

One of the important results of my book is to demonstrate that other regions of the world have a separate history. When we draw a distinction between Europe and the rest of the world, it does not mean that the rest of the world is one huge undifferentiated mass. In Iranshahr we can, beyond any doubt, see that the region has its own distinctive history, which is not arbitrary in any sense.

This is directly and indirectly a critique of Eurocentrism. I.e. the idea that history has an universal pattern which does not change significantly throughout world history. First history took off in Egypt and Mesopotamia, then in The Mediterranean, then in the early Moslem civilization, but after that, Europe took the lead, and the rest of the world was reduced to insignificance. We have to understand that every region has a history in its own terms. If we claim that Iranshahr suffered a decline, we are proposing a far too simple explanation. We have to ask, what kind of decline, regarding the population, culture etc. In the end we may find a very unique history, which cannot simply be summarized as "decline". All regions have their own histories with specific phases, ups and downs, and in each case we find specific, limiting environmental conditions. And if we add all the other elements of the particular history, it is impossible to maintain the undifferentiated notion of decline. The only way we as historians can gain scientific knowledge is by establishing comparative parameters.

A.M.: Does this lead to a multicultural position regarding history?

P.C.: We have to acknowledge that it was the Europeans who colonized the world, and, so far, it is also Europeans who have written a great part of world history. The world bears the mark of Europe, whether one likes it or not. In this respect we might even claim that Europe's history is the most important history in the world. This is not a Eurocentric position. Europe cannot be a model of world history in any sense of the word. On the contrary, all this means, is that we can only understand the history of Europe if we understand the history of the world, and thus we are led to a multicultural perspective on world history. We may also say that the

history of Europe is played out in the world, not in Europe, and this decenters Eurocentrism. It may sound as a kind of deconstruction but I see it as a strength of the historical science, i.e. of the inherent criticism, and self-criticism in professional history. I don't want to deconstruct the scientific consistency of the discipline, but I accept that the worldpicture of many European historians has become somewhat obsolete. But I also see a way out of this which is consistent with the present paradigm of comparative world history, as presented above, and as such I cannot adhere to the doctrine of deconstruction.

A.M.: In other words, out of the environmental perspective on the history of Iranshahr develops an openness in history. Environmental elements, which must be considered a somehow common physical factor for all societies and cultures – despite or exactly because of the differences mentioned above – can lead to a multicultural and diverse perspective on history?

P.C.: I think so, and I also believe that this may indicate a way of producing relevant historical knowledge. If environmental history can create a pluralistic approach to the histories and cultures of the world, and thus reverse Eurocentrism, I think we have achieved a very important result. In this respect one may call it a political perspective, because it shows a way forward concerning action towards environmental and other global problems.



**LIKE THE BULLET
OF AN IMAGINARY
REVOLVER
THE SPECTER
OF POPULAR CULTURE
IN EUROPE**

BY DIONISIO CAÑAS

Some years ago, Bernard-Henri Lévi, the French thinker, declared that "populism and one of its variants, the cult of youth," constituted one of the most

serious threats to European culture. Recently, Luis Gordillo, the Spanish artist, wrote that "very soon we shall see the debarkation of anti-art, though not by the expected and already proven sectors (appropriation and reductionism) but by a generalized populism." This alarmist attitude towards the invasion of European culture by popular elements is not new.

James Joyce wrote, in the early part of this century, that the most important Irish theater "had strayed from the path that leads to artistic progress, by giving in to the wishes of the masses." In 1922, José Ortega y Gasset published, in the journal *España*, an article with a title that clearly was intended as a manifest: "The Imperative of Intellectuality." The Spanish writer states that: "The annihilation of European intellectuals goes hand in hand with their mobilization" by political groups. Ortega goes even further; towards the end of the article, he peremptorily asserts: "If the 'people' are spontaneity and abandonment, then aristocracy is discipline and regimentation. So then, a nation is the organization of 'the people' by the aristocracy."

Of course, he refers to an intellectual aristocracy.

Fifty years later, Fidel Castro said that "there has been a certain inhibition in the circles of true intellectuals, who have left cultural problems in the hands of a small group of sorcerers." Then, who are the true intellectuals? The answer is elementary: those who are revolutionaries and populists. However, in 1968, a Cuban writer (Leopoldo Avila), declared that "the enemies of our culture are those who have been concerned, not in doing artistic work for the people, but in establishing international relations, favored by and using the means of the revolution, in order to use these means against it." Furthermore, "those who have not known how to use what they have received [from the people] assume aristocratic and paternalistic roles, thus forgetting the fact that one ascends to the people; that in a revolution the people are the best teachers."

In this fashion, the word "people" is used, like the bullet of an imaginary revolver, by elitists and populists in

order to wound one another. The “people” have not participated in those debates, and quite probably are not interested in doing so. On the other hand, Ortega’s declarations have not had great impact on the behavior of European intellectuals, and Castro’s heated recommendations have not been able to create any significant group of “true intellectuals” revolutionaries.

Any populist stance, by European intellectuals or creators, reeks of opportunism. Claude Grignon and Jean Claude Passeron, in the introduction to *Le savant et le populaire*, define populism “as a paradoxical form of disdain towards the popular social classes, which nevertheless appears, deceptively, as disdain for the intellectual.” But it is probably not necessary to dramatize excessively the situation of the “populist” intellectual.

It is an obvious fact that every moment is marked by a domineering class, which imposes its aesthetic codes by means of “its” artists and “its” intellectuals. Marx used to say that the prevalent ideas of any historic age are the ideas of the domineering class of any historic age. Outside of these imposed codes and marginalized by them, the so-called subcultures and also anticultures (Michel Maffesoli has recently studied the tribal spirit of these marginal cultures in Europe) manage to subsist. However, if one would observe all the cultural levels that coexist in a European country, without classifying them by attitude or rank, it would soon be evident that there is only one culture: the one created through dialogue, interferences and struggles between the different cultural levels in a country, in a region, or in a city. Cultural pluralism and social heterogeneity seem to belong together, thus revitalizing a European culture that, when seen as a homogenous entity, would be a distortion of reality that derives its main energy precisely from “mestizaje.”

In the latter part of the 18th century, Friedrich Schiller states: “There are moments in life in which we dedicate some love and emotional respect towards nature in plants, minerals, animals, landscape, as well as to human nature in children, in the mores of rural people

and of primitive ones, not because it pleases our senses, nor because it satisfies our intellect or our pleasure (it could often prove to be the contrary), but because of the mere fact that it *is Nature*.” For the father of the romantic sensibility, the rural worker was on the same level as savages, stones, animals and children.

Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron establish, with great clarity, the cultural problem that marked intellectual endeavor in the 18th and 19th centuries: though Nature could be seen as the source of artistic inspiration, the attitude of those intellectuals towards the rustic was disdainful. The rural worker was the one who truly “lived” nature, but his inability to contemplate it by means of a rational process, transformed the rustic himself into nature, into an object of study which absolutely bore no resemblance to the cultivated person. Thus the rustic became a landscape, a member of the animal or plant kingdom. Grignon and Passeron also point out that this ethnocentric approach considers the popular mass as “barbarian,” “natural,” “uncivilized;” as people who are inferior to us.

Ethnocentrism of a certain social class, a naive outlook which arises from a privileged position and is spoused by the privileged, has frequently adopted extreme practices, generally the most eloquent and rationalized, among intellectual fractions of the domineering class or among groups that are closely linked to power or that aspire to positions of power. And that, without even mentioning the horror towards the “lack of culture” of the people, shown by the intellectual bureaucracies of traditional States, nor the simple disdain [practiced by technocrats in modern States], towards the “irrationality” of popular behavior.

Schiller presented the dilemma of the return to Nature (not to the rural world) by the cultured man as a voluntary act of aesthetic and ethical consequence. Besides from the elitist views expressed by Schiller’s discourse, I would like to stress this willful return of the human being to his origins. This ancient problem has not been resolved. It is indeed surprising to see the members of

the European avant-garde in the 20th century engage in the effort of understanding the peculiarities of this dilemma. Thus, Piet Mondrian, in some essays regarding “Natural reality and abstract reality,” states: “We are no longer natural enough to be conjoined with nature, and we are not yet spiritual enough to be completely liberated from it.” Kandinsky, who did not dismiss nature as a source of inspiration for abstract art, declared: “Art can reproduce any setting, but not through external imitation of nature, but through an artistic reproduction of the internal value of that setting.”

The conflict of a possible return to nature (understood as a primary link) through intellectual exercise and contemplation, as expressed by Schiller, has continued to be of interest in Europe even in the avant-garde movements of the early part of this century. It must be pointed out that, in all the texts already mentioned, Nature is considered as an abstract force, seen through the eyes of the intellect, and in no form is the rustic a mere part of it; the rustic is, in fact, the landscape.

The gradual development of an interest in the rural worker and in the proletariat has possibly changed the approach towards agricultural labor and workmen in Europe. Grignon and Passeron thus assert that “the rehabilitation of popular culture has followed, though somewhat delayed, the rehabilitation of distant cultures.” However, in 19th century Europe, the stance toward the “dangerous classes,” towards the “humble and simple folk” was much more radical, when compared to the approach towards the colonized cultures; “class racism, understood as the certainty of a given social class to monopolize the cultural definition of a human being, and subsequently, of men who have to be amply recognized as such, is still present today in a great number of sectors of the domineering class.” On the other hand, the legitimization of academic discourse is almost exclusively based on the study of what is considered as “high culture.” “Popular culture” has only been acknowledged when it has been recycled by the superior culture, or when it has been dignified by the passage of time. It

is indeed paradoxical to see the study in academic circles of the medieval "cancionero popular," while the popular song of the 20th century is ignored with olympic disdain.

In Europe, only the bourgeoisie (upper or lower), and more recently, the middle class, are considered the guardians of "good taste" and the repository of cultural models. This is a delusion created by the images offered by media and advertising. There is no uniformity in what is or should be considered "good taste" and no possibility of reducing bourgeois behavior to some inflexible structures. Grignon and Passeron declare that as an opposition to "somewhat edifying descriptions of the domineering class, one feels like introducing, within sociological discourse, the vast libraries with unread books, the museums that are visited by hurrying patrons, the concerts that are heard by an audience that is half-sleep, the buffet dinners that are *assaulted*..." This is so true in Europe that, contrary to what one may think, a great number of those who are considered "people" sometimes do go to concerts without falling asleep, visit museums, read books, and do not "assault" a buffet dinner, even though it may be free of charge.

These stereotypes of social classes (and their "cultures") are arbitrary and useless. It is, however, a fact that the tastes of the upper class, cheapened and interpreted by the middle class, are taken over by the working class, sometimes becoming a caricature. This happens in patterns of behavior, in clothing, in interior decoration and even in linguistic usage. This game of influences, which normally follows a descending pattern (from the upper to the lower classes) has acquired a peculiar dynamic in the rural population of European countries.

It is a privilege enjoyed by the domineering class "to convert into cultural delicacies popular products that have been transformed into consumer goods" (Grignon and Passeron). This recycling of popular artifacts and culture is evident in European interior decoration: the pieces of furniture that had been discarded by the rural households, in order to modernize their

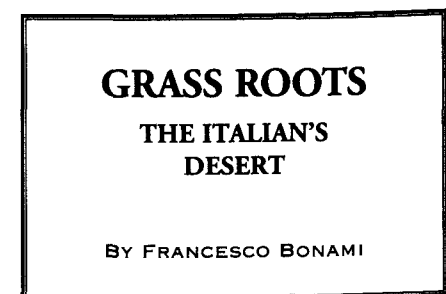
homes, became the latest trend in urban circles and recently these pieces have been revalued and restored by rural households. The enormous influence of magazines is a contributing factor (all of them monopolized by the great European urban centers; *Hola* is published simultaneously in Spain and in England): many people in rural areas furnish their homes, dress, copy behavioral patterns, and acquire information and gossip tidbits from glossy magazines. One wonders whether the rampant consumerism of rural areas is the result, in part, of true and real needs, or whether it is an offshoot of the willingness to imitate symbolically the middle and working urban classes.

After romantic populism came modernity and modern neopopulism, and later, postmodern "Pop." And thus, urban popular culture has acquired enough prestige to leave an imprint on our century, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. But, what has happened to rural popular culture in Europe? It is difficult to establish what elements of daily life in a rural area are remnants of old and ancient customs, or which ones result from the imitation of urban models. If one avoids the extreme position of categorizing certain expressions of rural popular culture as forms of resistance, one can nevertheless state that, in it, "essential things take place by the mere fact that it is forced to function as a ruled culture, that is to say, unfailingly as a *culture of abnegation and a culture of denial*, as subculture and counterculture." And "the characteristic difficulty in the sociology of a ruled symbolism is founded on the fact that the traits and the behavior of such are never purely autonomous nor purely reactive." Thus "the *neglect of domination* is, without a doubt, only one of the principles of the activity of popular symbolization" (Grignon and Passeron).

To a certain extent, specially for these two thinkers, all that happens within what is known as popular culture, is "an activity of popular symbolization." For, after all, and we strongly agree with Grignon and Passeron, the "tortured conscience of cultural indignity" occurs more frequently within the middle classes and

appears less in the popular ones. In order to be hyperobjective one must analyze the total "space of popular culture" (nutrition, domestic culture, employment, the establishment, the culture of adolescence, street culture, the culture of the factory, the culture of the bar, of the supermarkets, of sports, of television, of videos, of the automobile, etc....); perhaps only then can we know the reasons why populism is seen as a threat in Europe.

Translated from the Spanish by Doris Schnabel and the author.



After "Arte Povera" and the "Transavanguardia," an "Untitled" and autonomous generation of Italian artists is ready to enter onto the international contemporary art scene. Mario Airo', Stefano Arienti, Massimo Bartolini, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, Eva Marisaldi, Liliana Moro, Alessandro Pessoli, Massimo Uberti, Vedova Mazzei are only some examples of those who speak a completely transformed creative language. Despite this energy, however, no one is able to enter or exit the "fortress" Italy in order to establish the international dialogue than can no longer be put off.

Capucci, Riccardo Cavallo, Amalia Dal Ponte, Paolo Gallerani, Paola Gandolfi, Gianni Pisani, Angelo Savelli, Vito Tongiani, Mino Trafeli, Giuliano Vangi. Who are they? Maybe some of you will get to know them. You will get to know them if you visit the Italian Pavilion at the next Venice Biennial. They are some of the artists invited to represent (in a theatrical sense, I imagine) Italian contemporary art. They must be those Tartars that the second lieutenant Giovanni Drogo is waiting for