The Disintegration of Community

On Jorge Portilla’s Social and Political Philosophy,
With Translations of Selected Essays

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Introduction

On Thinking with Portilla about Politics

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ AND FRANCISCO GALLEGOS

Jorge Portilla’s (1919–1963) single most important contribution to Mexican philosophy is undoubtedly his essay “Phenomenology of Relajo,” a rich and fascinating meditation on values, nihilism, and the disruptive nature of relajo as a complex intersubjective mood or attitude.1 This relatively lengthy text was published posthumously in 1966, three years after Portilla’s death, in a book titled Femenología del relajo y otros ensayos, which also included other, shorter works making up the entirety of Portilla’s known oeuvre.2 Sánchez’s translation of “Phenomenology of Relajo,” included as an appendix to his 2012 book, The Suspension of Seriousness, introduced the English-speaking philosophical community to this remarkable essay and to Portilla as a value theorist and philosopher of culture.3

The translation of “Phenomenology of Relajo,” as well as Sánchez’s analysis of it, have been widely discussed and have given rise to questions surrounding the content of Portilla’s other works, the “otros ensayos” referenced in the title of Portilla’s anthology.4 Overshadowed by Portilla’s masterpiece, these other essays have been largely ignored both in Spanish and in English-speaking treatments of Portilla’s work. In this book, we attend to these forgotten “otros ensayos” in the hopes of, one, highlighting a contribution that, while rooted in its own time, is both timely and relevant.
to our own, and two, completing a picture of a philosophical project that benefits the history of philosophy, and, in particular, the history of Latin American philosophy.

What we find is that Portilla’s other essays are primarily concerned with social and cultural issues. We would like to suggest that, in their content and intention, these essays constitute Portilla’s “politics.” In the three essays that are translated here for the first time, Portilla discusses the allure and dangers of nationalism and the weaponization of political correctness, especially in cultural criticism (“Critique of Criticism”), the cultural and political life of the United States from the Mexican point of view, and the existential roots of US American exceptionalism and xenophobia (“The Spiritual Crisis of the United States”), and the nihilistic worldview that gave rise to Nazism and still threatens to give rise to fascism today (“Thomas Mann and German Irrationalism”). These political meditations are unified by Portilla’s central concern with community and its disintegration through attitudes that destroy communities from within.

The kind of community that most fascinates Portilla in these essays is that of the nation. Like many of his contemporaries, Portilla sought to understand the ways that nationality influences people, for good and ill. But Portilla’s work stands out for both its philosophical sophistication and the extraordinary quality of his writing. Indeed, readers who are new to Portilla will be delighted to discover that his prose seems to leap off the page with one thought-provoking idea after another. Portilla’s work also stands out for its deeply humane perspective. His essays are driven by a palpable anxiety concerning the possibility of experiencing genuine solidarity with one’s fellow citizens, despite their differences and even their character flaws. The thread that ties these essays together is a question that is as urgent today as ever: Under what conditions does that which sustains our communities disintegrate? It is our belief that Portilla’s post-War anxieties, as manifested in these “other essays,” motivate deep and illuminating reflections that can help us answer this timely question.

In the chapters that follow, we approach Portilla’s work from different angles in order to shed light on his insights and oversights, the historical context of his work, and its significance to contemporary debates on a wide range of topics—including the politics of social and cultural identity, the nature of community and nationality, and the phenomenology of moods. The chapters authored by Sánchez focus on Portilla as a political thinker, drawing out the political implications of his views and comparing them...
to a wide range of figures in social and political philosophy. The chapters authored by Gallegos focus on Portilla as a phenomenologist and social theorist, extracting and assessing the general principles, arguments, and methodologies that underlie his intriguing views about how various kinds of “affective attunements” (emotions, moods, character traits, and so on) can profoundly shape people’s everyday lives and even alter the destinies of nations. Our different approaches reflect some differences in our interpretation of Portilla—differences that we intentionally leave unresolved in order to provide the reader with a richer understanding of Portilla’s work. At the root of our differing interpretations are questions about Portilla’s methodology and the systematicity of his thinking. Gallegos argues that in Portilla’s essays, we can discern a largely implicit but fairly well-developed philosophical system that is grounded in his commitment to phenomenology. In contrast, Sánchez views Portilla’s work as less systematically developed and less committed to any particular methodology, yet more concerned with the importance of offering rational perspectives that can battle the chaos of the world around him. But despite these divergences, the authors engage Portilla in the spirit of critique and dialog.

In a more overarching sense, the analyses contained here attempt to think with Portilla about our contemporary crises. This approach to Portilla’s work can be distinguished from two alternatives that are perhaps more common when discussing a figure in the history of philosophy. The first is a strictly exegetical approach that is subservient to the original texts; the second is an approach that exploits the original texts as a mere resource for the authors’ own philosophical agenda. In order to approach Portilla in a way that is neither subservient nor exploitative, we have endeavored to think of him as though he were a deeply respected colleague who has begun a philosophical investigation to which we are also committed. We thus make every effort to translate and interpret his texts accurately, but at the same time, we take liberties to agree and disagree with Portilla as we see fit, to abandon some of his lines of thought and develop or embellish others, according to our own (inevitably biased and partial) philosophical interests. For this reason, we find that thinking with Portilla occasionally involves thinking after him, pursuing independent considerations about philosophical and political themes that, while not addressed by Portilla himself, are addressed by us in his critical spirit. All of this is done with the hope that Portilla’s thinking, always so vibrant on the page, may once again animate a living philosophical investigation.
1. Portilla’s Disquiet

Who was Jorge Portilla? His biography is sketchy. He never taught philosophy and never received a graduate degree in the field. Although he was a respected member of the famed but short-lived philosophical Grupo Hiperión, he did not produce, during his lifetime, the sort of celebrated academic texts that cemented the philosophical status of his contemporaries Octavio Paz, Emilio Uranga, Leopoldo Zea, or Luis Villoro. What we know is that he was anxious and uneasy, an alcoholic, a Catholic, a depressive who, apparently, succeeded in taking his own life in 1963. We know also that he had a formidable intellectual acuity. Juan José Reyes, whose father, Salvador Reyes Nevárez, was also a member of the Grupo Hiperión, describes Portilla as “brilliant and profound, attentive and loquacious, focused and expansive.” Reyes reports that Portilla was feared for his ability to engage in practical and abstract criticism with anyone, anytime, but also that he was “generous with his friends,” and kind. Although Portilla’s intensity could be unnerving, it appeared to spring from a sincere search for “his own salvation and the salvation of others on the margins . . . he was given over fully to others but always inclined toward his own spiritual salvation [al recogimiento].”

By all accounts, Portilla was, at heart, a remarkable and caring thinker who despised chaos, irrationalism, and the political games that separated and alienated people from one another, from themselves, and from the truth. His untimely death in 1963 left many questions unanswered, both about his person and about his philosophy. Here, our aim is to answer some of those questions about his philosophy and to solidify as much as possible his somewhat unusual philosophical orientation. As Portilla himself confessed to his friends: “I do not fit into any of the frames that make up Mexican philosophy.” To us, this confession is an invitation to venture into his work without the burden of any orthodoxy or rigid interpretations getting in our way. And, thus, we venture beyond the usual interpretation of Portilla as phenomenologist of relajo, to speak about his social and political thought.

Portilla’s core political values are perhaps most evident in his manner of philosophizing. It could be said that his philosophical labor was always a labor for others—or, more specifically, that it was always labor for Mexico and for Mexicans, labor that he hoped would make things better, or serve, in some way, the betterment of his countrymen. His critique of relajo, for
instance, is motivated by the hope that analyzing this issue would serve his community. As he puts it,

[it is] worth the effort to examine this issue, not so much because of a Pharisee-like desire to warn the youth of the dangers of the lack of seriousness [relajo], but rather because of the desire to understand . . . an issue that is alive and well in our community and—so to speak—to take philosophy out into the streets (which is its natural place) by stripping it as much as possible of the “technical” shell that sometimes conceals it.12

The idea that the “natural place” of philosophy is “the streets” or the community is tied to the pragmatic notion that philosophy should be in the service of human life itself—that if it is not in the service of the community or not performing a practical and liberating labor in the streets, among people, then it is not operating according to its nature. Portilla held firm to this conviction, even in his daily life, where he “never ceased to point out, to denounce, to reveal, those traps that get in the way of liberation.”13 Taking philosophy “out in to the streets” also meant that Portilla would not publish much in academic or professional journals or presses, thus restricting his output and largely confining his voice to conversations, magazines, and newspaper columns.14 In order to gain a better sense of Portilla as a philosopher, then, let us consider a sampling of his columns, which originally appeared as supplements between 1958 and 1962 in the Mexico City newspapers Excélsior and Siempre!, and were collected in his posthumous anthology under the title “Quinta Columna” (or “Fifth Column”) and “Cuaderno de Notas” (or “Notebook”). In these columns, Portilla sets as his goal the philosophical education of the masses for the sake of Mexico, based on his conviction that “philosophy is useful for understanding” [January 18, 1959; 200].15 We see in these writings philosophy, disguised as the journalistic exercises of a restless yet agile mind, unapologetically broadcasted in the streets—specifically, in newsstands, bookstores, libraries, and waiting rooms, sold at intersections or dragged listlessly by the wind through the avenues—and, thus broadcasted, sought to enlighten and edify the passersby, the factory worker, the thief, the detective, the doctor, the everyday reader who knows nothing of Marx, Hegel, or the philosophy of lo mexicano, but who cares about Mexico, his community, and his fellows.
A quick study of these columns reveals that the greatest influences on Portilla’s political views are Marxism and Catholicism, and that Portilla is committed to a kind of socialist humanism that puts truth before ideology, community before the individual, and brotherly solidarity before nation. In many of these seemingly hurried pieces, Portilla also touches on themes that he examines in more detail in his scholarly texts. Thus, time and again Portilla targets what he views as the negative and destructive forms of human conviviality that have historically kept Mexicans from recognizing and pursuing their own excellence. Even in his first column, Portilla laments the lack of “great . . . public virtues” in the Mexican community, and he argues that this “lack” is generated by a “skepticism, to which we, Mexican intellectuals, are especially inclined,” rooted in the belief that Mexico is helplessly inferior to the industrialized world, both economically and politically [December 14, 1958; 199].

Over time, Portilla comes to view this form of alienation as a symptom of a larger sickness that he refers to as “skeptical nihilism” [September 5, 1962; 201]. Skeptical nihilism is a cultural and political disease; indeed, it the polar opposite of everything Portilla cherishes. Skeptical nihilism holds that universal values do not exist, and that the larger human community is an abstraction and thus of no value. It emphasizes a historicism bordering on relativism that says that only one’s specifically situated community should matter, if anything is to matter at all. And, moreover, it says that any value that does not directly contribute to the empowerment of the individual is of no use. As such, skeptical nihilism is the closing of the mind, an abandonment of understanding for the sake of tribalism and individualism.

What is the antidote for the refusal of transcendence and understanding? By the late 1950s, Portilla is preaching a variation of Marxist Catholicism that he thinks can help in the effort to combat the closing of the mind and the disintegration of community. The effort, he suggests, ought to target the dangerous emotional dispositions of fear and hate. “Fear of man,” he writes, “engenders hate and contempt, which are characteristic passions of the right and the petite bourgeoisie” [October 10, 1962; 206]. This hate—hatred of the new, of the foreign, of the other, of the strange—justifies an individual’s or a community’s skepticism toward the other; it justifies the nihilism of values that would otherwise promote progress and growth; it justifies, finally, relajo, corruption, and the lazy politics of nationalists who would rather close their ranks than understand other ways of being. Portilla insists, however, that philoso-
phy can serve as a tool for the clarification and ultimate dissolution of hate. Thus, Portilla entreats the reader, “we must comprehend our own hate. We can literally drown in indignation and hate. So long as we do not clarify the origin or the meaning of this passion, we cannot be of help in anything or help anyone” [September 5, 1962; 203]. This view of the role of philosophy reflects what we could call Portilla’s basic philosophical principle, announced in one of the earliest columns: “reality is only accessible with the truth, yet only if one is in truth can we modify reality” [January 18, 1959; 200].

One of Portilla’s greatest strengths as a writer is his ability to identify and describe the character types that he encounters on the streets of Mexico City. Almost like a contemporary stand-up comedian, Portilla calls attention to “that guy—you know, the guy who . . .,” naming and describing a familiar type of person in a surprising, insightful, and humorous way. By doing so, he gently admonishes his audience not to be like the person he is criticizing, while also shedding light on aspects of our social space that we may have understood intuitively but could not articulate explicitly. In one column, for example, he targets the mocho, a caricature of the modern individual, or, better, of the radical individualism of the modern age [November 21, 1962; 210–211]. The mocho fetishizes production but ultimately seeks only his own advancement, pushing forward without respect for traditional values, cultural mores, rules, and logic. He is a narcissist, and for this reason, he is boring, pretentious, racist, closed-minded, hypocritical, and deceitful.

Portilla’s final column appeared at the end of 1962, less than a year before his death in the fall of 1963. In it, he expresses hope that individualism will be overcome. Retreating into his Marxist humanism, he proclaims that “individualism’s moment has passed,” and that a return to reason is possible [December 12, 1962; 211]. Echoing Emiliano Zapata’s famous dictum in his “Plan de Ayala” that what is important is to follow principles rather than personalities, Portilla writes, “Our time is no longer the time of ‘personality,’ but, perhaps, of ‘truth’” [211]. Here, hope is inscribed in three words, “sino, tal vez,”—“but, perhaps”—a rare confirmation of what careful readers already know, that, after all, Portilla’s philosophy is a philosophy of hope. His deconstructive critiques are meant to be uplifting, to help lay the groundwork for new kinds of intersubjective arrangements, or, at least, to help undo ways of thinking that obscure the possibility of new forms of being-with-others, communities grounded in trust, solidarity, and truth.
2. A Note on *Filósofas Mexicanas*

One salient feature common to Portilla’s work, both the scholarly essays and his journalistic contributions, is his silence about issues related to gender. In fact, Portilla rarely discusses women at all. In his critiques of various character types (the *relajiento*, the *mocho*, the critic, etc.), for example, he consistently assumes that the individual he is criticizing is a man ("el" *hombre mexicano*). We find this assumption in his analysis of the *relajo individual* in the “Phenomenology of Relajo,” where the *relajiento* is described as someone who is comfortable standing outside the rules of propriety, someone who is allowed by Mexican society to be disruptive and rebellious—social allowances made only for *men* in a traditionally patriarchal culture such that of Mexico. The same holds true of the *mocho* and the critic he discusses in “Critique of Criticism” (see appendix). In fact, none of the character types that Portilla discusses are specifically female, and Portilla appears to overlook the possibility that women might participate in the roles and practices he describes (for example, as literary critics or even as *relajientas*).

Portilla’s silence about gender, to some extent, reflected social, political, and academic attitudes typical of his time and place. In fact, most, if not all, established or recognized Mexican philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century were complicit in this silence. Whether the writer was José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, José Gaos, Emilio Uranga, Leopoldo Zea, or Luis Villoro, the perspective was masculine and, moreover, metropolitan, that is, related to *mestizo* males from Mexico City. One clearly sees, in the texts of these authors, that a single, relatively dominant perspective is taken for granted as the most legitimate and authoritative, a practice that although not a matter of policy was certainly adopted as a sort of implicit default. This, of course, adds a problematic layer to our discussion of Portilla’s thinking regarding society’s disintegration. Although we touch only briefly upon these and related issues in the chapters that follow, we are convinced that it should be the focus of future research, because retrieving diverse voices that speak about social and political issues during this period of Mexican history would certainly enrich Mexican philosophy as a whole.

When faced with Portilla’s silence about issues related to gender, some readers might assume that women philosophers were simply missing from the spaces where these conversations were taking place, or that these issues were irrelevant to the topics of his inquiries. Neither of these
assumptions would be correct. While there were relatively few Mexican
women contributing to the philosophical conversation in Portilla’s time,
they were not insignificant. (A popular positive response to those who
question whether or not there were any female Mexican philosophers in
the first half of the twentieth century goes like this: ¡de que las hay, las
hay! In other words, there certainly were female Mexican philosophers,
we just haven’t looked hard enough to find them!) In fact, the first com-
prehensive study and commentary of Portilla’s own work was by Rosa
Krauze (1923–2003), a friend and contemporary of Portilla, student of
the famed Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso, and prolific historian of
twentieth-century Mexican philosophy. Krauze was one of a handful of
interlocutors capable of approaching Portilla without hesitation. If her
account is any indication, their conversations were mutually enriching,
philosophically and psychologically, to the point that Krauze’s influence
on Portilla should not be hard to spot.18

Portilla would have had many such encounters with women philoso-
phers of his day. During his time of philosophical production (1948–1963),
several women philosophers had either already left their stamp on the
intellectual life of Mexico or were in the process of doing so. Among
them was Krauze, but also Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974), whose Sobre
cultura femenina [On Feminine Culture] sought to avoid the assumptions
of the male perspective in philosophy while making a case for the place
of women in the production and maintenance of culture.19 This work,
published in 1950, had been written under the direction of José Gaos,
and it was in Gaos’ seminars that Mexican women philosophers began
to flourish and assert their place in the Mexican intellectual landscape,
including Monelissa Lina Pérez Marchand, Victoria Junco Posadas, Olga
Victoria Quiroz Martínez, Vera Yamuni, María del Carmen Rovira Gaspar,
and Elsa Cecilia Frost.20 Perhaps due to Gaos’s influence, most of these
women went on to write on themes and issues in the philosophy of cul-
ture, feminism, or the philosophy of history, and often did so in ways that
challenged the normativity of the mestizo male perspective.

Portilla’s silence on issues related to gender and the oppression of
women is thus not justified by “the times,” and it is certainly not justified
from a theoretical perspective. Portilla sought to understand the disintegra-
tion of community, and while his work sheds valuable insight on a wide
range of factors contributing to communal disintegration—including diverse
value inversions, mythologies, communal moods, relations of power, and
ideologies—by ignoring the paternalistic and patriarchal tendencies that
prevailed in the social order of his day, the rampant oppression of women and the female perspective in all things political, and the marginalization of women in philosophy and other sites of cultural production, his work ignores structures that clearly contribute to communal disintegration. If this is correct, then Portilla’s own silence contributed to the marginalization of women and so to the disintegration of community, thus exacerbating and obfuscating the very phenomena he sought to analyze.

We offer these assessments in the spirit of an invitation. Krauze, Castellanos, Frost, and Zambrano are giants in the history of Mexican philosophy, and as we move ahead in normalizing this tradition in the English-speaking philosophical academy, their contributions should not be overlooked. Portilla’s philosophy did not develop in a vacuum; it was influenced by the history of philosophy and the writings of his peers, formed in a life of conversations, agreements and disagreement. As Krauze recalls, “with him, everything was a conversation. He spoke always with contagious enthusiasm. He didn’t need an entourage; he didn’t pick his interlocutor. . . . His life was wasted in talking . . . we would’ve gained so much if [he would have written things down], if his disposition would have been different.”

3. The Plan of this Book

The appendix of this book contains our translations of three of Portilla’s previously untranslated essays. We have selected these texts because we believe they collectively present the essential elements of Portilla’s social and political philosophy, so that English-speaking readers may develop their own interpretations of this intrepid Mexican philosopher. In order to provide readers with some guidance as they make their way into the texts—as well as offer some provocations to stimulate future discussions—the first six chapters of this book present complementary perspectives on Portilla’s three essays.

In chapter 1, “The Terrorism of the Social,” Sánchez provides an interpretation of the critique of nationalism and political Manichaeism in Portilla’s 1955 essay “Critique of Criticism.” Sánchez discusses the historical context of Portilla’s urgent concern with an ideological and exclusionary form of cultural criticism that adopts an aggressively puritanical approach to political correctness. Sánchez reflects on the relevance of this text for
our own times, and he draws out the ethical ideals that underlie Portilla’s concerns and can oppose the Manichaean attitudes that he warns about.

In chapter 2, “Portilla’s Conceptual Framework: Phenomenological Nationalism,” Gallegos argues that “Critique of Criticism” exhibits Portilla’s commitment to the view that nationality functions as a phenomenological horizon of intelligibility, and in particular, that many nations are in the grip of a mood or “affective attunement” that profoundly shapes the way individuals in these nations experience themselves, others, and the situations they encounter. Gallegos locates this idea of “phenomenological nationalism” at the intersection of phenomenological tradition’s ambivalent fascination with human sociality and Latin American philosophy’s guiding concern with liberation from the legacies of colonization.

In chapter 3, “The Politics of Innocence,” Sánchez turns to Portilla’s 1952 essay “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States,” thinking through, with, and beyond Portilla about US American culture and its grounding myths. Drawing on the perspectives of philosophers including Hegel and Emerson, Sánchez reflects on what Portilla means when he insists that US Americans are “innocent” and willfully naive concerning the dark sides of human life. Sánchez then invites us to think with Portilla about how the myth of innocence is deployed in contemporary US American social and cultural arrangements, such as in policies that reflect a belief in “American exceptionalism” and a fear of immigrants.

In chapter 4, “Portilla’s Method: A Phenomenological Social Theory,” Gallegos examines the methodology that Portilla employs in his analysis of the US American way of being. Gallegos extracts from Portilla’s essay the general methodological principles that guide Portilla’s innovative use of a mood-oriented approach to the phenomenology of nationality as a means of explaining widespread patterns of behaviors and attitudes that are found in a given nation. Gallegos raises a few concerns regarding Portilla’s empirical claims about life in the US, suggesting that Portilla’s analysis would have been strengthened if he had acknowledged the diversity of the US and explicitly focused his critique on the sense of innocence found within the White mainstream of US society.

In chapter 5, “From Irrationalism to Complacency for the Death of the Other,” Sánchez examines the topics of nihilism, death, and violence through the lens of Portilla’s 1962 essay, “Thomas Mann and German Irrationalism,” where Portilla examines what he calls the “the intellectual and affective climate” that gave rise to Nazism. Sánchez explores connections
between Portilla's views and those of fellow Mexican philosophers and others, including Immanuel Levinas. Thinking beyond Portilla, Sánchez concludes by considering his remarks in light of the epidemic of violence and death in twenty-first-century Mexico.

Finally, in chapter 6, “Portilla’s Hope: Phenomenological Flourishing and Affective Liberation,” Gallegos argues that in Portilla’s critique of Mann, we can discern Portilla’s positive political vision. This vision is grounded in Portilla’s conception of “phenomenological flourishing,” a kind of wellbeing grounded in the development of our capacities to disclose the meaning of our experience. On the basis of this quasi-ethical ideal, Portilla’s work calls for us to do what is necessary to dissolve the rigid and problematic moods that grip our nations, while warning us about some of the most difficult challenges we are likely to face as we work to realize this ideal of “affective liberation.”

We hope and expect that we will not have the last word on Portilla’s social and political thought, and we look forward to a new generation having the opportunity to think with one of Mexico’s greatest philosophers.

Notes

1. As Portilla explains, the term relajo refers here to the breakdown of a group activity that is intentionally brought about by individuals who refuse to take the activity “seriously”—typically by joking around incessantly. In this essay, Portilla argues that relajo is pervasive in Mexico and is detrimental to Mexican society. But relajo is also philosophically illuminating, he says, because these breakdowns in normal social cooperation reveal important features of our experience that philosophers have taken for granted and overlooked, such as the way that an individual's experience of values depends on the cooperation of others.

2. Jorge Portilla, La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984). Originally published in 1966 by the Mexico City publisher ERA.


5. La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos, the anthology of Portilla’s collected works, contains a total of eight chapters. Besides “Phenomenology of Relajo” and the three chapters that are translated in this book, the remaining chapters include “Comunidad, grandeza, y miseria del mexicano” (a translation of which is included in Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings, ed. Carlos Alberto Sánchez & Robert Eli Sanchez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); “La nausea y el humanismo” and “Dostoevsky y Santo Tomas” (discussed in Sánchez, Contingency and Commitment); and “Quinta Columna’ y ‘Cuaderno de Notas’” (discussed later in this introduction).

6. The Grupo Hiperión was an influential circle of intellectuals—including Portilla, Uranga, Zea, and Villoro, among others—who worked closely together in Mexico City between 1948 and the early 1950s, most famously addressing the question of mexicanidad.

7. See Christopher Domínguez Michael, Octavio Paz en su siglo (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2015). See especially Chapter 7, “Mexicanosofía,” where Domínguez provides an excellent summary of the Grupo Hiperión and its relationship with Octavio Paz. It is here, also, where Domínguez mentions Portilla’s suicide. Domínguez’s claim that Portilla committed suicide in 1963 is unconfirmed and unsupported by the obituaries of the day or the eulogies. In any case, if true, it is an end that would cohere with other accounts of this great thinker’s reckless behavior. Most references do not mention his manner of death, only that he was a heavy drinker and somewhat reckless with his health. See, especially, Rosa Krauze, “Sobre la Fenomenología del relajo,” Revista de la Universidad de México 20, no. 8 (1966): 9–14.


9. Reyes, El péndulo y el pozo, 66.

10. Ibid., 69.

11. Ibid., 67.


13. Reyes, El péndulo y el pozo, 68.

15. Portilla, *La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*. We will cite these pieces by date and page number in square brackets within the text to make quick reference to the newspaper columns where these appear.


17. That is, those who were in the business of philosophy—teaching, writing, advocating, or promoting philosophy.


Part II

On “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States”
Chapter 3

The Politics of Innocence

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ

It is never untimely to ask, What myths sustain our politics? Reflecting on what he considers “the spiritual crisis of the United States,” Jorge Portilla proposes that that which sustains and underlies US politics is innocence, or the myth of its own innocence, and that only by properly understanding what this is and how this is so can the different cultural crises affecting US culture in the twentieth century (and beyond) be properly understood and addressed. In the US, it turns out, the myth of innocence is at the root of all evil.

But what is “innocence”? Portilla appears to understand the concept of “innocence” in three different ways (although he employs it interchangeably) in the essay we are presently considering, “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States.”

When I say that innocence, that is, the absolute unfamiliarity of evil, is the foundation of the American Way of Life, I mean that the idea of innocence serves to make sense of almost every particular nuance of that way of life. [141; italics mine]

Innocence is understood, first, in its experiential aspect, namely, as the experience of an “absolute unfamiliarity of evil.” The term Portilla uses here is extrañeza, which means unfamiliarity, but also strangeness, estrangement, alienation, and surprise. The idea is that Americans (collectively and individually), and by this Portilla means White US Americans, think of themselves as “absolutely” or completely estranged or alienated from evil, finding it
strange and thus shocking or surprising on encountering it. Innocence is understood, second, metaphysically, as that which founds a way of life. At its foundation, i.e., at its ground, the “American Way of Life” is the estrangement of evil, it is purity; the American way of life is uncontaminated. And, third, innocence turns out to be an interpretive category, or, he says, “a capital category for the interpretation of the US American way of life” [141].

These three senses of innocence—what we can call the experiential, the metaphysical, and the interpretive—coalesce into one interpretive framework through which the US is understood from the Mexican point of view as absolutely resistant to whatever is not already internal to its own self-understanding. In other words, the “American Way of Life,” so much desired, admired, and mythologized in our contemporary world, is seen from the external perspective as reflecting an ignorance, alienation, and estrangement from evil, an ignorance or estrangement that seems to permeate “almost every aspect” of that way of life. Xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-black racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, etc., are all cultural or social attempts (conscious or unconscious) to protect innocence in its metaphysical, and social, manifestations—to protect purity from contamination.

Of course, it is a generalization to say that a people is “absolutely unfamiliar” with evil; after all, random massacres, rampant poverty, exploitation of children, and other grotesque social ills are as familiar in American life as in any other “way of life.” The point here, however, is that in their social and political attitudes, or those attitudes familiar to Portilla, the American way of life operates as if evil is a radical otherness that does not—and ultimately, should not—affect it. Contemporary post-9/11 anti-immigrant social policies assume that foreigners—and, eventually, all non-White Americans in general—introduce a heretofore unknown evil whenever and wherever they introduce their own cultural, political, religious, or philosophical perspective. The consequence of this stranger-bias is that in order to “Make America Great Again” these strange others must be expelled from the body politic. Thus, while it may seem like an overly hasty generalization on Portilla’s part, it pays to consider it a bit further if only to make sense of Mexico’s attitude toward the United States, not only in Portilla’s time, but in our own.

The aim of this chapter is thus twofold: one, to reflect on what Portilla means when he insists that Americans (again, White US Americans) are absolutely unfamiliar with evil and the extent to which this is an accurate portrayal of the American way of life; and two, to think with Portilla, from a broadly theoretical standpoint, on the manner in which the myth
of innocence is deployed in contemporary American social and cultural arrangements, i.e., in its politics and broader social policy.

1. The Spiritual Crisis of America

There is a sense in which innocence is the virtue that best describes the American character. A sense in which everything—culture, politics, art, and philosophy—flows out of the virtue of innocence. This sense is related to the founding of America, to its landscape, to its people, both to those who, fleeing persecution, found refuge in a “New World” and to those who were already here; it is related to its promise as a place of renewal, rebirth, or reinvention; it is related to the Western idea that everything found from its shores to its interior was pure, untainted by thousands of years of war, greed, and culture in the “Old World”; untainted, that is, by European history and its politics of sin. It is related to the notion, articulated at its founding, of America as a “redeemer nation” that in its purity showed itself to have been “touched by God.”

Jorge Portilla’s reflections on the “American Way of Life” take as their point of departure America’s self-understanding as this is communicated in mass media—in TV, radio, and magazines. Portilla was writing in the 1950s after a brief visit to the United States on a Rockefeller Grant, and as a Mexican and from a Mexican point of view; one can’t help but wonder to what extent his ruminations are based on stereotypes and misinformation, on preconceptions and hearsay that are sure to bias his “philosophical” interventions. However, despite these shortcomings—shortcomings that one can’t truly overcome due to the limits and prejudices of our own reason, even as information becomes more readily available and immediate thanks to the advent of social media technologies such as Twitter and Facebook—Portilla is able to attune himself to what is being communicated, thereby capturing an essential aspect of that which America believes about itself, of its political and cultural identity.

Before embarking on his analysis, Portilla tells us why this embarking is important. It is, he suggests, a matter of understanding a “radical otherness” (I quote here at length):

all Mexicans are presented with the need at one time or another, and by the nature of things themselves, to take a position that is as clear as possible regarding the historical facts of our
northern neighbor. The need to take such a position is based, it seems to me, on the fact that the United States always appears to us in the form of a radical “otherness.” . . . The ultimate foundations of US American civilization are almost absolutely strange to us. [139]

The effort to understand the peculiar American way of being is thus imposed on us as a first step toward adopting a lucid and well-defined attitude toward American culture, and it is on the basis of this radical feeling of strangeness and as a result of that will to understand that we can see the fact and breadth of the American crisis.

Succinctly put, we believe that what is in crisis is precisely the very foundation of US American life as such—the foundation of what in the US they have come to call *The American Way of Life.* [139–140]

A full understanding of that which is radically other, or absolutely strange, is, of course, not possible. It is to understand that which does not fully give itself and stands beyond the subjective horizons of intelligibility. Nevertheless, one can approximate understanding, one can approach the radically other and the absolutely strange. This approximation, or approach, is what the radical other demands in its very essence. So the goal, Portilla says, is to adopt a “lucid and well-defined attitude toward US American culture,” one that will likewise allow Mexicans—for whom the strangeness and otherness of *el norte* appears as promise and possibility, a mystery that beckons Mexicans northward now as it did then—to also see the “breath of the American crisis,” of its *spiritual* crisis.

Portilla’s prelude to the analysis also gives us a sense into the intimidating shadow cast by the United States in the geopolitical arena, a shadow that is darker and heavier to those standing right underneath, namely, its southern neighbors—Mexico and Central America. Inevitably, anyone living under this shadow must address himself or herself to it, affirm its presence, and respond to its strange power, to that otherness that looms as threat or opportunity. Inevitably, if one is Mexican, Portilla suggests, one must try to *understand* it. Understanding it thus becomes, for Mexicans, something of a moral and political responsibility, since the historical fate of Mexicans is necessarily tied—literally and figuratively—to
the US, whereby its triumphs and its crises become issues for Mexicans, whether they want them to be or not.

Motivated to understand by that radical otherness, Portilla's reflective gaze turns north. He notices that within America's strangeness, along with its mystery, there is something obvious and explicit that it itself announces. This “something” is reflected in American politics, its foreign policy and domestic agenda; the something is the illusory self-conception that America is innocent. This illusory self-understanding constitutes for Portilla a foundational crisis since on this illusion lays what we've come to know as the “American Way of Life.”

The crisis can be articulated in the following terms: The Puritan ideal of innocence that lies in the foundations of the “American Way of Life” does not lend itself to the reality of a global world, to the necessity for openness or a politics of interconnection and intercommunication, a phenomenon that undermines the positive aspects of that “way of life” or what that way of life means to represent. Because the ideal, or we can say the myth or ideology, of innocence ultimately grounds that which makes the American way of life “American,” a crisis of ideology is thus a crisis of cultural and political identity. As Portilla sees it, however, this is an inevitable crisis since any self-conception that relies on the categories of innocence, or what's the same, uniqueness, purity, and exception, will regard anything foreign or other to itself as a threat to this uniqueness, purity, or exception.

From the Mexican point of view, however, the ideology of innocence has fully interpellated American consciousness. In the Althusserian sense, interpellation describes the manner in which human subjectivity is constituted by ideological forces, the manner in which one's identity is “hailed” and thus affirmed by ideology itself. In this way, the ideology of purity, innocence, or estrangement from evil has constituted US American identity. Portilla illustrates this by relating the strange case of an American funeral director who, traveling the world in search of a painting of Christ, insists that it reflect a “happy” and “smiling” (or innocent) Christ. The funeral director goes as far as holding an competition where he intends to choose the statue of Christ that best represents Christ as he understand him and wants him to be. In the end, he is unable to find a suitable representation of a “happy” Christ, protesting that “all these paintings, even the smiling ones, look sad and definitely European. What I need is a radiant Christ who looks upward with an inner light of joy and hope; I want a Christ with
an American face” [140]. For the funeral director, echoing the ideology of innocence that constitutes his own viewpoint, “joy” and “hope” mark the “American face.” An American face, that is, will not reflect the troubles and tribulations of other faces, such as the European face, which, even when smiling, looks sad. The suggestion here, is, of course, that suffering is a symptom of evil and not of innocence and purity, or radiance and the “inner light of joy.”

With this example, Portilla wonders about the extent to which Americans will hold on to the myth of innocence in spite of history or common sense. As he puts it, the funeral director’s insistence that Christ be a smiling Christ “radically ignores the difficult nuances of the relationship between the historical Jesus and the humanity of the men who followed him and those who killed him. It erases the sense of Christ’s appearance in history, the sense of His life and His death” [141].

Ultimately, the crisis to which Portilla refers has to do with a disconnect between what is the case and what Americans desire the true to be the case, with the lack of correspondence between truth and belief, idea and reality. The reality of Christ, in the person of the Bible or as a historical figure, is one of persecution, passion, and rebirth, acts that in themselves are violent and not deserving of smiles or happy “close ups.” Similarly, the claim to innocence in social life clashes with a reality of America’s historical experience. Americans resist the truth, Portilla suggests, because it itself is not innocent. (In our contemporary milieu we talk about living in the “post-truth” era, one where truth is not as important as what feels to be true. As Portilla illustrates, however, this is not a new era at all; historically, Americans would rather live in something more than true, in a more radical conception of what is true, in a conception of life that is pure, that feels right and good; post-truth is foundational to the very identity of America itself.) Ultimately, the cultural desire to be innocent and to remain so clashes with the reality that innocent is not something one can be or maintain without shutting out or expelling all external, strange, or alien influences.

2. On American Innocence

2.1. The Degradations of Evil

The case of the “smiling Christ” seems to accurately represent the manner in which Americans assume the ideology or myth of their own innocence;
it reflects the way in which Americans are interpellated by that ideology. It is an interpellation that manifests itself in professions of uniqueness and exemption, where what is an ordinary fact for the rest of the world does not apply here. In the geopolitical arena, this is known as “American exceptionalism,” the idea that the United States is different from every other nation on earth and thus deserves special privileges and exemptions. In Portilla’s account, one of these exemptions is the exemption to evil, or, the privilege of absolute innocence. This is a radical exemption, since innocence as defined by Portilla is more of an ideal than a reality. He writes:

he is innocent who is not defiled by evil in general or by sin in particular. An innocent world will thus be that world in which evil has not penetrated, where evil has not corrupted the root of life itself. [142]

Depending on how we understand evil or sin, rare would be “he” who is “innocent”; even as an “ideal” toward which to aspire, an entire people uncorrupted by evil (or sin) would be hard to come by. Even if we consider the most abstract definition of “evil,” the idea would be that innocent describes a state of affairs or a person wherein all corrupting influence, all impurities, and all that is generally disruptive to pure living “has not penetrated” or “corrupted” that state of affairs or that person. It thus seems like an aspirational ideal, if nothing else, making it impossible to find an entire culture exempt from evil.

In spite of the funeral director’s insistence that a smiling Christ would best represent American innocence, Portilla argues that the myth of innocence is not usually manifested in such declarations of purity, incorruptibility, or perfection, but in something much more “American”: It shows up in a belief in America’s quantifiable superiority. This belief is expressed as a “tendency to identify the most with the best” [142], or with equating quantity with quality. Thus, having the most money, the highest buildings, the most advanced technology, is translated in the American consciousness as factual evidence of having the best “way of life.” So, for example, if San Francisco has the most expensive housing market in the Northern Hemisphere, this is understood as a reflection of the quality of life there, which is then assumed to be the best (a simplistic generalization, to be sure).

Behind this tendency to equate quantity with quality is the myth of innocence and the accompanying belief—derived from America’s Puritan roots and the Protestant ethic—that one’s blessedness is reflected in one’s material wealth, so that the more one has, the more one’s life approximates
what God has determined as the right and good life for us. In turn, the
more one approximates God’s will, the more innocent and pure one is,
and vice versa. As Portilla puts it:

Indeed, in a world where evil does not penetrate, any increase
can only be an increase of good. Any affirmation of quantitative
superiority is then the realization of genuine superiority. The
mere consciousness of a great magnitude is bound, in this
hypothesis, to the consciousness of a superior good. [143]

The myth of innocence can thus be broken down as the belief that “evil
does not penetrate” the American way of life, evidenced by its economic,
political, cultural, and technological superiority. We can see, then, how an
ideology of innocence operates as the engine that drives ambition and,
simultaneously, fear of the other and the foreign.

We can also see how these expressions of superiority play out in
contemporary political attitudes: Nativist objections toward immigrants,
segregationist social policies, exclusionary rhetoric, etc., all assume that
foreign elements, if allowed to penetrate American culture, will pollute or
degrade it, ruining its purity and demeaning its quantifiable superiority—
others will make America poorer, less technological, more diverse, and
less definable. Ultimately, evil is defined as that which penetrates from
the outside and, once inside, changes, modifies, or erases; all otherness,
the alien, the stranger, the foreign, is evil and, as such, must be kept at a
distance—marginalized, abolished, suppressed, oppressed, or destroyed—if
American superiority (that is, its innocence) is to be preserved.

In Portilla’s time, American superiority (and its grounding myth, i.e.,
the myth of innocence) played out most prominently in popular culture,
and in particular in certain characteristic themes in American films and
literature. Portilla gives us two examples that are worth mentioning: the
hero and the detective.

2.2. Casting out the Darkness: The Hero

The American hero always appears justified, he is the center
that determines the sense of the world that surrounds him, and
in determining this sense he becomes the lord of that world.
The “others” cannot take a point of view on him that is not
easily surpassed by the most elemental moral judgment and
precisely by a moral judgment; the others are evil, they desire
evil, the American hero wants the good, and it can be said that,
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more than desiring it, he embodies it, this is his strength; his weakness is that he sits precisely in the "outer darkness" where evil has an important place and therefore can corner him and put him in difficulties so serious that can only be bettered with the providential arrival of steel angels, aerial fortresses, which at the end of the film appear as a glorious and roaring symbol of light and the good, cleanliness and order. [144]

The appearance of the hero in American cinema is emblematic of a culture already obsessed with its own superiority and its own purity (its innocence). The hero is the self-justified, world-constituting, “lord of the world” who, as morally perfect and morally blameless, offers himself as warrior against evil and darkness; those who threaten his life, his superiority and purity, are the enemy, they are “evil, they desire evil,” and thus his battle is good and “glorious.” The hero is American exceptionalism personified. His eventual victory over the forces of evil—over the others—is thus more than a victory of good vs. evil, it is the victory of purity and light over “outer darkness”—over the outside, over the not-I.

In the fictional world of “super” heroes, the outer darkness is the birthplace of villains and destroyers of worlds. In the modern world of alarmist propagandists on cable news and social media, the outer darkness is beyond the border of the nation, where darker skins reside, where accents and the poor thrive, where the light of innocence does not shine. This is likewise the birthplace of bad guys and corrupters, the unclean and the impure, of them who appear disguised as Mexican immigrants, Central American, African, and Middle-Eastern refugees, and other environmental and economic exiles. The hero’s task is to cast these others out, to cast out the dark and maintain the privilege of light.

Ultimately, the fictional hero of American cinema embodies all that is essential in the symbolism of what is called the “American Way of Life”: innocence (he is not evil), purity (he is clean, has a “feeling of purity [incontaminación]” [146]), and superiority (he is better than because he has more than).

2.3. Cleanliness and Order

2.3.1. The Detective

While the hero in American cinema is an embodiment of an American consciousness that believes itself to be superior in being over all others,
the detective in American crime novels is the embodiment of the culture’s belief that it is superior in knowledge and ability over all others.

According to Portilla, the American crime novel treats crime, or what’s the same, social “evil,” not as a general condition of human coexistence or, more particularly, as a result of social inequities or personal psychoses, but as a technical issue, one that can be solved by technical means, i.e., in laboratories, through the meticulous examination of evidence, etc. With the proliferation of crime novels, and thus with the proliferation of the myth of evil as a technical matter to which an entire science (namely, forensics) is devoted, Americans hold on to the truth of their myth of innocence, believing that through technical means they can cleanse their social life of any corruption or contamination; in other words, through the procedures of forensics, the belief is affirmed via fictional detectives that evil can be reduced to a science and, because of this reduction, the purity of innocence can be maintained. Portilla writes:

the detective novels remind one that there is a whole scientific world, with laboratories full of precision instruments and perfectly trained and capable men who keep crime on the periphery of the world. [148]

2.3.2. Psychoanalysis

Related to the detective novel, at least in what it represents in the American imaginary, psychoanalysis is another way in which Americans protect their innocence. If a foundational innocence is not threatened by a real other, alien and external to the self, then the threat may very well come from an imagined, or suppressed, other internal to the self. This threat comes in the form of neuroses, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsion, and other emotional or psychological conflicts that contaminate one’s unconscious life. Despite their immateriality, these neuroses have presence, and so their expulsion from the individual body becomes necessary to maintain the appearance of innocence in the body politic.

The procedure for removing this threat to one’s inner purity is psychoanalysis. According to Coriat,

[Psychoanalysis] is the study of man’s unconscious motives and desires as shown in various nervous disturbances and in certain manifestations of every-day life in normal individuals . . . [which] influence the formation of character traits, but likewise are responsible for many forms of nervous illness.
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To a people obsessed with its own innocence, it is the unknown and strange (in this case, one’s own “unconscious”) that represents the greatest danger to one’s integrity in the form of “disturbances” and “illness.” Psychoanalysis promises to rid the individual of these evils.

Moreover, if innocence itself is the absence of guilt, and guilt is an unconscious expression of a more dangerous disturbance, then psychoanalysis, as the procedure whereby guilt is removed from the unconscious, allows Americans to stay innocent; it allows them the opportunity to renew their purity again and again in repeated acts of self-cleansing.

Both the detective novel and psychoanalysis represent the accomplishment of keeping evil on the periphery of the world. Both keep innocence intact, both keep American culture pure from contamination; both represent the work that goes into keeping American spirit clean.

That is, Portilla conceives the American fascination with therapy (psychoanalysis) and crime solving as representing the cultural obsession with cleanliness.

Psychoanalysis and the detective novel can therefore be interpreted as a technical dressage of evil, but such domestication can only occur when an innocent world has previously been postulated. Banishing evil to the periphery of being and controlling it with psychological and police techniques, all that remains is, literally, to wash our hands. [148]

This idea that to stay clean, and more importantly, to stay spiritually clean, all one has to do is engage in certain techniques of self-care or self-cleansing is an American idea rooted in the not-so-humble belief in an always already superior spiritual constitution. Thus, in American cinema, the hero himself, who is always already ontologically superior to his enemies, is revealed at the end of the film to be smart, insightful into the ways of good and evil, and handsome (and, thus, impeccably clean). (We need not look too hard for examples: Mel Gibson’s character in the Lethal Weapon series comes to mind, “Dirty Harry,” and even Ethan Hawke’s character in Traffic. [Notice that all are male, White, and “all-American.”])

3. The Limits of Innocence

The ideology (or, we can also say, myth) of innocence is thus reproduced in popular culture through the tropes of heroism, cleanliness, and order.
As these tropes are repeated and institutionalized into culture and tradition, so is the belief that the greatest enemy to the American way of life is whatever threatens that tradition; that the greatest threat is whatever doesn't work toward the maintenance and continual justification of that tradition; and that anything that threatens the tradition is, by definition, evil and, ultimately, un-American.

Ultimately, the ideology of innocence justifies a naive view about American life held by many who espouse the dangers of the threat of otherness, namely, that when unthreatened and undisturbed, this way of life “exists” as a homogenous and harmonious coherence of sameness. That is, that unhindered by external influences, by alien or surprising strangeness, Americans (again, White US Americans) are one people, with one culture, innocent and great in their ways, with a supreme morality, prudence, work ethic, and divine ability to solve problems and expose truth.

According to Portilla, this ideology and its corresponding beliefs can be found at the core of American philosophy itself—that is, in pragmatism. Portilla (correctly) understands pragmatism as the view that a belief will be true when it is verified by its results. However,

[w]hat is implied in such a conception is a naive trust that everything will go well. To refer truth to its practical results is possible only on the assumption that the practical results will eventually reflect the Truth with a capital “T”. That is, it is possible only on the naive belief that man will not lose his way. The truth depends on behavior, but the criterion of that behavior, not expressed philosophically but revealed in this conception itself, is the good diffused in a world where evil has no place.

Pragmatism can only be sustained under the assumption that men will propose only morally valid ends. It is only within a community composed of substantially virtuous men that it is possible to postulate the action of men as a criterion of the good and of truth.

Pragmatism is representative, on a more respectable level, of the same world in which we find the Happy Ending of US American filmmaking. Relatively speaking, both pragmatism and cinema respond to the most serious questions by saying that everything will work out. [150]
As Portilla understands it, at the core of pragmatism itself is that stubborn belief in the American will to goodness, moral uprightness, and innocence. The belief that truth will be verified by the consequences it brings about—by the work it does—speaks to the fundamental belief in the goodness of the truth and the righteousness of the work. If the belief, the truth, the proposition, the act—if these are good, then so will be the work that these do, a correlation that forgets that great evil can always be the result of good intentions. As Portilla interprets it, pragmatism is an essentially American philosophy with an essentially American flavor.

In spite of the success of pragmatism as an “American” philosophy, the grounding ideology of innocence is in crisis. To highlight the crisis, Portilla turns to the work of the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

According to Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* (1952), in the chapter titled, “An Innocent Nation in an Innocent World,” America is a nation founded on the belief that the “outside” world is corrupt and corrupting and that only here, in the US, can one find shelter from the corruption. However, as history advances, and social and economic globalization becomes more and more of a reality, the nation finds itself once again under attack by those old corrupting influences. This is America at a crossroad, in crisis, and Niebuhr seeks to locate “the origin of [the] fault, [the] fissure that explains the situation, that is, he undertakes a review of the spiritual foundations of America” [152]. He finds this “fault” in America’s geopolitical situation, in the role that it plays in the modern world. America’s politics is a politics of power, and a politics of power seems to run counter those values of innocence that are “constitutive of the nation,” making it “impossible to maintain the atmosphere in which they flourished” [153]. Niebuhr’s conclusion is that “the nation that at one point represented a new beginning in a corrupt world now seems to corrupt itself in the act of imposing on the world its most valued assets” [153]. American innocence, that is, is lost.

Holding on to a primordial innocence amid a complex and evolving historical reality is, of course, a fool’s errand. Innocence will be lost at the first difficulty. This explains why innocence must be mythologized, institutionalized, and codified, so that it may survive the reality of its historical decay.

Of course, neither Portilla nor Niebuhr is the first to think critically about innocence. One of the first “American” thinkers to think about America through the trope of innocence was Ralph Waldo Emerson. But
his was more of a warning than a description of the state of the American soul. In his Journals he tells us that “A man is not to aim at innocence, any more than he is to aim at hair; but he is to keep it.” That one should aim to “keep it” suggests that innocence is already marked on the character, like the possibility of hair when one is forming in the mother’s womb. Thus, one should not strive to be innocent, as one already is; one should merely strive to hold on to whatever innocence one can, suggesting, of course, that innocence flees and disappears in time, like hair.

But is Emerson telling us that innocence is a virtue proper to Americans (or North Americans)? No. Neither is he telling us that Americans are innocent, only that one should, American or not, hold on to one’s innocence. Why? Because in acting from innocence one is fearless, one is unhesitatingly brutal, and direct; that is, presupposing the purity of one’s intentions, one also assumes that the consequences, whatever they may be, will likewise be pure—or correct, or true. Innocence, as I said above, is aspirational. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes,

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you.10

This, again, points to that feeling of being beyond, of being superior to both others and to nature itself. In the state of innocence of the boy, he is irresponsible precisely because he does not need to respond to or respect limits, which are evil and a constraint on his freedom. In this state, he thinks he is above the rules of causality, and the more he achieves (the more quantity he accumulates) in his irresponsibility, the more his confidence grows that those rules do not apply to him and, that, moreover, his truths are justified in their accomplishment.

However, Emerson does not condone such irresponsibility; he seeks to instill in his (American) readers precisely that missing sense of per-
sonal responsibility, respect for causality, and an appreciation of their own freedom. To act from the standpoint of innocence and irresponsibility is the role of the child, not the “man.” He continues:

the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with eclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable...innocence, must always be formidable. He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private, but necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men, and put them in fear.11

Here, Emerson highlights what happens when innocence is lost. One is taken for one's word; one is watched and judged; one is partisan and one is biased; one is no longer formidable. As such, innocence is lost at the first sign of man's maturity, when he learns to make promises, to keep them, and thus exposes his vulnerability to the world—he exposes his human weakness, i.e., the necessity to do evil and to have evil done to him.

Philosophically, then, the idea of innocence is only that—an idea. The mythology of this idea, or ideal—the ideology of innocence—is ultimately a form of religious sentimentality that has no ground in actual, concrete reality. Hegel, in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, talks about the “original state of innocence”12 that could be found only in Adam's Paradise, where purity without sin was conceived for the sake of maintaining the coherence of the story. The moment that Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise, and freedom of the will enters the picture, so does guilt, which is opposite of innocence. Hegel writes:

the state of innocence consists in the fact that nothing is good and nothing is evil for human beings; it is the state of the animal; paradise is in fact initially a zoological garden; it is the state where there is no accountability or capacity for guilt, and this is now the human state. “Guilt” means in general “holding to account.”13
Hegel’s description suggests that innocence and freedom are incompatible in practice: If America is innocent, then it cannot be free. This paradox is unaccounted for in America’s conception of itself as innocent. In fact, freedom is thought to be our most cherished value, that which defines the American way of life itself.

But according to Hegel, innocence describes an immediacy with being that precludes the self-awareness required to hold (someone) into account—it precludes ethics itself. In the “original condition” where innocence operates, there is a “perfect . . . unity with nature” that describes a state of nature, without law, without self-consciousness, without separation.

It is only when the two are separated, when I am for myself and things are outside of me, that things become enveloped in the bark of sense that separates me from them, and nature erects a screen before me.14

Separation, which is the actual condition of socialized being (i.e., in her alienation from nature), is thus the end of innocence and the beginning of ethical life. Thus, for Hegel, ethical life and innocence are ultimately incompatible (as are freedom and innocence). Hegel’s suggestion is that this innocence is not genuinely human existence. Free ethical life is not the same as the ethical life of the child, and is at a higher level than this form of innocence; it is self-conscious volition, a willing that determines its purpose for itself by thoughtful insight. In the ethical realm this is the first genuine relationship. Just by being free will, human beings have passed beyond this state of innocence.15

Hegel’s declaration that innocence does not represent “genuine” human life points to the fact that innocence is assumed as always as an ideal—something to strive for, something to seek to hold on to, as Emerson says, but something that is, essentially, not real. Ethics itself requires the loss of innocence. Thus, a nation that truly thinks itself innocent will not have the moral vision to reach outside of itself in acceptance or care of others—it will lack an ethical will. The American way of life as innocent and pure is, consequently, a closed life, one that must reject “genuine relationships,” and as such, is not free.
4. Innocent Superiority

Why have I titled this chapter “The Politics of Innocence”? In short, because innocence, according to Portilla, grounds the manner in which America (or, more precisely, the United States) positions itself as a geopolitical entity. The ideology of innocence dictates the political stance America takes toward its neighbors, toward strangers and friends alike. Innocence is thus political. That is, as we reflect with Portilla on innocence and its various manifestations (heroism, cleanliness, exception, superiority, etc.), we see how the ideology of innocence can ground political positions as extreme as eugenics or White supremacy.

In recent years, the issue of superiority—specifically, the question of White superiority—has re-entered the national conversation in the US. We can locate the desire to claim racial superiority in the narrative of innocence that says that innocence is pure and that purity must reject otherness as corrosive and corrupting; it says that otherness is not innocent, but guilty of some evil, and so it must be blamed for whatever befalls the innocent. This motivates Portilla to think about race and race relations in the US: “We note, however, that the basis of racial discrimination is precisely that refusal of the White man to assume his guilt” [147]. This is an important insight, as it suggests that “the White man” truly does believe that he is free from any blame that might befall him in relation to his history of oppression and slavery and that, ultimately, he is blameless (i.e., innocent).

Pursuant to this insight we can make declarations like the following: An extreme manifestation of a politics of innocence is White supremacy. That is, the way that innocence is forced into the social imaginary is meant to uphold a view of racial superiority that benefits the “White man,” understood as any individual who believes himself corruptible by otherness and difference because of a claim to an original purity.

Still, even if Americans are not in fact innocent, the next question is: What role does this belief play in the organization of our social and political life? More interestingly, what happens when such a contingent virtue is used as the basis for politics or for the political foundation of American culture itself?

What we get is American exceptionalism, or the belief that US culture is unlike any other, that its history is unlike any other, and that its “way of life” is unlike any other. While corruption, death, and the weakening of institution is the fate of all nations and all cultures, America thinks...
itself the exception. This exception extends to what it can and cannot get
away with: imperialism, manifest destiny, empire—these are to be held not
as moral stains on the American cultural spirit, but as rights of privilege.
American innocence and American exceptionalism are two sides of
the same ideological coin. And they depend on each other. As a “real”
American, one believes oneself to be exceptional, to be an exception, because
of a fundamental innocence that can be traced back to the purity of the
American spirit in relation to Europe and to native cultures; as a “real”
American, one believes oneself to be innocent, free of guilt, because one
is the exception—because everyone else is guilty, or corrupt, or unworthy.
Daniel Bell conceives American exceptionalism as an inability to
recognize that maturity means being responsible and committed to the
needs of others and not only to the needs of oneself. Exceptionalism is a
selfishness, an irresponsible narcissism, that blinds itself to the realities of
both history and the actual world. Bell writes, “America was the exemplary
once-born nation, the land of sky-blue optimism in which the traditional
ills of civilization were, as Emerson once said, merely the measles and
whooping cough of growing up.” This idea of being a “once-born nation”
is the one that justifies a belief in the original uniqueness of America, in
its perpetual innocence. A nation must be “twice-born”—first through a
founding and then through “reflection and commitment” born of strug-
gle—in order to enter maturity. In other words, as Emerson tells us above
in “Self-Reliance,” the innocence of youth—of a once-born nation—must
be lost in order to be born again, to be, Bell says, “humanized among the
nations.” Without self-reflection and commitment (to others, to principles
of inclusion and justice), America will continue to exempt itself from sin
and so think itself first; as first, best; as best, superior; and as superior,
innocent. And maturity, its humanization, will be a long ways away.

5. Conclusion: Innocence in the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, the ideology of innocence continues to function
as a ground for US policy and public opinion. After the catastrophe of
September 11, 2001, which some would say represented the interruption of
the peaceful and serene progress of US history, while others would insist
was an attack on American innocence itself, anti-immigrant sentiment,
which had been there for hundreds of years, became policy. A social
narrative took hold that said that immigrants—those among us and those
without—were intent on destroying our way of life and thus something had to be done. To sway public opinion, the media and lawmakers didn't have to do much, since all their work was ready to hand in the archives of America’s (darker) history. Anti-immigrant myths abound, and most of these speak of what immigrants will do to the purity, innocence, and greatness of this “once-born nation.” Immigrants, the myths go, corrupt what is otherwise pure and clean. What results is anti-immigrant legislation that harkens back to a fabled time of peace and flourishing among the people and creatures of an American Eden. Immigrants, as intruders, as uninvited guests to this (Impossible) Eden, are thus configured by the ideology as impure, inferior, parasitic, and threatening. Immigration, says the ideology, weakens America. A politics of innocence thus asks itself how America can become great (which is to say, innocent) again. And its answer is simple: rid itself of all corrupting influences—namely, immigrants.

The ideology and corresponding politics of innocence thus seek to protect an innocence inscribed in America as a “once-born,” young and innocent, nation. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which monitors hate groups all across the US, refers to those who profess this ideology as “nativists.” This moniker directly references an unjustifiable belief that White US Americans are somehow original or native to the nation-state. The nativists that the SPLC monitors are not, of course, the Native Americans of the Cherokee or Sioux Nations or the Acoma or Laguna Pueblos, who are historically “native” to the US; the nativists are usually US citizens who define their existential and social position in opposition to non-citizens, or immigrants. They are native in virtue of not (currently) being immigrants. It is a weak nativism that nonetheless finds in the immigrant other a threat to an imagined purity and innocence that is usually associated with the historical romanticized threat to purity and innocence that White Europeans posed to true Native American peoples.

Nativists usually espouse a litany of myths to legitimate their anti-immigrant ideology. Aviva Chomsky lays out 20 such myths, among them the myth that immigrants take American jobs (Myth 1), the myth that “illegal” immigrants have overrun the country (Myth 8), the myth that immigrants threaten the national culture (Myth 12), and the myth that immigrants want to take for themselves what Americans have (Myth 14). In one way or another, these myths are grounded on the notion of America as superior and exceptional and thus possessing everything that is best and desirable (Myths 1 and 14) but also innocent and vulnerable (Myths 8 and 12). If immigrants are thought to threaten the “national culture,” then
this is because it is thought that they will contaminate this (presumably
“original” and pure) culture with their own, alien, culture by introducing
traditions, languages, and ways of being that are other, strange, and dis-
rupting. Moreover, if “illegal” immigrants have “overrun” the country, as
Myth 8 suggests, then not only is the national culture threatened, but so is
the law that protects it, since what we have is an infestation of illegality, a
pestilence of law-breakers running loose in our clean, pure, and innocent
cities! Both of these myths, however, are grounded on a somewhat paradox-
ical assumption, namely, that America is the greatest country in the world
and, simultaneously, that it is the most vulnerable country in the world. If
the “national culture” or the laws that support it can so easily be threatened
or broken, then this means that neither was strong nor fit to begin with.

Anti-immigrant sentiment in the US points to the fear that the
“national culture” will lose the privilege of its innocence. And this fear,
Portilla suggests, points to guilt—a guilt, prominently inscribed in history,
related to not taking responsibility for its own behavior, for the lives of
others outside its borders who should remain anonymous but who, on
“illegally” crossing the border, lose their anonymity and become real,
flesh-and-blood human beings who must be faced. The myths are meant to
de-realize the immigrant, to objectify them, to mask their faces. But this
guilt also points to the means whereby America can become responsible
for itself and others. Portilla writes:

There are good reasons therefore to assume that if US Amer-
icans now consider themselves vulnerable as Americans, this
is certainly a sign that the assumption of innocence of the US
American world, if not completely gone, at least is beginning
to lose its efficacy. I do not mean to say, then, that the main
tenet of US American life has ceased being innocence and has
become guilt. This would not be a crisis but a conversion. [154]

Such a conversion would mean that America is now “humanized among
the nations,” as Bell puts it. But Portilla doubts that such a humanizing
conversion can ever take place. Thus, he writes by way of conclusion:

It remains alien to our purpose to point to solutions or ways
out of the crisis.

What we can say is that if the resolution of the crisis is
understood in terms of America’s participation in that guilt
common to all humanity, a guilt that would be fully accepted by that nation, then we can also say that such a solution involves a conversion capable of subverting the very foundations of that culture, and, of course, this seems highly unlikely. [156]

The ideology of innocence that Portilla diagnoses is one that obscures truth and reality. The politics of innocence, the policies and behaviors that emerge from the ideology, are likewise blind to the realities of our modern world. If assuming a sense of guilt is the way out of this false self-conception, then this would mean that America (US White America) would have to assume responsibility for what it has done in the name of innocence: It would mean taking responsibility for those it has harmed on its way to achieving its self-proclaimed greatness. However, as Portilla points out, and as we can readily see today, this ideology and its politics is deeply ingrained in our social imaginary—purity, incorruptibility, heroism, strength, and greatness are still ways of describing the US American way of life and still provide reasons to protect it. This presumed innocence continues to operate and prevent the US from becoming humanized among nations.

Notes


2. That Portilla refers to “White US Americans” is not as obvious as I’m making it out to be. See chapter 4, below.

3. Deborah L. Madsen, American Exceptionalism (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 3. Madsen writes that the idea of an “untouched innocence” “permeates every period of American history . . . it is the single most powerful agent in a series of argument concerning the identity of America and Americans” (1).


6. Horold H. Koh, *On American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale Law School Legal Repository, 2013), 1480–1526. The term “American exceptionalism” is credited to Alexis de Tocqueville who, in 1831, defined it as “the perception that the US differs qualitatively from other developed nations because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions” (1481n4).


13. Ibid., 214.


15. Ibid., 244.


Chapter 4

Portilla’s Method

A Phenomenological Social Theory

FRANCISCO GALLEGOS

In the 1952 essay “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States,” Jorge Portilla offers a critical analysis of the U.S., based in part on what he observed when visiting the country earlier that year. As we saw in the previous chapter, Portilla argues in this essay that everyday life in the US has historically been structured by a deep-seated “innocence,” a certain kind of naivety in which “sin, evil, and death” are experienced as being fundamentally “foreign”—not unknown, exactly, but un-owned, treated as though such things were not natural or proper parts of the “American Way of Life.” According to Portilla, however, there are signs that this innocence is beginning to disintegrate, and that the nation as a whole is confronting the possibility that it is, in fact, culpable and vulnerable in ways that it had previously dismissed. Portilla describes this change as a “spiritual crisis” that threatens to undermine the foundation of social and political life in the US, and he warns that this crisis may give rise to dangerous, defensive reactions by those who seek to cling to, preserve, and renew the innocence that now seems to be under threat.

This analysis of the US exemplifies Portilla’s commitment to what I have called “phenomenological nationalism,” the view (examined in detail in chapter 2) that individuals’ sense-making capacities are mediated and structured by their nationality. In particular, Portilla argues that the way
individual US Americans interpret and relate to the world is profoundly influenced by certain affective attunements—namely, innocence and, increasingly, threatened innocence. Portilla highlights several ways these affective attunements manifest themselves, and by thinking with Portilla, we can identify similar trends that have emerged since the essay’s publication. In US politics today, for example, we can find threatened innocence on the Right in the form of defensive hostility toward those who criticize the nation. On the Left, threatened innocence animates a sanctimonious preoccupation with the nation’s guilt and a puritanical tendency to blame and demonize those who appear to personify and defend the nation’s worst qualities—as though “they” were the greatest obstacle preventing the nation from finally claiming the innocence that is proper to it. Portilla’s analysis thus suggests that the fate of individual US Americans is tied to the fate of their nation, but that crude political nationalism, naive idealism, or an insistence on “American exceptionalism” is not what is needed. Rather, the crucial question is: Can the US, as a nation, develop the emotional maturity required to accept, and come to terms with, its participation in the sin, evil, and death common to all humankind?

In this chapter, I shift the focus from the content and conceptual framework of Portilla’s analysis of the US to the methodology that he employs in this text. The topic of Portilla’s methodology is likely to be a salient point of interest to many of his readers. His conclusions are bold and troubling, and so it behooves us to inquire about whether they are well grounded. When we do so, we see that many of his conclusions rest on empirically verifiable assertions, such as his assertions that certain attitudes and behaviors are widespread in the US but not present to the same degree in other nations. Yet Portilla was not trained as a sociologist, anthropologist, or ethnographer. With this in mind, we may wonder: On what grounds does he make assertions about the characteristic and distinctive features of US society and culture? To put the question provocatively, we might ask: What, if anything, distinguishes Portilla’s analysis of the US (and other nations) from amateur, armchair social science? In less pointed and more general terms, how should we describe Portilla’s approach to cultural analysis, and how should we evaluate the credibility and merit of his approach?

In section 1, I begin by sketching the methodological principles that appear to guide Portilla’s analysis of the US. After clarifying some of the central elements of what I call Portilla’s “phenomenological social theory,” I turn in section 2 to an examination of Portilla’s innovative use of phe-
nomenology, highlighting several ways that his analysis, which focuses on phenomenological structures operating at a national level, compares and contrasts with a more traditional approach to the phenomenology, which typically focuses on the experience of individuals. Finally, in section 3, I raise a few concerns regarding Portilla’s empirical claims about life in the US. In my view, Portilla’s analysis would have been strengthened if he had acknowledged the diversity of the US and explicitly directed his focus toward the “innocence” of the White mainstream of US society. Moreover, I argue that his account overlooks some reasons to suspect that this social group has always experienced its innocence as being “in crisis.” If this is correct, it suggests that Portilla was mistaken to conclude that in 1952 he was witnessing a historical shift in the existential foundations of the US American way of life.

Whatever we conclude about these potential oversights, however, I believe that Portilla’s analysis offers a rich resource for those who seek a deeper understanding of this nation: How can it be that a nation that is founded on such grave injustices as the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement and mistreatment of generations of African Americans, and the violent domination and exploitation of people around the world, can maintain—however tenuously, defensively, and neurotically—a conception of itself as innocent, and indeed, as an indispensable force for moral righteousness in the world? Although Portilla’s essay leaves unanswered many of the questions it raises, they are, at least, the right questions to ask. As we will see, pursuing the conversation that Portilla has initiated promises to shed light on the underlying logic behind some of the contradictory attitudes about matters of justice that animate US Americans—and perhaps point the way toward a more authentic American redemption.

1. Portilla’s Analytical Strategy

Because Portilla rarely reflected explicitly about his methods, interpreters must rely on their own inferences in order to extract the general principles that appear to guide his reasoning in particular cases. In this section, I begin by sketching my view of Portilla’s analytical strategy, and then I offer a few observations about what I see as some of the most innovative, problematic, and fecund aspects of his approach.
1.1. Portilla’s Argument by the Steps

Portilla’s line of reasoning in “The Spiritual Crisis of the United States” can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, Portilla argues that for much of US history, life in the US has taken place within what he calls “an innocent world,” and as such, it has been profoundly and pervasively influenced by a distinctive phenomenological structure that operates at a national level. In the second stage, Portilla argues that this innocent world is now “in crisis,” i.e., that it is becoming destabilized and is possibly on the verge of collapsing.

Each of these two stages of Portilla’s argument involves three steps, which we can call observation, generalization, and transcendental speculation. In the first stage of his argument, Portilla begins by making observations about particular, manifest behaviors and attitudes of US Americans, such as:

- A naive lack of appreciation for the reality of death [146], and a desire for narratives to have “happy endings” [150];
- An arrogant sense of entitlement to power over others [151];
- A valorization of quantification and the assumption that bigger is always better [142];
- A valorization of action, initiative, and enterprise, and an insistence on thinking about life’s challenges as problems that can and should be solved [144].

The next stage of Portilla’s argument, which I call “generalization,” remains implicit in the text. Generalization refers to the claim that the behaviors and attitudes that have been observed are representative of general trends in the US, or as Portilla puts it at one point, that they belong to “the US American in general” [146]. Portilla never explicitly defends the idea that the tendencies he observes have, in fact, been characteristic and distinctive of the US throughout its history—i.e., widespread in this nation, but not widespread in other nations—but his argument depends on this assumption. After all, if the behaviors and attitudes he observed were merely idiosyncratic to the particular individuals involved, or perhaps were common to only a small section of the population, then Portilla would have no grounds for making any claims about life in the US as a whole.
Thus, even though Portilla often runs together the steps of observation and generalization, I distinguish these steps here in order to highlight, for the benefit of future readers and scholars, the importance of Portilla’s implicit assumption that his observations generalize. As we will see in section 3 of this chapter, I find this assumption to be particularly problematic.

The final step of this stage of Portilla’s argument involves what is known as “transcendental” reasoning—that is, reasoning about conditions of possibility. In this case, Portilla attempts to identify, through a priori reflection, the conditions that make it possible for US Americans to exhibit the characteristic and distinctive tendencies that he has observed. He asks: What conditions would give rise to these tendencies? In answer to this question, Portilla draws on the phenomenological notion of a “world,” arguing that the behaviors and attitudes he has observed could only be possible if everyday life in the US took place within a world that was innocent, organized around a “peculiar feeling of purity, of unfamiliarity with the somber facts of existence, facts which are supposed to be absent from US American life” [146]. This line of transcendental reasoning appears repeatedly in the text. For example, as we saw in the previous chapter, Portilla begins the essay by recounting the story of Dr. Eaton, a funeral director in California who commissions a portrait of Jesus smiling with joy, thereby revealing his obliviousness to the significance of Jesus as a religious symbol of martyrdom. Portilla argues that the idea to commission such a painting was “very original, and it is almost certain that Dr. Eaton’s strange pretense has not occurred to anyone outside the United States” [141]. Just as Dr. Eaton’s line of reasoning would be unthinkable for those who do not share his innocence, so, too, Portilla says, the characteristically American assumption that bigger is better only makes sense within an innocent world.

The condition of possibility for considering quantity as the criterion of value is precisely an innocent world. . . . In a world conscious of evil, magnitude does not say anything; it is axiologically mute and may even take on a sinister aspect. Consider, for example, the dimension of apocalyptic beasts in the Tower of Babel, or the somber aura of giants in Greek mythology or the world of Germanic sagas. [143]

Portilla makes the same kind of claim with regard to many other phenomena, saying that the existence of a world marked by innocence is the
condition for the possibility of American pragmatism, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the cultural preoccupation with sex, psychoanalysis, crime, and detective novels, and so on. Portilla thus concludes that there is a phenomenological structure—that is, a certain kind of world—operating at a national level, making it possible for individuals in the US to think, feel, and act in the ways he has observed. Thus, if Portilla’s reasoning is correct, we can expect that “the idea of innocence serves to make sense of almost every particular nuance of that [US American] way of life” [142].

This completes the first stage of Portilla’s argument. But Portilla is not yet finished, because he observes a second set of behaviors and attitudes among US Americans that appears to contradict the notion that everyday life in the US takes place within an innocent world. For example, he observes:

- The emergence of numerous academic and popular critiques of the US, its history, values, and actions [152ff];
- Defensive reactions to such critiques, including McCarthyist attempts to persecute individuals and ideas that are perceived as threats to the dominant values of the nation [154f];
- A shift in political discourse, in which the source of justification for the US American way of life is located in the past, instead of in the future [156].

Once again, Portilla implicitly assumes that these observations generalize—i.e., that these behaviors and attitudes represent a historically new and increasingly widespread set of tendencies within the US. And again, on this basis, Portilla employs transcendental reasoning, inquiring about what conditions would make these changes possible. He argues that these new tendencies could only arise if the innocence of the US was beginning to disintegrate, giving rise to a profound sense of anxiety surrounding the central concern of moral righteousness. For example, he describes a kind of Cold War–era “propaganda” that “pervades all advertising media, according to which we must defend the threatened US American way of life” [153]. Portilla argues that this attitude is only possible in a world in which the underlying assumption of innocence is beginning to disappear.

Why defend the American way of life and not just speak rather of freedom or human rights?
More than any other point this one appears to . . . [reveal] the crisis of US American consciousness. Indeed, only the vulnerable can be defended and, at the very same moment in which the necessity to defend a form of life appears, so does the insufficiency of that form of life. . . . Innocence is by definition invulnerable, and what is invulnerable does not require any defense whatsoever. . . . There are good reasons therefore to assume that if US Americans now consider themselves vulnerable as Americans, this is certainly a sign that the assumption of innocence of the US American world, if not completely gone, at least is beginning to lose its efficacy. [153–154]

Portilla thus concludes that a new historical process is undermining the phenomenological structure that has previously organized everyday life in the US.

With this sketch of Portilla’s analytical strategy in place, we are now in a position to make some general observations about his methodology.

1.2. Portilla as Social Theorist

As we have seen, each stage of Portilla’s argument combines two distinct styles of reasoning. The steps of observation and generalization are empirical in nature, while the step of transcendental speculation is phenomenological. Within the tradition of phenomenology, this particular combination of methodological approaches appears to offer both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, by beginning with an empirically informed cultural analysis, Portilla is able to articulate creative insights into a number of pressing issues that have not been explored by other phenomenologists. On the other hand, Portilla’s reliance on empirical claims also represents a significant liability for his project. His entire line of thought depends on the accuracy of his observations and on whether he is correct that these observations represent trends that are characteristic and distinctive of the US. However, Portilla is not equipped to demonstrate the validity of these claims; he is in no position, for example, to perform controlled experiments, surveys, or data analysis to compare the behavior and attitudes of US and non-US nationals over time. Thus, the viability of his project ultimately depends on whether future research in the social sciences can demonstrate the validity of his observations and generalizations.
Insofar as Portilla is making claims that directly depend on validation from the social sciences, it is reasonable to wonder what distinguishes his work from mere armchair sociology. After all, it seems undeniable that Portilla does not have sufficient grounds to make conclusive assertions about trends in US culture and society; therefore, if we take Portilla’s central aim to be making conclusive assertions about trends in US culture and society, then we cannot avoid coming to a negative assessment of the credibility of his approach. However, there is an alternative interpretation of Portilla’s project that I find more plausible. According to this interpretation, Portilla’s work ought to be understood as an example of what I call “phenomenological social theory”—an approach to theorizing about social and political issues that draws on the tradition of phenomenology in order to generate concepts and hypotheses that can guide future research within the social sciences.

There are two elements of this interpretation that may save Portilla from being prematurely rejected for lacking a scientifically adequate methodology. First, if we read Portilla’s essay as a work of social theory, then its present lack of evidential support can be seen as a feature of its innovativeness, rather than a sign of its inadequacy. After all, social theory always involves some amount speculation in order to enter into the so-called “hermeneutic circle,” because articulating the larger significance of a set of facts necessarily requires a leap beyond those facts themselves. Whenever a social theorist attempts to establish a new conceptual framework for interpreting and guiding research in the social sciences, it is inevitable that they will do so “on credit,” so to speak, with the promise and hope that future research will demonstrate the fruitfulness of the theory they are proposing. This enables social theorists to avoid—temporarily—objections that they would otherwise have difficulty answering. For example, even if we are compelled by Portilla’s examples of US American innocence, a reader might accuse him of simply “cherry-picking” examples that already fit with the theory that he is trying to construct. After all, there are innumerable events that could be observed about everyday life in the US, many of which are utterly insignificant. How, then, does Portilla know which events are significant for the purposes of his theory, unless he is already viewing the data in a motivated and biased way? But although this is a significant concern for any theorist, it is not itself a sufficient reason to reject a theory out of hand. While we might wish that Portilla had been clearer about the principles of selection that guided his acquisition of data points to be explained, nevertheless, he is entitled, as a theorist, to take interpretive risks in order to get his theoretical model off the ground.
Understood in this way, every claim that Portilla makes should be thought of as a mere hypothesis to be confirmed or disconfirmed by those with the scientific training necessary to reach conclusions about such things. Admittedly, this interpretation of Portilla's work goes against the grain of his writing style, insofar as his pronouncements about life in the US and other nations often have the surface grammar of factual assertions or conclusions. If my interpretation is correct, we should read each of these sentences as being preceded by an implicit qualification, such as “It is my hypothesis that . . .” Thus, rather than simply asserting that US Americans have this or that characteristic tendency, Portilla should be read as hypothesizing that future research will show that US Americans have the tendencies he describes. Interpreted in this way, his essay is implicitly voiced in a subjunctive tense, and its ultimate aim is to articulate elements of a theoretical paradigm that may prove to useful for understanding the contemporary world. Ideally it would inspire social scientists to design new controlled experiments, surveys, and data analyses, and to reevaluate the relevant sociological and anthropological literatures, in order to corroborate and refine Portilla's theoretical outlook. 

Although Portilla does not have training in the social sciences, such training is not necessarily required of those playing the distinctive role of social theorist. And as a theorist, Portilla certainly has training that ought to give him some initial credibility. His central qualifications are the skills and sensibilities that he has gained from a lifetime of study, reflection, and conversation with intelligent and well-educated interlocutors about the ways that individuals’ experiences can be shaped by both existential structures and socio-historical forces. These interlocutors include, of course, the other members of the Grupo Hiperión, who devoted an extraordinary amount of intellectual effort to understanding the nature and effects of national cultures. Moreover, it is clear that Portilla applied his skills and sensibilities to a massive amount of data about cultural trends in US, collected from careful observations of, and personal interactions with, a wide variety of individuals, institutions, and cultural artifacts in the US. In addition, Portilla's writing demonstrates that he is conversant with the work of some of the most prominent historians and social theorists of the time, including Reinhold Niebuhr and R. H. Tawney.

Besides its theoretical nature, a second aspect of Portilla's approach that distinguishes it from pseudoscience is its phenomenological nature. Indeed, in my view, Portilla's innovative use of phenomenology is the most fecund aspect of his theorizing. As we will see in the following section,
phenomenology can be particularly helpful for understanding the holistic
nature of human life. As with any holistic structure, the ways that human
beings think, feel, and act can be difficult to understand in terms of the
causal interactions of component parts. For example, when seeking to
explain a certain social trend, a non-phenomenological explanation—
what Portilla calls a “genetic explanation” [143]—will seek to identify the
underlying causes or mechanisms that give rise to the trend:

Genetic cause(s) → Particular behaviors and attitudes

However, because human life is so complex, and each individual element of
our experience and behaviors is multiply determined by the innumerable
elements with which it is interconnected, a genetic explanation is often
exceedingly difficult to provide. In contrast, a phenomenological expla-
nation of the same social trend posits the existence of an intermediary
structure between the mechanical causes of the trend and the various
effects to be explained:

Genetic cause(s) → Phenomenological structure (e.g., a “world”) →
Particular behaviors and attitudes

Phenomenology, as a discipline, is not in a position to explain why any given
genetic causes would give rise to a particular phenomenological structure.
That part of the explanation is left to the sciences, with the expectation that
we may never fully comprehend the mystery of such emergence. However,
phenomenology is poised to offer illuminating insight into the underlying
logic of the particular behaviors and attitudes in question.9 Let us turn,
then, to a brief examination of how Portilla employs phenomenological
concepts and methods in order to illuminate some otherwise perplexing
features of the various ways that US Americans tend to relate to matters
of morality and justice.

2. A Phenomenology of the Nation

In order to see more clearly what makes Portilla’s approach distinctive
within the tradition of phenomenology, consider how a phenomenological
analysis typically proceeds. Typically, a phenomenological analysis begins
with a description of an individual’s experience from the first-person point of view; from there, it moves to a transcendental argument about the ontological conditions for the possibility of this experience, often concluding with a characterization of the human condition. We see this pattern, for example, in Heidegger’s analysis of the emotion of fear in his classic text, *Being and Time*. In this analysis, Heidegger begins by describing the way an individual experiences fear, putting aside considerations of how brain produces this experience or whether the experience is provoked by something that is “objectively real” or “merely imagined.” Starting from this first-person perspective, Heidegger notes several interesting aspects of the experience, such as the fact that fear involves the experience of being threatened. He then deploys a transcendental argument, saying that any experience of fear must be made possible by a preexisting affective attunement to the concern for safety and security, because without the previous influence of this affective attunement, one would not be disposed to register and respond to things that pose a threat. He concludes that this fact reveals something important about the human condition—namely, that for creatures like us, our experience is always already structured by an implicit awareness of our vulnerability. Thus, vulnerability is not merely something “ontic” (i.e., concrete or particular) that we occasionally confront; rather, vulnerability is an “ontological” structure that mediates and influences the way we experience every particular thing we encounter.

In contrast to this classic approach, Portilla’s work does not begin with a description of his own experience; instead, he begins with a description of the experience of a quite large group of people, namely, a nation. From there, Portilla offers a transcendental argument, not about the ontological conditions common to human beings as such, but about the existential conditions common to this particular group. Thus, between the ontic level of an individual’s particular experiences and the ontological level of the ground of experience for human beings as such, Portilla posits an intermediary phenomenological structure—the nation, or more precisely, the world that members of a nation inhabit—which modifies the characteristics and potentialities of the human condition in distinctive ways:

- **Surface level**: the particular experiences of individuals (ontic);
- **Intermediate level**: the nation/national world (ontic-ontological);
- **Ground level**: the human condition (ontological).
When we articulate Portilla's approach in this way, two questions come to the fore. First, as I noted above, Portilla's analysis begins with a description of the experience of a group, rather than an individual. With this in mind, we may wonder: Does Portilla operate on the (undoubtedly controversial) assumption that a nation can have experiences—i.e., that a nation constitutes some sort of collective or plural subjectivity that has a kind of “first-person point of view”? Second, how should we think about a phenomenological structure that supposedly operates at an intermediate, ontic-ontological level? In particular, how does Portilla conceptualize a national “world,” and in what sense does he think that the existence of such a world makes certain behaviors and attitudes “possible”?

2.1. Nationality and Collective Subjectivity

Does Portilla view nations as collective subjects? This question gains some urgency when we consider that in his essay “Phenomenology of Relajo,” Portilla appears to endorse the possibility that experiences can be shared by groups of people. In that essay, Portilla argues that when individuals are participating in a group activity—such as a ballet performance, fiesta, university lecture, ceremony, or conversation—these individuals can experience the situation in a genuinely collective manner, sharing the experience in such a way that, as one philosopher puts it, “the sharing is not a matter of type, or of qualitative identity (i.e., of having different things that are somehow similar), but a matter of token, or numerical identity.” Portilla suggests that this may happen, for example, when the people in the audience at a ballet performance find themselves moved by the gracefulness of the dance, or when party-goers get swept up in the joyousness of the celebration. In moments like this—when a group of people is swept up in shared mood, responding to an evaluative property (e.g., the gracefulness of the dance, or the joyousness of the celebration) whose emergence depends, in part, on their own activity—the individuals involved will experience themselves as united together in a profound type of experiential solidarity that Portilla calls “coexistence.” Indeed, as we will see in more detail in chapter 6, Portilla argues that such experiences of coexistence are of great importance, because they are the true “foundation of a community.”

Nevertheless, although Portilla accepts the possibility that experiences can be shared in some circumstances, he does not claim that entire nations can share an experience in this way. To the contrary, Portilla's
analysis of shared experiences provides reason to doubt that a group so large and disparate as a nation could ever constitute a collective subjectivity. The reason is that, because coexistence involves “the continuous self-constitution of a group in reference to a value,” coexistence is a fragile state that can easily be disrupted. Indeed, for Portilla, the primary danger posed by certain types of characters, such as the relajiento and the apretado, lies in their tendency to disrupt the mood that is sustaining a moment of coexistence, thereby undermining the existential foundation of a community. In Portilla’s view, the achievement of genuine coexistence is always fragile and fleeting, even in relatively intimate settings, because it requires that the people involved in a group activity orchestrate and navigate a collective mood and thereby sustain a certain kind of emotional engagement over time.

With this in mind, it is difficult to imagine how an entire nation might genuinely share any experience, given how unlikely it is that so many diverse people could be emotionally responsive to anything in a sufficiently similar manner, not to mention participate in a shared activity across such great distances. It is possible, perhaps, that some examples may be found in historic events that galvanize a nation in an extraordinary way. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US may have experienced a genuinely shared mood of anxiety as the nation collectively engaged in the activity of figuring out what had happened and what the implications of the attack would be. Nevertheless, the remarkable depth of national solidarity that is experienced in such moments is rare and relatively short lived. In contrast, the kind of structures that Portilla describes in his analysis of nations—such as the zozobra of Mexico and the innocence of the US—are supposed to endure for decades at a time.

It is thus likely that when Portilla undertakes the phenomenological analysis of a nation, he does not think of a nation as constituting a collective subjectivity that has a shared point of view. A better way to understand Portilla’s approach, in my view, is to think of it as a kind of speculation about the way that individuals within a nation experience themselves and the world. Thus, any assertions that Portilla makes about a “nation” should be interpreted as shorthand for equivalent assertions about “the individuals who are members of the nation.” For example, when Portilla talks about the ideals that have “led this nation [the US] to optimism and an unwavering confidence” [150], we should interpret such passages as referring to widespread dispositions among individual US Americans.
to experience themselves and the world in a certain way—in this case, in an optimistic and confident manner. This interpretation has the virtue of being consistent with Portilla’s views regarding shared experiences, as well as the virtue of generosity, insofar as it relieves Portilla of the need to carry the heavy metaphysical baggage associated with positing the existence of large-scale collective subjectivities.

But if a nation is not a collective subject, then what is the organizing force that makes it possible for millions of individuals members of a nation to exhibit the characteristic and distinctive qualities that Portilla has identified?

2.2. Nation, World, and Possibility

In order to clarify Portilla’s innovative understanding of “world” and “possibility”—concepts that play a crucial role in his argument—it may be helpful to begin once again with a comparison to Heidegger. One prominent difference, as we will see, is that while Heidegger focuses on the world, or perhaps the human world, Portilla is interested in what might be called a “sub-world,” that is, a world that is inhabited by a certain group of people at a certain historical moment. This difference will have important implications that Portilla’s readers will have to work through.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines the “world” as a context of significance in virtue of which, and in terms of which, things become intelligible and make sense in the ways that they do. As one interpreter puts it:

> The world is a horizon of understanding, a space of possibilities, on the background of which we understand both paraphernalia [i.e., the objects that surround us in everyday life, such as tables and phones] and ourselves. . . . The world is a unitary horizon for making sense of both human life and the paraphernalia with which we surround ourselves.

Thus, in Heidegger’s view, the world, as a context of significance, makes it possible for things to show up as intelligible objects of our experience. For example, to return to Heidegger’s analysis of fear, the human world is one in which our safety and security can be threatened; in other words, the “space of possibilities” that we inhabit includes the possibility of being harmed. This inescapable vulnerability is one element of the context of significance in terms of which we make sense of the things
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we encounter, and as such, this context of significance makes it possible for us to experience a certain class of objects—namely, threats. Imagine, for instance, that we were not already attuned to the concern for our security, perhaps because we had a psychiatric condition that prevented us from understanding why it would matter if things affected our safety and security. In this case, a threat, as such, could never be present in our experience. Even if we were locked in a room with a hungry tiger, the situation would not show up, or make sense to us, as a “threat.” Of course, other people observing the situation might see us as being threatened, but threats could never show up in our own experience, because the possibility of being threatened would not even be intelligible to us. The point is that if something is truly unintelligible to us in this way, we will remain oblivious to it. Heidegger thus conceptualizes the world as our outermost horizon of understanding, which serves as the ultimate condition for the possibility of things showing up in our experience.18

However, this does not appear to be the way that Portilla conceptualizes the “innocent world” inhabited by US Americans. If we relied on Heidegger’s conception of world to interpret Portilla, we would be forced to read Portilla as making the implausible claim that US Americans have been literally unable to make sense of the notion that they are subject to death, and that they partake in sin and evil—as though these things were simply unintelligible to US Americans, and so could not even show up in their experience. This idea calls to mind an absurd alternative reality in which US Americans literally do not understand what death is, and so are bizarrely unaffected by the sudden disappearance of their friends and loved ones. Along these lines, Portilla teasingly mentions the preacher Vincent Norman Peale’s book Not Death at All, the title of which seems to give voice to the innocence of US American in a humorously exaggerated way [146].

A more plausible way to understand Portilla’s view, I argue, is to interpret his notion of “possibility” as roughly equivalent to we sometimes call a “live option”—i.e., a possibility for thinking, feeling, or acting that shows up to a person as reasonable, fitting, or viable, based on the person’s prior experiences, and given what appears to matter most in the situation at hand.19 Put another way, a live option is a possibility that has a significant degree of what I call “normative grip.” Normative grip is the sense of being called upon or required to uphold some standard or norm in the way we think or behave, or in the attitudes that we take toward things. When we experience a high degree of normative grip, for
example, we might find ourselves so gripped by the importance of acting in a certain way that acting otherwise becomes completely unthinkable. In contrast, when we experience a low degree of normative grip, we might understand in a “merely intellectual” way that a particular action is required or fitting, but find that this thought fails to move us emotionally or to be conclusive in our deliberations about what to do. When we interpret Portilla in these terms, we can describe his view as holding that an innocent world is a context of significance in which certain kinds of attitudes and behaviors—particularly those related to the concern of moral righteousness—appear to be live options, while others appear not to be live options. In such a world, the possibility of being vulnerable to sin, evil, and death may be perfectly intelligible, strictly speaking, but this possibility nonetheless has little or no normative grip. Individuals who inhabit this world may understand in a “merely intellectual” way that they are collectively responsible for grave injustices, and that life is often tragic and unfair and always ends in death; but if they should consider these thoughts, they are likely to turn their attention elsewhere relatively quickly, without allowing the implications of these ideas to reverberate deeply in their thoughts and actions. In this way, such individuals are like reckless young people who are innocent, in the sense of lacking life experience, and so relatively unresponsive to the possibility of seriously harming other people and being harmed themselves.20 In contrast, a non-innocent world (such as we might find in Mexico, perhaps) would be a context of significance within which individuals experience themselves as being called upon, with some urgency, to respond in appropriate ways to sin, evil, and death, which have already marked their lives and may appear again at any moment.

2.3. Three Basic Elements of the World of Innocence

Although this way of conceptualizing “world” and “possibility” is not found in Heidegger, we can nonetheless draw from his work in order to develop these concepts further. In Being and Time, Heidegger distinguishes three basic aspects of our ability to make sense of our experience: (1) our cognitive and linguistic capacities, (2) our emotional responsiveness, and (3) our practical skills and tools, together with the relevant aspects of our bodies, traditions, and institutions that enable our skills and tools to be effective.21 In order to make sense of something, it is necessary to have a concept and a word for it, or at least to have a conceptual and
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linguistic context that is congruent with the development of such a concept and word. Likewise, in order to grasp the meaning of something, it necessary to be able to respond emotionally to the ways the object impinges on one's concerns and values. Lastly, in order for something to be intelligible, there must exist a practical context that enables the thing to function in its characteristic ways. Each of these capacities make it possible for us to have meaningful experiences, and as such, alterations in any of these capacities will alter the limit of what we can understand and experience as real.

One of the most dramatic illustrations of this line of thought is found in Jonathan Lear's discussion of the collapse of traditional way of life of the Crow, an indigenous tribe in North America, in the late nineteenth century. As Lear reports, one important traditional practice for the Crow was the practice of planting a coup-stick, in which Crow warriors would drive a stick into the ground in a mortal vow not to retreat beyond the where the stick was planted. The possibility of performing this action depended on the existence of a context of significance in which this action had meaning. This context of significance is constituted by (1) a vast network of concepts and words, including the concepts and words for coup-stick, warrior, retreat, death, and so on, that enable the Crow and their interlocutors to think and talk in meaningful ways about the practice; (2) a widespread disposition to respond emotionally in certain ways to the act of planting a coup-stick and a range of related actions, such as displaying courage or cowardice on and off the battlefield; and (3) an immense assortment of items (including, most prominently, coup-sticks), skills, traditions, and institutions that surrounded and supported the practice of planting a coup-stick and allowed it to have the meaning that it had (including legitimate procedures for determining whether a coup-stick was properly planted and whether the concomitant vow was upheld). The collapse of the Crow traditional way of life meant the disappearance of these cognitive and linguistic capacities, emotional dispositions, skills, tools, traditions, and institutions. The central point, for our purposes, is that without this context of significance, it is no longer possible to plant a coup-stick. A person can drive a stick into the ground and make a vow not to retreat, but in the absence of this context, such an act will not constitute planting a coup-stick and will not be intelligible to anyone as such.

Lear’s analysis is Heideggerian in its focus on the conditions under which something is intelligible or unintelligible, possible or impossible.
But as we have seen, Portilla does not appear to think about innocence in these terms. Indeed, it seems clear that US Americans generally have the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional capacities to make sense (strictly speaking) of their subjection to sin, evil, and death, and likewise, US society already contains the traditions and institutions that would be required for the nation to take accountability for its sins and to respond appropriately to the reality of evil and death.

How, then, might these three basic elements of our sense-making capacities enter into Portilla’s analysis? In my view, by distinguishing these three constitutive elements of sense-making, we can see that each of these capacities can be relatively developed or underdeveloped. We can thus imagine a spectrum or range in a person’s or society’s capacity to make sense of something in each of these three different ways that sense-making occurs. From this perspective, we can interpret Portilla’s view as follows: Everyday life in the US has historically taken place in a context of significance in which these three sense-making capacities are underdeveloped with regard to the task of coming to terms in a genuine, mature, and realistic way, with our inescapable subjection to sin, evil, and death.

On this view, individuals in US society may be able to think and talk about sin, evil, and death, but in general, they have not been able to do so very well, in the sense that the meaning of these difficult aspects of human life often fails to reverberate deeply enough to shape what appears as a normatively gripping, live option. It is possible that certain concepts and words have been lacking that would help individuals to track the relevant distinctions and connections. For example, with regard to the capacity to think and talk about injustice, Miranda Fricker has argued that when the term “sexual harassment” came into public use in the 1970s, this concept helped people identify and understand the meaning of a kind of injustice that they had witnessed or experienced but failed to comprehend fully. Today, terms such as “privilege” and “microaggression” are gaining acceptance and contributing to the capacity of US Americans to think and talk about injustice, and surely other terms that could be invented in the future would help as well. In addition to the lack of particular words and concepts, US society may demonstrate a relative lack of diligence and skill with regard to pursuing conversations about these topics over time and across different sectors of society. As a result, US Americans do not normally have access to the cognitive-linguistic environment in which the relevant assertions, questions, requests, and imperatives are able to function.
in a way that enables individuals to think and talk about injustice very well. A similar set of arguments could be marshaled with regard to the capacity to think and talk about death.

Likewise, according to the interpretation of Portilla’s view that I am proposing, while US Americans have access to the basic emotional or practical capacities required to understand sin, evil, and death in a merely intellectual way, they have not developed these capacities as fully as would be required in order for the meaning of these aspects of life to resonate more deeply. With regard to the capacity to respond emotionally to sin, evil, and death, US Americans have suffered from a lack of sufficient opportunities to practice, from a young age and throughout their lives, the emotional skills required for engaging with these themes in a sustained and vulnerable way. As a result, US Americans often lack the “psychosocial stamina” required to respond emotionally to these painful aspects of life without resorting to defensive maneuvers, such as the defensive strategies of dismissal, denial, and problematization discussed in chapter 2. With regard to the capacity to deal with these topics in a practically competent way, US American society has traditions and institutions that can address sin, evil, and death, but these traditions and institutions have generally not been able to do so very well. In courts of law and public opinion, there has been a lack of the precedents, policies, and mechanisms that would be required for dealing with these issues in a practically effective manner.

To summarize, I suggest that what Portilla calls the “innocent world” of the US arises from a lack of development of three modes of making sense of the nation’s participation in sin, evil, and death, creating a context of significance in which a range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are unable to show up as normatively gripping, live options. This interpretation would help Portilla explain the behaviors and attitudes he observes in the US. For example, Portilla describes the so-called “panty raids” that were apparently common on college campuses in the 1950s, “naive and playful assaults in which young college students seize the most intimate garments of their companions for no other purpose than to display them innocently in the light of day” [147]. Using the conceptual tools I have just sketched, we might say that at this time, the possibility of partaking in such a practice showed up to many young men with a high degree of normative grip; at the same time, while these young men might have been able to understand, in a merely intellectual way, why someone might find
this practice objectionable, such considerations often failed to resonate deeply or to be conclusive in their deliberations. Thus, we can explain the “ontic” behaviors and attitudes of these young men as a result of the way things showed up to them as meaningful, and we can explain the patterns in their experience of meaning, in turn, with reference to the underdevelopment of certain cognitive, emotional, and practical capacities in US society.

The same type of explanation can be offered for the other behaviors and attitudes that Portilla describes. Concluding a narrative without a happy ending, or forgoing an opportunity to gain power and control, solve a problem, or make something bigger—these possibilities may be intelligible (strictly speaking) to a US American, but they are likely to show up as obtuse or unreasonable. In this way, what I have called Portilla’s phenomenological social theory bridges the explanatory gap between the kinds of empirical or genetic causes described by the social sciences and the intimate structure of the experience of individual US Americans. It does so by positing the existence of a national world that operates as an intermediate-level phenomenological structure. This national world modifies what is intelligible and possible for human beings as such, shaping the meaning of what is intelligible and possible according to what shows up as a normatively gripping, live option for those individuals whose sense-making activities take place within the context of significance that has been constructed by the members of the nation over the course of its history.

3. The Future of Portilla’s Inquiry

While I hope that the above discussion goes some way toward clarifying the methodology that Portilla implicitly relies on in his analysis of the US, there are many questions that remain unanswered—phenomenological questions, empirical questions, and questions about the relationship between the phenomenological and the empirical. For example, one set of phenomenology-related questions centers around Portilla’s claim that the innocence of the US is “in crisis.” What is involved in such a crisis? Is Portilla suggesting that the innocent world that existed in the US for much of its history is simply disintegrating, leaving an unstructured and chaotic context of significance in its place? Or is he suggesting that this innocent world is simply being modified in some fundamental way, while still remaining a coherent context of significance? Alternatively, Portilla may
be suggesting that this traditional world is being displaced by the rise of a new world, such as the world of threatened innocence. But if the crisis involves the displacement of one world by another, how should we think about the relationship between these two worlds? Do some US Americans occupy one context of significance, while other members occupy a different context of significance—or do some or all US Americans occupy both contexts simultaneously, to some degree?

There are also a number of questions concerning the interpretation of Portilla’s conception of a “world” that I proposed above. These questions inquire into the relationship between empirical social practices and institutions, on the one hand, and the phenomenological structures they allegedly generate, on the other. For example, what, specifically, are the concepts, words, and cognitive-linguistic practices that play or could play an important role in supporting or undermining the innocence of US Americans? How, exactly, are US Americans “trained” as emotional agents, and how could they be trained, in order to support or undermine that innocence? And which skills, tools, traditions, and institutions, in particular, play or could play such an important role at the intersection of the ontic and ontological? Much more would need to be said about these issues before Portilla’s phenomenological theory could hope to succeed as an explanatory account in the social sciences.

Lastly, many questions remain unanswered regarding the empirical claims on which Portilla’s project rests. For example, is it true that the behaviors and attitudes that Portilla describes as being reflective of innocence have, in fact, been characteristic and distinctive of the US for much of its history? And is it true that in 1952 Portilla was witnessing a historical turning point, a crisis in the existential foundation of the US American way of life?

When we step back and reflect on the number and quality of the questions raised by Portilla’s work, we can see just how much interpretive work is left to future scholars who seek engage with Portilla’s political philosophy. Although some might take this as evidence that Portilla’s thinking was not adequately systematic or thorough, I would suggest instead that we see these unanswered questions as a sign of the fascinating philosophical terrain to which Portilla’s work will take us, if we accept the invitation to think with him about these pressing issues. In conclusion, then, I will offer a few provocations related to the empirical validity of Portilla’s claims.

One glaring mistake in Portilla’s analysis of the US, in my view, is his failure to appreciate the diversity of the nation, and in particular, his failure to notice the ways that racial and ethnic minorities in the country
have historically resisted validating or partaking in the “innocence” of the dominant, White mainstream. For example, those African Americans who have been subject to slavery and social annihilation never had the luxury of denying the reality of death. Indeed, according to Cornel West, the history of African American culture, music, religion, philosophy, literature, and politics is, in many ways, a history of this community’s attempt to come to terms with the tragic and complex nature of life on earth, an attempt to give one another the courage to resist the temptation to dismiss or deny the dark side of the human experience, or to treat it as a mere problem to be solved. For this reason, in contrast to the forms of Christianity that have variously been historically popular among Whites in the US, which tend to be either fundamentalist or naively reassuring, “the black church [places] . . . profound stress on the concrete and the particular—wrestling with limit situations, with death, dread, despair, disappointment, disease, and so on.” Indeed, he says, “black evangelical Christianity is primarily concerned with human fallenness” and recognizes that “no individual or society can fully conform to the requirements of the Christian gospel, hence the need for endless improvement and amelioration.” In a similar manner, we find in the blues and in funk music (a genre whose very name reminds us of the stench of death and the musk of the living body), as in the writings of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, “candid narratives and painful truths about our all-too-human complicity with evil and evasion of dark realities, which no country or social experiment can ignore without danger.”

Likewise, Latinx folks have never been allowed to rest in the comfort of innocence, simplicity, and purity. To the contrary, the most prominent theme of all forms of Latinx self-expression is perhaps multiplicity, the pain and beauty of being forced to perpetually cross borders and dwell in a permanent “in-between” place along every dimension of human existence. Moreover, the Latinx community has inherited some of the non-innocence of Latin America, a non-innocence that emerges in ways that are both life-affirming—such as in Día de los Muertos celebrations, rasquache decor, and a form of Catholicism colored by indigenous animism and Marxism—as well as problematic—such as in the tendencies toward zozobra, cynicism, and pessimism so eloquently described by Portilla and his contemporaries. All of this may lead us to suspect that things are not quite as simple as Portilla suggests, even among the White community. As an outsider looking in, it is perhaps inevitable that Portilla focuses on the images of White innocence that the nation projects most energetically—images from Hollywood.
films in which White protagonists are confident and capable, while foreigners are villains or buffoons with “big mustaches and exaggerated gestures” [145], or images of White politicians who appear to have no qualms about executing “a program of hegemony reinforced by unprecedented military might” [150]. But on closer examination, we may see that this appearance of White innocence is a facade that is in need of perpetual reinforcement and policing at the margins. As many philosophers of race have argued, Whiteness itself was socially constructed in an incredibly fraught social and political context and has been used as a central tool in the continual effort to maintain an unnatural and cruel economic and cultural system that often seems poised to collapse.32 If this is true, it would not be surprising to find that White innocence has always been “in crisis” to some extent.33 Indeed, as one scholar notes, behind the apparent naturalness and neutrality of Whiteness in the White experience is a perpetual contestation of the meaning of Whiteness, reflected, for example, in the history of the US Supreme Court’s treatment of Whiteness in immigration law, where we see that “Whiteness is a social construction whose composition changes throughout time and place,” granted to particular social groups or rescinded according to the political exigencies of the moment.34 This line of thought suggests that the signs of threatened innocence that Portilla was observing in 1952 were not, in fact, signs of a historical shift in the existential foundation of the nation, as he claimed, but were simply par for the course.35

Perhaps Portilla was simply misled by the common illusion that one’s own time is more historically significant than it truly is. But on the other hand, perhaps the present moment always has the potential to be what the Greeks called a krísis—the turning point in a disease, in which the patient will either succumb or recover. Today, as social movements in the US are finding new ways to bring the distorting effects of privilege into public awareness, in hopes of teaching the innocent world to see its own innocence with suspicion, only time will tell whether these efforts are simply a continuation of the nation’s perpetual fixation upon its own moral status—or the beginning of something new.

Notes

1. This information about the context of the article’s production is provided in the introduction to Portilla’s anthology, La fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos, 11.
2. There are some signs that Portilla perceives a need to provide evidential support for his implicit claim that his observations are, in fact, representative of widely pervasive trends. For example, he assures the reader that he could provide “innumerable” examples of the kinds of trends he has identified: “That the US American world becomes fully comprehensible from the postulate of innocence is something that can be verified by innumerable facts, more or less complex” [143].

3. The Christian Bible depicts Jesus as a martyr who offered human beings a chance to redeem themselves from their subjection to sin, guilt, and death, but was rejected and murdered by those he was trying to save. For this reason, Jesus has almost always been depicted with a loving but sad expression.

4. According to Portilla, “Pragmatism can, without serious alteration, be reduced to the following formula, which has been coined by the US American philosopher, Patrick Romanell: ‘The truth of an idea (proposition, belief, hypothesis) depends on the practical value of its results.’ This means that both the truth and the real meaning of an idea must be sought in its consequences for action, i.e., its effectiveness.” In response, Portilla says: “Pragmatism can only be sustained under the assumption that men will propose only morally valid ends. It is only within a community composed of substantially virtuous men that it is possible to postulate the action of men as a criterion of the good and of truth” [150].

5. “Only on the assumption of innocence does it become possible to face the future openly and confidently as happens in the disturbing doctrine of manifest destiny that you see with the annexation of Texas” [155].

6. “I believe that the proliferation of literature on sexual matters can be explained by the fact that everything concerning sex resists being clearly integrated in a perspective of total innocence, and it is thus necessary to return [to the topic] again and again in a sort of vertigo of fascination. It is precisely this character of proliferation to infinity, of production in a series, that gives meaning to the detective story in the US. Faced with the irrefutable fact of crime, there is nothing so comforting as the detective novel. . . . Psychoanalysis and the detective novel can therefore be interpreted as a technical domestication of evil, but such domestication can only occur when an innocent world has previously been postulated. Banishing evil to the periphery of being and controlling it with psychological and police techniques, all that remains is, literally, to wash our hands” [147–148].

7. The kind of controlled experiment that may lend some support to some of Portilla’s hypotheses is described, for example, in E. L. Uhlmann, T. A. Poehlman, D. Tannenbaum, and J. A. Bargh, “Implicit Puritanism in American moral cognition,” Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 47 (2011): 312–320. This study compared random groups of US Americans to British, Canadian, and Asian American groups and found “evidence that the judgments and behaviors of contemporary Americans are implicitly influenced by traditional Puritan-Protestant values regarding work and sex.”
8. I am grateful to Manuel Vargas and Clinton Tolley at the UCSD Mexican Philosophy Lab for their help in clarifying this line of thought.


10. As Heidegger puts it: “The fact that this sort of thing can matter to us is grounded in our attunement.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176.


13. Ibid., 198.

14. Ibid.

15. For more on the *relajiento* and *apretado*, see chapter 2.

16. Heidegger’s classic formulation of the definition of “world” is as follows: “That wherein Dasein understands itself beforehand . . . [and] in terms of which it has let entities be encountered beforehand.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 86. “Dasein” is Heidegger’s term for creatures like us, i.e., creatures that make sense of reality in the existentially inflected ways that human beings do.


18. Thus, in the full passage that I cited above, Heidegger connects the class of experience made possible by this fearful attunement to the corresponding feature of the world such an attunement reveals: “The fact that this sort of thing can matter to us is grounded in our attunement; and as an attunement [the concern for safety and security] has already disclosed the world—as something by which we can be threatened, for instance.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176.

19. The concept of a live option is famously articulated by William James, who illustrates his conception of this kind of possibility with the example of a religious person considering the belief system of another faith. Even if a Christian can make sense of the views of his Muslim counterpart, he says, so that the Muslim’s belief system is perfectly intelligible, nonetheless the Christian is likely to find that these ideas do not make an “electric connection with [his] nature” and “refuse to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead.” William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Vol. 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 199.

20. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for making this connection.


24. This formulation is adapted from Robin DiAngelo’s discussion of “White fragility,” which she defines as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

25. The reader may be surprised by Portilla’s characterization of such panty raids as “naive and playful,” when such activities were undoubtedly frightening to many of the women targeted by these brazen displays of misogyny and the impunity with which men could violate women’s boundaries. However, because this passage is located in an essay criticizing the hypocritical and dangerous “innocence” of US Americans, I suspect that Portilla is being ironic in this characterization—i.e., that although those who participated in such activities viewed themselves as merely being naive and playful, Portilla thinks we ought to assess such individuals more harshly. That said, such passages highlight the problematic fact that, as discussed in the introduction, Portilla fails to engage with women or issues of gender in his writing. For more on the history of panty raids, see Beth Bailey, “From panty raids to revolution: Youth and authority, 1950–1970,” in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Joe Alan Austin and Michael Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 187–204.

26. Thanks to Andrea Pitts for calling attention to this point. For a discussion of Mexican and Chicana philosophers that harmonizes with the critique of Portilla I offer in this section, see Andrea Pitts, “Toward an Aesthetics of Race: Bridging the Writings of Gloria Anzaldúa and José Vasconcelos,” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2012): 80–100.

27. For an excellent comparison of slavery and its aftermath in the US and other societies, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).


33. Thanks to Shannon Sullivan for suggesting this point. For further discussion, see Shannon Sullivan, “White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and...
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35. On the other hand, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 abolished the use of racial restrictions in immigration and naturalization statutes. This provides some reason to think that there was something about this period of history—which coincided, of course, with the so-called “civil rights era”—that was historically important for White society and may have constituted something of a crisis for innocence. My point, however, is that this is simply a “crisis” that never ends. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for these points.