

a culture also has to be created to substitute for the existing nonculture. The elements that ought to constitute the core of the new culture are not here, and they are important: ideas, knowledge, aspirations, technology, what to do and how to do it. Once more we find the dishonest task of substituting for reality instead of transforming it.

Does It Mean Anything to Be Mexican?

Roger Bartra

The classic writings on "lo mexicano" have been heavily criticized in recent years for their tendency to generalize about what is unarguably a vast number of people. Relatively few of those people, we might surmise, conform to the image of the eternal adolescent or the wounded, angry macho described by the likes of Octavio Paz. Nor may it be helpful, beyond a certain point, to generalize, in rather dichotomous fashion, as Bonfil Batalla does, about the existence of two Mexicos inhabited by circumscribed dominant and subordinate groups. Some have suggested that these pensadores (grand thinkers), whatever their motives, have only created and perpetuated stereotypes of the Mexican that have been manipulated for political ends. Anthropologist-sociologist Roger Bartra takes the argument a step further, suggesting that the stereotype of the pelado, as featured in Mexican popular culture, serves the interests of the Mexican state. Bartra finds this popular stereotype exemplified by Mario Moreno, better known as Cantinflas (1911–1993), the beloved comedic everyman of the Mexican cinema.

Roger Bartra received his doctorate in Sociology from the University of Paris and is currently an investigator with the Institute of Social Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). For many years he was the editor of La Jornada Semanal, one of the nation's most prominent literary magazines. Bartra has been a pioneer in the field of Mexican cultural studies and is the author of many influential writings on the intersection of culture and power in both rural and urban Mexico.

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. — Ovid, Metamorphoses

The deplorable conditions in which the working classes are born and raised have for a long time inspired a feeling of horror and revulsion in the bourgeoisie, who are afraid to recognize the proletariat as creatures they themselves have created. Although no one can deny that they are a necessary and inevitable result of industrialization, they continue to be seen by the dominant class as "a malignant chancre on the flanks of modern society," according to Albert Dandoy in a noteworthy book on the French working class published

just after the Second World War. The book is dreadful, but it does pick up the old bourgeois tradition of horror at a proletariat whose mentality is tinged with resentment, distrust, immorality, mimicry, and complexes of inferiority and dispossession. These, we notice, are the same features attributed to the Mexican by Samuel Ramos and his school. The new urban landscape fills these observers of the Mexican spirit with terror. For them the Mexican is a figure without meaning, who denies everything for no reason, who lacks principles, distrusts everyone, and disdains ideas. Ramos asks anxiously: "But then, why does the Mexican live?" He can live because he leads a nonreflective existence, without a future, so that Mexican society is no more than "a chaos in which individuals gravitate at random like scattered atoms." This metaphor applies perfectly to the typical functioning of modern capitalist society.

From 1844, Friedrich Engels tried to understand and describe the terrible "culture of poverty," as it is called today. In his classic study of the situation of the working class, he showed that the typically proletarian tendencies to impulsiveness, improvidence and, of course, to the abuse of alcohol and sex are a necessary counterweight to ease the privations, instability, and degradation characteristic of their everyday lives. Today, the strange proletarian subculture of the nineteenth century has almost ceased to exist in the most-developed capitalist countries; but it has surfaced on the backward periphery, where the pains of a deferred industrial revolution are made more acute by the consequences of colonial and imperial oppression. It is not surprising that cultural stereotypes arise which are to a certain degree similar to those used by the European bourgeoisie to illustrate their idea of the proletariat.

What is odd about the Mexican situation is that there is a curious departure from the proletarian prototype, with the object of fomenting the development of a national identity. After the Revolution, the Mexican nationalists, orphans of native bourgeois traditions, had only the peasants and the proletariat as sources of inspiration. An ideological dissection had to be performed in order to extract some features of popular culture for elevation to the category of national ideology; other aspects, considered irrelevant, were to be disposed of. It was not simply a Manichaean operation to get rid of those elements considered harmful, as was undertaken by the positivists of the *porfiriato*.¹ Rather, it meant the emergence of a complex, contradictory image of the Mexican, in great measure forged as a reflection of the condition of the urban proletariat. I have already mentioned the prototype of the Mexican as sentimental and violent, passionate and aggressive, a resentful and rancorous figure. Another essential element must now be recognized: the Mexican also appears as a man in flight, seeking refuge from the sad reality around him. This evasion has been described and assessed from many different perspectives—from the

idleness and lack of willpower that lead him to shun work to the creation of complex mechanisms of elusion and dissimulation. For many it is a senseless flight, contributing to the chaos of industrial society. One result of this evasion is the creation of an image having a long history in picaresque literature. The Mexican *pelado*, however, is not just a variant of the social type created by the Spanish picaresque tradition. Thus Augustín Yáñez has claimed that the *pelado* lacks the roguish acuity of the *pícaro*, a cleverness that is essentially language-based and "acquired through adventure, example, and practical observation." The *pelado*, jettisoned by modern urban industrialization, is . . . one for whom language is not a means of communication but, rather, a barrier of elusion designed for self-defense and concealment. Thus, one of the best descendants of the old *pícaro* is a hero of the silent movies rather than of the novel: Charlie Chaplin, who with his helpless simplicity and gentle guile manages to awaken waves of sympathy for those living in the misery of the twentieth century. The elusive language of gestures, with every kind of movement of the eyebrows and moustache, is the best barrier against the aggressiveness of reality.

The Mexican equivalent of Chaplin is Cantinflas, one of whose most important characteristics is precisely the elusive language that allows him to slip out of any predicament. One observer of the Mexican character, César Garizurieta, claims that Cantinflas is the most representative example of the Mexican psychological type. Unlike Chaplin, whose formal dress reveals a Utopian desire for change, Cantinflas has no aspirations to better himself and "does not want a better world even as a dream; he is happy with life as it is." The Mexican of the modern age has remained at the level of a caricature of man. The energy, aggressiveness, and life force, so fervently exalted by various illustrators of the Mexican Revolution as characteristic of the new man, fade away before the prototype of Cantinflas. This frustrated Mexican Prometheus fails to bring with him not only the secret of fire, but also the gift of the word. According to Garizurieta,

Cantinflas expresses himself in self-defense through an artificial, subtle language, resulting from aspects of his incompetence. Faced with his exaggerated feeling of inferiority, he knows that he is equally compromised whether he affirms or denies. Therefore, he neither affirms nor denies: he oscillates between affirmation and denial. Without intending it, he elicits laughter or tears when he speaks, since there are no frontiers delimiting the tragic from the comic.

Without a doubt the great popularity of Cantinflas stems from the fact that, in his mockery, he is also criticizing social injustice. For example, when



Cantinflas (left) became a major movie star during the 1940s, often playing the role of a *pelado*. La Cineteca Nacional

he is asked if work is a good thing, he answers: "If it were any good, the rich would have cornered the market in it." But he is a conformist critic who proposes escape rather than struggle, slipping away rather than fighting. The Mexican becomes a teacher of feints and puns. He becomes a twisted, subtle, evasive, and indirect character, dominated by "the goal of circumlocution" thanks to a language having such a prodigious store of evasions, elusions, wastefulness, and deviousness that it appears made to order for the art of punning, "pointing to one extreme only to turn up at the other, and later reversing the direction."² It is highly unlikely that the Cantinflas stereotype can be applied to many Mexicans; however, it is obvious that it could be useful in defining the political style of Mexico's government bureaucrats. It is also an excellent metaphor for describing that peculiar mediating structure which legitimizes one-party dictatorship and government despotism. That structure is a labyrinth of contradictions, puns, and feints which allow the most radical popular demands to be accepted—before, inevitably, they are lost in the maze of corridors, anterooms, and offices, and their original meaning vanishes. In

this aspect, above all others, it can be easily appreciated that the definition of the national character obeys political motives more than anything and can be understood better if we seek its roots not in the people, but in the hegemonic classes. Consider the following definition:

It is imminence that is the determining characteristic of the Mexican, the provisional man, and everyday events that are not suspended on the edge of it leave him unconcerned: to lose his job or his love; to have money or not to have it; to fulfill a promise or not, for him everything *importa madre* [doesn't really matter].³

This is an outline of *importamadrismo*, whose antecedents as a metaphor one must seek as far back as in the book *El no importa de España* (1668), by the Spanish writer of novels of customs and manners, Francisco Santos. There Santos referred to the Spanish indolence that justified everything which turned out wrong with a dry *no importa* (it doesn't matter). Menéndez Pidal tells of the German count who, around 1599, was exasperated by Phillip II's unperturbable ministers (nicknamed the "ministers of eternity") and who greatly suffered with the "come back tomorrow" attitude so well described by Mariano José de Larra in 1833.

We are confronted with a complicated phenomenon: in some moments in history, the ruling classes appropriate what they think is popular culture and develop a curious mimicry of it. In this way the national culture drinks at the wells of popular culture. But it is not a linear process; the popular components of the national culture are mere fragments (frequently very distorted ones) of what is in reality the everyday life of the social class whence they are taken. We can recognize the proletarian (even lumpenproletarian) origin of the feints, elusions, puns, and laziness that are said to contribute to the formation of the Mexican character; we can even observe behavior worthy of Cantinflas in many politicians. But it must be emphasized that there is a wide gap between the real life of a *pelado* in the inner-city community of Tepito and the model that cinema, television, literature, or philosophy proposes to society as a point of reference. The situation grows in complexity owing to the fact that the mass media recycle the popular stereotypes fabricated by the hegemonic culture so that, in their turn, they exercise an influence on the lower classes' way of life. If this last stage did not occur, then the national culture would have no part in the legitimation of the dominant system. This legitimizing function endows power with a species of dynamism, so that we are constantly encountering the birth of new forms of culture. The same stereotype that can, at first, have a markedly antihegemonic character is transformed until it acquires almost unrecognizable facets: thus, the workers in the revolutionary

murals become existentialist hieroglyphs representing anguish, and the comedy of the humbler classes' outdoor theaters is continued in the stammerings of Cantinflas. At last, for the hegemonic classes, the potentially dangerous and revolutionary *pelados* and proletarians end up as a bunch of grotesque characters who know only to jabber and who, in most cases, express their emotions in song.

The dialects that arise in the working-class barrios are originally forms of defense. Not only are they language that allow the members of a social group to identify with their own way of life, but they also act as barriers that impede others from understanding their conversations. Understandably, the popular dialects are highly influenced by the speech of the underworld and the prisons, where cryptic forms of communication are developed to hinder understanding. These are languages *with no meaning* for those who do not belong to the social group which creates them, and that is precisely why they are developed: they make sense only *here* (in the streets), rather than *out there* (in refined, bourgeois society). From this need to identify and differentiate oneself came the so-called *arte-acá* (art-here) of Tepito, a poor Mexico City barrio in which popular forms for the defense of the local culture have arisen. But the moment the popular slang is removed from its natural environment it loses its sense, and the phenomenon I have noted occurs: what is *meaningless* becomes the *new meaning* of popular speech. The slang's new function is to confuse meanings and reveal only the defensive, evasive aspects of the popular language. So the speech of Cantinflas drains the language of meaning and converts it into a method for avoiding predicaments; in contrast, the popular slang that Cantinflas takes as his point of departure is a deeply committed form (i.e., it is coherent to him and the world around him). In this way the Mexican stereotype adopts elements that have a popular origin, but when the scene shifts—as when barrio slang emerges from the mouth of Cantinflas—they acquire another meaning.

The myth of the *pelado* in its Cantinflas version is particularly interesting because it clearly reveals the relationship that the political culture establishes between government and people. Cantinflas is not only the stereotype of the poor Mexican from the city; he is also a harmful simulacrum of the strong structural link that necessarily exists between state despotism and popular corruption. Cantinflas's message is transparent: misery is a permanent state of mindless primitivism that must be vindicated through laughter. This is expressed principally in his corruption of speech, through a veritable implosion of meanings; it is the delirium of a metamorphosis in which everything changes without any apparent meaning. It is understood that there is a correspondence between the corruption of the people and the corruption of the

government: the people get the government they deserve. Or, put the other way round, the authoritarian, corrupt government has the people that suit it: namely, those whom the nationalism of Cantinflas offers as objects of domination.

A frequent theme in the Cantinflas movies is the confusion of roles: the bullfighter is a petty thief (*Ni sangre ni arena*); the policeman is a *pelado* (*El gen-darme desconocido*); and the judge and lawyers end up talking like Cantinflas (*Ahí está en detalle*). The intrinsic corruption of the *pelado* is found throughout the political system; given that the regime of the Revolution is of the people, it must behave in accord with the Mexican character (with "national idiosyncrasy," as politicians like to refer to this corruption of character). The cheap morals and vulgarity with which the exploits of Cantinflas are usually presented cannot obscure the fundamental fact that they are a simulacrum of the *pelado* converted into a policeman, the people transformed into government, and nonsense enthroned as political discourse.

The verbal confusion of Cantinflas, rather than serving to criticize the demagoguery of the politicians, actually legitimizes it. With gestures and mime (running parallel to the nonsense of the verbal effluence) it is insinuated that there is another interpretation, something hidden; that other reality, invoked by the nodding of the head and the movement of the eyebrows and hips, is a world of illegal profits, sexuality without eroticism, power without representation, wealth without work. There is in the punning and the feints a subtle invitation to bribery: the rules of the game are founded in a common venality that allows the Mexican to evade the police, swindle the feeble-minded, escape from homosexuality, obtain intercourse easily with other women while avoiding being made a cuckold by one's own. The *pelado* lives in a world that, in order to function, needs to be oiled regularly: thus, a shifting society is built in which, at any moment, everything can lose meaning, and civility becomes slick and lubricious. When things freeze up, it is necessary to smear them with what in Europe is called the "Mexican ointment": a bribe. When a problem or obstacle arises, it is necessary to rub into the appropriate hands the ointment that will keep the permanent delirious metamorphosis of the senses under way.

The stereotype of the *pelado* living immersed in the corrupt world must, nevertheless, move us and touch our heartstrings. We cannot avoid glimpsing in the *pelado* the presence of a spirit pierced by emotions, impulses, afflictions, and excitements. So, when the spirit is questioned about the meaning of being Mexican, the answer is obvious: the Mexican has no sense . . . but he does have sentiments.