

The Disintegration of Community

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

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The Spiritual Crisis of the United States³

JORGE PORTILLA

TRANSLATED BY FRANCISCO GALLEGOS AND
CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ

It is already commonplace in contemporary philosophizing to say that all reflective thinking comes from a natural world that determines it. All scientific thinking comes from a world not scientifically constructed. In the same way, discussions regarding the cultural world of a nation open up a field of reality determined by the point of view of the one who is discussing it, and an essential aspect of that point of view is the national origin of the observer.

That this is to the detriment of the objectivity of those judgments formulated about a particular national world by a person who is alien to that world is a matter that does not concern us here; the fact is that such judgments are continually formulated, and not a few of them—in very bitter terms, I may add—have been aimed at our country. These are things about which nothing can be done.

On the other hand, 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 northern neighbor. The need to take such a position is based, it seems to me, on the fact that the United States always appears to us in the form of a radical “otherness,” to say it with the happy neologism of Antonio Machado. The ultimate foundations of the US American civilization [*civilización*

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1 *norteamericana*] are almost absolutely strange to us, however impressive
2 and even plausible the results may seem to us.

3 The effort to understand the peculiar US American way of being
4 is thus imposed on us as a first step towards adopting a lucid and well-
5 defined attitude toward US American culture, and it is on the basis of this
6 radical feeling of strangeness and as a result of that will to understand
7 that we profile the fact of the US American crisis and its scope.

8 Succinctly put, we believe that what is in crisis is precisely the very
9 foundation of US American life as such—the foundation of what [140]
10 in the US they have come to call *The American Way of Life*.⁴

11 What this foundation is, and in what sense it can be said to be in
12 crisis, is, therefore, what I will try to clarify in what follows.

13 In an issue of *Time* magazine for May 19, 1952, there appeared
14 in the section of “Religion” an article titled: “Requested: The American
15 Smile.” It reads:

16 “Dr. Hubert Eaton, a 70-year-old director of California’s Forest Lawn
17 Cemetery, is a cheerful man. In his creed, inscribed on a plaque in Forest
18 Lawn, he wrote: ‘I believe above all in a Christ who smiles and who loves
19 you and I.’” Forest Lawn itself boasts of “bright and joyful private sleep
20 rooms . . .” (this is what they call the tombs) “the beautiful views of the
21 green meadows and tall trees . . .”—these things apparently reinforce Dr.
22 Eaton’s theology. But Dr. Eaton, who has filled the cemetery with a mass
23 of paintings and religious statuary (including a replica of Michelangelo’s
24 *David* with a fig leaf), has not found an image of Christ that looks suf-
25 ficiently happy to accommodate his convictions.

26 Dr. Eaton’s best artistic acquisitions have come from Italy. Last year
27 he offered a prize of one million lire (\$1600 USD) to the artist that could
28 achieve the most suitable *close up*⁵ portrait of a smiling Christ. The jury
29 was constituted by five Italian experts.

30 “A few days ago,” continues *Time*, “director Eaton arrived in Florence
31 to examine the paintings submitted by thirteen of the 32 Italian artists
32 invited to participate in the contest. When the pictures were uncovered
33 it was clear that someone had made a mistake. Six of the portraits did
34 not smile at all. The rest had, at best, a faint smirk.”

35 Eaton commented: “Nothing is good enough for Forest Lawn, as you
36 see.” He added: “all these paintings, even the smiling ones, look sad and
37 definitely European. What I need is a radiant Christ who looks upward
38 with an inner light of joy and hope; I want a Christ with an American
39 face.” The judges gave their decision, withdrew the prize money, and gave
40 each artist a consolation prize of 100,000 [141] lire. Next year a new com-

petition will be held. Eaton said he will continue to call for new contests
until he gets what he wants.

It is undeniable that this whole thing is very original, and it is almost
certain that Dr. Eaton's strange pretense has not occurred to anyone out-
side the United States.

But it is not necessary to discuss this, what matters here is that we
can extract, from this pilgrim's story, a principal category for the inter-
pretation of the US American way of life.

This category is found in our story as a presupposition without which
the claim of the director of Forest Lawn would be impossible.

Indeed, the unusual demand, which, besides, is apparently so difficult
to fulfill, that Christ smiles, delicately overlooks the fact of Christ's passion
and the manner of his death. It radically ignores the difficult nuances of
the relationship between the historical Jesus and the humanity of the men
who followed him and those who killed him. It erases the *sense* of Christ's
appearance in history, the sense of His life and His death.

This *sense* that motivates His appearance in history, His life and
His death, is none other than *sin*, or if you prefer *evil* or the fall of the
man. In between man in general and the man, Jesus of Galilee, we find
this scandalous, irrational, uncontrollable fact, which is *evil*, and which
transforms the relationship between any man and Jesus into a difficult
and delicate matter whatever may be the attitude that is taken before his
immense presence. These attitudes oscillate between those of St. Paul and
those of Nietzsche, passing through those corresponding to the German
idealists Kant and Hegel. The good director of Forest Lawn, however, takes
a completely different and absolutely *sui generis* attitude. He wants a smil-
ing Christ and wants to see this comforting smile on an American face.

This means that Dr. Eaton knows nothing of evil, neither of sin nor
of man's fall, nor of the need for redemption that is bought at the price
of Christ's death. That is, it means that Dr. Eaton is *innocent*.

Well, it would seem that innocence is precisely that category that
ultimately founds the US American way of life.

But here it is necessary to correct a misinterpretation that may arise
from the anecdote with which I have illustrated my [142] hypothesis.

When I say that innocence, that is, the absolute unfamiliarity
[*extrañeza*] 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, as I hope to show later.

This does not mean, of course, that every US American, taken
individually, will take himself as innocent from blame, let alone that this

1 *objective belief* is accepted as true, so to speak, and found everywhere in
 2 the innumerable forms and interpretations of life and man that charac-
 3 terize US American culture.

4 I take here the word *innocence* in its more general sense of unfa-
 5 miliarity with evil; he is innocent who is not defiled by evil in general or
 6 by sin in particular. An innocent world will thus be that world in which
 7 evil has not penetrated, where evil has not corrupted the root of life itself.

8 We enter, therefore, into our interpretation without further details,
 9 which besides are not suitable in the short space of this conference.

10 The first noticeable characteristic one can attribute to the United
 11 States, visible even for those who have never visited that country, is
 12 the ubiquitous presence of *quantification*. Before you are told anything
 13 else, you are told the number of library volumes, the costs and sizes of
 14 buildings, or the number of times you could wrap the world in wire. The
 15 tendency to apply the category of quantity has many aspects and can be
 16 interpreted in several ways. It has been said that its origin lies in the fact
 17 that the US is a capitalist economy and the corresponding tendency to
 18 *value* everything, a tendency proper to any nation of merchants. It could
 19 also be interpreted as originating from scientific thought, or as belonging
 20 to a nation of builders in which measurement, the quantification of reality,
 21 is a necessary starting point.

22 But these explanations do not elucidate the fact that quantity (volume,
 23 cost, dimension) serves in the US as a criterion of value. The surprising
 24 insistence that such a building of such a height should be the *highest* in
 25 the world, for example, points to a tendency to identify the *most* with the
 26 *best*; this is not merely the valuation beloved by merchants; [143] behind
 27 it there is a US American satisfaction with his world.

28 The US American seems to take quantity as the abstract and pure
 29 form of his own excellence, as an aseptic symbol of superiority, blessed
 30 with a certain scientific air.

31 It is not our intention to reproach anyone; all peoples seek these
 32 comforting symbols. What interests us is to underline the fact that the
 33 US American has taken as his symbol precisely the category of quantity;
 34 he reads his own excellence in a quantitative comparison.

35 Explanations for the origin of this phenomenon may be more or less
 36 valid, but what matters to us is not a genetic explanation but, rather, *to*
 37 *make clear or highlight a condition of possibility*; we say therefore that the
 38 condition of possibility for considering quantity as the criterion of value
 39 is precisely an innocent world.

40

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

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.

That the US American world becomes fully comprehensible from the postulate of innocence is something that can be verified by innumerable facts, more or less complex—perhaps less characteristic than the tendency toward quantification, that is to say, less known in the world outside the US, but which may help to characterize it with the same profundity.

Among other defining aspects of the US American way of life, some of the most important appear in the field of filmmaking, in an excessive interest in so-called sexual “problems,” the interest in, and monstrous proliferation of, psychological or psychoanalytical literature, the equally monstrous proliferation of the detective novel, and finally, hygiene, that is, the obsession with bodily cleanliness [144].

Of course there are manifestations of higher rank such as pragmatism. Pragmatism is the philosophical expression of the US, and this is recognized around the world. Philosophers from the US and elsewhere may disagree on everything, but they agree that pragmatism is a characteristically US American philosophy. The basis of this identification is not very clear, but it is something that one instinctively intuits, in the same way that we guess the kinship of two people by the identical spirit in certain gestures. But about this we will not make a judgment; we will simply point out that pragmatism fits the same interpretation that we propose for the other, more quotidian aspects (of life in the US), and I think even here we have seen certain signs of crisis.

Two features of filmmaking reveal the conception of the US American world as a field of innocence, leaving aside the films in which this is the actual theme, such *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, or *You Can't Take It With You*; the first, of lesser importance, is the confrontation between the US American world and the outside world with the theme of the US American hero abroad; the other is the inevitable happy ending, about which we will speak later.

1 This confrontation appears, if we exaggerate just a bit, as the contrast
2 between paradise and the “outer darkness, where there is weeping and
3 the gnashing of teeth.”

4 The US American hero always appears justified; he is the center that
5 determines the sense of the world that surrounds him, and in determining
6 this sense he becomes the lord of that world. The “others” cannot take
7 a point of view on him that is not easily surpassed by the most basic
8 moral judgment, and precisely by a moral judgment; the others are *evil*,
9 they desire evil. The US American hero wants the good, and more than
10 desiring it, it can be said that he embodies it—this is his strength; his
11 weakness is that he sits precisely in the “outer darkness” where evil has an
12 important place and therefore can corner him and put him in difficulties
13 so serious that they can only be overcome with the providential arrival
14 of steel angels, aerial fortresses, which at the end of the film appear as a
15 glorious and roaring symbol of light and the good, cleanliness and order.

16 The contrast between the two worlds is always [145] depressing for
17 non-US Americans, and the *genetic explanation* of this pious US American
18 interpretation can be found in the Calvinist and Puritan origins of that
19 nation. Calvinism condemned wealth as the end of human life with great
20 violence, but it was also a doctrine that reinforced economic virtues and
21 ultimately viewed wealth not as a path for salvation but as an indubitable
22 sign of predestination.

23 R. A. Tawney, in a chapter entitled “The Triumph of the Economic
24 Virtues” from his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, writes that “Convinced
25 that character is everything and circumstances nothing, [the Puritan] sees
26 in the poverty of those that fall on the road not a misfortune to be pitied
27 and helped, but a moral fault to be condemned, and in wealth not an
28 object of suspicion, which can be abused like other gifts, but a blessing
29 that rewards the triumph of energy and will. Tempered by self-examina-
30 tion, self-discipline, self-control, he is the practical ascetic who wins his
31 victories not in the cloister, but on the battlefield, in the stock market,
32 and in the marketplace.”

33 We venture as a hypothesis regarding the origin of the US American
34 way of life a second moment of secularization, which was the secularism
35 of Calvinism with respect to the Catholic world. It would seem that the
36 US American world is a secularized Puritanism that has largely forgotten
37 its Protestant, Calvinistic, and Puritan origins, and has become a kind of
38 terrestrial paradise, a strange form of modern immanentism that for some
39 reason preserves as living relics the virtues that Tawney calls economic.
40

In fact, the outside world appears in US American cinema as generally composed of poor, therefore bad, and naturally filthy and stupid men, incapable of such audacious and apt actions as that of US American heroes. They can be nice, cheerful, with big mustaches and exaggerated gestures, but they are incapable of industry and at most sell apples or sing passionate songs accompanied by their guitar like the grasshopper of the story.

I want to insist for the last time on the fact that what we care to emphasize is not that individual US Americans believe themselves to represent [146] excellence—all the peoples of the world have the same pretension—but, rather, that the US American in general finds his excellence in this peculiar feeling of purity [*incontaminación*], of unfamiliarity with the somber facts of existence, facts which are supposed to be absent from US American life.

The vexing issue of the vulgar view of the outside world in cinema raises the problem of how evil occurs in the US, since it is evident that the thesis of US American innocence cannot mean that this nation is actually paradise.

Let us note in passing that if there is no sin in paradise, then there should be no death, which is the result of sin and evil. But certainly there is death in the US, even if it appears there is not much, because we cannot fully believe Norman Vincent Peale, the New York preacher who has published a brochure with the title *Not Death at All*.⁶

Well, as there really is death, there is also evil, and with this we address the question of the great interest in psychoanalysis, in so-called sexual problems, and the proliferation of the detective novel.

Whatever one may think of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic technique or as an anthropology, it is true that from a moral point of view it is, or it can be, a system of excuses.

It is obvious that at the level of individual psychology, the unconscious is a kind of other self, a Mr. Hyde, which psychoanalysis is capable of taming by means of an adequate technique. Taken as an anthropology, psychoanalysis cleverly conceals everything problematic from traditional ethics. It simply eliminates the theory of freedom, the theory of ends, and the problem of evil.

The ego is, on the one hand, innocent of the excesses of the “id,” but in addition these excesses can be controlled with a rational technique. In its first aspect, it is undoubtedly an excuse and allows one to assume wayward impulses in a horizon of innocence, and in its second aspect,

1 it turns evil into something controllable, into a passing and superficial
 2 phenomenon that does not affect the very core of personality, since the
 3 “id,” despite being an annoying guest of the psyche, is conceived as rad-
 4 ically strange, like a relic of a subhuman world that can be *eliminated*
 5 and *controlled* [147].

6 Psychoanalysis thus reveals itself as an excellent instrument guaran-
 7 teeing innocence at the level of individual life, and the impressive volume
 8 of psychoanalytic literature in the US begins to make sense in the light
 9 of our hypothesis.

10 It would be tempting here to draw a parallel between the role of
 11 the unconscious in individual psychic life and that of black men in social
 12 life, and to show precisely how the refusal of the White man to assume
 13 his guilt before the man of color in America’s dark racial conflict is the
 14 ultimate basis of racial discrimination.

15 But, on the one hand, to present an interpretation of the racial
 16 problem of the United States in the framework of the concepts of psy-
 17 choanalysis would mean simplifying the terms of a very serious problem;
 18 on the other, it is not our intention to solve the internal problems of the
 19 US, but to outline a first attempt at interpretation from the point of view
 20 of our own [Mexican] circumstances.

21 We note, however, that the basis of racial discrimination is precisely
 22 that refusal of the White man to assume his guilt.

23 In connection with the role of psychoanalysis is the continued allu-
 24 sion to sexual matters under the neutral title of “sex” in newspapers and
 25 magazines and in the innumerable books that solemnly offer to solve the
 26 problems of sex in a scientific manner.

27 But where this innocence of the sexuality seems to reach its critical
 28 point is in the famous Kinsey report that intends to inform people about
 29 the “sexual behavior of the human male.”⁷ In this extraordinary book we
 30 find all the splendor of that “innocence of becoming” Nietzsche speaks
 31 about, at the same time a *postulate and expression* of modern science’s
 32 neutral attitude toward the moral world.

33 Let us overlook the naive and playful assaults in which young col-
 34 lege students seize the most intimate garments of their companions for
 35 no other purpose than to display them innocently in the light of day.

36 I believe that the proliferation of literature on sexual matters can be
 37 explained by the fact that everything concerning sex resists being clearly
 38 integrated in a perspective of total innocence, and it is thus necessary to
 39 return [to the topic] again and again [148] in a sort of vertigo of fascination.
 40

It is precisely this character of proliferation to infinity, of *production in a series*, that gives meaning to the detective story in the US. Faced with the irrefutable fact of crime, there is nothing so comforting as the detective novel.

Not only do we see there that the one who commits the crime pays, and that every criminal ends up falling into the hands of the police, but we are also able to master one of the most disturbing apparitions of evil (crime) through technical procedures. With the same daily insistence with which newspapers talk about the presence of crime in society, the detective novels remind one that there is a whole scientific world, with laboratories full of precision instruments and perfectly trained and capable men who keep crime on the periphery of the world.

If we compare the treatment of this issue with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where the topic of evil as crime is treated in all its depth, the meaning of the US American detective novel becomes clearer to us.

Psychoanalysis and the detective novel can therefore be interpreted as a technical domestication 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.

From an uncontaminated spiritual world we see the sacramental value of water and soap, as well as other more sophisticated products, such as chlorophyll-based deodorants for all conceivable uses. The *last, most humble and contemptible* vestige of evil, *grime*, is the easiest to remove.

Certainly the lament of Saint Paul—"the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"—does not find resonance in the United States.⁸

So far I have tried to verify the value of a hypothesis by interpreting, in its light, facts that in our eyes appear as characteristically North American and that pertain to the structure of daily life in that nation [149].

But its value can be extended to an interpretation of the US American philosophy *par excellence*, pragmatism. About that point, I regret that lack of space does not allow me to give the subject the treatment I would have wanted. But I believe that in a more detailed analysis of the content of this philosophical tendency, our hypothesis would not only be confirmed, but its validity would become even more evident.

Pragmatism can, without serious alteration, be reduced to the following formula, which has been coined by the US American philosopher

1 Patrick Romanell⁹: “The truth of an idea (proposition, belief, hypothesis)
2 depends on the practical value of its results.”

3 This means that both the truth and the *real meaning* of an idea must
4 be sought in its consequences for action, i.e., its *effectiveness*.

5 Both Pierce and James Dewey place action, effectiveness, as a criterion
6 of verification of all possible truth; that is, they claim that the ultimate
7 verification of a truth is the conduct that it inspires or determines, and
8 no one doubts the possibility of building an entire philosophical system
9 within the horizon of this postulate. But there is a fundamental ambiguity
10 here, because it happens that a criterion has been previously assumed that
11 decides about the action.

12 For if the truth of an idea is said to depend on the practical value of
13 the results of the idea, if the verification of a truth depends on the conduct
14 that it inspires or determines, the excellence of such behavior, then on
15 what does it expend? If the truth of an idea depends on its effectiveness,
16 we can ask: effectiveness *for what?*

17 But pragmatism is precisely the philosophy that refuses to answer
18 the latter questions, because another of its postulates is that the world of
19 action is automatically regulated, that is, that action is the source of its
20 own criteria of value.

21 In the words of John Dewey, there is a certain “power of *experience*
22 itself to provide its own necessary principles of belief and action,” that
23 is, “experience and life can regulate themselves.” (see John Dewey, *What*
24 *I Believe*, chapter 1).

25 The most obvious interpretation is that pragmatism [150] is the
26 philosophy proper to an active people, but this interpretation in being
27 true does not sufficiently cohere with the facts.

28 What is implied in such a conception is a naive trust that everything
29 will go well. To refer truth to its practical results is possible only on the
30 assumption that the practical results will eventually reflect the Truth with
31 a capital “T”. That is, it is possible only on the naive belief that man will
32 not lose his way. The truth depends on behavior, but the criterion of that
33 behavior, not expressed philosophically but revealed in this conception
34 itself, is the good diffused in a world where evil has no place.

35 Pragmatism can only be sustained under the assumption that men
36 will propose only morally valid ends. It is only within a community
37 composed of substantially virtuous men that it is possible to postulate
38 the action of men as a criterion of the good and of truth.

39

40

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

Pragmatism, however, has ceased to be the dominant philosophy in US American universities, and there are even some philosophy professors, such as the notable professor from Chicago, Mortimer Adler, who have attacked it with surprising violence.

This general abandonment of pragmatism, *although significant*, is only a hint of the crisis of innocence and optimism beginning to become evident in the US.

The crisis begins to take shape in certain paradoxes whose profile acquires more precise contours as the international history of the postwar period unfolds.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the guiding ideals of US history that led this nation to optimism and an unwavering confidence in them have placed it before the outside world as the bearer of a program of hegemony reinforced by unprecedented military might. An armed nation with the most destructive instruments in history, forced [151] to impose on the world its own ideals, *excellent as they may be*, can hardly preserve the aura of innocence that colors the US American way life.

On the other hand, the outside world does not seem to accept with any sort of joy the rose-colored perspective of North American regulation. The guilty world resists adopting the solutions of the innocent world, and this causes great perplexity for the Americans.

To put it in the terminology of an eminent US American philosopher: “every individual with sensibility (in the US) finds himself in relation to a structure that is never confirmed in the vicissitudes of recent history.” That is, the categories that from within US American life suffice for a complete understanding of everything, seem to fail in their function when it comes to interpreting the entirety of contemporary history.

The third paradox, the most serious in our view, appears in the light of the US American claim to defend spiritual values in the face of the threat of materialism.

“The question of materialism,” Reinhold Niebuhr tells us in his excellent *The Irony of American History*, “gives rise to certain ironic consequences in our dispute with communism. . . . Perhaps the Communists are not *in the philosophical sense* as consistently materialistic as they pretend to

1 be. They support the idea of a 'dialectic' or 'logic' underlying nature and
 2 history, which means that a *rational* sense and structure extends along
 3 the entirety of reality. Despite the constant emphasis on 'human dignity'
 4 in our own liberal culture, our predominantly naturalist bias often results
 5 in views on human nature in which the dignity of man is very clear."

6 "In the meantime," he adds, "we are immersed in a historical situ-
 7 ation in which the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in the
 8 hell of global insecurity."

9 These ironic paradoxes or situations, as Niebuhr says, are objective
 10 configurations which, insofar as they are known in the US, give rise to
 11 certain attitudes or dispositions, and it is these reactions that can be
 12 interpreted as symptoms of crisis [152]. Several levels can be distinguished
 13 among them, and in the highest it would be necessary to place the study
 14 of Reinhold Niebuhr mentioned above. In this remarkable work, the New
 15 York philosopher, in trying to clarify the position of America in the world
 16 community, makes clear the pretension of the founders of that nation and
 17 of the theorists of its politics.

18 "The purpose was," he says, "to start a new beginning in a corrupt
 19 world . . ."

20 New England came to be described by US American ideologists as
 21 "the place where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth."

22 His description of the spirit that animated the founders and ideol-
 23 ogists is condensed in the title of the second chapter of his book, "The
 24 Innocent Nation in an Innocent World."

25 The result is the profound mismatch between the US American world
 26 and the outside world, and the content of the book revolves around the
 27 possibilities of correcting this mismatch, that is, of achieving community,
 28 coexistence as a means of escaping the ironies of US American history,
 29 that is to say of the paradoxes that arise from the position of the United
 30 States in the contemporary world.

31 In recognizing this mismatch, Niebuhr performs a movement of
 32 reflection about the history of his country, seeking precisely the origin of
 33 a fault, a fissure that explains the situation; that is, he undertakes a review
 34 of the spiritual foundations of America with a critical spirit, i.e., with a
 35 non-dogmatic spirit (a radically different attitude from naive confidence
 36 in traditional values).

37 We cannot outline here a sketch of the profound and lucid course
 38 of his research; what interest us is only to highlight the fact that the con-
 39
 40

tent of the work involves in its author the abandonment of the dogmatic 1
attitude toward the values embodied in US American life. 2

In our view, Niebuhr's is a description of the US American situation 3
precisely in its character of crisis, *because what we have here is a crisis* 4
of foundations, and a crisis is only worthy of the name when it affects or 5
puts into question the validity of something fundamental. On the surface, 6
only problems occur. A problem is a contradiction more apparent than 7
real, one that resolves [153] itself with certain axioms or assumptions; but 8
when these same axioms or assumptions become doubtful or unjustifiable, 9
one can no longer speak of problems but of crisis. 10

Indeed, Niebuhr manages to save US American ideals of democracy, 11
freedom, and dignity of the individual, but he finds that the need to accept 12
a politics of power to defend such values, which are constitutive of the 13
nation, makes it impossible to maintain the atmosphere in which they 14
flourished. The nation that at one point represented a new beginning in 15
a corrupt world now seems to corrupt itself in the act of imposing on 16
the world its most valued assets. 17

If we were to compare the attitude of Prof. Niebuhr to the proponents 18
of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which takes the American nation as a 19
civilizing force, we could see how Niebuhr represents a moment of crisis, 20
and precisely a crisis of the innocence we are talking about. 21

At a rather less respectable level than the Columbia professor, we 22
find the dogmatic attitude of propaganda that pervades all advertising 23
media, according to which we must defend the threatened US American 24
way of life. 25

Why defend the American way of life and not just speak rather of 26
freedom or human rights? 27

More than any other point this one appears to be the one that reveals 28
more than anything the crisis of US American consciousness. Indeed, only 29
the vulnerable can be defended and, at the very same moment in which 30
the necessity to defend a form of life appears, so does the insufficiency of 31
that form of life. Precisely in this defensive attitude does the US American 32
confesses himself to be bothered *by the look* or *the criticism* of something 33
foreign, something not American. Faced with this threatening action from 34
the exterior, one can justify any attitude regarding any *thing, ideal, value,* 35
or *principle*, but doing so threatens innocence itself, because innocence 36
is by definition invulnerable, and what is invulnerable does not require 37
any defense whatsoever. 38

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1 Until recently the feeling of innocence was accompanied by an aura
2 of invulnerability that manifested itself in [154] the way in which, for
3 example, Bernard Shaw's insolence was tolerated when directed against
4 the US, and the idea that to succeed as a writer in the US the most direct
5 way was to elegantly insult Americans.

6 There are good reasons therefore to assume that if US Americans now
7 consider themselves vulnerable *as Americans*, this is certainly a sign that
8 the assumption of innocence of the US American world, if not completely
9 gone, at least is beginning to lose its efficacy. I do not mean to say, then,
10 that the main tenet of US American life has ceased being innocence and
11 has become guilt. This would not be a crisis but a conversion. Vulnerability
12 is certainly not synonymous with guilt, but both one and the other are
13 phenomena of the same family and have the same existential foundation.
14 This foundation is none other than the finiteness or deficiency of human
15 existence that the Germans call debt (*Schuld*) and the French call lack
16 (*manque*). Concepts such as *finitude*, *deficiency*, *vulnerability*, lack, fault,
17 blame, all have a close relationship that is immediately perceived.

18 And so US American vulnerability, as a presupposition for the defense
19 of the *US American Way of Life*, is threatened by an *imminent* guilt. Said
20 in familiar language, this means that the defense of the *American Way of*
21 *Life* has its roots in the fear of the US to assume any guilt; meanwhile it
22 launches more atomic bombs or simply unleashes a war that in the eyes
23 of the world makes its virtues suspect. And this is a spiritual crisis in
24 the US because what is at stake is precisely this *innocence*, this absolute
25 justification found in the spirit that animated the founders of the nation
26 and that has diffused itself into every corner of its existence.

27 We could accumulate data that highlights this bad faith present in
28 the US, such as the spontaneous creation of committees that undertake
29 nothing less than the censorship of libraries. Then there were the articles
30 of faith that accused books of subversiveness or of having been written
31 by authors suspected of having "un-American views." [155] These small
32 spontaneous inquisitions clearly contradict the most fundamental feature
33 of the US American spirit, precisely in that they pretend to defend a vague
34 US American orthodoxy.

35 This is another example of the foundational crisis of which we speak.
36 But the crisis becomes more evident when we consider the profound
37 change in temporal perspective that is involved in all these events. One
38 of the features that North American philosophers emphasize more than
39 any other in pragmatism is the openness of this philosophical attitude
40 toward the future.

Indeed, to refer the validity of an idea or proposition to its practical results involves placing the meaning of truth in the future. If we take pragmatism as an expression of the US American spirit, we find a correlation between the philosophical attitude of pragmatism and the open, optimistic, and futurizing spirit of US American culture.

But a defense of the *American Way of Life* reveals a shift of emphasis that goes *from the future to past*, since the lifestyle of a nation is something that is taken as already over and done with, something that can be found in the past and not in the future.

Only on the assumption of innocence does it become possible to face the future openly and confidently as happens in the disturbing doctrine of Manifest Destiny that you see with the annexation of Texas. But abandoning the protentive [*futurizante*] attitude for a retentive attitude [*una actitud retentiva*] is a clear indication of at least some difficulty in holding the assumptions of innocence.

What the United States appears to now show the world is not an indeterminate future as a common task, but its own past as the source for self-justification. In this perspective, the future is closed, and there is instead an opening to the past. However, talk of a “closed future” is just another way of indicating that which we have indicated in our talk of crisis.

We can summarize all this as follows:

The spiritual crisis of the United States is primarily manifested in the fact of a particular maladjustment between [156] North America and the rest of the world, including between its allies and its enemies. The root of such maladjustment can be found in that fundamental underlying feeling of innocence, seen as typical of the US American way of life but as strange to every other country the world over. The crisis is *expressed*, in turn, in the way in which the United States is aware of this maladjustment and in its willingness to defend that vague set of goods that constitute the “American way of life.” This shows that the United States has to some extent lost the claim to absolute justification that is at the origin of its history; thus, we have characterized that confluence of elements as representing the crisis of US American innocence.

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

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

1 For this reason it would perhaps be legitimate to anticipate a change
2 in attitude regarding their foreign policy in the sense of an honest and
3 open politics of power that has no pretensions of justification. But that
4 anticipation can only be confirmed or disproved by future facts themselves.

5 This seems to us to be, broadly speaking, the picture of US American
6 spiritual life at present.

7 These reflections were made possible by meditations on Mexican
8 reality initiated by the Grupo Hiperión in 1949 and continued, with varying
9 degrees of rigor and with more or less success, until today. My reflections
10 on the facts described here have been determined by my prior attention
11 to the characteristics of our Mexican cultural world.

12 The US American characteristics of innocence, substantiality, [157]
13 and optimism have been noticeable from a consciousness of characteristics
14 contrary to guilt, accidentality, insufficiency, and, in general, the sense
15 of finitude that seem to inform the specific manifestations of our own
16 [Mexican] world.

17 The United States appears to us, then, to confirm that first impression
18 of “otherness” about which we spoke at the start of this reflection, and it
19 does so in the form of a stark contrast that affects the deepest roots of
20 the life of both peoples.

21 What does this contrast mean, and, in view of that meaning, what
22 should be the proper attitude of Mexicans toward the US American world?
23 These are questions whose solution will be proposed after the clarification
24 of the meaning of our history, which the Grupo Hiperión and its teachers,
25 Samuel Ramos, José Gaos, and Leopoldo Zea, have proposed as an urgent
26 task of Mexican philosophy.

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