The Pachuco and Other Extremes

All of us, at some moment, have had a vision of our existence as something unique, untransferable and very precious. This revelation almost always takes place during adolescence. Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone: it is the opening of an impalpable, transparent wall — that of our consciousness — between the world and ourselves. It is true that we sense our aloneness almost as soon as we are born, but children and adults can transcend their solitude and forget themselves in games or work. The adolescent, however, vacillates between infancy and youth, halting for a moment before the infinite richness of the world. He is astonished at the fact of his being, and this astonishment leads to reflection: as he leans over the river of his consciousness, he asks himself if the face that appears there, disfigured by the water, is his own. The singularity of his being, which is pure sensation in children, becomes a problem and a question.

Much the same thing happens to nations and peoples at a certain critical moment in their development. They ask themselves: What are we, and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are? The answers we give to these questions are often belied by history, perhaps because what is called the “genius of a people” is only a set of reactions to a given stimulus. The answers differ in different situations, and the national character, which was thought to be immutable, changes with them. Despite the often illusory nature of essays on the psychology of a nation, it seems to me there is something revealing in the insistence with
The minority of Mexicans who are aware of their own selves do not make up a closed or unchanging class. They are the only active group, in comparison with the Indian-Spanish inertia of the rest, and every day they are shaping the country more and more into their own image. And they are also increasing. They are conquering Mexico. We can all reach the point of knowing ourselves to be Mexicans. It is enough, for example, simply to cross the border: almost at once we begin to ask ourselves, at least vaguely, the same questions that Samuel Ramos asked in his Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico. I should confess that many of the reflections in this essay occurred to me outside of Mexico, during a two-year stay in the United States. I remember that whenever I attempted to examine North American life, anxious to discover its meaning, I encountered my own questioning image. That image, seen against the glittering background of the United States, was the first and perhaps the profoundest answer which that country gave to my questions. Therefore, in attempting to explain to myself some of the traits of the present-day Mexican, I will begin with a group for whom the fact that they are Mexicans is a truly vital problem, a problem of life or death.

Los Angeles, a city inhabited by over a million persons of Mexican origin. At first sight, the visitor is surprised not only by the purity of the sky and the ugliness of the dispersed and ostentatious buildings, but also by the city’s vaguely Mexican atmosphere, which cannot be captured in words or concepts. This Mexicanism—delight in decorations, carelessness and pomp, negligence, passion and reserve—floats in the air. I say “floats” because it never mixes or unites with the other world, the North American world based on precision and efficiency. It floats, without offering any opposition; it hovers, blown here and there by the wind, sometimes breaking up like a cloud, sometimes standing erect like a rising skyrocket. It creeps, it wrinkles, it expands and contracts; it sleeps or dreams; it is ragged but beautiful. It floats, never quite existing, never quite vanishing.

Something of the same sort characterizes the Mexicans you see in the streets. They have lived in the city for many years, wearing the same clothes and speaking the same language as the other inhabitants, and they feel ashamed of their origin; yet no one would mistake them for authentic North Americans. I refuse to believe that physical features are as important as is commonly thought. What distinguishes them, I think, is their furtive, restless air: they act like persons who are wearing disguises, who are afraid of a stranger’s look because it could strip them and leave them stark naked. When you talk with them, you observe that their sensibilities are like a pendulum, but a pendulum that has lost its reason and swings violently and erratically back and forth. This spiritual condition, or lack of a spirit, has given birth to a type known as the pachuco. The pachucos are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in Southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior as well as by the clothing they affect.

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1 In our recent history there are many examples of this superimposition, as well as of the existence of different historical levels: the neofeudalism of the Porfirio Díaz regime, using positivism (a bourgeois philosophy) to justify itself historically; Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos, the intellectual initiators of the Revolution, using the ideas of Boutroux and Bergson to combat positivism; socialist education in a country at least incipiently capitalist; revolutionary murals on government walls; etc. These apparent contradictions all demand a new examination of our history and also of our culture, which is a mingling of many currents and epochs.
They are instinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them more than once. But the *pachuco* do not attempt to vindicate their race or the nationality of their forebears. Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination—it is an ambiguous one, as we will see—not to be like those around them. The *pachuco* does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America. His whole being is sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma. Even his very name is enigmatic: *pachuco*, a word of uncertain derivation, saying nothing and saying everything. It is a strange word with no definite meaning; or, to be more exact, it is charged like all popular creations with a diversity of meanings. Whether we like it or not, these persons are Mexicans, are one of the extremes at which the Mexican can arrive.

Since the *pachuco* cannot adapt himself to a civilization which, for its part, rejects him, he finds no answer to the hostility surrounding him except this angry affirmation of his personality.\(^2\) Other groups react differently. The Negroes, for example, oppressed by racial intolerance, try to “pass” as whites and thus enter society. They want to be like other people. The Mexicans have suffered a less violent rejection, but instead of attempting a problematical adjustment to society, the *pachuco* actually flaunts his differences. The purpose of his grotesque dandyism and anarchic behavior is not so much to point out

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\(^2\) Many of the juvenile gangs that have formed in the United States in recent years are reminiscent of the post-war *pachucos*. It could not have been otherwise: North American society is closed to the outside world, and at the same time it is inwardly petrified. Life cannot penetrate it, and being rejected, squanders itself aimlessly on the outside. It is a marginal life, formless but hoping to discover its proper form.

the injustice and incapacity of a society that has failed to assimilate him as it is to demonstrate his personal will to remain different.

It is not important to examine the causes of this conflict, and even less so to ask whether or not it has a solution. There are minorities in many parts of the world who do not enjoy the same opportunities as the rest of the population. The important thing is this stubborn desire to be different, this anguished tension with which the lone Mexican—an orphan lacking both protectors and positive values—displays his differences. The *pachuco* has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs. He is left with only a body and a soul with which to confront the elements, defenseless against the stares of everyone. His disguise is a protection, but it also differentiates and isolates him: it both hides him and points him out.

His deliberately aesthetic clothing, whose significance is too obvious to require discussion, should not be mistaken for the outfit of a special group or sect. *Pachuquismo* is an open society, and this in a country full of cults and tribal costumes, all intended to satisfy the middle-class North American’s desire to share in something more vital and solid than the abstract morality of the “American Way of Life.” The clothing of the *pachuco* is not a uniform or a ritual attire. It is simply a fashion, and like all fashions it is based on novelty—the mother of death, as Leopardi said—and imitation.

Its novelty consists in its exaggeration. The *pachuco* carries fashion to its ultimate consequences and turns it into something aesthetic. One of the principles that rules in North American fashions is that clothing must be comfortable, and the *pachuco*, by changing ordinary apparel into art, makes it “impractical.” Hence it negates the very principles of the model that inspired it. Hence its aggressiveness.
of the forbidden. He is someone who ought to be destroyed. He is also someone with whom any contact must be made in secret, in the darkness.

The pachuco is impassive and contemptuous, allowing all these contradictory impressions to accumulate around him until finally, with a certain painful satisfaction, he sees them explode into a tavern fight or a raid by the police or a riot. And then, in suffering persecution, he becomes his true self, his supremely naked self, as a pariah, a man who belongs nowhere. The circle that began with provocation has completed itself and he is ready now for redemption, for his entrance into the society that rejected him. He has been its sin and its scandal, but now that he is a victim it recognizes him at last for what he really is: its product, its son. At last he has found new parents.

The pachuco tries to enter North American society in secret and daring ways, but he impedes his own efforts. Having been cut off from his traditional culture, he asserts himself for a moment as a solitary and challenging figure. He denies both the society from which he originated and that of North America. When he thrusts himself outward, it is not to unite with what surrounds him but rather to defy it. This is a suicidal gesture, because the pachuco does not affirm or defend anything except his exasperated will-not-to-be. He is not divulging his most intimate feelings: he is revealing an ulcer, exhibiting a wound. A wound that is also a grotesque, capricious, barbaric adornment. A wound that laughs at itself and decks itself out for the hunt. The pachuco is the prey of society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter’s attention. Persecution redeems him and breaks his solitude: his salvation depends on his becoming part of the very society he appears to deny. Solitude and sin, communion and health become synonymous.
terms.

If this is what happens to persons who have long since left their homeland, who can hardly speak the language of their forebears, and whose secret roots, those that connect a man with his culture, have almost withered away, what is there to say about the rest of us when we visit the United States? Our reaction is not so unhealthy, but after our first dazed impressions of that country's grandeur, we all instinctively assume a critical attitude. I remember that when I commented to a Mexican friend on the loveliness of Berkeley, she said: "Yes, it's very lovely, but I don't belong here. Even the birds speak English. How can I enjoy a flower if I don't know its right name, its English name, the name that has fused with its colors and petals, the name that's the same thing as the flower? If I say bugambilia to you, you think of the bougainvillaea vines you've seen in your own village, with their purple, liturgical flowers, climbing around an ash tree or hanging from a wall in the afternoon sunlight. They're a part of your being, your culture. They're what you remember long after you've seemed to forget them. It's very lovely here, but it isn't mine, because whatever

*No doubt many aspects of the pachuco are lacking in this description. But I am convinced that his hybrid language and behavior reflect a physico-chemical oscillation between two irreducible worlds — the North American and the Mexican — which he vainly hopes to reconcile and conquer. He does not want to become either a Mexican or a Yankee. When I arrived in France in 1945, I was amazed to find that the young men and women of certain quarters, especially students and "artists," wore clothing reminiscent of that of the pachucos in Southern California. Was this a quick, imaginative adaptation of what these young people, after years of isolation, thought was in fashion in North America? I questioned a number of people about it, and almost all of them told me it was a strictly French phenomenon that had come into existence at the end of the Occupation. Some even considered it a manifestation of the Resistance: its Baroque fantasy was a reply to the rigid order of the German. Although I do not exclude the possibility of a more or less indirect imitation, I think the similarity is remarkable and significant.

saying it for me... or to me, either."

Yes, we withdraw into ourselves, we deepen and aggravate our awareness of everything that separates or isolates or differentiates us. And we increase our solitude by refusing to seek out our compatriots, perhaps because we fear we will see ourselves in them, perhaps because of a painful, defensive unwillingness to share our intimate feelings. The Mexican succumbs very easily to sentimental effusions, and therefore he shuns them. We live closed up within ourselves, like those taciturn adolescents — I will add in passing that I hardly met any of the sort among North American youths — who are custodians of a secret that they guard behind scowling expressions, but that only waits for the opportune moment in which to reveal itself.

I am not going to expand my description of these feelings or discuss the states of depression or frenzy (or often both) that accompany them. They are all apt to lead to unexpected explosions, which destroy a precarious equilibrium based on the imposition of forms that oppress or mutilate us. Our sense of inferiority — real or imagined — might be explained at least partly by the reserve with which the Mexican faces other people and the unpredictable violence with which his repressed emotions break through his mask of impassivity. But his solitude is vaster and profounder than his sense of inferiority. It is impossible to equate these two attitudes: when you sense that you are alone, it does not mean that you feel inferior, but rather that you feel you are different. Also, a sense of inferiority may sometimes be an illusion, but solitude is a hard fact. We are truly different. And we are truly alone.

This is not the moment to analyze our profound sense of solitude, which alternately affirms and denies itself in melancholy and rejoicing, silence and sheer noise, gratuitous crimes and religious fervor. Man is alone everywhere. But the solitude