This presumed innocence  
continues to operate and prevent the US from becoming humanized  
among nations.

## Notes

1. Jorge Portilla, “The Spritual Crisis of the United States,” translated  
by Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Francisco Gallegos. Translation included in the  
appendix. Page numbers in brackets refer to the 1984 Spanish edition of this work  
included in *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*.

2. That Portilla refers to “White US Americans” is not as obvious as I’m  
making it out to be. See chapter 4, below.

3. Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University of  
Mississippi Press, 1998), 3. Madsen writes that the idea of an “untouched inno-  
cence” “permeates every period of American history . . . it is the single most  
powerful agent in a series of argument concerning the identity of America and  
Americans” (1).

4. See Ana Santos Ruiz, *Los hijos de los dioses: El “Grupo Filosófico Hiperión”  
y la filosofía de lo mexicano* (Mexico City: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2016).

5. See Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso,  
2008).



- 1           6. Horold H. Koh, *On American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale Law  
2 School Legal Repository, 2013), 1480–1526. The term “American exceptionalism”  
3 is credited to Alexis de Toqueville who, in 1831, defined it as “the perception that  
4 the US differs qualitatively from other developed nations because of its unique  
5 origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious  
6 institutions” (1481n4).
- 7           7. Isador H. Coriat, *What is Psychoanalysis?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge,  
8 Trench, Troubner & Co., 1919), 12.
- 9           8. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: Uni-  
10 versity of Chicago Press, 1952), especially chapter 2.
- 11           9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks: Vol-*  
12 *ume XIII, 1852–1855*, ed. Ralph H. Orth and Alfred Ferguson (Cambridge, MA:  
13 Harvard University Press, 1977), 444.
- 14           10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *The Works of Ralph Waldo*  
15 *Emerson: Essays, Lectures, Poems, and Orations* (London: George Bell and Sons,  
16 1883), 20.
- 17           11. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 20.
- 18           12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. P. G.  
19 Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 211.
- 20           13. *Ibid.*, 214.
- 21           14. *Ibid.*, 239–240.
- 22           15. *Ibid.*, 244.
- 23           16. Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage: Sociological Essays and Journeys* (New  
24 Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. 271.
- 25           17. Bell, *The Winding Passage*, 271.
- 26           18. As Frederick Allen wrote for *Forbes* in his appropriately titled editorial,  
27 “September 11 and American Innocence: What Really Happened to US?”: “The  
28 other day at the Republican debate, Jon Huntsman said “I think we have had our  
29 innocence shattered” by what happened on September 11, 2001. On *Morning Joe*  
30 the journalist Tina Brown called the date “the last moment of American inno-  
31 cence,” and Mike Barnicle described it as “the end of our metaphorical summer  
32 as a country.” Frederick E. Allen, “September 11 and American Innocence: What  
33 Really Happened to US?” *Forbes*, September 9, 2011.
- 34           19. See Southern Poverty Law Center, “Anti-Immigrant,” accessed January  
35 23, 2020, [www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/anti-immigrant](http://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/anti-immigrant).
- 36           20. Aviva Chomsky, *“They Take Our Jobs!” And 20 Other Myths About*  
37 *Immigration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).
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## Chapter 4

# Portilla's Method

### *A Phenomenological Social Theory*

FRANCISCO GALLEGOS

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In the 1952 essay “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States,” Jorge Portilla offers a critical analysis of the U.S., based in part on what he observed when visiting the country earlier that year.<sup>1</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Portilla argues in this essay that everyday life in the US has historically been structured by a deep-seated “innocence,” a certain kind of naivety in which “sin, evil, and death” are experienced as being fundamentally “foreign”—not *unknown*, exactly, but *un-owned*, treated as though such things were not natural or proper parts of the “American Way of Life.” According to Portilla, however, there are signs that this innocence is beginning to disintegrate, and that the nation as a whole is confronting the possibility that it is, in fact, culpable and vulnerable in ways that it had previously dismissed. Portilla describes this change as a “spiritual crisis” that threatens to undermine the foundation of social and political life in the US, and he warns that this crisis may give rise to dangerous, defensive reactions by those who seek to cling to, preserve, and renew the innocence that now seems to be under threat.

This analysis of the US exemplifies Portilla’s commitment to what I have called “phenomenological nationalism,” the view (examined in detail in chapter 2) that individuals’ sense-making capacities are mediated and structured by their nationality. In particular, Portilla argues that the way



1 individual US Americans interpret and relate to the world is profoundly  
 2 influenced by certain affective attunements—namely, innocence and,  
 3 increasingly, *threatened innocence*. Portilla highlights several ways these  
 4 affective attunements manifest themselves, and by thinking *with* Portilla,  
 5 we can identify similar trends that have emerged since the essay’s publica-  
 6 tion. In US politics today, for example, we can find threatened innocence  
 7 on the Right in the form of defensive hostility toward those who criticize  
 8 the nation. On the Left, threatened innocence animates a sanctimonious  
 9 preoccupation with the nation’s guilt and a puritanical tendency to blame  
 10 and demonize those who appear to personify and defend the nation’s worst  
 11 qualities—as though “they” were the greatest obstacle preventing the nation  
 12 from finally claiming the innocence that is proper to it. Portilla’s analysis  
 13 thus suggests that the fate of individual US Americans is tied to the fate  
 14 of their nation, but that crude political nationalism, naive idealism, or an  
 15 insistence on “American exceptionalism” is not what is needed. Rather,  
 16 the crucial question is: Can the US, as a nation, develop the emotional  
 17 maturity required to accept, and come to terms with, its participation in  
 18 the sin, evil, and death common to all humankind?

19 In this chapter, I shift the focus from the content and conceptual  
 20 framework of Portilla’s analysis of the US to the *methodology* that he employs  
 21 in this text. The topic of Portilla’s methodology is likely to be a salient point  
 22 of interest to many of his readers. His conclusions are bold and troubling,  
 23 and so it behooves us to inquire about whether they are well grounded.  
 24 When we do so, we see that many of his conclusions rest on empirically  
 25 verifiable assertions, such as his assertions that certain attitudes and behav-  
 26 iors are widespread in the US but not present to the same degree in other  
 27 nations. Yet Portilla was not trained as a sociologist, anthropologist, or  
 28 ethnographer. With this in mind, we may wonder: On what grounds does  
 29 he make assertions about the characteristic and distinctive features of US  
 30 society and culture? To put the question provocatively, we might ask: What,  
 31 if anything, distinguishes Portilla’s analysis of the US (and other nations)  
 32 from *amateur, armchair social science*? In less pointed and more general  
 33 terms, how should we describe Portilla’s approach to cultural analysis, and  
 34 how should we evaluate the credibility and merit of his approach?

35 In section 1, I begin by sketching the methodological principles that  
 36 appear to guide Portilla’s analysis of the US. After clarifying some of the  
 37 central elements of what I call Portilla’s “phenomenological social theory,”  
 38 I turn in section 2 to an examination of Portilla’s innovative use of phe-  
 39  
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nomenology, highlighting several ways that his analysis, which focuses on 1  
 phenomenological structures operating at a *national* level, compares and 2  
 contrasts with a more traditional approach to the phenomenology, which 3  
 typically focuses on the experience of individuals. Finally, in section 3, 4  
 I raise a few concerns regarding Portilla's empirical claims about life in 5  
 the US. In my view, Portilla's analysis would have been strengthened if he 6  
 had acknowledged the diversity of the US and explicitly directed his focus 7  
 toward the "innocence" of the *White mainstream* of US society. Moreover, 8  
 I argue that his account overlooks some reasons to suspect that this social 9  
 group has *always* experienced its innocence as being "in crisis." If this is 10  
 correct, it suggests that Portilla was mistaken to conclude that in 1952 11  
 he was witnessing a historical shift in the existential foundations of the 12  
 US American way of life. 13

Whatever we conclude about these potential oversights, however, I 14  
 believe that Portilla's analysis offers a rich resource for those who seek 15  
 a deeper understanding of the US. His analysis points directly to one of 16  
 the deepest puzzles about this nation: How can it be that a nation that is 17  
 founded on such grave injustices as the genocide of Native Americans, the 18  
 enslavement and mistreatment of generations of African Americans, and 19  
 the violent domination and exploitation of people around the world, can 20  
 maintain—however tenuously, defensively, and neurotically—a conception 21  
 of itself as innocent, and indeed, as an indispensable force for moral righ- 22  
 teousness in the world? Although Portilla's essay leaves unanswered many 23  
 of the questions it raises, they are, at least, the right questions to ask. As 24  
 we will see, pursuing the conversation that Portilla has initiated promises 25  
 to shed light on the underlying logic behind some of the contradictory 26  
 attitudes about matters of justice that animate US Americans—and perhaps 27  
 point the way toward a more authentic American redemption. 28

## 1. Portilla's Analytical Strategy 31

Because Portilla rarely reflected explicitly about his methods, interpreters 33  
 must rely on their own inferences in order to extract the general principles 34  
 that appear to guide his reasoning in particular cases. In this section, I 35  
 begin by sketching my view of Portilla's analytical strategy, and then I 36  
 offer a few observations about what I see as some of the most innovative, 37  
 problematic, and fecund aspects of his approach. 38

39

40



## 1 1.1. PORTILLA'S ARGUMENT BY THE STEPS

2

3 Portilla's line of reasoning in "The Spiritual Crisis of the United States"  
 4 can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, Portilla argues that for  
 5 much of US history, life in the US has taken place within what he calls  
 6 "an innocent world," and as such, it has been profoundly and pervasively  
 7 influenced by a distinctive phenomenological structure that operates at a  
 8 national level. In the second stage, Portilla argues that this innocent world  
 9 is now "in crisis," i.e., that it is becoming destabilized and is possibly on  
 10 the verge of collapsing.

11 Each of these two stages of Portilla's argument involves three steps,  
 12 which we can call *observation*, *generalization*, and *transcendental speculation*.  
 13 In the first stage of his argument, Portilla begins by making observations  
 14 about particular, manifest behaviors and attitudes of US Americans, such  
 15 as:

16

17 • A naive lack of appreciation for the reality of death [146],  
 18 and a desire for narratives to have "happy endings" [150];

19

20 • An arrogant sense of entitlement to power over others [151];

21

22 • A valorization of quantification and the assumption that  
 23 bigger is always better [142];

23

24 • A valorization of action, initiative, and enterprise, and an  
 25 insistence on thinking about life's challenges as *problems* that  
 26 can and should be *solved* [144].

27

28 The next stage of Portilla's argument, which I call "generalization," remains  
 29 implicit in the text. Generalization refers to the claim that the behaviors  
 30 and attitudes that have been observed are representative of general trends  
 31 in the US, or as Portilla puts it at one point, that they belong to "the  
 32 US American in general" [146]. Portilla never explicitly defends the idea  
 33 that the tendencies he observes have, in fact, been characteristic and dis-  
 34 tinctive of the US throughout its history—i.e., widespread in this nation,  
 35 but not widespread in other nations—but his argument depends on this  
 36 assumption. After all, if the behaviors and attitudes he observed were  
 37 merely idiosyncratic to the particular individuals involved, or perhaps were  
 38 common to only a small section of the population, then Portilla would  
 39 have no grounds for making any claims about life in the US as a whole.

40



Thus, even though Portilla often runs together the steps of observation and generalization, I distinguish these steps here in order to highlight, for the benefit of future readers and scholars, the importance of Portilla's implicit assumption that his observations generalize.<sup>2</sup> As we will see in section 3 of this chapter, I find this assumption to be particularly problematic.

The final step of this stage of Portilla's argument involves what is known as "transcendental" reasoning—that is, reasoning about *conditions of possibility*. In this case, Portilla attempts to identify, through *a priori* reflection, the conditions that make it possible for US Americans to exhibit the characteristic and distinctive tendencies that he has observed. He asks: What conditions would give rise to these tendencies? In answer to this question, Portilla draws on the phenomenological notion of a "world," arguing that the behaviors and attitudes he has observed could only be possible if everyday life in the US took place within a world that was innocent, organized around a "peculiar feeling of purity, of unfamiliarity with the somber facts of existence, facts which are supposed to be absent from US American life" [146]. This line of transcendental reasoning appears repeatedly in the text. For example, as we saw in the previous chapter, Portilla begins the essay by recounting the story of Dr. Eaton, a funeral director in California who commissions a portrait of Jesus smiling with joy, thereby revealing his obliviousness to the significance of Jesus as a religious symbol of martyrdom.<sup>3</sup> Portilla argues that the idea to commission such a painting was "very original, and it is almost certain that Dr. Eaton's strange pretense has not occurred to anyone outside the United States" [141]. Just as Dr. Eaton's line of reasoning would be unthinkable for those who do not share his innocence, so, too, Portilla says, the characteristically American assumption that *bigger is better* only makes sense within an innocent world.

The condition of possibility for considering quantity as the criterion of value is precisely an innocent world. . . . In a world conscious of evil, magnitude does not say anything; it is axiologically mute and may even take on a sinister aspect. Consider, for example, the dimension of apocalyptic beasts in the Tower of Babel, or the somber aura of giants in Greek mythology or the world of Germanic sagas. [143]

Portilla makes the same kind of claim with regard to many other phenomena, saying that the existence of a world marked by innocence is the

1 condition for the possibility of American pragmatism,<sup>4</sup> the doctrine of  
 2 Manifest Destiny,<sup>5</sup> the cultural preoccupation with sex, psychoanalysis,  
 3 crime, and detective novels,<sup>6</sup> and so on. Portilla thus concludes that there is  
 4 a phenomenological structure—that is, a certain kind of world—operating  
 5 at a national level, making it possible for individuals in the US to think,  
 6 feel, and act in the ways he has observed. Thus, if Portilla’s reasoning is  
 7 correct, we can expect that “the idea of innocence *serves* to make sense of  
 8 almost every particular nuance of that [US American] way of life” [142].

9 This completes the first stage of Portilla’s argument. But Portilla  
 10 is not yet finished, because he observes a second set of behaviors and  
 11 attitudes among US Americans that appears to contradict the notion  
 12 that everyday life in the US takes place within an innocent world. For  
 13 example, he observes:

14

- 15 • The emergence of numerous academic and popular critiques  
 16 of the US, its history, values, and actions [152ff];
- 17 • Defensive reactions to such critiques, including McCarthyist  
 18 attempts to persecute individuals and ideas that are perceived  
 19 as threats to the dominant values of the nation [154f];
- 20 • A shift in political discourse, in which the source of justi-  
 21 fication for the US American way of life is located in the  
 22 past, instead of in the future [156].

24

25 Once again, Portilla implicitly assumes that these observations general-  
 26 ize—i.e., that these behaviors and attitudes represent a historically new  
 27 and increasingly widespread set of tendencies within the US. And again,  
 28 on this basis, Portilla employs transcendental reasoning, inquiring about  
 29 what conditions would make these changes possible. He argues that these  
 30 new tendencies could only arise if the innocence of the US was beginning  
 31 to disintegrate, giving rise to a profound sense of anxiety surrounding  
 32 the central concern of moral righteousness. For example, he describes a  
 33 kind of Cold War-era “propaganda” that “pervades all advertising media,  
 34 according to which we must defend the threatened US American way of  
 35 life” [153]. Portilla argues that this attitude is only possible in a world in  
 36 which the underlying assumption of innocence is beginning to disappear.

37

38 Why defend the American way of life and not just speak rather  
 39 of freedom or human rights?

40

More than any other point this one appears to . . . [reveal] 1  
 the crisis of US American consciousness. Indeed, only the 2  
 vulnerable can be defended and, at the very same moment in 3  
 which the necessity to defend a form of life appears, so does the 4  
 insufficiency of that form of life. . . . Innocence is by definition 5  
 invulnerable, and what is invulnerable does not require any 6  
 defense whatsoever. . . . There are good reasons therefore to 7  
 assume that if US Americans now consider themselves vulnera- 8  
 ble as *Americans*, this is certainly a sign that the assumption of 9  
 innocence of the US American world, if not completely gone, 10  
 at least is beginning to lose its efficacy. [153–154] 11

Portilla thus concludes that a new historical process is undermining the 13  
 phenomenological structure that has previously organized everyday life 14  
 in the US. 15

With this sketch of Portilla's analytical strategy in place, we are now 16  
 in a position to make some general observations about his methodology. 17

#### 1.2. PORTILLA AS SOCIAL THEORIST 19

As we have seen, each stage of Portilla's argument combines two dis- 21  
 tinct styles of reasoning. The steps of *observation* and *generalization* are 22  
 empirical in nature, while the step of *transcendental speculation* is phe- 23  
 nomenological. Within the tradition of phenomenology, this particular 24  
 combination of methodological approaches appears to offer both benefits 25  
 and drawbacks. On the one hand, by beginning with an empirically 26  
 informed cultural analysis, Portilla is able to articulate creative insights 27  
 into a number of pressing issues that have not been explored by other 28  
 phenomenologists. On the other hand, Portilla's reliance on empirical 29  
 claims also represents a significant liability for his project. His entire line 30  
 of thought depends on the accuracy of his observations and on whether 31  
 he is correct that these observations represent trends that are characteristic 32  
 and distinctive of the US. However, Portilla is not equipped to demon- 33  
 strate the validity of these claims; he is in no position, for example, to 34  
 perform controlled experiments, surveys, or data analysis to compare the 35  
 behavior and attitudes of US and non-US nationals over time. Thus, the 36  
 viability of his project ultimately depends on whether future research in 37  
 the social sciences can demonstrate the validity of his observations and 38  
 generalizations. 39

40



1       Insofar as Portilla is making claims that directly depend on validation  
2 from the social sciences, it is reasonable to wonder what distinguishes his  
3 work from mere armchair sociology. After all, it seems undeniable that  
4 Portilla does not have sufficient grounds to make conclusive assertions about  
5 trends in US culture and society; therefore, if we take Portilla's central aim to  
6 be *making conclusive assertions about trends in US culture and society*, then  
7 we cannot avoid coming to a negative assessment of the credibility of his  
8 approach. However, there is an alternative interpretation of Portilla's project  
9 that I find more plausible. According to this interpretation, Portilla's work  
10 ought to be understood as an example of what I call "phenomenological  
11 social theory"—an approach to theorizing about social and political issues  
12 that draws on the tradition of phenomenology in order *to generate concepts*  
13 *and hypotheses* that can guide future research within the social sciences.

14       There are two elements of this interpretation that may save Porti-  
15 lla from being prematurely rejected for lacking a scientifically adequate  
16 methodology. First, if we read Portilla's essay as a work of *social theory*,  
17 then its present lack of evidential support can be seen as a feature of its  
18 innovativeness, rather than a sign of its inadequacy. After all, social theory  
19 always involves some amount speculation in order to enter into the so-called  
20 "hermeneutic circle," because articulating the larger significance of a set of  
21 facts necessarily requires a leap beyond those facts themselves. Whenever  
22 a social theorist attempts to establish a new conceptual framework for  
23 interpreting and guiding research in the social sciences, it is inevitable  
24 that they will do so "on credit," so to speak, with the promise and hope  
25 that future research will demonstrate the fruitfulness of the theory they are  
26 proposing. This enables social theorists to avoid—temporarily—objections  
27 that they would otherwise have difficulty answering. For example, even  
28 if we are compelled by Portilla's examples of US American innocence, a  
29 reader might accuse him of simply "cherry-picking" examples that already  
30 fit with the theory that he is trying to construct. After all, there are innu-  
31 merable events that could be observed about everyday life in the US, many  
32 of which are utterly insignificant. How, then, does Portilla know which  
33 events are significant for the purposes of his theory, unless he is already  
34 viewing the data in a motivated and biased way? But although this is a  
35 significant concern for any theorist, it is not itself a sufficient reason to  
36 reject a theory out of hand. While we might wish that Portilla had been  
37 clearer about the principles of selection that guided his acquisition of data  
38 points to be explained, nevertheless, he is entitled, *as a theorist*, to take  
39 interpretive risks in order to get his theoretical model off the ground.  
40

Understood in this way, every claim that Portilla makes should be thought of as a mere *hypothesis* to be confirmed or disconfirmed by those with the scientific training necessary to reach conclusions about such things. Admittedly, this interpretation of Portilla's work goes against the grain of his writing style, insofar as his pronouncements about life in the US and other nations often have the surface grammar of factual assertions or conclusions. If my interpretation is correct, we should read each of these sentences as being preceded by an implicit qualification, such as "*It is my hypothesis that . . .*" Thus, rather than simply asserting that US Americans have this or that characteristic tendency, Portilla should be read as hypothesizing that future research will show that US Americans have the tendencies he describes. Interpreted in this way, his essay is implicitly voiced in a subjunctive tense, and its ultimate aim is to articulate elements of a theoretical paradigm that may prove to useful for understanding the contemporary world. Ideally it would inspire social scientists to design new controlled experiments, surveys, and data analyses, and to reevaluate the relevant sociological and anthropological literatures, in order to corroborate and refine Portilla's theoretical outlook.<sup>7</sup>

Although Portilla does not have training in the social sciences, such training is not necessarily required of those playing the distinctive role of social theorist. And as a theorist, Portilla certainly has training that ought to give him some initial credibility. His central qualifications are the skills and sensibilities that he has gained from a lifetime of study, reflection, and conversation with intelligent and well-educated interlocutors about the ways that individuals' experiences can be shaped by both existential structures and socio-historical forces. These interlocutors include, of course, the other members of the Grupo Hiperión, who devoted an extraordinary amount of intellectual effort to understanding the nature and effects of national cultures. Moreover, it is clear that Portilla applied his skills and sensibilities to a massive amount of data about cultural trends in US, collected from careful observations of, and personal interactions with, a wide variety of individuals, institutions, and cultural artifacts in the US. In addition, Portilla's writing demonstrates that he is conversant with the work of some of the most prominent historians and social theorists of the time, including Reinhold Niebuhr and R. H. Tawney.<sup>8</sup>

Besides its *theoretical* nature, a second aspect of Portilla's approach that distinguishes it from pseudoscience is its *phenomenological* nature. Indeed, in my view, Portilla's innovative use of phenomenology is the most fecund aspect of his theorizing. As we will see in the following section,

1 phenomenology can be particularly helpful for understanding the holistic  
 2 nature of human life. As with any holistic structure, the ways that human  
 3 beings think, feel, and act can be difficult to understand in terms of the  
 4 causal interactions of component parts. For example, when seeking to  
 5 explain a certain social trend, a non-phenomenological explanation—  
 6 what Portilla calls a “genetic explanation” [143]—will seek to identify the  
 7 underlying causes or mechanisms that give rise to the trend:

8

9 Genetic cause(s) → Particular behaviors and attitudes

10

11 However, because human life is so complex, and each individual element of  
 12 our experience and behaviors is multiply determined by the innumerable  
 13 elements with which it is interconnected, a genetic explanation is often  
 14 exceedingly difficult to provide. In contrast, a phenomenological expla-  
 15 nation of the same social trend posits the existence of an intermediary  
 16 structure between the mechanical causes of the trend and the various  
 17 effects to be explained:

18

19 Genetic cause(s) → Phenomenological structure (e.g., a “world”) →  
 20 Particular behaviors and attitudes

21

22 Phenomenology, as a discipline, is not in a position to explain why any given  
 23 genetic causes would give rise to a particular phenomenological structure.  
 24 That part of the explanation is left to the sciences, with the expectation that  
 25 we may never fully comprehend the mystery of such emergence. However,  
 26 phenomenology *is* poised to offer illuminating insight into the underlying  
 27 logic of the particular behaviors and attitudes in question.<sup>9</sup> Let us turn,  
 28 then, to a brief examination of how Portilla employs phenomenological  
 29 concepts and methods in order to illuminate some otherwise perplexing  
 30 features of the various ways that US Americans tend to relate to matters  
 31 of morality and justice.

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## 2. A Phenomenology of the Nation

35

36 In order to see more clearly what makes Portilla’s approach distinctive  
 37 within the tradition of phenomenology, consider how a phenomenological  
 38 analysis typically proceeds. Typically, a phenomenological analysis begins

39

40

with a description of an individual's experience from the first-person point of view; from there, it moves to a transcendental argument about the ontological conditions for the possibility of this experience, often concluding with a characterization of the human condition. We see this pattern, for example, in Heidegger's analysis of the emotion of fear in his classic text, *Being and Time*. In this analysis, Heidegger begins by describing the way an individual *experiences* fear, putting aside considerations of how brain produces this experience or whether the experience is provoked by something that is "objectively real" or "merely imagined." Starting from this first-person perspective, Heidegger notes several interesting aspects of the experience, such as the fact that fear involves the experience of being *threatened*. He then deploys a transcendental argument, saying that any experience of fear must be made possible by a preexisting affective attunement to the concern for safety and security, because without the previous influence of this affective attunement, one would not be disposed to register and respond to things that pose a threat.<sup>10</sup> He concludes that this fact reveals something important about the human condition—namely, that for creatures like us, our experience is always already structured by an implicit awareness of our vulnerability. Thus, vulnerability is not merely something "ontic" (i.e., concrete or particular) that we occasionally confront; rather, vulnerability is an "ontological" structure that mediates and influences the way we experience every particular thing we encounter.

In contrast to this classic approach, Portilla's work does not begin with a description of his own experience; instead, he begins with a description of the experience of a quite large group of people, namely, a nation. From there, Portilla offers a transcendental argument, not about the ontological conditions common to human beings as such, but about the existential conditions common to this particular group. Thus, between the ontic level of an individual's particular experiences and the ontological level of the ground of experience for human beings as such, Portilla posits an intermediary phenomenological structure—the nation, or more precisely, the world that members of a nation inhabit—which modifies the characteristics and potentialities of the human condition in distinctive ways:

- *Surface level*: the particular experiences of individuals (ontic);
- *Intermediate level*: the nation/national world (ontic-ontological);
- *Ground level*: the human condition (ontological).

1 When we articulate Portilla's approach in this way, two questions come to  
 2 the fore. First, as I noted above, Portilla's analysis begins with a descrip-  
 3 tion of the experience of a group, rather than an individual. With this  
 4 in mind, we may wonder: Does Portilla operate on the (undoubtedly  
 5 controversial) assumption that a nation can have experiences—i.e., that a  
 6 nation constitutes some sort of collective or plural subjectivity that has a  
 7 kind of “first-person point of view”? Second, how should we think about  
 8 a phenomenological structure that supposedly operates at an intermediate,  
 9 ontic-ontological level? In particular, how does Portilla conceptualize a  
 10 national “world,” and in what sense does he think that the existence of  
 11 such a world makes certain behaviors and attitudes “possible”?

12

### 13 2.1. NATIONALITY AND COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

14

15 Does Portilla view nations as collective subjects? This question gains some  
 16 urgency when we consider that in his essay “Phenomenology of Relajo,”  
 17 Portilla appears to endorse the possibility that experiences can be shared  
 18 by groups of people. In that essay, Portilla argues that when individuals  
 19 are participating in a group activity—such as a ballet performance, fiesta,  
 20 university lecture, ceremony, or conversation—these individuals can  
 21 experience the situation in a genuinely collective manner, sharing the  
 22 experience in such a way that, as one philosopher puts it, “the sharing  
 23 is not a matter of type, or of qualitative identity (i.e., of having different  
 24 things that are somehow similar), but a matter of token, or *numerical*  
 25 *identity*.”<sup>11</sup> Portilla suggests that this may happen, for example, when the  
 26 people in the audience at a ballet performance find themselves moved by  
 27 the gracefulness of the dance, or when party-goers get swept up in the  
 28 joyousness of the celebration. In moments like this—when a group of  
 29 people is swept up in shared mood, responding to an evaluative property  
 30 (e.g., the *gracefulness* of the dance, or the *joyousness* of the celebration)  
 31 whose emergence depends, in part, on their own activity—the individuals  
 32 involved will experience themselves as united together in a profound type  
 33 of experiential solidarity that Portilla calls “coexistence.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as we  
 34 will see in more detail in chapter 6, Portilla argues that such experiences  
 35 of coexistence are of great importance, because they are the true “foun-  
 36 dation of a community.”<sup>13</sup>

37 Nevertheless, although Portilla accepts the possibility that experi-  
 38 ences can be shared in some circumstances, he does not claim that entire  
 39 nations can share an experience in this way. To the contrary, Portilla's  
 40

analysis of shared experiences provides reason to doubt that a group so large and disparate as a nation could ever constitute a collective subjectivity. The reason is that, because coexistence involves “the continuous self-constitution of a group in reference to a value,” coexistence is a fragile state that can easily be disrupted.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, for Portilla, the primary danger posed by certain types of characters, such as the *relajiento* and the *apretado*, lies in their tendency to disrupt the mood that is sustaining a moment of coexistence, thereby undermining the existential foundation of a community.<sup>15</sup> In Portilla's view, the achievement of genuine coexistence is always fragile and fleeting, even in relatively intimate settings, because it requires that the people involved in a group activity orchestrate and navigate a collective mood and thereby sustain a certain kind of emotional engagement over time.

With this in mind, it is difficult to imagine how an entire nation might genuinely share any experience, given how unlikely it is that so many diverse people could be emotionally responsive to anything in a sufficiently similar manner, not to mention participate in a shared activity across such great distances. It is possible, perhaps, that some examples may be found in historic events that galvanize a nation in an extraordinary way. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US may have experienced a genuinely shared mood of anxiety as the nation collectively engaged in the activity of figuring out what had happened and what the implications of the attack would be. Nevertheless, the remarkable depth of national solidarity that is experienced in such moments is rare and relatively short lived. In contrast, the kind of structures that Portilla describes in his analysis of nations—such as the *zozobra* of Mexico and the innocence of the US—are supposed to endure for decades at a time.

It is thus likely that when Portilla undertakes the phenomenological analysis of a nation, he does not think of a nation as constituting a collective subjectivity that has a shared point of view. A better way to understand Portilla's approach, in my view, is to think of it as a kind of speculation about the way that *individuals* within a nation experience themselves and the world. Thus, any assertions that Portilla makes about a “nation” should be interpreted as shorthand for equivalent assertions about “the individuals who are members of the nation.” For example, when Portilla talks about the ideals that have “led this nation [the US] to optimism and an unwavering confidence” [150], we should interpret such passages as referring to widespread dispositions among individual US Americans

1 to experience themselves and the world in a certain way—in this case,  
 2 in an optimistic and confident manner. This interpretation has the virtue  
 3 of being consistent with Portilla’s views regarding shared experiences, as  
 4 well as the virtue of generosity, insofar as it relieves Portilla of the need  
 5 to carry the heavy metaphysical baggage associated with positing the  
 6 existence of large-scale collective subjectivities.

7 But if a nation is not a collective subject, then what is the organiz-  
 8 ing force that makes it possible for millions of individuals members of a  
 9 nation to exhibit the characteristic and distinctive qualities that Portilla  
 10 has identified?

11

## 12 2.2. NATION, WORLD, AND POSSIBILITY

13

14 In order to clarify Portilla’s innovative understanding of “world” and  
 15 “possibility”—concepts that play a crucial role in his argument—it may  
 16 be helpful to begin once again with a comparison to Heidegger. One  
 17 prominent difference, as we will see, is that while Heidegger focuses on  
 18 *the* world, or perhaps the *human* world, Portilla is interested in what  
 19 might be called a “sub-world,” that is, a world that is inhabited by a certain  
 20 group of people at a certain historical moment. This difference will have  
 21 important implications that Portilla’s readers will have to work through.

22 In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines the “world” as a *context of*  
 23 *significance* in virtue of which, and in terms of which, things become *intel-*  
 24 *ligible* and *make sense* in the ways that they do.<sup>16</sup> As one interpreter puts it:

25

26 The world is a horizon of understanding, a space of possibilities,  
 27 on the background of which we understand both paraphernalia  
 28 [i.e., the objects that surround us in everyday life, such as tables  
 29 and phones] and ourselves. . . . The world is a unitary horizon  
 30 for making sense of both human life and the paraphernalia  
 31 with which we surround ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

32

33 Thus, in Heidegger’s view, the world, as a context of significance, makes  
 34 it possible for things to show up as intelligible objects of our experience.  
 35 For example, to return to Heidegger’s analysis of fear, the human world  
 36 is one in which our safety and security can be threatened; in other  
 37 words, the “space of possibilities” that we inhabit includes the possibility  
 38 of being harmed. This inescapable vulnerability is one element of the  
 39 context of significance in terms of which we make sense of the things  
 40



we encounter, and as such, this context of significance makes it possible 1  
 for us to experience a certain class of objects—namely, *threats*. Imagine, 2  
 for instance, that we were not already attuned to the concern for our 3  
 security, perhaps because we had a psychiatric condition that prevented 4  
 us from understanding why it would matter if things affected our safety 5  
 and security. In this case, a threat, as such, could never be present in our 6  
 experience. Even if we were locked in a room with a hungry tiger, the 7  
 situation would not show up, or make sense to us, as a “threat.” Of course, 8  
*other* people observing the situation might see us as being threatened, but 9  
 threats could never show up in our *own* experience, because the possibil- 10  
 ity of being threatened would not even be intelligible to us. The point is 11  
 that if something is truly unintelligible to us in this way, we will remain 12  
 oblivious to it. Heidegger thus conceptualizes the world as our outermost 13  
 horizon of understanding, which serves as the ultimate condition for the 14  
 possibility of things showing up in our experience.<sup>18</sup> 15

However, this does not appear to be the way that Portilla concep- 16  
 tualizes the “innocent world” inhabited by US Americans. If we relied on 17  
 Heidegger’s conception of *world* to interpret Portilla, we would be forced 18  
 to read Portilla as making the implausible claim that US Americans have 19  
 been *literally* unable to make sense of the notion that they are subject to 20  
 death, and that they partake in sin and evil—as though these things were 21  
 simply unintelligible to US Americans, and so could not even show up 22  
 in their experience. This idea calls to mind an absurd alternative reality 23  
 in which US Americans literally do not understand what death is, and 24  
 so are bizarrely unaffected by the sudden disappearance of their friends 25  
 and loved ones. Along these lines, Portilla teasingly mentions the preacher 26  
 Vincent Norman Peale’s book *Not Death at All*, the title of which seems 27  
 to give voice to the innocence of US American in a humorously exag- 28  
 gerated way [146]. 29

A more plausible way to understand Portilla’s view, I argue, is to 30  
 interpret his notion of “possibility” as roughly equivalent to we some- 31  
 times call a “live option”—i.e., a possibility for thinking, feeling, or acting 32  
 that shows up to a person as *reasonable*, *fitting*, or *viable*, based on the 33  
 person’s prior experiences, and given what appears to matter most in the 34  
 situation at hand.<sup>19</sup> Put another way, a live option is a possibility that 35  
 has a significant degree of what I call “normative grip.” Normative grip 36  
 is the sense of being called upon or required to uphold some standard 37  
 or norm in the way we think or behave, or in the attitudes that we take 38  
 toward things. When we experience a high degree of normative grip, for 39  
 40



1 example, we might find ourselves so gripped by the importance of acting  
 2 in a certain way that acting otherwise becomes completely unthinkable.  
 3 In contrast, when we experience a low degree of normative grip, we  
 4 might understand in a “merely intellectual” way that a particular action  
 5 is required or fitting, but find that this thought fails to move us emo-  
 6 tionally or to be conclusive in our deliberations about what to do. When  
 7 we interpret Portilla in these terms, we can describe his view as holding  
 8 that an innocent world is a context of significance in which certain kinds  
 9 of attitudes and behaviors—particularly those related to the concern of  
 10 moral righteousness—appear to be live options, while others appear *not*  
 11 to be live options. In such a world, the possibility of being vulnerable to  
 12 sin, evil, and death may be perfectly intelligible, *strictly speaking*, but this  
 13 possibility nonetheless has little or no normative grip. Individuals who  
 14 inhabit this world may understand in a “merely intellectual” way that  
 15 they are collectively responsible for grave injustices, and that life is often  
 16 tragic and unfair and always ends in death; but if they should consider  
 17 these thoughts, they are likely to turn their attention elsewhere relatively  
 18 quickly, without allowing the implications of these ideas to reverberate  
 19 deeply in their thoughts and actions. In this way, such individuals are  
 20 like reckless young people who are innocent, in the sense of lacking life  
 21 experience, and so relatively unresponsive to the possibility of seriously  
 22 harming other people and being harmed themselves.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, a  
 23 non-innocent world (such as we might find in Mexico, perhaps) would be  
 24 a context of significance within which individuals experience themselves  
 25 as being called upon, with some urgency, to respond in appropriate ways  
 26 to sin, evil, and death, which have already marked their lives and may  
 27 appear again at any moment.

28

## 29 2.3. THREE BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE WORLD OF INNOCENCE

30

31 Although this way of conceptualizing “world” and “possibility” is not  
 32 found in Heidegger, we can nonetheless draw from his work in order to  
 33 develop these concepts further. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes  
 34 three basic aspects of our ability to make sense of our experience: (1)  
 35 our cognitive and linguistic capacities, (2) our emotional responsiveness,  
 36 and (3) our practical skills and tools, together with the relevant aspects  
 37 of our bodies, traditions, and institutions that enable our skills and tools  
 38 to be effective.<sup>21</sup> In order to make sense of something, it is necessary to  
 39 have a concept and a word for it, or at least to have a conceptual and  
 40

linguistic context that is congruent with the development of such a concept and word. Likewise, in order to grasp the meaning of something, it necessary to be able to respond emotionally to the ways the object impinges on one's concerns and values. Lastly, in order for something to be intelligible, there must exist a practical context that enables the thing to function in its characteristic ways. Each of these capacities make it possible for us to have meaningful experiences, and as such, alterations in any of these capacities will alter the limit of what we can understand and experience as real.

One of the most dramatic illustrations of this line of thought is found in Jonathan Lear's discussion of the collapse of traditional way of life of the Crow, an indigenous tribe in North America, in the late nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> As Lear reports, one important traditional practice for the Crow was the practice of planting a coup-stick, in which Crow warriors would drive a stick into the ground in a mortal vow not to retreat beyond the where the stick was planted. The possibility of performing this action depended on the existence of a context of significance in which this action had meaning. This context of significance is constituted by (1) a vast network of concepts and words, including the concepts and words for *coup-stick*, *warrior*, *retreat*, *death*, and so on, that enable the Crow and their interlocutors to think and talk in meaningful ways about the practice; (2) a widespread disposition to respond emotionally in certain ways to the act of planting a coup-stick and a range of related actions, such as displaying courage or cowardice on and off the battlefield; and (3) an immense assortment of items (including, most prominently, coup-sticks), skills, traditions, and institutions that surrounded and supported the practice of planting a coup-stick and allowed it to have the meaning that it had (including legitimate procedures for determining whether a coup-stick was properly planted and whether the concomitant vow was upheld). The collapse of the Crow traditional way of life meant the disappearance of these cognitive and linguistic capacities, emotional dispositions, skills, tools, traditions, and institutions. The central point, for our purposes, is that without this *context of significance*, it is no longer possible to plant a coup-stick. A person can drive a stick into the ground and make a vow not to retreat, but in the absence of this context, such an act will not constitute planting a coup-stick and will not be intelligible to anyone as such.

Lear's analysis is Heideggerian in its focus on the conditions under which something is intelligible or unintelligible, possible or impossible.

1 But as we have seen, Portilla does not appear to think about innocence  
2 in these terms. Indeed, it seems clear that US Americans generally have  
3 the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional capacities to make sense (strictly  
4 speaking) of their subjection to sin, evil, and death, and likewise, US  
5 society already contains the traditions and institutions that would be  
6 required for the nation to take accountability for its sins and to respond  
7 appropriately to the reality of evil and death.

8 How, then, might these three basic elements of our sense-making  
9 capacities enter into Portilla's analysis? In my view, by distinguishing these  
10 three constitutive elements of sense-making, we can see that each of these  
11 capacities can be relatively *developed* or *underdeveloped*. We can thus imag-  
12 ine a spectrum or range in a person's or society's capacity to make sense of  
13 something in each of these three different ways that sense-making occurs.  
14 From this perspective, we can interpret Portilla's view as follows: Everyday  
15 life in the US has historically taken place in a context of significance in  
16 which these three sense-making capacities are underdeveloped with regard  
17 to the task of coming to terms in a genuine, mature, and realistic way,  
18 with our inescapable subjection to sin, evil, and death.

19 On this view, individuals in US society may be able to think and  
20 talk about sin, evil, and death, but in general, they have not been able to  
21 do so *very well*, in the sense that the meaning of these difficult aspects of  
22 human life often fails to reverberate deeply enough to shape what appears  
23 as a normatively gripping, live option. It is possible that certain concepts  
24 and words have been lacking that would help individuals to track the  
25 relevant distinctions and connections. For example, with regard to the  
26 capacity to think and talk about injustice, Miranda Fricker has argued that  
27 when the term "sexual harassment" came into public use in the 1970s, this  
28 concept helped people identify and understand the meaning of a kind of  
29 injustice that they had witnessed or experienced but failed to comprehend  
30 fully.<sup>23</sup> Today, terms such as "privilege" and "microaggression" are gaining  
31 acceptance and contributing to the capacity of US Americans to think  
32 and talk about injustice, and surely other terms that could be invented in  
33 the future would help as well. In addition to the lack of particular words  
34 and concepts, US society may demonstrate a relative lack of diligence and  
35 skill with regard to pursuing conversations about these topics over time  
36 and across different sectors of society. As a result, US Americans do not  
37 normally have access to the cognitive-linguistic environment in which the  
38 relevant assertions, questions, requests, and imperatives are able to function  
39  
40

in a way that enables individuals to think and talk about injustice very 1  
well. A similar set of arguments could be marshaled with regard to the 2  
capacity to think and talk about death. 3

Likewise, according to the interpretation of Portilla's view that I 4  
am proposing, while US Americans have access to the basic emotional 5  
or practical capacities required to understand sin, evil, and death in a 6  
merely intellectual way, they have not developed these capacities as fully 7  
as would be required in order for the meaning of these aspects of life to 8  
resonate more deeply. With regard to the capacity to respond emotionally 9  
to sin, evil, and death, US Americans have suffered from a lack of suffi- 10  
cient opportunities to practice, from a young age and throughout their 11  
lives, the emotional skills required for engaging with these themes in a 12  
sustained and vulnerable way. As a result, US Americans often lack the 13  
"psychosocial stamina" required to respond emotionally to these painful 14  
aspects of life without resorting to defensive maneuvers, such as the 15  
defensive strategies of dismissal, denial, and problematization discussed 16  
in chapter 2.<sup>24</sup> With regard to the capacity to deal with these topics in 17  
a practically competent way, US American society has traditions and 18  
institutions that can address sin, evil, and death, but these traditions and 19  
institutions have generally not been able to do so very well. In courts of 20  
law and public opinion, there has been a lack of the precedents, policies, 21  
and mechanisms that would be required for dealing with these issues in 22  
a practically effective manner. 23

To summarize, I suggest that what Portilla calls the "innocent world" 24  
of the US arises from a lack of development of three modes of making 25  
sense of the nation's participation in sin, evil, and death, creating a context 26  
of significance in which a range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are 27  
unable to show up as normatively gripping, live options. This interpreta- 28  
tion would help Portilla explain the behaviors and attitudes he observes 29  
in the US. For example, Portilla describes the so-called "panty raids" that 30  
were apparently common on college campuses in the 1950s, "naive and 31  
playful assaults in which young college students seize the most intimate 32  
garments of their companions for no other purpose than to display them 33  
innocently in the light of day" [147].<sup>25</sup> Using the conceptual tools I have 34  
just sketched, we might say that at this time, the possibility of partaking 35  
in such a practice showed up to many young men with a high degree of 36  
normative grip; at the same time, while these young men might have been 37  
able to understand, in a merely intellectual way, why someone might find 38

39  
40

1 this practice objectionable, such considerations often failed to resonate  
2 deeply or to be conclusive in their deliberations. Thus, we can explain  
3 the “ontic” behaviors and attitudes of these young men as a result of the  
4 way things showed up to them as meaningful, and we can explain the  
5 patterns in their experience of meaning, in turn, with reference to the  
6 underdevelopment of certain cognitive, emotional, and practical capacities  
7 in US society.

8       The same type of explanation can be offered for the other behav-  
9 iors and attitudes that Portilla describes. Concluding a narrative without  
10 a happy ending, or forgoing an opportunity to gain power and control,  
11 solve a problem, or make something bigger—these possibilities may be  
12 intelligible (strictly speaking) to a US American, but they are likely to  
13 show up as obtuse or unreasonable. In this way, what I have called Portilla’s  
14 phenomenological social theory bridges the explanatory gap between the  
15 kinds of empirical or genetic causes described by the social sciences and  
16 the intimate structure of the experience of individual US Americans. It  
17 does so by positing the existence of a *national world* that operates as an  
18 intermediate-level phenomenological structure. This national world modi-  
19 fies what is intelligible and possible for human beings as such, shaping the  
20 meaning of what is intelligible and possible according to what shows up as  
21 a normatively gripping, live option for those individuals whose sense-mak-  
22 ing activities take place within the context of significance that has been  
23 constructed by the members of the nation over the course of its history.

24

25

26

27

### 3. The Future of Portilla’s Inquiry

28 While I hope that the above discussion goes some way toward clarifying  
29 the methodology that Portilla implicitly relies on in his analysis of the  
30 US, there are many questions that remain unanswered—phenomenolog-  
31 ical questions, empirical questions, and questions about the relationship  
32 between the phenomenological the empirical. For example, one set of  
33 phenomenology-related questions centers around Portilla’s claim that  
34 the innocence of the US is “in crisis.” What is involved in such a crisis?  
35 Is Portilla suggesting that the innocent world that existed in the US for  
36 much of its history is simply disintegrating, leaving an unstructured and  
37 chaotic context of significance in its place? Or is he suggesting that this  
38 innocent world is simply being modified in some fundamental way, while  
39 still remaining a coherent context of significance? Alternatively, Portilla may  
40

be suggesting that this traditional world is being displaced by the rise of 1  
 a new world, such as the world of *threatened* innocence. But if the crisis 2  
 involves the displacement of one world by another, how should we think 3  
 about the relationship between these two worlds? Do some US Ameri- 4  
 cans occupy one context of significance, while other members occupy a 5  
 different context of significance—or do some or all US Americans occupy 6  
 both contexts simultaneously, to some degree? 7

There are also a number of questions concerning the interpreta- 8  
 tion of Portilla's conception of a "world" that I proposed above. These 9  
 questions inquire into the relationship between empirical social practices 10  
 and institutions, on the one hand, and the phenomenological structures 11  
 they allegedly generate, on the other. For example, what, specifically, are 12  
 the concepts, words, and cognitive-linguistic practices that play or could 13  
 play an important role in supporting or undermining the innocence of 14  
 US Americans? How, exactly, are US Americans "trained" as emotional 15  
 agents, and how could they be trained, in order to support or undermine 16  
 that innocence? And which skills, tools, traditions, and institutions, in 17  
 particular, play or could play such an important role at the intersection of 18  
 the ontic and ontological? Much more would need to be said about these 19  
 issues before Portilla's phenomenological theory could hope to succeed as 20  
 an explanatory account in the social sciences. 21

Lastly, many questions remain unanswered regarding the empirical 22  
 claims on which Portilla's project rests. For example, is it true that the 23  
 behaviors and attitudes that Portilla describes as being reflective of innocence 24  
 have, in fact, been characteristic and distinctive of the US for much of its 25  
 history? And is it true that in 1952 Portilla was witnessing a historical turning 26  
 point, a crisis in the existential foundation of the US American way of life? 27

When we step back and reflect on the number and quality of the 28  
 questions raised by Portilla's work, we can see just how much interpretive 29  
 work is left to future scholars who seek engage with Portilla's political phi- 30  
 losophy. Although some might take this as evidence that Portilla's thinking 31  
 was not adequately systematic or thorough, I would suggest instead that we 32  
 see these unanswered questions as a sign of the fascinating philosophical 33  
 terrain to which Portilla's work will take us, if we accept the invitation 34  
 to think with him about these pressing issues. In conclusion, then, I will 35  
 offer a few provocations related to the empirical validity of Portilla's claims. 36

One glaring mistake in Portilla's analysis of the US, in my view, is 37  
 his failure to appreciate the diversity of the nation, and in particular, his 38  
 failure to notice the ways that racial and ethnic minorities in the country 39  
 40

1 have historically resisted validating or partaking in the “innocence” of the  
 2 dominant, White mainstream.<sup>26</sup> For example, those African Americans who  
 3 have been subject to slavery and social annihilation never had the luxury  
 4 of denying the reality of death.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, according to Cornel West, the  
 5 history of African American culture, music, religion, philosophy, literature,  
 6 and politics is, in many ways, a history of this community’s attempt to come  
 7 to terms with the tragic and complex nature of life on earth, an attempt to  
 8 give one another the courage to resist the temptation to dismiss or deny  
 9 the dark side of the human experience, or to treat it as a mere problem  
 10 to be solved. For this reason, in contrast to the forms of Christianity that  
 11 have variously been historically popular among Whites in the US, which  
 12 tend to be either fundamentalist or naively reassuring, “the black church  
 13 [places] . . . profound stress on the concrete and the particular—wrestling  
 14 with limit situations, with death, dread, despair, disappointment, disease,  
 15 and so on.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, he says, “black evangelical Christianity is primarily  
 16 concerned with human fallenness” and recognizes that “no individual or  
 17 society can fully conform to the requirements of the Christian gospel,  
 18 hence the need for endless improvement and amelioration.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar  
 19 manner, we find in the blues and in funk music (a genre whose very name  
 20 reminds us of the stench of death and the musk of the living body), as in  
 21 the writings of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni  
 22 Morrison, “candid narratives and painful truths about our all-too-human  
 23 complicity with evil and evasion of dark realities, which no country or  
 24 social experiment can ignore without danger.”<sup>30</sup>

25 Likewise, Latinx folks have never been allowed to rest in the comfort  
 26 of innocence, simplicity, and purity. To the contrary, the most prominent  
 27 theme of all forms of Latinx self-expression is perhaps *multiplicity*, the pain  
 28 and beauty of being forced to perpetually cross borders and dwell in a  
 29 permanent “in-between” place along every dimension of human existence.<sup>31</sup>  
 30 Moreover, the Latinx community has inherited some of the non-innocence  
 31 of Latin America, a non-innocence that emerges in ways that are both  
 32 life-affirming—such as in *Día de los Muertos* celebrations, *rasquache* decor,  
 33 and a form of Catholicism colored by indigenous animism and Marxism—as  
 34 well as problematic—such as in the tendencies toward *zozobra*, cynicism,  
 35 and pessimism so eloquently described by Portilla and his contemporaries.

36 All of this may lead us to suspect that things are not quite as simple as  
 37 Portilla suggests, even among the White community. As an outsider looking  
 38 in, it is perhaps inevitable that Portilla focuses on the images of White inno-  
 39 cence that the nation projects most energetically—images from Hollywood  
 40



films in which White protagonists are confident and capable, while foreigners are villains or buffoons with “big mustaches and exaggerated gestures” [145], or images of White politicians who appear to have no qualms about executing “a program of hegemony reinforced by unprecedented military might” [150]. But on closer examination, we may see that this appearance of White innocence is a facade that is in need of perpetual reinforcement and policing at the margins. As many philosophers of race have argued, Whiteness itself was socially constructed in an incredibly fraught social and political context and has been used as a central tool in the continual effort to maintain an unnatural and cruel economic and cultural system that often seems poised to collapse.<sup>32</sup> If this is true, it would not be surprising to find that White innocence has always been “in crisis” to some extent.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, as one scholar notes, behind the apparent naturalness and neutrality of Whiteness in the White experience is a perpetual contestation of the meaning of Whiteness, reflected, for example, in the history of the US Supreme Court’s treatment of Whiteness in immigration law, where we see that “Whiteness is a social construction whose composition changes throughout time and place,” granted to particular social groups or rescinded according to the political exigencies of the moment.<sup>34</sup> This line of thought suggests that the signs of threatened innocence that Portilla was observing in 1952 were not, in fact, signs of a historical shift in the existential foundation of the nation, as he claimed, but were simply par for the course.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps Portilla was simply misled by the common illusion that one’s own time is more historically significant than it truly is. But on the other hand, perhaps the present moment always has the potential to be what the Greeks called a *krísis*—the turning point in a disease, in which the patient will either succumb or recover. Today, as social movements in the US are finding new ways to bring the distorting effects of privilege into public awareness, in hopes of teaching the innocent world to see its own innocence with suspicion, only time will tell whether these efforts are simply a continuation of the nation’s perpetual fixation upon its own moral status—or the beginning of something new.

## Notes

1. This information about the context of the article’s production is provided in the introduction to Portilla’s anthology, *La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, 11.



1           2. There are some signs that Portilla perceives a need to provide evidential  
2 support for his implicit claim that his observations are, in fact, representative of  
3 widely pervasive trends. For example, he assures the reader that he could provide  
4 “innumerable” examples of the kinds of trends he has identified: “That the US  
5 American world becomes fully comprehensible from the postulate of innocence is  
6 something that can be verified by innumerable facts, more or less complex” [143].

7           3. The Christian Bible depicts Jesus as a martyr who offered human beings  
8 a chance to redeem themselves from their subjection to sin, guilt, and death, but  
9 was rejected and murdered by those he was trying to save. For this reason, Jesus  
10 has almost always been depicted with a loving but sad expression.

11           4. According to Portilla, “Pragmatism can, without serious alteration, be  
12 reduced to the following formula, which has been coined by the US American  
13 philosopher, Patrick Romanell: ‘The truth of an idea (proposition, belief, hypoth-  
14 esis) depends on the practical value of its results.’ This means that both the truth  
15 and the *real meaning* of an idea must be sought in its consequences for action,  
16 i.e., its *effectiveness*.” In response, Portilla says: “Pragmatism can only be sustained  
17 under the assumption that men will propose only morally valid ends. It is only  
18 within a community composed of substantially virtuous men that it is possible  
19 to postulate the action of men as a criterion of the good and of truth” [150].

20           5. “Only on the assumption of innocence does it become possible to face  
21 the future openly and confidently as happens in the disturbing doctrine of manifest  
22 destiny that you see with the annexation of Texas” [155].

23           6. “I believe that the proliferation of literature on sexual matters can be  
24 explained by the fact that everything concerning sex resists being clearly inte-  
25 grated in a perspective of total innocence, and it is thus necessary to return [to  
26 the topic] again and again in a sort of vertigo of fascination. It is precisely this  
27 character of proliferation to infinity, of production in a series, that gives meaning  
28 to the detective story in the US. Faced with the irrefutable fact of crime, there  
29 is nothing so comforting as the detective novel. . . . Psychoanalysis and the  
30 detective novel can therefore be interpreted as a technical domestication of evil,  
31 but such domestication can only occur when an innocent world has previously  
32 been postulated. Banishing evil to the periphery of being and controlling it with  
33 psychological and police techniques, all that remains is, literally, to wash our  
34 hands” [147–148].

35           7. The kind of controlled experiment that may lend some support to  
36 some of Portilla’s hypotheses is described, for example, in E. L. Uhlmann, T. A.  
37 Poehlman, D. Tannenbaum, and J. A. Bargh, “Implicit Puritanism in American  
38 moral cognition,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2011): 312–320.  
39 This study compared random groups of US Americans to British, Canadian, and  
40 Asian American groups and found “evidence that the judgments and behaviors of  
contemporary Americans are implicitly influenced by traditional Puritan-Protestant  
values regarding work and sex.”

8. I am grateful to Manuel Vargas and Clinton Tolley at the UCSD Mexican Philosophy Lab for their help in clarifying this line of thought. 1
9. For a rich source of discussion about this and related issues, see Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015). 2
10. As Heidegger puts it: "The fact that this sort of thing can matter to us is grounded in our attunement." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176. 3
11. Hans B. Schmid, *Plural Action: Essays in Philosophy and Social Science* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), 69. 4
12. Portilla, "Phenomenology of Relajo," 145. 5
13. *Ibid.*, 198. 6
14. *Ibid.* 7
15. For more on the *relajiento* and *apretado*, see chapter 2. 8
16. Heidegger's classic formulation of the definition of "world" is as follows: "That wherein Dasein understands itself beforehand . . . [and] in terms of which it has let entities be encountered beforehand." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 86. "Dasein" is Heidegger's term for creatures like us, i.e., creatures that make sense of reality in the existentially inflected ways that human beings do. 9
17. William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2006), 63. 10
18. Thus, in the full passage that I cited above, Heidegger connects the class of experience made possible by this fearful attunement to the corresponding feature of the world such an attunement reveals: "The fact that this sort of thing can matter to us is grounded in our attunement; and as an attunement [the concern for safety and security] has already disclosed the world—as something by which we can be threatened, for instance." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176. 11
19. The concept of a live option is famously articulated by William James, who illustrates his conception of this kind of possibility with the example of a religious person considering the belief system of another faith. Even if a Christian can make sense of the views of his Muslim counterpart, he says, so that the Muslim's belief system is perfectly intelligible, nonetheless the Christian is likely to find that these ideas do not make an "electric connection with [his] nature" and "refuse to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead." William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, Vol. 6* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 199. 12
20. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for making this connection. 13
21. See Heidegger's discussion of care (*Sorge*), and its "equiprimordial" constitutive elements of discourse (*Rede*), mood (*Befindlichkeit*), and understanding (*Verstehen*). Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 375, 293, 277. 14
22. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). 15

- 1           23. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*  
2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 3           24. This formulation is adapted from Robin DiAngelo's discussion of "White  
4 fragility," which she defines as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial  
5 stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." Robin DiAngelo,  
6 "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.
- 7           25. The reader may be surprised by Portilla's characterization of such panty  
8 raids as "naive and playful," when such activities were undoubtedly frightening  
9 to many of the women targeted by these brazen displays of misogyny and the  
10 impunity with which men could violate women's boundaries. However, because  
11 this passage is located in an essay criticizing the hypocritical and dangerous  
12 "innocence" of US Americans, I suspect that Portilla is being ironic in this char-  
13 acterization—i.e., that although those who participated in such activities viewed  
14 themselves as merely being naive and playful, Portilla thinks we ought to assess  
15 such individuals more harshly. That said, such passages highlight the problematic  
16 fact that, as discussed in the introduction, Portilla fails to engage with women  
17 or issues of gender in his writing. For more on the history of panty raids, see  
18 Beth Bailey, "From panty raids to revolution: Youth and authority, 1950–1970,"  
19 in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century Amer-  
20 ica*, eds. Joe Alan Austin and Michael Willard (New York: New York University  
21 Press, 1998), 187–204.
- 22           26. Thanks to Andrea Pitts for calling attention to this point. For a discus-  
23 sion of Mexican and Chicana philosophers that harmonizes with the critique of  
24 Portilla I offer in this section, see Andrea Pitts, "Toward an Aesthetics of Race:  
25 Bridging the Writings of Gloria Anzaldúa and José Vasconcelos," *Inter-American  
26 Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2012): 80–100.
- 27           27. For an excellent comparison of slavery and its aftermath in the US and  
28 other societies, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA:  
29 Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 30           28. Cornel West, "My Intellectual Vocation," in *The Cornel West Reader*  
31 (New York: Civitas Books, 2000), 20.
- 32           29. West, "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King,  
33 Jr." in *The Cornel West Reader*, 429.
- 34           30. West, "Introduction." in *The Cornel West Reader*, xix.
- 35           31. For excellent articulations of this view, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Border-  
36 lands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987). See also Mariana Ortega,  
37 *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* (Albany,  
38 NY: SUNY Press, 2016).
- 39           32. See, for example, David S. Owen, "Towards a Critical Theory of White-  
40 ness," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2007): 203–222.
33. Thanks to Shannon Sullivan for suggesting this point. For further dis-  
              cussion, see Shannon Sullivan, "*White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and*

<i>Race</i> by Gloria Wekker,” <i>philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism</i> 7, no. 2 (2017): 363–367.	1
34. Jose Jorge Mendoza, “Illegal: White Supremacy and Immigration: Core Issues and Emerging Trends,” in <i>The Ethics and Politics of Immigration: Core Issues and Emerging Trends</i> , ed. Alex Sager (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 201–220.	2
35. On the other hand, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 abolished the use of racial restrictions in immigration and naturalization statutes. This provides some reason to think that there <i>was</i> something about this period of history—which coincided, of course, with the so-called “civil rights era”—that was historically important for White society and may have constituted something of a crisis for innocence. My point, however, is that this is simply a “crisis” that never ends. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for these points.	3
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