

A CRISIS IN LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE

THERE have not been wanting signs in recent years that Latin American culture is passing through a crisis. In many countries cultural tendencies have changed or been intensified—the Fall of France was an acute shock to Argentina, North American influence gives rise to disquiet in some Colombians, there is an increase in English influence in Brazil. Some outside critics¹ have asked what the Latin American contribution to world culture is, now or in the past, and it is a difficult question to answer, more for lack of a definition of terms than for lack of material to adduce (for at once many things come to mind: the relics of pre-Columbian civilisations, the lovely colonial art, some contribution to science in the eighteenth century and to medical art in our own times, contemporary peasant arts and the interesting developments in serious painting, a solid contribution to the law of nations and international relations, and above all the formation of a way of life and a tradition). So much depends on how far a contribution to world culture is made to coincide with what the world wishes to receive or with a preconceived view as to what it ought to wish to receive. An ingrained habit of self-criticism and depreciation makes individual Latin Americans question very seriously whether they have in fact a culture of their own, while governments have taken to stressing the national traditions of each individual country. Some analysis of the root conditions of Latin American culture may help to clarify its present crisis for us. It should be borne in mind that for 140 years of independent existence the majority of Latin American countries have lacked in greater or less degree wealth, population, power and stability, and that the first three if not all these vital conditions for cultural life were imperfectly realised during the three hundred years of colonial rule, for the wealth (that is the product of the labour) of the colonies was brought to Europe, the native population actually declined and power only existed in the form of isolation. Only the stability of stagnation was there. That a colonial culture arose, so charming and so sensitive in its artistic expressions, is a tribute to the capacity for opulent improvisation of the Spanish colonist and to the laborious delicacy of the Indian craftsman. That, in the circumstances, the modern national cultures should exist at all is likewise a tribute to the intellectual keenness and the single-minded determination of the Latin American educated classes.

The Latin American finds himself a modern man with (1) a

¹ For example, Giovanni Papini in the interview with Sr Arciniegas published in the *Revista de América* of Bogotá in June, 1947.

foreshortened perspective of culture and (2) on the one hand, a great divide at its earliest possible national junction, that is to say, at the time of the discovery and conquest by Spain and Portugal, and, on the other hand, a great rejection at its most real national starting point, that is, the beginning of the era of independence, 1810; the general upshot is the same for Brazil as for the Spanish-speaking republics, although the details of the historical development are different, sometimes with a difference that is important. This discontinuity in culture has necessarily created a problem subjectively in the individual Latin American spirit, and objectively in the cultural institutions, and the ethos pervading them, of the several nations. The attempted solutions of this problem have been in the nature of groping searches in several directions.

In the direction of France in the first place. Latin America has made an attempt to find herself, if we may thus personify the collective feeling of two continents in the soul of their inhabitants, in a spiritual type based only on 'the modern man' of the eighteenth century, that is, on a denationalised, exclusively rational and political being, looking not heavenward but towards what was, in the circumstances, its opposite, Paris. If all good North Americans go to Paris at the last, it is the bad South Americans who, in this life, have transported their swagger to its elysian fields. But the rational is the superficial, and the political the partial, and, moreover, though there may be no better rationalists than the French, there are better Frenchmen than the rationalists; but it has been only, in the main, the Latin American women who have nourished themselves on French religious literature, and that, in the past, has been of a distinctly Jansenist rigidity. As to politics, from the beginning, the purity of the source was confused by Anglo-Saxon influences, added to, in the case of Spanish America, by the stronger influence of the American constitution. Liberal politics (in the sense of a conception of political activity tending to swamp every other human activity), rationalist philosophy, masonic symbolism—felt with such poetic intuitions, for example, by a Francisco Bilbao of Chile—even Catholic devotion in one of its more rigorous traditions, have all proved, on the whole, insufficient to fill out the figure of Latin American humanity, deprived of its natural contours by the divisions of its origins.

Secondly, Spain: another remedy that has been sought for the Latin American cultural problem has been in what may be called the pan-Hispanic movement. The flaw here has been that the pan-Hispanism of Latin America has derived from a Spanish world that no longer exists, indeed from a Spain that no longer exists. The

deplorable course of nineteenth century Spanish history and culture could be no encouragement to a continent and a half seeking a content to its natural capacity. Spain reproached the Spanish American for his mental and spiritual gallicism, but if the alternative was to be one with the same Spain that made the reproaches, then they were instantly voided. Of course, the alternative, even if it were to be exclusively Hispanic, could not be limited to the modern Peninsula, but this fact is forgotten by both parties to the controversy. The point is, in this difficulty of the Latin American in search of his origins, precisely that the Spain of today is as much a 'daughter' of her own past as the Spanish American countries, in a way that is not true, for example, of England and the United States. England has maintained and increased her cultural density where Spain (whether through her fault or not is not to the point here, though I believe that it is not her fault) has not been able to do so. The Spaniards of the eighteenth century broke with their past; despite some brilliant exceptions in the nineteenth century (Balmeş, Donoso Cortés, Menéndez y Pelayo), cultural continuity has not been re-established. The United States has formed part of an English-speaking intellectual world and has been able to contribute to it, whereas it was of no special advantage culturally, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to be members of a Spanish-speaking world. The Spain that is a rich source of spirit and intellect to the Spanish-speaking world is mediaeval and Renaissance Spain. For America, the Spain of the Cid, whose chest must not be locked up with any number of keys²—the Spain of the discovery, of Columbus, last relic himself of oecumenical Spain, the Spain, even, of the heyday of the colonial period, the two centuries of the Golden Age from Fray Luis de León to Calderón, from plateresque to baroque, these are the Spains from which to derive a potent symbol of the Spanish American past, but in this mental process, modern Spain herself is but one among a score of others equally seeking their past. The situation is different for Brazil, and to this difference Brazil owes much of her interest and fascination for the foreigner. There could be no possible attempt in the nineteenth century to subordinate the great daughter country to a Portugal even more harassed politically than her neighbour, and without a cultural revival at all comparable with that of even sceptical nineteenth century Spain. Both the colonisation and the independence of Brazil made for a greater degree of autonomy

² Costa, a modern Spaniard, declared, in his effort to counter the corrosion of his countrymen's rhetoric, that the sepulchre of the Cid should be locked with seven keys. This is to shut one's eyes to a reality instead of opposing insincerity about the reality.

spiritually than was the case with the Spanish colonies, and, however gilded and plush, the Empire, presided over with such loving care by its scholar-emperor, gave at least a degree of cultural stability and self-confidence to the country.

The truth, however, is that the alternative to Latin American gallicism is only partially and not exclusively Spanish, and this brings us to the third and in some ways most interesting remedy proposed for Latin American cultural problems: the Indianist solution.

Here we meet something truly profound and fruitful, but it is liable to be lost altogether if an exaggerated idea and ideal of it be formed; some writers, both Latin American and foreign, have tended to do this. In the old American civilisations we find a modality, remote and deeply original, it is true, of the Far East³. We are dealing with a world of spirit perhaps more Tibetan than Chinese or Japanese; that is to say, a world in which the Mongolian mentality adopts a religious attitude, and combines with its native introversion and intuitive disposition a profound reverence for the unseen and an inner worship of Being. But there are two things to bear in mind: the American landscape and the fact that the American Indian varies enormously from area to area. The American continent situates the Mongol in a landscape and a variety of climates which he does not find on the Asiatic mainland. The mountain and the plain are not of course new to him, but the jungle, even the volcano (in such profusion at least), the startling, perhaps strident quality of the new scene are a challenge. In the Chinese, subjective, sceptical, unreligious, the family is the form of life, harmony its ideal. In the Japanese, fanatical, unmythical, extrovert and sentimental, the state, by a process perhaps not hard to divine, becomes its form, and domination its ideal. The Tibetans give us the metamorphosis of these remote people in an almost completely religious mode with a world of spirit for its goal in life and a church for its form.

The native American shows many of these traits in varying degrees in different regions. The 'dignity of the East' is present from the noble savage idealised by a rationalist and too sentimental west, and more or less existent in the North American plains or the Brazilian forest, to the people of Moctezuma and the dynasty of the Incas. But the Indian is a man who has travelled great distances, fought a great fight with a strange Nature, been frozen on the Andes or devoured by the jungle, and the struggle has

³ In the welter of theory it may safely be accepted that the bulk of the pre-Columbian population derived ultimately from a Mongolian origin.

silenced him. Although closer again to Nature, he is essentially the Oriental: patient, persistent, satisfied with little because his demand is more inward than outward, aloof, sagacious and not less capable of cruelty than the European, as the hysterical religion of the Aztec warns us, but with an inward life full of symbolic treasure, whether it take shape in the wild pantheon of Mexico, in the gracious legend of the Chibcha or in the austere mythology of Peru, and with a capacity for giving form to his symbols for which we seek a parallel in vain, except among the Chinese, whose sense of outward beauty the Indian does not reach, the Japanese from whose romanticism, however, he is far removed, or the Tibetans, whose psychic potency his struggle with Nature has prevented—perhaps we should say protected—him from attaining. On the whole, the Spaniard and the Portuguese have had to deal with a race of great spiritual strength, subtlety, passivity and inwardness, with a tendency to be overwhelmed by the pressure of natural forces.

The Spaniards, in dealing with the Indian, changed him. The Portuguese too, but in a more radical and obvious way, for either they completely absorbed him, or they drove him deeper into the forest until modern times, when the Brazilian policy for the Indians has been remarkable for its insight and good sense. The institutions of the Indian, oriental, surely, in the constant political movement of Mexico and in the all-embracing community of Peru, the Spaniards practically destroyed, but his religious nature they fulfilled, this may and must be said without ignoring much that is imperfect in the missionary achievement of Spain. The christianised and hispanised Indian, the Latin Americans have to deal with at much closer quarters than did their ancestors, the first Spaniards, for he is within themselves.

Most Latin Americans, except, quite without foundation in fact, the inhabitants of the River Plate area⁴, readily admit the fact of miscegenation; but percentage proportions of population elements mean nothing to the problem at present under consideration, for if the Indian had remained entirely unmixed with the Spaniard and Portuguese, his presence in the continental psychology would not have been avoided—this is seen even in the inhabitants of the United States, overwhelmingly descended from quite recent immigrants, in whom, according to some observers, it is possible to see, even in their physiognomy and gestures, traces of the Indian psychology embedded with the other components of their nature. In Peru and in Mexico, indianisation has been made in the present

⁴ Contrast, however, Don Ricardo Rojas in his *Blasón del Plata*.

century a fashion, but it is here that exaggeration becomes a danger. There is no possibility of a return to Aztec or Maya empire or Peruvian *ayllu*. For if the Spaniard has been indianised, the Indian has been hispanised, and in any case the joint result is living in a world new to them both. But it is in this tendency of the modern Latin American to find a cultural past in the Indian that most hope lies, for it does three things: it attaches the modern Latin American more closely to the landscape he dwells in, it rectifies a falsehood inherent in seeking his heritage only in Spain and Portugal, and it rights a wrong done in the centuries of conquest, and by a process which ever operates in the use of political violence: the mutual absorption of the opposing elements. The true heritage of the Latin American, like the true heritage of everyone else, is complex, and it is in the process of the conversion of a sense of division into a sense of complexity that the contemporary Latin American cultural problem lies, but it is a process which must be carried out evenly and not veer to one-sided solutions. The Latin American inherits the brilliance of the mediaeval Peninsula and the grandeur of the Colony, and also the massiveness and the subtlety of the autochthonous race: but it is in their interaction that he possesses these elements, not in isolation, and it is in the inner universe of Catholicism that they play out their mutually affecting rôles down a century and a half of political experiment now losing its first crude ferment, and in a modern world of multiple international contacts. It is all these things together that constitute the civilisation of the modern Latin American, and there are signs that he has at last found that he is at home in his own country and can take from abroad without seeking to identify himself with the country he takes from, whether France, Spain, England or the United States.

With regard to the Negro element, the situation is much simpler: except in Brazil and Cuba, this element is a small minority, its source of renewal has everywhere long since been closed; the Negro from the first has shared the domestic life of the European element, and in any case, offered least resistance to outward europeanisation, for he had least formal culture of his own to retain in place of it. Even so, there has been a growing interest in some countries in the African contribution to their composite culture and to the African twist that has been given to some manifestations of it. This tendency is strongest in Brazil and Cuba, where it is reflected in some striking literary expressions, and even in Colombia there is an Institute for the study and preservation of the African heritage of the coloured population. Psychologically, the Negro represents,

though it may be in diminishing degree, a reinforcement of the primitive in all of us. There is no doubt that he is much nearer the white in mentality than is the Indian. It is the general experience of Latin American countries that the incorporated Negro has great intellectual—indeed pedagogical—ability and is quite capable of as high a degree of citizenship as any other element of their society, while as for religion, Blessed Martin de Porres in America and the martyrs of Uganda in Africa answer our question with a finality somewhat crushing to our impertinence.

The great divide we spoke of as standing at the very source of Latin American culture in the substitution of Iberian civilisations for the autochthonous can, then, be seen as a complex of legacies rather than as an impoverishment, or as a fact that has to force the modern Latin American to a course narrowing to the reality of his own soul. What about the great rejections standing at the head of the national tradition that begins with the period of independence? The rejection of the parent culture and the adoption of France that finally led or contributed to the rebellions that took place everywhere in the Spanish colonial area in 1809 and 1810, and in Brazil led to the severance from Portugal in 1822, was undoubtedly an exaggeration, but it was inevitable and it is a fact. The present relative state of French and Spanish culture exacts a readjustment on the part of Spanish America (it is doubtful whether any case could be made in regard to the mutual relations of the two Portuguese-speaking nations, the rôles of parent and child seem by now definitely dissolved, in some ways almost reversed) but it is a readjustment that will be made by a culture now independent, not, as before, seeking hungrily by whom it should be devoured. The incipient revival of traditional Spanish culture, which looks like being the distinguishing feature of its history in the middle third of the twentieth century, is a phenomenon which is not passing unnoticed in Spanish America: politically, Spain arouses mixed feelings; in the majority, perhaps, of Spanish Americans, horror at the excesses of one side and more than indifference to ideas of a revival of empire from the other side in the civil war leave the balance even. But the countries vary, Mexico has received a great contingent of left-wing intellectuals, and there were many who flourished till recently in Buenos Aires, while tiny contingents less pronounced in political views but still ill at ease in their own country are to be found in most other Spanish-speaking countries. These colonies however represent an injection of intellectual life that on the whole, however brilliant, cannot be defined as a revival of traditional Spanish culture. This revival is one which makes a

break with all that in the nineteenth century turned its back on Spain's past as being (for this is what it amounts to) too Catholic. It might be dated from the conversion of Ramiro de Maeztu and the publication of his brilliant essay on '*Hispanidad*' in 1932. Since then there has been an astonishing succession of historical and literary studies that direct attention to a more just interpretation of Spain's cultural past than has been the fashion for the last two centuries. This stream of scholarship has its effect in the American countries in most of which there is a corresponding increase in output. Literature, philosophy and science from the country most nearly akin to their own, and above all, in their own language, are bound to make a strong appeal and find a wide public. The influence of Spanish American poets, especially of Rubén Darío, at the beginning of the present century, though ungraciously cried down in Spain for some years, establishes an equality of give and take much to be desired. In the case of France, which must ever hold a high place in the history of Latin American culture, the phase of excessive imitation of the secularist philosophy and of the art of the nineteenth century is over, but it is probable that other elements in the ampler spiritual movement of French culture will have an influence not less strong in Latin America than in other parts of the world. The great French Dominican and Jesuit writers, Maritain and Gilson and their followers are widely read in Latin America. The disasters of the war will not lessen French cultural influence, so long as that culture persists to exert an influence, but the influence, one senses, will be received with more discrimination by people more conscious of their own traditions and more disposed to select from a wider choice.

EDWARD SARMIENTO

CUSTOM IN ST THOMAS'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

IN the introduction which he wrote to the proceedings of the Malvern Conference the late Dr Temple compared the works of Maritain and Niebuhr upon political subjects, and suggested that despite the skill and rigorous reasoning of the former his scholasticism prevented him from attacking the real, everyday difficulties of our present situation in the way which Niebuhr does. A similar complaint was made by Mr Lewis in a recent number of *Philosophy* where he spoke of the new scholasticism as having 'missed the vital creative forces of our age'. If this deficiency is