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Cuenca, a City of Science and Knowledge

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The cultural memory of peoples zealously treasures the processes that have forged it and takes pride in those sublime moments that emerge from the energy of its creators and that culminate, in many cases, without individualising its managers and stakeholders, anonymously consigning their names to history and to the destiny they deserve.

Activity in culture is not an institutional expression but rather a responsibility with regard to the diversity of actions developed by human beings, which recreate and identify us in the different manifestations that make us special and unique.

The nuances of history have belonged to all of us equally since its origins, despite the differing starting points, the call of the past, the demands of the present, and the obligations that awareness of being poses.

Since its origin, Cuenca has been a visionary city that looks to the future and is concerned about the preservation of water, the environment and coexistence between its residents. Moreover, it has great human value and a social order that can still be seen.

This city full of strength, history, ancient knowledge, science, arts and traditions will be the ideal setting for a meeting on culture to debate the new forms of development of peoples and the role of culture in this increasingly questioned and necessary process, in which the meaning and purposes of cultural work can be broadly discussed and planted in the collective memory to lay the foundations for thinking about the future.

The notion of development is innate in capitalism and modernity. More specifically, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the unstoppable advance of this idea of “development” as a goal to be achieved with indefinable boundaries, potentially encompassing all those willing to enter its logic in an apparent and endless process of wellbeing for humanity.

New technologies, the unlimited development of science – which never envisaged an ethical, sustainable or moral line of demarcation –, the predatory and extractivist conception of the economy, not to mention the ignominious conditions of exploitation of some by others promoted by modernity – men exploiting men, nations exploiting nations, neo-colonialism, the insulting contempt for any other form of knowledge that was not incarnated in the scientificist-rationalist perspective – shaped an unsustainable paradigm. This paradigm not only brought about the worst wars that humanity has experienced but also the gravest ecological crisis in human history, an ecological debacle with nature and social ecosystems themselves, depriving reality of an impracticable model for the planet that undoubtedly endangers the survival and feasibility of the human species.

However, this modernity also promoted, as never before, the advance of communication technologies and cultural, symbolic and artistic production and circulation, equal rights, and large-scale democratic revolutions which, unfortunately, were systematically betrayed and turned into instruments of domination.

The crisis of modernity, which worsened after the world wars in which over one hundred million people died, denounced first by Heidegger in his *Letter on Humanism*,¹ had been anticipated since the 19th century by Marxism and Existentialism. This hecatomb of modernity led to what since the 1960s we have called POSTMODERNISM with all its derivations, including the exaggerated positions of those who announced the end of history to promote globalised imperialist capitalism as a final and more complete form of development.

¹ Peter Sloterdijk argues in his *Rules for the Human Zoo* that it was Heidegger who initiated contemporary postmodernism with his *Letter on Humanism*, written in autumn 1946.

This postmodernism outlined cultural boundaries, and also the scope of this paradigm which, in essence, has not changed since the zenith of modernity, which began in 1789. Postmodernism itself can be seen, in many aspects, as the cultural and conceptual form adopted by the neo-liberalism of the second half of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, after the world wars, marginal sectors of lucid intellectuals, of committed scientists and spiritual leaders, structured other forms of thinking difficult to include in postmodernist perspectives. Ideas that warn of the aforementioned collapse of the species; about the impossibility of maintaining any economic scheme based on the extraction of resources and the exploitation of man by man; proposals that show the unfeasibility of economies sustained by consumption and financial fictions. There are even those who call for the disappearance of states structured on unnecessary visions of national sovereignty when the problems experienced are planetary. These structures of sovereignty must be subject to higher principles, such as respect for life, diversity, nature as an object and a subject of rights, and the generation of more balances and harmonious habitats for all species and for the world.

Most thinkers have found different and highly developed new cultural references in other sources, such as indigenous peoples from various parts of the world, which offer visions and mechanisms dissimilar to those from the West to appropriate the reality and the (social or natural) environment. José María Arguedas argued that we will not be able to conceive the development of our nations as long as we have not resolved the fundamental contradiction between the western way of life, based on an individualist relation with the world, and the way advocated by our indigenous peoples, based on a community perspective of life, which includes the Pachamama.

We have also seen the collapse of the hegemonic nations, the emergence of new economies under the same "development" parameters (China, India, Brazil, Russia) which have only complicated the already difficult conditions of the economy and the global markets. The galloping European crisis, acutely represented in the situation of Greece, Ireland, Spain or Portugal, confronts us with a single reality: it is essential that the paradigms underlying the true development of human beings must be revised, updated and, above all, responsibly adopted with a view to providing feasibility to the human race on the planet that, under the current model, has reached the limit of the pillaging of resources.

We cannot ignore the impressive technological development human beings possess, which has yielded new realities in the field of culture, science and art. Therefore, thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard argue that we are not witnessing the cultural transformation itself but the simulacrum of culture which, along with this technological development, is structuring virtual spaces of cultural and social life which are not real but in which the spectacle, simulation and fascination of technologies have become similar to the hegemonic and imperialist role that religions had upon social life in the past, with equal auras of mystery, exclusivity and segregation faced with those who have no access to these resources.

However, in contrast to Baudrillard, we believe that culture and society do exist within these new technologies. An increasing number of thinkers, artists, politicians and real social processes are involved. Contemporary art is unconceivable without considering the new technological resources which provide a platform for conceiving political phenomena such as that of the *forajidos* in Ecuador, the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East or the more recent wave of *indignants* in New York or Europe, without the significance that the forms of communications offered by technologies have had. Not only are we faced with new forms of art and culture but with new and real social and political stakeholders born out of technical innovations, which is structuring a new and complex cultural, social, communicational and political universe.

However, there are those who believe that Latin America has "miraculously" escaped from the fate of the era. Accepting that the crises in Latin America were unleashed in past decades, that we are constructing the region of the planet which is still the most unequal in terms of distribution of wealth, that we were savagely used by all the oppressive and extractivist needs of the hegemonic metropolises, not only have we evaded the crises but, from a subaltern and peripheral position, from

the recognition of our wounds and our strengths, we have started walking along our own paths which, despite the traditional and orthodox theories of economy, are substantially improving the standards of living, wealth, conservation of resources and the strengthening of intellects as never before in history, such as the case of our Ecuador under the power of the “Citizen Revolution”. Certainly, our models are still aimed, in practice, at forms of wellbeing similar to those of the capitalism that is being questioned – remember, as Don Beck and Christopher Cowan² state, that every new era has a lot of the former, as is logical – or that we have still not managed to deepen our own approach without hurting what humanity has achieved in terms of rights and freedoms. However, it is also true that in cultural terms the map of the world – even in the hegemonic visions that still prevail in the metropolises – increasingly involves embracing more of us and our realities. Latin American thinkers, artists, creators and cultural managers are already paving the way, in more than one aspect.

It is essential to develop new ideas, new forms of relationship and life, new paradigms to encompass individuals, organisations of individuals and societies as a whole. And we are convinced that on this path to overcoming the urgent and distressing problems we are facing, culture plays a key role as the bearer of the most sublime of human knowledge, and the best of principles and values of this humanity, in favour of the world and the planet.

Thus, thinking about the need for a new structure of cultural relationships, faced with the new paradigms under construction, forms part of the future to which we are clumsily heading.

The vision of Cuenca, World Cultural Heritage, a city of science and knowledge, involves a radical change in the cultural process of the city but also shows us the value and efforts of its people, a mixture of management and work endeavours, a joining of skills, great determination, endless dedication and ongoing learning.

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² BECK, Don and COWAN, Christopher, *Spiral Dynamics*, online edition.