

Chapter 2

Octavio Paz: A Critique of Sociology or a Critical Sociology?

Abstract The chapter offers a brief review of some earlier studies that were interested in Paz's work from a sociological perspective. It will become evident that they were, however, especially interested in political issues. In contrast, I will argue that Paz is not only an interesting object of study for political sociology, but that in parts of his work he himself expresses a sociology, and that this sociology is inseparably linked to the historical experience of the Mexican Revolution. However, his criticism of the conventional forms of sociology can only be properly understood when it is contrasted to models of sociologies that had a positive influence on his work. Here it is important to mention, above all, the influence of the aforementioned *Collège de Sociologie*. The group of French intellectuals that went under this name proposed a consequent parallel reading of hard social facts and culture that captured Paz' interest. In fact, Paz' most important book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, can be seen as an exercise in just the kind of research that the *Collège* stood for. Another important idea that Paz shared with some members of the *Collège*, especially Roger Caillois, was that of the poetic experience.

Keywords Octavio Paz • Postcolonial critique • Political sociology • Models of sociologies • Modernity modernization theories • Mexican revolution

2.1 An Approach to the Sociology of Octavio Paz

It is difficult to overlook the fact that most published studies on the works of Octavio Paz discuss his poetry and aesthetics, although the large majority of his opus consists of essays and papers on diverse topics, many of them of interest when read from the perspective of the cultural sciences.¹ One possible explanation may lie in the fact that in his essays Paz often took polemical positions that differed from the conventional opinions of intellectuals and politicians on both the left and right, and that this

¹The monumental edition of Paz' works edited in Mexico by *Fondo de Cultura Económica*—which was overseen by Paz himself before his death in 1998—consists of 15 volumes, but his poetry—curiously—fills only two.

discredited his thought in general (cfr. Rodríguez 1996: 14ss.). Another reason may be that Paz repeatedly voiced his wish to be recognized principally as a poet. In this section, however, I intend to demonstrate that his preference for *poetics* did not entail devoting himself to purely aesthetic pursuits, but that his works reflect a very particular way of exploring the world; one by no means incompatible with sociology (cfr. Sect. 3.2). Whatever the case, in recent years this curious abstention from examining Paz' other writings seems to have been overcome to some extent and his essays that elaborate a social, political and, in the broadest sense, cultural, diagnosis of modernity seem to be receiving the attention they deserve.

This process reveals that Paz' works are surprisingly no longer of interest only to literary scholars, but are being read from the perspective of various disciplines: philosophy (Astorga 2004), political philosophy (Arriola 2008), political science (Grenier 2001; Söllner 2009), and cultural anthropology (Weinberg 2009), as well as sociology (Rodríguez 1996; Capetillo 2005, 2009; Kozlarek 2009). These pioneering works that seek to analyze Paz' essays through the lenses of different social and cultural sciences is of great importance, for they have opened an intellectual terrain that went unnoticed not only in Europe and the United States but also in Mexico, setting aside a few early initiatives that failed to produce significant results.²

Now, by focusing interest, especially, on the appropriation of Paz' essays by sociology, we can distinguish three earlier attempts that I would like to outline briefly:

1. For his 500-page Master's thesis (published in 1996), the aforementioned Xavier Rodríguez Ledesma undertook one of the broadest attempts to date to read the works of this Mexican poet from a sociological point of view, though the title does not reflect this: *The Political Thought of Octavio Paz* (cfr. Rodríguez 1996). In his thesis, Rodríguez discusses why, in 1996 at the *Faculty of Political and Social Sciences* of Mexico's National University (UNAM), he had to defend the merits of presenting a thesis on Octavio Paz to obtain his Master's degree in sociology; a justification based principally on two strategies. The first emphasized similarities to Lewis Coser's definition (see Coser 1972) of the relation between literature and sociology; while in the second Rodríguez argued that, as a sociologist, he was justified in analyzing the writings of a man of letters because they offer reflections on topics of great interest to sociology as well.

In this regard, the three central chapters in which Rodríguez presents his analysis of Paz' works are seen to be oriented by three sociological themes. The first focuses on Paz' relation to Marxism and socialism; the second—which also pertains clearly to the field of political sociology—analyzes Paz' critique of Mexico's political system; and the third discusses the concept of modernity. At times Rodríguez struggles to convince the reader that his work is really sociological, because issues and topics that evidently related to political science often dominate his argumentation.

²One of the best-known is probably Habermas' affirmation that Octavio Paz is "an advocate of modernity" (cfr. Sect. 3.3).

Rodríguez' second strategy does little to substantially modify this. He elucidates this strategy in the first chapters where he explains that his sociological interest in Paz is justified, above all, by the social function that Paz performed as an intellectual. On the one hand, the sociological view of intellectuals makes it possible to explore the "cultural life" of a society (cfr. 9); but Rodríguez emphasizes, on the other, that the institutional interpenetration of intellectuals with "political power" is relevant to understanding Mexican society: "In [Mexico] touching any topic in the intellectual domain necessarily entails awareness of the relations established between the intellectual world and power" (ibid.: 10).

Here once again, Rodríguez seems to return to political science; after all, does the relation between intellectuals and "power" not belong more to this discipline?

Other works that have undertaken a similar task discuss in alternate ways how to thematize the social-practical aspect of intellectuals—that is, their specific mode of social action—and how this allows us to transform reflections by intellectuals into a sociological topic. One good demonstration is Alex Demirović's attempt to describe the "praxis of intellectuals" using the example of the members of the Frankfurt School (Demirović 1999). While striving to develop a sociological argument, Demirović underlines the difficulty of distinguishing between the disciplines of sociology, on the one hand, and political science, on the other (cfr. ibid.: 18). In the end, he succeeds by determining the intellectual's place of action. In this regard he writes: "Habermas pointed out, correctly, that the sphere of the intellectual—the public sphere—does not coincide precisely with the State, but complements it" (ibid.: 18s.). For Demirović, the intellectual's arena of action is precisely this public domain or, better, the "civil society", as he also calls it in allusion to Gramsci.

This fixation on the action of intellectuals in the public sphere allows separating the social from the political and, therefore, the domain of sociology from that of political science or, better, political theory. Might Rodríguez' book have achieved greater sociological acuity had he focused on the *social action* of intellectuals in the public realm instead of the relations between intellectuals and political power? Although Rodríguez does not discuss this issue explicitly, there are indications that lead us to suppose that the reality of public opinion in Mexico is quite distinct from that of Germany. For example, when Rodríguez stresses that however strong Paz' influence may have been on "public sphere" it never came close to rivaling the primordial influence of Mexico's powerful television networks (cfr. ibid.: 35).

In this sense, the blurry distinction between sociology and political science could be understood as a problem that reflects the difficulty of differentiating between the political domain and a clearly definable social sphere in Mexico. As mentioned above Fernando Castañeda has pointed out that this supposition may be one reason why "academic sociology" in Mexico is understood quite naturally as a political space that makes up for the absence of any real political public sphere (cfr. Castañeda 2004).

But these circumstances do not limit Rodríguez' sociological pretensions in his analysis of Paz whose works, he argues, do in principle permit a sociological approach. We concede that Rodríguez is correct in writing that "[...] as sociologists we have something to say on what Octavio Paz thinks and writes, though he was not

a sociologist, political scientist or philosopher” (ibid.: 60). It is clearly possible to identify in his works topics that are of interest, especially, to a sociological perspective; themes that lead us to comprehend Paz in his role as an intellectual, and describe in sociological terms how he fulfilled it. But this does not exhaust the possibilities for sociological analyses of Paz’ works.

The case of Octavio Paz opens the opportunity to explore intellectual activity in public opinion in yet another way: this one based on the instruments that he developed and applied to achieve results in his public activity. Here we must recall that Paz served as Editor of two important journals: *Plural* (1971–1976) and *Vuelta* (1976–1998). In his *Prologue* to the first issue of *Vuelta*, he wrote that while the aim was to create a literary journal, literary pretensions could not be separated from critique, and that the latter was not limited only to literature, but was to be understood always as political as well. Paz summarized this compensatory interaction between literature and politics as follows:

True, literature does not save the world; [but] it does, at least, make it visible; represents it, or, better, presents it. Sometimes it transfigures it; at others it transcends it. The presentation of reality almost always includes its critique (Paz 1976: 5).

The academic processing of these journals under Paz’ editorship, their influence on public opinion and politics, and the cultural and political polemics and debates they spurred and in which they sought to intervene, constitute an as yet largely unexplored field for research.

2. Some years ago, the Canadian political scientist Yvon Grenier published a “cultural-sociological” analysis of Paz’ political essays that is also relevant to this overview (Grenier 2001). His focus can be understood as that of an action theorist for it is impregnated with the idea that social actors always act through the medium of a culture that, while clearly influencing them, does not absolutely predetermine their options for action. The cause of this—he writes—is the creativity inherent in all human action. As we shall see, this idea is totally consistent with Paz’ reflections on this issue; therefore, Paz not only acted creatively, but was actually aware that he was doing so. Grenier emphasizes that artists, intellectuals and scientists all make conscious use of the resource of creativity:

[...] it is tempting to postulate that the indeterminacy of human beings –their capacity to change their environment and change themselves– is particularly pronounced in their most creative activities: arts and science (ibid.: 4).

Referring to Margaret Archer’s theory of culture, Grenier then demonstrates the clear anti-functionalist orientation of his understanding of action through culture. However, his intention is to strengthen not only his argument of action theory but also a political argument, for he considers the functionalist idea of the relation between culture and action basically as a consequence of the political necessities of the Nation-State: “The very concept of ‘culture’ emerged to designate a largely top-down construction of a public space by the nation-state elite” (Grenier 2001: 7).

Grenier writes that this signaling of the creativity of human action within and through culture challenges the culture of “national” reproduction by establishing on first principles that cultures cannot simply be *reproduced*. He holds that the creativity in the action of artists and intellectuals is characterized in this political context also by a particular accentuation, one that entails weakening any kind of dogmatics, be it that of the political *status quo* or of certain opposing cultures. Thus, it is to be expected that the postures of artists and intellectuals will always be “non-conformist” or “critical” to the highest degree.

Assuming that Paz has this fundamental understanding of non-conformist action, Grenier seeks to explain why this Mexican intellectual lost, time and again, the sympathies of both political officials and leftist oppositors. Grenier sustains that, in principle, Paz’ political opinions are “incredibly slippery” (*ibid.*: xi) and therefore cannot be wedged into simple dualist schemes.

But does this mean that Paz was an opportunist, a relativist bereft of normative orientation? Grenier anticipates such suspicions. In his view, Paz’ complex and often ambivalent postures are a result of not only his creativity but also of the fundamental cultural coordinates that he followed during his lifetime in an ambivalent, reciprocal relation: on the one hand—Grenier writes—the Enlightenment, on the other, Romanticism.

[...] Paz draws inspiration from both the ideas of the Enlightenment (especially its liberal incarnation) and from those of the romantic age, two rival intellectual movements. This inspires interesting speculations on the flexibility and adaptability of liberal (and romantic) thought (*ibid.*: x).

But what Grenier’s focus on the sociology of action and culture primordially visualizes is, ultimately, an anthropological-humanist horizon that nourishes both his concept of culture and Paz’ thought. It is this anthropological-humanist orientation that, counter to all biases, places the non-determinist nature of human action in the very center. Thus, it is valid for the sociological understanding of both culture and Paz’ works in general; a notion that Axel Honneth and Hans Joas expressed in their attempt to redefine the anthropological foundations of the social sciences:

Anthropology should not be [...] misunderstood as the doctrine of the constants of human cultures that are maintained throughout history or of an inalienable substance of human nature but, rather, in the sense of a query as to the previous inalienable conditions of human variability [...] (Honneth and Joas 1980: 13).

This is to say that Grenier’s proposal to explore Paz’ essays in terms of cultural sociology and action is not just a methodological instrument used to unseal this author’s works from outside, but a vehicle that allows the interpreter to penetrate into the most intrinsic aspects of those writings. What prevails here is the unquestioned comprehension of the inexhaustible creativity and liberty of human action condensed into an anthropological-humanist understanding: “Such an approach ultimately rests on a philosophical conception of the human

experience that is also central in Paz's thought: human beings are condemned to be free" (Grenier 2001: 11).³

3. Grenier's proposal clearly transcends a sociological analysis of Paz' works by going on to identify aspects of social theory—mainly those of the creativity of human action in, and through, culture—that Paz seems to confirm in his writings, sometimes passively, at others, explicitly. This essential equality of sociology and literary works brings to mind the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman (cfr. Bauman 2000). But they must be followed by the question of whether we can go so far as to attribute to Paz' work something like a sociology of its own. Some attempts to answer this question exist.

Many opine that while Paz' writings were unquestionably inspired in part by cultural anthropology, psychology and, of course, sociology, this does not mean that they develop, effectively or explicitly, an anthropology, social psychology, or sociology. However, some authors—and I would include myself—insist on this point, for they hold the view that Paz' works do indeed contain a sociology.

One of the first authors to make this understanding explicit was the Cuban literary scholar and Hispanist, Enrico Mario Santí. Chapter IV of his book, *El acto de las palabras*, entitled "Introducción al *Laberinto de la soledad*", presents one of the best orientations to Paz' classic book yet penned (cfr. Santí 1997a: 123–231). Santí's "Introduction" is especially interesting because it places the diverse topics discussed in the book in a systematic context, while also reconstructing the multiple methodological and theoretical pretensions that so often intersect and complement each other. Indeed, he devotes a whole sub-section to Paz' sociology, which he interprets as a "sociology of the sacred" (cfr. *ibid.*: 196ss; also: Lafaye 2013).

At first sight, this term may seem rather overwhelming. Why should Paz' sociology be understood as a "sociology of the sacred" when so many other sociological topics jump off the pages of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*? But Santí is not concerned so much with extracting sociological topics and analyses as with demonstrating the influences that lay behind Paz' sociology. And it turns out that they can be traced back to the sociology of the sacred and the *Collège de Sociologie*, rooted in the Durkheimian school; a source that was especially fruitful for Paz.

Santí reminds us, justifiably, that one particular member of the *Collège* exerted a special and long-lasting influence on Paz: the French scholar Roger Caillois (1913–1978). Caillois would surely have caught Paz' attention even had he not been well-versed in French culture (cfr. Ruy Sánchez 1991: 14), for he was exiled in Argentina during World War II and wrote in the journal *Sur* that Paz not only read with passion but also to which he contributed essays (cfr. *ibid.*: 196; Moebius 2006: 361). Later, from 1945 to 1951, Paz lived in Paris, where he had contact with members of the *Collège* (cfr. Santí 1997a: 198).

In addition to these biographical coincidences, we can identify coincidences of content. For example, like some *Collège* members, Paz articulated an interest in highlighting the "sacred" motivations behind social action in modern societies.

³I will return to this point later.

Finally, we can add the fact that Paz explicitly expressed his admiration for the kind of social research found in the work of Caillois, specifically, and the *Collège* more generally.

Of course, Santí notes that: “It would be an exaggeration to reduce the entire analytical enterprise of *El laberinto de la soledad* (at least the first part) to a mere updating of the agenda of the *Collège de Sociologie*” (Ibid.: 196); but it would be naïve to argue that the *Collège* in no way influenced Paz’ thought. I analyze these coincidences and differences in greater detail below; here I only wish to demonstrate that we can, in effect, assume a pretension of sociological research in at least some of Paz’ essays, a sociology oriented by a pre-existing program of sociological research (cfr. Sect. 2.4).

Santí further observes in his chapter, though only in a footnote, that perhaps the entire thematic approach of *El Laberinto*, with its focus on the idea of solitude, coincides with other sociological constructions of the time; citing as an example David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

Other authors have stressed other possible sociological influences on Paz: for example, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce’s attempt to see *El laberinto* primordially as an application of the “formal sociology” associated with Georg Simmel (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009). Evidence for this argument is less convincing than Santí’s proposal to read Paz’ sociology in relation to the *Collège*, but here the main goal should not be to detect the *only* sociological influence manifested in what is so clearly a literary work, but to demonstrate that Paz’s essays—regardless of the sources that may have nourished them—reveal a genuinely sociological impulse, a genuinely sociological interest, and, with restrictions, methods also genuinely sociological. Paz was not a sociologist, but his works—my thesis sustains—do indeed contain a sociology. But before attempting to reconstruct some aspects of this sociology, I must first clarify how this affirmation meshes with the fact that Paz criticized academic “sociology” frequently and vehemently.

While my proposal is based on those outlined above, it seeks to go beyond them. While it would not be incorrect to say that Paz was guided by European sociologists who today occupy a peripheral position in the lineage of the discipline, it is equally clear that Paz’ sociology is hardly understandable if we ignore the influences that acted on him in the Latin American and, more importantly, Mexican, contexts. In this regard, one determining factor is how Paz positioned himself relative to the “traditions” of “sociological thought” discussed previously. Clearly, he was critical of many conventional sociologies—not only modernization theories but also the dependency theories so key to Latin America—so his critique of modernity must be understood more as a critical cultural sociology that was not only oriented by the anti-positivism of post-revolutionary thought in Mexico, but that sought to replace it with a “sociology of experiences” that has never been appreciated in Mexico or elsewhere as a valuable and meritorious contribution to sociology.

This sociology finds protagonists not only in theoretical and intellectual contexts but also in concrete historical experiences, especially the Mexican Revolution.

2.2 The Mexican Revolution and the Experience of a Postcolonial Modernity

Sociology is the self-reflexive discourse of modern societies, but this process of self-reflection is always impregnated with concrete historical experiences. Revolutions play a decisive role in the self-understanding of modern societies. As Hannah Arendt observed:

For the modernity of the revolution there is probably nothing so characteristic as the fact that it vindicates beforehand defending the cause of humanity (Arendt 1994: 10).

The understanding of modernity found in Octavio Paz' writings was also impregnated, and essentially so, with the historical experiences of a revolutions: especially the Mexican Revolution of 1910. But the historical experience of that revolution revealed a different modernity to Paz, one that I call "postcolonial modernity".

Paz was also aware, however, that particular historical experiences are complemented by the experiences that all human beings make: "Although each individual is unique and all peoples different, everyone passes through the same experiences" (Paz 1993: 30). What Paz refers to here are not contingent historical experiences but those that reside in the *human condition*. I will comment in greater detail below on these "anthropological experiences" that Paz deemed a kind of interpretative pattern for the historical-contingent experiences. Here I only wish to foreshadow that discussion by pointing out that Paz believed that all human beings are exposed to the experience of solitude, and that it is precisely this experience which motivates them to bond to other people. He understood this dialectic of "solitude" and "communion" as the motor of history in general; thus he wrote that historical experiences are "intimate and collective", one's own but at the same time "of everyone" (cfr. Paz 1993: 22).

This means that personal experiences in historical situations constitute a legitimate way to access the social and cultural realities of distinct historical moments. And this is valid even when the historical experiences are not one's own. In this regard, Paz' book *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* is most revealing. At first sight, it appears to be the biography of a nun and poetess in New Spain and, hence, a work relevant, in the strict sense, principally to the literary sciences. But what Paz set out to accomplish in this book does not end there, for he wished it to be understood as a work on the colonial history of Mexico (cfr. *ibidem*: 29), based on a method he called "restitution". Enrico Mario Santí detected—justifiably—in this "restitution" a methodological focus that seeks specific access to the past by ceding the word to voices long-disappeared (cfr. Santí 1997b: 132ss.). I would add that it is an effort to reconstruct the *experiences* made by concrete individuals with, and in, historical situations, in order to make history comprehensible for the present precisely through their *experiences*.

But Paz also cited his own experiences to access history, and not only that of Mexico. It would be difficult to separate his profound awareness of the great importance of the Mexican Revolution from his biography. He arrived in the world in 1914

to a country convulsed by Revolution. Because his father Octavio Paz Solórzano supported the revolution, Octavio spent most of his childhood with his mother at his grandfather's country home in Mixcoac—today part of Mexico City, but at the time a small town on its outskirts. But his father's activity was not the only factor that led Paz to identify with the Revolution, for in it he perceived nothing less than the possibility of constructing a new society and culture, one to which in a certain sense he would devote his entire *opus* (see Krauze 2011; Domínguez 2014). In homage to the group of intellectuals who from 1938 to 1941 accompanied him in the journal *Taller*, Paz wrote:

[...] for us, poetic and revolutionary activity were intertwined... the same thing. Changing man required, first, changing society... [This meant] the imperious need, poetic and moral, to destroy bourgeois society so that total man, poetic man, finally owner of himself, could appear. This position [...] can be summarized thus: for most of the group, love, poetry and revolution were three burning synonyms (cited in: Monsiváis 2000: 35s.).

Now we may ask, what was the nature of the understandings that Paz extracted from the experiences with the first postcolonial revolution of the 20th century, and how did they influence his sociology? To answer this we must clarify why we could describe that historical event as “postcolonial”. The reason is that the Mexican Revolution was a movement that sought not to liberate the proletariat—like the later October Revolution—but to resolve problems whose roots lay in the country's colonial past. Although Mexico had been independent for two hundred years, Paz believed this had been a “great fiasco” (cfr. Paz 1999: 623), lamenting the fact that unequal social structures emerged virtually unscathed from the ashes of the colonial period. But the deepest reason for the continuity of colonial structures was not so much a desire to maintain injustice and inequality, but the *lack* of any willingness to create something truly new from the stock of Mexico's own traditions. Paz felt that the colonial era had ended less because of the new forces that emerged to oppose it than the simple exhaustion of its cultural energies. In *El laberinto* he declares that independence actually pertained much more to the *conquest* than to an order that had clearly freed itself of its colonial legacy:

Conquest and Independence seem to be moments of flux and reflux in a great historical wave that formed in the 15th century, spread to America, achieved a moment of beautiful equilibrium in the 16th and 17th centuries, before finally withdrawing, though not without first shattering into a thousand pieces (Paz 1994: 125).

If the end of the colonial era that Paz narrates with such sensitivity in his book on Sor Juana can only be described as agony (cfr. Paz 1991, 1998: 119), for it extinguished all remaining cultural, social or political vitality: then the period of “official” independence, destined to last exactly 100 years up to the outbreak of the Revolution, was a time of “postcolonial” rigidity.

This was expressed—Paz wrote—in the fact that nothing new was generated. Of course, this was not always easy to understand, for the languages of the new elites were always “modern”: “an echo of the French revolutionaries and, especially, the ideas of North American Independence” (ibid.: 126), later of “liberalism” (131) and, finally, of “positivism” (133ss.; cfr. also Sect. 1.5). But for Paz all those languages

simply constituted “masks” that concealed reality instead of revealing it or fostering deep social and political changes. He wrote in 1950:

The moral damage has been incalculable, penetrating deeply into zones of our being. We move in the lie with naturalness. For over one hundred years we have suffered authoritarian regimes that serve feudal oligarchies, though they use the language of freedom (ibid.: 127).

Here Paz argues that one characteristic of the postcolonial situation in Mexico was that the seeds of “modern” discourses fell upon infertile soil, while the gap separating social from political reality in those discourses continued to widen. It was the Revolution that so abruptly modified that situation: “The Mexican Revolution is a fact that broke into our history as a true revelation of our being” (ibid.: 137), the pinprick that burst the postcolonial bubble by forcing the political and social imagination to return to reality. It is above all this “realism” that Paz evokes time and again. He saw the Revolution as an act that overcame postcolonial lethargy only because people embraced each other, as at a party; bonding to others in a “communion” that was, for Paz, the saving grace of the Revolution.

The Revolution barely has ideas. It is an explosion of reality: revolt and communion, a stirring up of long-dormant substances, a release into the air of many ferocities, many tenderesses and many refinements concealed for fear of being. And with whom does Mexico commune in this bloody fiesta? With itself, its own being. Mexico dares to be. The revolutionary explosion is a portentous fiesta in which the Mexican, drunk with his own being, finally comes to know, in a mortal embrace, the other Mexican (ibid.: 146).

No nationalist passion is expressed here; to the contrary: the normative horizon to which Paz always felt linked was that of humanity in its entirety. But he also knew that there was no one path to that universal. Rather, the path to man in general passed through very concrete experiences that people make in their own, respective historical circumstances. The Mexican Revolution was one experience of this kind; the experience through which Mexicans discovered themselves as Mexicans and, simultaneously, as human beings. “Being Mexican constitutes no special privilege or condemnation. The privilege and condemnation consist in being humans”, Paz declared in 1967 in an interview with the Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis (Paz and Monsiváis 2000: 109). The Revolution constitutes the rediscovery of the human being, which can be replaced by no abstract knowledge, but can be produced only through “communion” with other human beings.

The Mexican Revolution thus performed a dual movement: on the one hand, a return to oneself, on the other, an approach towards “the other”, the other *human being*. While revising the ideas that had concerned him in *El laberinto* in an autobiographical essay entitled *Itinerario*, Paz wrote:

The revolutionary movement evolved in two directions: the encounter of Mexico with itself, where its historical originality and its fecundity reside; and, parallel to this, it was, and is, the continuation of different attempts to modernize the country [...] (Paz 1993: 100s.).

For Paz, “modernization” had different meanings; but in this case it constitutes, above all, a dialectical counterpart of itself. Modernization is, therefore, a movement towards a “communion” with the whole world and the human beings that inhabit it.

But one definitive aspect of this movement is that it cannot be separated from the consciousness of one's own traditions, as modernization theories sought to achieve. Paz entrusted the task of exhuming those long-buried traditions to intellectuals in modernizing societies, because only thus could the respective path towards one's own modernity be revealed: "Our tradition, if it was really alive and not just an inert form, would rediscover for us a universal tradition into which ours would be inserted, prolonged and justified" (1994: 149).

At this point it is important to establish the following: the experience of the postcolonial condition in Mexico and the manner in which the Mexican Revolution responded to it led Paz, with many other Mexican thinkers, to develop a notion of modernization decidedly distant not only from that of North American modernization theories, but also from revolutionary ideas derived from Marxism. In the Mexican setting it is particularly interesting that this approach was explicitly understood as a critique of the rectilinear time conception in those theories of modernization and revolution; a view that Paz developed in the late 1960s in a clearly sociological argument.

The text to which I refer was written in 1967, while Paz was serving as Mexico's ambassador to India, a place of origin that is in no sense unimportant. Paz lived in India for almost a year in 1952 and again from 1962 to 1968. Despite all the differences he detected and recognized in his comparisons of Mexico and India (see Domínguez 2014), he also understood the affinities that resulted from the colonial history of the two nations. He argued that an essential coincidence was that both were postcolonial societies seeking their own paths towards modernity, and that another was how in this process both were searching to connect with their own respective traditions. "Neither Indians nor Mexicans renounce their past; they recover and repaint it" (Paz 1995a: 148).

In this text, Paz further examines the idea of revolution and, especially, the importance it seems to hold for the self-understanding of modern societies. "The revolutionary is a philosopher or, at least, an intellectual: a man of ideas"⁴ (1996a: 590). However, this understanding of revolution differs from that of the Mexican "Revolution", which was much more a spontaneous "revolt" that came into contact with ideas only later, in a second phase. But Paz' interest in this text centered not so much on historical differences but, as mentioned above, the *idea* of revolution and its importance for modern society. His allusion to the philosopher contains a reference to a defining particularity of the concept of revolution: "Universal like reason, it admits no exceptions and ignores both arbitrariness and mercy. Revolution: a word of the just and of those who administer justice" (ibid.).

But the real problem with this concept of revolution resides, Paz argues, less in the moralism of the fanatics of justice or, perhaps, in the universalism of the philosophers that seems to admit no exceptions, than in the conception of time that lends legitimation to this concept. To clarify this, Paz compares the conception of time that characterizes the concept of revolution today with the original form. And this

⁴These ideas are influenced by the reading of Albert Camus's *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1953). On the important influence that Camus had on Paz see also Lafaye 2013.

leads him to conclude that “*revolution*” initially meant a movement directed towards the past. However, current *use* has forgotten this etymological particularity, so the logic of time that defines revolution now sees it moving in a straight line towards the future.

The new meaning destroys the old one: the past will not return and the archetype of occurrence is not that which was but that which will be. In its original meaning, revolution was a word that affirmed the primacy of the past [...]. The second meaning postulates the primacy of the future [...]: the preeminence of the future, the belief in continuous progress and the perfectibility of the species, rationalism, discrediting tradition and authority, humanism. All these ideas fuse in that of rectilinear time: history conceived as a march. The irruption of profane time (ibid.: 591).

It is precisely this idea of revolution upon which Paz centers his critique, though he strives to clarify that this *idea* cannot be reduced to events that may be called “revolutions” in the strict sense. Rather, he defines the self-understanding of modern societies in general, though this gives rise to various problems.

First he mentions the disappearance of the individual. According to the philosophers of history who define the modern idea of revolution, its motor force is the “progress” of the entire human species. This implies that:

[...]individual man loses the possibility of perfection, for the subject of eternal progress is not him, but all humanity. The species progresses but the individual is lost (ibid.: 592s.).

A second problem with repercussions for society as a whole that is manifested in the idea of revolution was identified by Paz in his concept of social acceleration.

To the change in the orientation of men’s activities and thoughts there corresponds a change of rhythm: rectilinear time is accelerated time (ibid.: 593).

It was in the late 1960s that Paz addressed a topic that is discussed today primarily by Hartmut Rosa in one of the most original proposals for a critique of modernity. Rosa summarizes this theme as follows:

As a guiding hypothesis [we may take] [...] the assumption that modernization is not only a complex process *in time* but one that also denominates, first and foremost, a very significant transformation in structural and cultural terms of the temporal structures and horizons themselves, such that the most adequate way to understand the *direction of change* is through the concept of social *acceleration* (Rosa 2005: 24).

Those who conceive “social acceleration” as a central and criticable aspect of modern society simultaneously signal a disposition to subordinate other phenomena to this *social* circumstance. Here, Paz leaves no doubt that in his opinion the supposed “technological revolution” must be understood, above all else, as a consequence of social acceleration:

Technology was not the creator of speed: the establishment of modern time made the speed of technology possible. This is the meaning of the common phrase: life is so much faster today. Acceleration emerges because we live facing the future, in horizontal time, in a straight line (ibid.: 593).

It is also in this context—in the next chapter I present more examples—that Paz formulated a biting critique of the sociology of his time. If acceleration is an essential characteristic of our time then, according to Paz, we require “a dynamic image of society as a contradictory totality” (ibid.: 596). But in Paz’ view sociology offers something quite different for it has apparently chosen to increasingly understand the social as communication. Paz considers that this evolution of social theory is not independent of a technological “revolution”: that of the electronic means of communication (cfr. ibid.: 604). Here he discusses at some length the ideas of the Canadian theorist of the mass media, Marshall McLuhan whose famous phrase, “the medium is the message”, Paz finds problematic not only because it deflects our attention from the meaning that people exchange regarding the media they use to communicate, but also because it categorically attributes the lack of content of the medium to the content of the messages.

By saying that the medium is the message, McLuhan affirms that the message is not what we say but what the medium says, in spite of us, or without us being aware of it (ibid.: 602).

Paz reaches this conclusion: “The media become meanings and produce, automatically and fatally, their own meaning” (ibidem). He not only protests vociferously against the supposition that technology—in this case, communication technologies—is autonomous, he firmly declares that, in his opinion, it is fundamentally wrong. Also, he writes that the technology that man utilizes must be understood as “the product of a society and concrete men” (ibidem). Human beings cannot be subjected absolutely to the supposedly independent unfolding of time; to the contrary, man must always take *decisions*—regardless of the state of technological development in which he exists.

With this, my reconstruction of Paz’ “critique” of revolution in modern society comes to its end. Additional points could be mentioned: for example, the “revolution” of consumption and, above all, the meaning of revolution in the world of ideas of the Marxist left. Paz touched briefly upon these issues, but it should be clear by now that with his critique of the idea of revolution in the self-understanding of modern society he desired, mainly, to call attention to a certain understanding of time, which conceives time as a rectilinear process directed towards the future that produces permanent ruptures with the past.

However, this idea of modernity is not the only possible one for Paz, who elaborates his critique of modernity on the basis of his experiences with another modernity; one that I propose to understand as postcolonial modernity. In this context, his experience with the first postcolonial revolution, the 1910 Mexican Revolution, acquires special importance. Paz considered that conflagration the very antithesis of that modernity impregnated by the concept and *idea* of revolution. The concept of revolution is, according to Paz, truly misleading when applied to the Mexican “Revolution”, and should be replaced by the term “revolt”. Paz observed: “The word revolt was displaced by revolution; now revolution, true to its etymology, returns to its ancient meaning, to its origin: we live the revolt” (Paz 1996a: 636).

Paz understands the Mexican “Revolution” as the classic example of a revolt. Even in the 1960s he held that this example would continue or, perhaps better, be repeated, in the postcolonial world (cfr. 1993: 100). While this hope would prove incorrect, Paz never ceased to believe in the veracity of the model. In it he perceived the possibility to reconcile modernity with tradition: the possibility to determine the destiny of modernity through our own means, equivalent to bonding with the world without having to abandon oneself. Paz supposed that this path towards modernity, which he associated with different peoples’ respective traditions while not establishing any particular one as absolute, would open the postcolonial world through revolts. Nonetheless, he also recognized that most attempts—including a Mexican Revolution petrified in bureaucracy—failed to take advantage of this possibility.

What we are left with from the experience of the Mexican Revolution are, ultimately, elements for a critique of modernity with enormous potential for social theory, whose horizon constitutes a critique of the rectilinear conception of time that sustain modernization theories, and a normative commitment with a humanism that considers inter-human relations the maximum realization of a humanely dignified life.

2.3 A Humanist-Sociological Critique of Sociology

I recognize that one needs patience and goodwill to detect in Paz’ opus a commitment to sociology or, more generally, the social sciences, for time and again we encounter statements like the following one, which at first glance seem to express a hostile attitude towards these academic disciplines:

In general, economists and sociologists see the differences between traditional and modern society as an opposition between development and underdevelopment: the disparities between the two Mexicos are quantitative in nature so the problem is reduced to determining whether the developed half can absorb the underdeveloped half. Now, while it is normal for statistics to omit qualitative descriptions of phenomena, it is not normal that our sociologists fail to discern that behind these figures there lie psychic, historical and cultural realities that are irreducible to the gross measures that census are forced to utilize (Paz 1994: 303).

Such affirmations clearly anticipate a profound critique of, especially, post-war sociology, the principle lines of which challenge certain aspects of modernization theories while also questioning their temporal logic characterized, as it is, by a lineal understanding of time, and the conception that social and cultural processes can be described and understood on the basis of quantitative, empirically measurable data. Paz does not deny here that quantitative research is “necessary”, or that modernization constitutes a reasonable goal, even for societies like Mexico’s, but he does question whether modernization theories are in a condition to adequately comprehend processes of social change because of their exclusive dependence on quantitative data.

Paz perceives a central problem in the assumption that *all* societies go through exactly the same process of civilizing development, a mode of thought that

presupposes—erroneously, he says—that there exists but one *unique* human civilization, and that “western” societies are its ideal model (cfr. Paz 1985b: 43). He had formulated these reflections in the *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* presented at Harvard in 1972, so it is interesting to note that the current sociological debate on modernity is oriented by certain key ideas that are quite similar to what Paz expounded some 40 years ago. In this regard, Shmuel Eisenstadt expressed clear doubts regarding modernization theories from a sociological perspective in the 1970s; doubts that at some important junctures coincide with Paz’ diagnosis (cfr. Eisenstadt 1973). Eisenstadt’s influence made itself felt, above all, in the debate on *multiple modernities* and current sociological discussions on the theory of civilization (cfr. Eisenstadt 2000). Given these evolutions one could argue that Paz’ critique of sociology in the 1960s was not anti-sociological, to the contrary, it pointed in a direction that sociology itself would eventually take. Was Paz, then, a misunderstood pioneer of sociological thought?

To me, this supposition does not seem to be farfetched, for in another field into which sociology is only beginning to penetrate we can also detect traces of Paz’ thought. In the 1960s and 70s he combined his critique of sociology with arguments with which this discipline is only today coming to grips in postcolonial theory. In this case as well, obviously, the geographical place from which Paz judged the modern world is a determining factor. From the perspective of Mexico, whose society—according to modernization theories—would be categorized as “underdeveloped”, the assumption that there can be only two types of society—“developed” and “underdeveloped”, “modern” and “traditional”—could not be considered as anything but a gross simplification. Paz writes:

The adjective *underdeveloped* belongs to the anemic and castrated language of the United Nations [...]. The term has no precise meaning in the fields of anthropology and history: it is not a scientific term, but a bureaucratic one (Paz 1985b: 43).

Here, the problem to which Paz wished to call attention was that a technical-administrative jargon expels languages more sensitive to complexity from the social sciences; differences from “Western” society’s paradigm of modernization and progress are now declared simply as “underdevelopment” or “backwardness” (cfr. Paz 1985b: 41s.). In the early 1980s in his book *Time and the Other* (Fabian 2002), the cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian expressed a similar reproach, as he attempted to demonstrate that translating differences among societies into the temporal terminology of “advanced” and “backward” serves but one primordial objective: to justify and vindicate the domination of non-western societies by the western powers. Fabian’s argument has an important function for some authors who sympathize with postcolonial theory. In this context we should mention the works of Walter D. Mignolo, who sought to apply current postcolonial ideas to the specific conditions of Latin America (cfr. Mignolo 1995, 2005).⁵

⁵However, it is surprising that Mignolo does not even mention such important contributions to the understanding of modernity from the Latin American perspective as the one elaborated by Octavio Paz. This applies, at least, to three of Mignolo’s most important books (Mignolo 1995, 2000, 2005).

Now, Octavio Paz is interesting in this context, because he strove to explain the ideological bias that prevails in the distinction between “western” and “non-western”, “developed” and “underdeveloped” societies, and because he insisted in pointing out just how misguided the arguments elaborated on the basis of these opposed concepts really are. In this regard, Paz reminds us that one of the key criterion of “development”, or “underdevelopment”, was the kind and quality of food of different societies. The premise was that consuming sufficient amounts of rye and wheat was a sign of a high level of development, while eating other kinds of cereals—e.g. corn and rice—was interpreted as a clear indicator of underdevelopment (cfr. Paz 1999: 287). Paz exposes the lack of seriousness of such notions by satirically exaggerating the argument: “This criterion condemns Japan to underdevelopment for all eternity, for rice is less nutritious than wheat and no less ‘traditional’ than corn” (ibid.: 288). Paz arrives at the following conclusion:

Development has been a veritable straitjacket. A false liberation: while it has abolished many ancient and senseless prohibitions, in return it overwhelms us with exigencies no less terrible and onerous (ibid.).

The sociological analyses and political strategies that derive from this are not, in principle, unviable, but must be more precise. Modernization must be understood in concrete, individual, social and cultural contexts as an extraordinarily complex process. Greater awareness of complexity requires, Paz wrote, greater sensibility to cultural differences, something that is sorely lacking among sociologists of modernity theories.

There are leaps and collisions, changes and restorations that are resolved in the only thing that matters: works. All else pertains to the domain of history and sociology, the first the kingdom of the particular and the second of ideological fog (Paz 1994a: 19).

Once again, it seems that Paz emits an intransigent judgment of sociology. However, in this citation he refers, first, to sociology which remains obdurate before the “works” created by a society; that is, its culture.

Paz, once again, does not dismiss sociology per se, but seeks to recall the cultural aspects that the conventional sociology of his time failed to take into account, arguing that cultural sensibility is required to understand modern societies. Perhaps Paz sympathized more with Simmel’s sociology of culture than with that of modernization theories (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009), and probably even more with the sociology of culture of the *Collège de Sociologie*, as we shall see in the following chapter. But what is clear is that a sociology lacking in cultural sensibility ignores something he considered to be of great importance: namely, that which is truly human. For Paz the study of culture is not an end in itself but a means of accessing human beings that sociological theories of modernization and development seem to have abandoned long ago. Therefore, Paz demands that:

We conceive models of development that are viable and *less inhumane*, costly and insensitive than current ones. I said before that this is an urgent task: in truth, *it is the task of our time*. But there’s more: the supreme value is not the future but the present; the future is a fallacious time that always tells us ‘the hour has not yet come’, thus denying us. The future

is not the time of love: what man truly wants, he wants *now*. He who builds the house of future happiness constructs the prison of the present (Paz 1998: 212; *emphasis added*).

Here Paz is not promoting some Dionysian hedonism but, rather, the idea of focusing interest, including that of social research, on the here, above all, the now of *human* needs, yearnings and passions.

In a reflection on Paz' *Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro wrote:

The Labyrinth of Solitude does not pretend to be a scientific investigation that inquires into, for example, the determinant economic or social causes of historical processes (Villoro 1995: 31s.).

But Villoro is correct here only if by scientific investigation he refers to what Paz criticized, as we have demonstrated in this chapter: that is, the quantitative, empirical social research that justifies the normative framework of modernization theories. Villoro errs if he refers also to a qualitative program of cultural sociology, whose characteristic methodology resides in interpreting the cultural conditions of modern forms of life.

2.4 The *Collège de Sociologie* and the Heterological Sociology of the Sacred

Despite his critical attitude towards the sociology of his time, especially modernization theories, we can discern in Paz' works traces of the sociologies that inspired him, but because his writing style does not respect the academic rigor of citing sources these connections must be deciphered with philological and hermeneutic meticulousness. As mentioned earlier, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce spares no effort to demonstrate that the thought of Georg Simmel exerted an important influence on Paz, one that is especially visible in *The Labyrinth* (cfr. Capetillo-Ponce 2005, 2009). However, as mentioned above, in his important study of *The Labyrinth* Enrico Mario Santí brings to light another significant sociological influence: that of the so-called *Collège de Sociologie*, a small group of French thinkers that proposed a critique of modern society that mixed surrealist forms of expression and representation with the ideas and methods of sociology and cultural anthropology (cfr. Santí 1997a). Since Paz actually refers to this group in *The Labyrinth* (cfr. Paz 1998: 50; 55), I believe we must follow up on this lead.

Unfortunately, my search through manuals of sociology for background on this creative, experimental initiative was fruitless, for it seems that the *Collège de Sociologie* is not recognized as having made any serious contribution to the history of sociology. Thankfully, some years ago Stephan Moebius conducted a thorough study of the history of the *Collège* and the influence that its unconventional thinkers achieved (cfr. Moebius 2006). Anyone who has read his book and knows *The Labyrinth* could hardly ignore the evident affinities.

The nucleus of figures that comprised the *Collège*, which existed for only three short years—from 1937 to 1939, when World War II broke out in Europe—included George Bataille (1897–1962), Michel Leiris (1901–1990) and, of special interest for our argument, Roger Caillois (1913–1978). The sociological influences that inspired this group derived, first, from the “Durkheimian School” that included Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, Robert Hertz and George Dumézil. The driving force was Durkheim’s sociology of religion, though the members of the *Collège*’s distanced themselves from some of the key points of that approach. Similar to Paz, they harbored an interest in the “sacralizing energies of collective excitation, reduced and placed under control by the civilizing process, but still present in the deep strata of the social” (Moebius 2006: 14), and assumed that these energies endure even in modern societies. In part, those religious “survivals”⁶ were cleverly mobilized by fascist movements, though that was only possible because most of the cultures of modern societies already considered that they had been eliminated. The fact that modern culture is so insensitive to such survivals of the sacred even though they continue to act upon people in modern societies, was due to a mistaken or, better, incomplete, conception of the human being. The *Collège*’s desire was, precisely, to correct this circumstance:

In the center was [...] the ‘total phenomenon’ of man, which cannot be reduced to a *homo oeconomicus* or an *animal rationale*, but must be studied in relation to foreign cultures (ibid.: 359).

This anthropology, which takes the sacred and irrational seriously even under modern conditions, was the foundation of the “sociology of the sacred” that the *Collège* sustained; that is, the program of sociology of the sacred was understood as a key to the study of modern societies, one that would unlock the alcoves of the phenomena of human existence that were excluded from conventional, modern social research. Moebius defines the concept of the sociology of the sacred as follows:

It was oriented by the resuscitation and study of the vital elements of communitarian links and collective experiences and effervescences –stimulated by rituals, fiestas or games– in modern society (Moebius 2006: 13).

Seen in these terms, the *Collège* was clearly *not* focused on a reactionary anti-modernism that sought to regress towards pre-modernity, as occurred with the conservative “cultural critique” in Germany (cfr. Breuer 1995). Moebius emphasizes that the members of the *Collège* saw themselves as leftists, despite their many reserves regarding Marxism. Clearly, such dualist classificatory schemes as ‘left/right’ lack the precision required to adequately define the *Collège*’s position on the political spectrum (cfr. Moebius 2006: 15).

In contrast, there is no question but that the *Collège*’s political intentions focused on fighting fascism, complemented by an understanding of the need to radically

⁶ Tylor, Edward, 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J. P. Putnam’s Sons. I would like to thank Paul Kersey for making me aware of this idea in Tylor.

change society. In this sense they deemed it particularly important to form new communities with new myths (cfr. *ibid.*: 13); not with the goal of abandoning modernity and changing direction towards a pre-modernity, but as a reminder that modernity had not eliminated or replaced the archaic but, in the best of cases, had made it reflexive or, in the worst, misunderstood it as if it had been overcome.

A quick look at the social ontology of the *Collège* clarifies what all of this may mean in concrete terms. This is interesting in the context of the “debate on communitarianism” of the 1990s, for the social ontology of the *Collège* cannot be reduced to either the position of liberalism or that of communitarianism. The *Collège* argues against “liberalism” only because it disagreed with both contractualism—which maintains that social solidarity is constructed through purely rational means—and individualism, to which it attributed social fragmentation. Against “communitarianism” it could be alleged that from the perspective of the *Collège*’s members a given community is not justified only by being considered the continuation of an inherited cultural inventory. In the face of such “de facto communities” the *Collège* advocated the possibility of forming *new* communities. Moebius explains: “For the *Collège* ‘decisions by the community’ are important [...]” (*ibid.*: 151). The community is understood, ultimately, as a social process: “The community is constantly in *recurrent praxis*; neither substance nor subject, but a *sharing in praxis*” (*ibidem*).

The preceding sections bring to light some important lines of ideas that can be re-discovered in the social thought of Octavio Paz. He railed against the modern obsession with the *tabula rasa* of reason, against the lineal understanding of time that inclines towards the future, and he championed a conceptual world of modernity that is not questioned but enriched, if not enabled, by the respective traditions. That is to say, Paz attempts to complement a precipitated modernizing effort through evocations of the “integral phenomenon of man”.

The *Collège*’s sociology of the sacred can be subsumed as well under the concept of heterology, which unites in a theoretical sense all that which in social reality contradicts the processes of social homogenization; for example: the sacred, the emotions, sexuality, etc. (cfr. *ibid.*: 14). In a more methodological sense, heterology is understood as a “science of the non-assimilable, of the concealed rest, and of that which is marginalized from reason and the homogeneous order” (*ibid.*: 16).

Paz felt an especially deep attachment to one member of the *Collège*: Roger Caillois. In some autobiographical reflections he recalled how Caillois first drew his attention: “In 1940 a book by a young French writer came into my hands [...] The author was Roger Caillois and the book *Le Mythe et l’Homme*” (Paz 2001: 23). Paz immediately felt a “spontaneous affinity”, and his subsequent reading of other works by Caillois strengthened his conviction that they contained “the beginnings of a method that would lead him [...] to edify diaphanous buildings of concepts-images” (*ibid.*: 24). What Paz appreciated specifically in Caillois and his method was that, though founded upon the idea of the “unity of the world”, it was at the same time immune to the error of wishing to press this unity into some conceptual or figurative mold. “Through the diversity of matters Caillois proposed to discover the unity of the world. He did not intend to demonstrate that unity; for him it was conclusive evidence: it did not need to be proven, but revealed” (*ibid.*: 25).

But it was another aspect of Caillois' thought that excited Paz even more. In his studies Caillois did not limit himself to demonstrating one fact or another by presupposing the unity of the set in general, but strove to reveal "the network of invisible relations and secret correspondences among the worlds that compose this world" (ibid.).

Caillois' method showed not just coincidences with Alexander von Humboldt's "world-science" (*Weltwissenschaft*), but actually appeared to be based on a very similar "world-consciousness" (see Ette 2002, 2004; Kozlarek 2011). According to this approach, everything in the world is connected to everything else, a conception that found expression in the notion that it is valid even for the relation between stones and the world of human ideas. Paz, enchanted by this idea, wrote: "The stone and the work of imagination are the two extremes of the universe" (Paz 2001: 23), referring to the ideas that Caillois formulated in his *Pierres réfléchies* (1975).

Paz extracted several consequences from those ideas. One of the most important is probably the thesis that the language which can best express these universal relations is poetry; a point confirmed by Caillois. Paz wrote:

According to Caillois, *poetry* is not a particular phenomenon of human language but a property of nature as a whole. There is a kind of unity and continuity between the physical, intellectual and imaginary worlds; that unity is of a formal order and is constituted, as in a poem, not as a deductive series of meanings but as a system of echoes, correspondences and analogies (Paz 1994b: 469s.).

The primacy of poetic language in no way meant that Paz thought that knowledge is transmitted only in poems, but it did mean that in all possible milieus, for example sociology—as Caillois had demonstrated (cfr. 1994c: 468)—knowledge must be guided by "poetic experience". Paz expressed his meaning in a letter to Caillois:

In my judgment, your experience approaches more closely to what is called the "poetic experience", which consists in seeing the world as a system of correspondences, a tapestry of accords [...] (Paz 1994d: 468).

Paz felt it was possible for human beings to experience this universal communion because he was convinced that all man's aspirations are founded upon the certainty that it is possible to re-establish original unity. The clearest signs of this he saw in love, a sentiment that can also be understood as a yearning for the original union.

To summarize: there are two substantial points where Paz surely detected a profound affinity with the *Collège de Sociologie*: 1. Heterology, as the "science of the non-assimilable, the concealed rest, and that which is marginalized from reason and the homogeneous order" (Moebius 2006: 16), corresponded to his *experiences as a poet*: the poet is always in intimate contact with everything that moves human beings, not only with that which desires to admit only part of humanity. It is in this sense that in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956) he affirmed: "The poem founds the people because the poet retraces the current of language to drink at the original fountain." (Paz 2003: 41) Here he is not dealing merely with an exclusively aesthetic experience; to the contrary, Paz knows how to interpret this experience as social:

In the poem society confronts the foundations of its being, its first word. [...] The poem is mediation between society and that which founds it (ibidem).

Paz considers that this social function of poetry is threatened when the poet is converted into a “propagandist” for political ends (cfr. ibidem). But it would likewise be endangered if the poet were to devote himself to poetry for merely aesthetic purposes. Paz always vehemently rejected this “pure poetry”.

2. The second affinity with the *Collège* and, above all, with Roger Caillois that Paz detected is the idea of the universal connectivity. Caillois’ works reveal a profoundly *poetic experience* as their fundamental epistemological orientation that Paz also wished to utilize in his diagnosis of the epoch in terms of the social sciences (cfr. Paz 1994d: 468; also Sect. 3.1). In the next chapter, I demonstrate how Paz develops a poetic sociology of modernity based on the poetic experience.

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