

## Humanist Readings Club Session X, Mexican Humanism

Mexico is electing a new president on June 2. The leading candidate, Claudia Sheinbaum, has proclaimed that her philosophy is "Mexican Humanism", a term also embraced by the incumbent President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador [AMLO]. What does Sheinbaum mean? For Mexicans the phrase is a clear reference to the philosophical ideas associated with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, ideas that are still alive for many Mexicans.

(From a United States perspective, any intellectuality from a leading politician might seem odd. Mexico is different. The leading candidate, Sheinbaum, has an earned Ph.D. in applied physics. Her opponent, Xochitl Galvez has a degree in computer engineering. Both are women. Sheinbaum is Jewish and Galvez is Native American. Mexicans might wonder why the US prefers the candidates it chooses.)

Pre-Revolutionary Mexico was ruled from 1877 to 1910 by the dictator Porfirio Diaz. Diaz's rule was a period of relatively unregulated capitalism. In particular, foreign companies, mostly from the US, were allowed to develop mines, railroads etc. pretty much as they liked, at least after paying off the necessary officials. Wealthy Mexican landlords were able to expand their holdings at the expense of traditional small farmers.

Diaz's rule was ideologically justified by invoking Positivism, an ideology developed in the early 1800s by the French philosopher Auguste Comte. Positivism was secular. Positivists believed that science was the key to social peace and progress. Comte made up a new word, "sociology" for the science that should guide society. Diaz's lieutenants were known as "cientificos" because, even if they were bankers or soldiers, they always claimed their decisions were based on "science".



Current Election Posters

In 1909 Antonio Caso, a 25 year old lawyer, and several of his friends founded the Atheneum of Youth, a group of young intellectuals dedicated to challenging Positivism, or at least the version of Positivism the científicos proclaimed. They agreed with the Positivist's scepticism towards Catholicism, but believed that true Humanism placed much more emphasis on the dignity of the individual. About a year later, in 1910, the Mexican Revolution broke out.



**Antonio Caso**

It is difficult for an outsider to understand how a movement of a handful of young intellectuals could have so much influence, but many Mexicans give Caso et al. a lot of credit. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) Octavo Paz wrote:

"The critique of positivism was decisive in the intellectual history of Mexico and was one of the indispensable antecedents of the Revolution".

Unlike many of his associates, Caso never entered practical politics. Paz noted:

"Caso's...unfailing love for knowledge - which caused him to go on with his classes even while opposing factions were shooting each other in the street - made him a splendid example of what philosophy means: a love that nothing can buy and that nothing can pervert".

So what exactly was Caso's philosophy? Caso believed in a humanism which placed the supreme value on the development of the individual person where the goal of individual development was to develop love of other people. Caso cited the German philosopher Immanuel Kant as a source for his belief in the value of the individual human. Caso writes: (All quotes from here on are from Caso)

"The human person is endowed with comprehension, with the capacity to distinguish the false from the true, the ability to recognize what is necessary and perfect.

"The human person is conscious of the difference between reason and instinct, between reason, ignorance, passion, and insanity. . . .

"Our century rebels against the person when it ignores the directive of reason. When the person is completely subordinated to the state, reason (that admirable power of comprehension) always vindicates the prerogatives of the personality itself, because the personal conscience denies the absolute subordination of the person to the state. In this sense, what we term conscience is only reason applied to our moral life.

"In the presence of the audacious mysticisms of this century, in the presence of irrational "totalitarianism," the mind protests with the powerful proclamation of Kant: "Every object that has a relative and extrinsic value is a thing; rational beings, persons, have an intrinsic value; they are ends in themselves. Things have a price, persons have dignity." Because of this, servility is the lowest kind of life. It corrupts the dignity of the person; it transforms men into things that can be bought in a market.

"Personalism declares that each rational being is irreplaceable, precisely because he is a person. One makes a contract to exchange one good for another at a price; this makes good sense when dealing with things. When dealing with persons, not "biological unities," their dignity is found in affirming their unique character. He who has dignity can never have a price".

How do we develop our personality? Through education. Caso explains:

"To be, is to be individual."

"I judge that the supreme law of education is to respect the personality of the one who is being educated. I think that its ultimate goal is the development of each one's distinctive personality. In sum, for me, education does not "form" its object, but simply "informs" it.

"The human spirit, irreducible, independent, sui generis, unique, must not be schooled in order to "deform" but to "inform." Schools, thus conceived, must not educate directly for the family, for the country, for humanity, or for God, but for the individual who receives the education. . . .

"To the cowardly positivists frightened by the idea of "mental anarchy" I say, no. I believe education should tend to free us, to unbind, to relax, in a word, to individualize us.

"I clearly conceive, then, educational institutions as sites of intellectual information and moral systems, as repositories or libraries that offer valuable data and premises useful to the spirit; and I firmly believe that all those who fail to adjust to this conception essentially corrupt the school by converting it into a penitentiary, a barracks, a convent, a laboratory, or at least a place of vulgarization instead of individualization. . . ."

And what is the point of this education? To develop love for others.

".the moral law, the necessity for each person to realize his place in the midst of a society that is, inescapably, the spiritual heir of all the centuries, the work of generations that preceded us, and in the present, a spiritual union, a solidarity, of efforts to form our own personality by relations with other persons. Tradition is love for what used to be; solidarity is love for the present. The human person is realized, in terms of tradition and solidarity, both through self-respect and through love for others."

The enemy of human development is oppressive social institutions. For Caso, the biggest problem in his early years was unregulated capitalism as practiced under the Diaz dictatorship. Later he emphasized that Catholicism and Stalinism were dangerous in the same way.

"The greatest error of contemporary civilization is the lack of respect for the human person, its preeminent attention to groups, to sums, to the anonymous, the collective, and the common. . . If man sacrifices himself to the standards of contemporary civilization, his destiny, his sense of humanity shall have been lost forever. Humanity and personality are the proper and genuine dimensions of the species in its historical development."

This isn't a purely rational philosophy. Caso's belief in the special value of human personality, which he takes from Kant, transcends empirical observation. For this reason Caso's philosophy was often called "transcendental humanism". For a similar reason, early Unitarians who were also inspired by Kant are called "transcendentalists".

Caso's core philosophy doesn't require the existence of God, but Caso considered himself to be a Christian, although not a Catholic.

"We think that humanism, as an expression of the culture and integration of the human being, has not yet borne fruit thoroughly, nor will it ever while there are men on the surface of this planet, for if man is not integrated as the man of the Renaissance desired, he will not be able to save himself! Furthermore, humanism is joined closely but in a concealed fashion with the Christian religion and its mysteries. We Christians revere the man-God. Our religion is the only one that loves and pays homage to God incarnate in human clay! Thus, there is an undeniable foundation for humanism, manifest and splendid, in the dogmas of Christianity. The pure cult of "humanity," as understood by Auguste Comte, is a false position in the last analysis, profane; but Christ is God humanized. Here is the profound feeling of religious humanism."

The idea that Christ is a role model that humans can reasonably aspire to emulate isn't mainstream Christianity with its emphasis on salvation, Heaven and Hell etc. It is quite similar to a view of Christianity among some US Unitarians.

A few months after Caso's ideas began circulating among educated Mexicans, the Mexican Revolution broke out. The Revolution began as a quarrel among the ruling elite about who would succeed the 81-year-old dictator Diaz, but in much of Mexico it soon included a revolt of small farmers and farmworkers against wealthy landowners. The best known leaders of the rural revolt were Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

The new government installed by the Revolution did not implement all the reforms Villa and Zapata had fought for, but they definitely wanted to give the appearance of honoring the



ideas of both Caso and the intellectuals and Villa and the revolutionaries. The government had the brilliant idea of hiring Mexico's best painters to paint large scale murals illustrating the Revolution's ideals.

The best known of these painters was Diego Rivera. Rivera liked industry but didn't like capitalists. On the right, Rivera's spouse, artist Frida Kahlo, is shown distributing weapons to revolutionary workers.



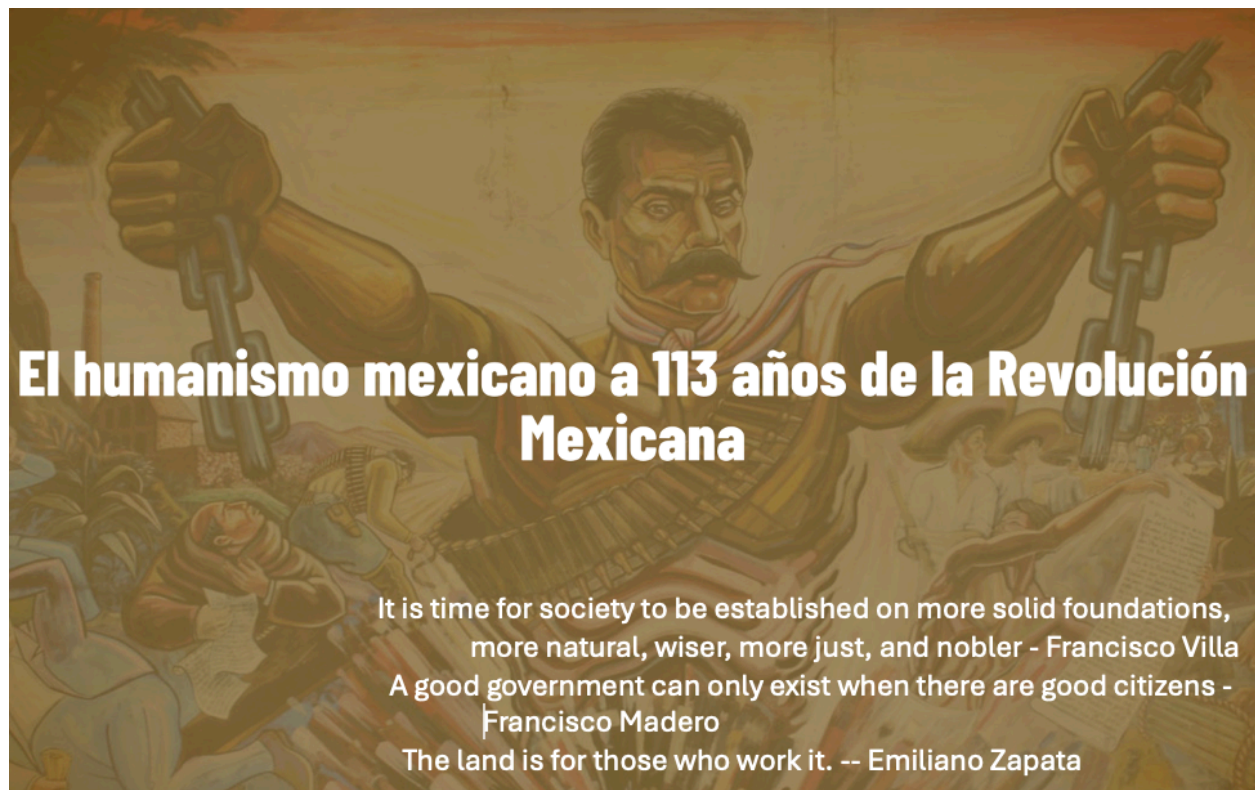
Rivera didn't like the Catholic Church either. The depiction of the Inquisition on the right is from Rivera's mural on the grand staircase at the National Palace.



Rivera's view of Communism was nuanced. He thought it was a noble ideal which had been distorted into something evil by Stalin. Rivera's solution was to honor Leon Trotsky, Stalin's rival, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union. Four years after this was painted, Trotsky was welcomed to Mexico and given asylum. In 1940 Stalin's agent's found Trotsky in Mexico and murdered him.



Finally, this is a recent propaganda poster from the current Mexican government. The quotations were translated with Googletranslate. The three Humanists quoted are the two agrarian leaders, Villa and Zapata, and the first President of Revolutionary Mexico, Francisco Madero. They are better known than Antonio Caso, but the philosophy is the same. The picture is of Zapata.



Whether Claudia Sheinbaum is a true follower to the ideals of "Mexican Humanism" as she claims or merely an opportunist seeking to associate herself with popular ideas, the Mexican people will get to decide in the June 2 election.