

*'PUEBLOS ENFERMOS':*  
THE DISCOURSE OF ILLNESS  
IN THE TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY  
SPANISH AND LATIN  
AMERICAN ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOURSE OF DEGENERATION  
AND ITS DISSEMINATION IN THE SPANISH AND  
LATIN AMERICAN NATIONAL ESSAY

The historical period generally referred to in European cultural and historical studies as “turn-of-the-century,” roughly the years between 1890-1918, has for a long time been associated with a sensibility of collective cultural fatigue or exhaustion. This sensibility, commonly denominated by the generic, all-inclusive term “decadence,” manifested itself in expressions of censure, frustration, impotence and, in some instances, blissful indifference regarding the accelerating pace of the social, cultural and economic transformations realized by the entry of the logic and structure of industrial capitalism into all levels of life. The social discipline inaugurated by this transformation permeated the private and public spheres, rigidifying and antagonizing relations between the sexes, social classes and ethnic groups.

This social transformation was scientifically sanctioned by the biological doctrine of evolution in a discursive leap which projected the theories and beliefs of natural history on to human social, cultural and economic history. Within this mixing of evolutionary, economic and political discourses, the social antagonisms engendered by this allegedly “evolutionary” social transformation were simultaneously constructed as the processes of economic competition and natural selection. At the intra-national level, the benefactor of this organicist theorization of socio-economic antagonism and exploitation was the male, European bourgeoisie whose dominance over women, peasants, workers and ethnic minorities was simultaneously constructed as a biological, moral and rational manifestation of superiority. At the international level the evolutionary doctrine of the “survival of the fittest” provided renewed scientific and moral legitimacy for imperialism throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Yet the regional unevenness of this transformation, its intrinsic inequality and the social resistance it provoked, within the hegemonic European powers as well as their colonies, undermined one of the basic conceptual premises of this concept of evolution, namely, the Enlightenment belief in *man* as an inherently rational being. If this belief in man's innate rationality was true, late nineteenth century bourgeois society was faced with an ideological contradiction summarized in the following questions: why was this process of economic transformation, national state consolidation and transnational exploitation so conflictive?; why the continuation of poverty and misery within the wealthy states of Europe?; why the civil, international and imperialist wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?; why was Europe justified in the subjugation and exploitation of colonial non-white peoples? The resolution to this contradiction, the European (and North American) intelligentsia reasoned, was that not all of humankind was rational and thus capable of evolutionary progress.

As Enrique Dussel has demonstrated, the intellectual basis for the exclusion of the vast majority of the world from the material benefits of reason and modernity was already present within the concept of Enlightenment. This exclusionary clause was provided by one of the principal articulators of Enlightenment thought, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant premised the development of reason, and thus of modernity, on an anthropomorphic, teleological process of "maturation" from an inherently sinful state of youthful sloth and irrationality, to an adult state of discipline and reason. As Dussel affirms, the effort invested to bring about this "evolution" towards rationality implies a moral superiority for the "enlightened" and a concomitant immorality for the "irrational": "For Kant, immaturity or adolescence are culpable states, laziness and cowardice their ethos: the *unmundig*" (68). In this way, a hegemonic, European modernity was personified in the terminology of morality and maturation, while a subaltern European (Spain, Italy, Eastern Europe) and African, Asian and Latin American pre-modernity was associated with immorality and childhood.

This intricate relationship between reason, modernity, national development and maturation was enhanced by Hegel. Hegel stated that Africa, Asia and the Americas were "immature" inasmuch as they were ontologically situated in the state of nature, namely, a state which is opposed to consciousness. For Hegel, nature, and the

non-Europeans who live in a perpetual state of nature, remain in an ahistorical, preconscious state of being incapable of maturation or evolution. The social, cultural and political manifestations of these naturally “immature” peoples are judged by Hegel to be incommensurate with the progress of the universal spirit, and as such, are found to be accidental or inconsequential to history. Here we have two key recurring themes: 1) that nature is immature, imperfect, and corrupt; 2) that nature is outside of consciousness and history; it exists as Other in relation to the Idea.<sup>1</sup>

This anthropomorphic, developmental model of modernity and reason called for a system of knowledge capable of articulating the differences between these stages of mental growth. Accordingly, as Carl Schorske points out, the model of “rational man” was discarded in favor of another model capable of explaining this biologically justified inequality: “Traditional liberal culture had centered upon rational man, whose scientific domination of nature and whose moral control of himself were expected to create the good society. In our century, rational man has had to give place to that richer but more dangerous and mercurial creature, psychological man” (4).

The construction of psychological man enabled society to explain its social inequality and conflict not in terms of poverty, uneven development or the unequal distribution of wealth and power, but rather as pathology it thus authorized psychologists and their allied sexologists, criminologists and ethnologists to define the marginality of specific social, cultural and ethnic sectors as the manifestation of these groups’ inherent irrationality, a condition rooted in abnormality or sickness. As Michel Foucault indicates, (in the following passage from *The Birth of the Clinic*,) it was not merely the content of biological and psychological theory that facilitated the medicalization of socially marginalized groups, but rather it was the structurally and functionally bipolar nature of this theory’s articulation which made this classification possible:

Furthermore, the prestige of the sciences of life in the nineteenth century, their role as model, especially in the human sciences, is

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*: “Nature has presented itself as the Idea in the form of *otherness*. Since therefore the Idea is the negative of itself, or is *external to itself*, Nature is not merely external in relation to this idea (and to its subjective existence Spirit); the truth is rather that *externality* constitutes the specific character in which Nature, as Nature, exists” (sic).

linked originally not with the comprehensive, transferable character of biological concepts, but, rather, with the fact that these concepts were arranged in a space whose profound structure responded to the healthy/morbid opposition. When one spoke of the life of groups and societies, of the life of the race, or even of the 'psychological life,' one did not think first of the internal structure of *the organized being*, but of the *medical bipolarity of the normal and the pathological*. (35)

In this way the medical and psychological disciplines discarded the model of "health" for a prescribed model of "normality" based on abstract, purely theoretical standards. "Sickness" was redefined as the inability to meet these standards. Social organicists readily applied this concept to society. Crusading, civic-minded psychologists, medical doctors, public health officials and criminologists medicalized the working class, the *lumpen proletariat*, criminals, ethnic minorities, "revolutionaries," prostitutes and women in general as "abnormal" or "sick." In this way those elements of society who questioned the inequity of the system, either through the mere fact of their poverty, through social protest and sexual or criminal "deviancy" were medically marginalized. Moreover, the shift from medical to social discourse was in itself a logical consequence of the consolidation of the former. For as Foucault indicates, the very process of the professionalization and standardization of medicine was linked to the state in its administrative and policing functions.<sup>2</sup>

In a larger context, the medicalization of the subaltern was a fundamental task of modernity. The drive to isolate and classify the organically and socially ill was part of a greater project to rationalize, modernize and industrialize the nation. Fulfilling this need, the function of the discourse of degeneration was to determine which groups and practices constituted biological and cultural obstacles to modernity, to diagnose the illnesses afflicting these groups and to develop treatments or solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Birth of the Clinic*, while referring to a late 18th century document, Foucault gives an account of the social and political authorization of medicine: "And yet, in the final analysis, when it is a question of these tertiary figures that must distribute the disease, medical expertise and the doctor's supervision of social structures, the pathology of epidemics and that of the species are confronted by the same requirement: the definition of a political status for medicine and the constitution, at state level, of a medical consciousness whose constant task would be to provide information, supervision, and constraint, all of which 'relate as much to the police as to the field of medicine proper'" (26).