

**MEXICANS AS  
OBJECTS AND  
SUBJECTS OF  
STUDY**

What is the Mexican like? What does he consist of? are questions where both artist and intellectual have become entangled, from many points of view, disciplines, and historical circumstances. Personalities as different as Lorenzo de Zavala, Baron Humboldt, Benito Juárez, Malcolm Lowry and Octavio Paz, have all tried to discover the formula that explains exactly how the traditions forming our national personality are composed.

We still do not know exactly how to characterize and analyse a civilization that is recent on the world scene, that is built on a multi-ethnic past, three centuries of colonialism, a process of independence dominated by instability and one of the most controversial and spectacular

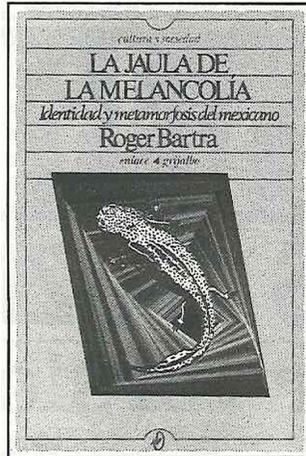
revolutions of this century. Nevertheless, the Mexican state enjoys a legitimacy that allows it, in spite of what many specialists have foreseen, to veer away from difficulties which the country's economic situation have made increasingly serious.

**La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano** (The Cage of Melancholy: the identity and metamorphosis of the Mexican) is a stimulating inquiry penetrating the basis of Mexican nationalism and some of its manifestations "para avanzar en el estudio de los procesos de legitimación del Estado moderno" (advancing the study of the legitimizing processes of the modern State). The author, Roger Bartra, who received a Guggenheim scholarship to write the book, used his own studies on the shaping of the "Mexican national character" to show the ideological content existing behind these interpretations. "El objeto de reflexión de dichos trabajos es una construcción imaginaria que ellos mismos han elaborado con la ayuda decisiva de la literatura, el arte y la música." (The object of reflection in this work is an imaginary reconstruction made with the definitive help of literature, art and music).

This book selects some preoccupations that have arisen from the criticism that, in recent years, has been levelled at the fruitful tradition of French structuralism, and from the new analytical proposals that have tried to incorporate in social studies the points of view characteristic of other disciplines, in this case, of literature. In **La jaula de la melancolía**, the author calls on sources which, if not unedited, are very little used by the humanities in their research. The versatile structure of the text, the deliberate use of a literary point of view, and an ironic attitude towards his own analysis, make the work fresh and even amusing.

In fact Bartra presents his book as a game where the analysis of studies and stereotypes, comprising what we know as "Mexican", converses in an animated way with a creative metaphor, product of the ambivalent nature of the axolote (larva, salamander). Bartra establishes a game logic that is not of every writer's, "saltando de una idea a otra, sin respetar su contorno personal o generacional, agrupando afirmaciones y apreciaciones aun cuando hayan sido elaboradas en contextos filosóficos diferentes u opuestos", (jumping from one idea to another, with no respect for its personal or generational outline, grouping together statements and assessments even when they have been created in different or opposing philosophical contexts), with the object of "forzar la imaginaria mexicana sobre el carácter nacional para introducirla a un canon o conjunto de estereotipos y observar despues, que el

canon aparece en la cultura política mexicana como una representación trágica de la vida cotidiana de la masa del pueblo" (forcing Mexican imagery on to the national character to introduce it into a formula or set of stereotypes and observe after, that the formula appears in the Mexican political culture as a tragicomic representation of



the people's daily life). The formula of the axolote serves the purpose of pinpointing the presence of national culture in legitimizing processes of the political system. In this way, ideas on death or the mother, the "relajo" (disorder) or melancholy, are related to a whole social behavioral pattern that participates in the hidden mechanisms of power.

Bartra's book, in the same way as Borges or Cortázar, is conceived as a machine generating interpretations (in fact as an interpretation generating others) and in this sense, the constant use of irony, utilizing the axolote as a cohesive element of mythology and material reality, propitiates the tension between analysis and metaphor. With the use of irony, and in a freer way, the researcher confronts the transformations accompanying his findings and their results. At present, the problems presented by theory can not be solved in a satisfactory way by submerging them in a unifying discussion. The social researcher has to adopt the point of view based on reality and assume explicitly that his conclusions cannot be taken as absolute truths in a context that is permanently changing. Irony, a fundamental element of modernity, "se encuentra en el hecho de que no existe una inocente, sublime y dialéctica totalidad —ni en los hechos ni en la teoría, sino un mundo heterogéneo y dividido" (arises from the fact that there does not exist an innocent, sublime and dialectical totality —neither in facts, nor in theory— but instead a heterogeneous and divided worldj)".

This is the reason for which one is presented to Mexican nationalism

cemented by the double condition of the axolote: as an expression of life and as an amphibian condemned to be a symbol, sign and mask, trapped forever in the cage of melancholy.

Bartra, Roger. **La Jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano**, (The Cage of Melancholy: identity and metamorphosis of the Mexican) Grijalbo, Mexico, 1987, 272 p.

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