

THE EMPIRE OF THE WRITTEN WORD: MODERNITY, HUMANISM, AND COLONIZATION ¹

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ORIGINALLY PRESENTED
November 1st, 2013 at 2:30 p.m.

ORIGINAL TITLE
The Art of Distance: Notes on a Poetics of Transmission

It has often been stated that modernity can be characterized as having placed human beings, with all their intellectual and productive potentialities, center stage, transforming these potentialities into a foundation that holds, orders, and justifies the world that surrounds us. During this modern era, consciousness became the first and most solid piece of evidence, from which it was possible to construct a system of objects and relations: that is, a world. The plot of the world's adventures and misadventures, of its advances and setbacks, of its stumbles and detours, took the name of history. We have become so accustomed to these ideas that it is increasingly difficult to perceive what they encompass or presuppose, at least till the end of the nineteenth century, when such ideas began to fade.

THE ORDER OF THE HUMAN

“When a people create their shrines, they trace their inner itinerary in the idol, in the stone, in the plain or in the hill. Faith manifests itself as a shrine and leaves behind a sort of residue. It is as if it externally fixed eternity that a people found in their own soul”.² The young modern nation states erected these singular types of shrines in the form of patriotic monuments in public spaces during the nineteenth century; these shrines became idols of a

1 → Translated by Cecilia Diego, Jazon T. Wozniak, and David Backer. The full Spanish version is available at lapes.org.

2 → Rodolfo Kusch, *América Profunda*, 84.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

society that substituted the state for god but could not, however, for that reason, stop imprinting its inner order in the world and fixing its soul in rock or bronze.

The city of Rio de Janeiro, then capital of Brazil, had its first modern monument—built in 1867 in honor of a Don Pedro—located in the then Praça da Constituição (today Praça Tiradentes). The idea to erect a monument to the founder of the empire was conceived in 1824 and approved a year later. However, work on the monument suffered delays due to political disputes that broke out shortly after. Nevertheless, the idea was kept alive and on the seventh of September of 1854, the Municipal Chamber of Rio (Camara Municipal), in an extraordinary session, approved a project to “levantar na Praça da Constituição da Corte e Capital do Império do Brazil uma estátua à memória de S. M. I., o sr. D. Pedro primeiro, imperador e defensor perpétuo do Brazil”.³ The winner of an international public contest, Brazilian artist Joao Maximiliano Mafra, was chosen for the project, and a Parisian firm—called Luis Rocket—was hired to cast the bronze. Work on the base of the monument started on October 12th, 1855 and the pedestal and statue arrived from Havre to Brazil—upon the French galley *Reine du Monde*—on October 19th, 1861. The statuary Rocket arrived on November 17th and the monument was erected on the 1st of January of 1867 with a ceremony commemorating the placing of the first stone.

Construction of the monument paralleled, with surprising fidelity, the construction of the modern Brazilian state and its most important institutions, including national educational institutions. Such is the case of the First Normal School, baptized *Instituto de Educação Professor Esmael Coutinho*, inaugurated April 4th, 1835 and located in the neighboring city of Niterói, as well as the then *Imperial Colégio de Pedro II*, inaugurated in 1837, on the birth date of the child-emperor.

As Kusch states, shrines merely imprint onto a given geographical point a people’s spiritual order at a specific moment of their history. For example, the first patriotic monument of the

3 → [...] construct in the Praça da Constituição of the Court and Imperial Capital of Brazil a statue in memory of Don Pedro Primero, Emperor and perpetual defender of Brazil.

Brazilian modern state should also be considered a first order document, an exemplary metaphor in which there is an explicit provisionary configuration of the human in a particular period that we call modernity, and in a singular territory that we denominate South America. Hence, in what follows we will linger in a reading of this monumental image. Not only does this monument present a certain idea of the human, but it furthermore explicates the dynamic of its production. What we call the human is in no way a pre-existing reality, something like a substance that would exist independently from the ideas that think it, and the words that name it, but rather a construction, the product of a series of historical and social devices. Through these devices the human becomes thinkable and, so to speak, exists. In this sense we can say that the monument to Don Pedro I is something like the metaphorical translation of an anthropological machine through which the human is invented or produced. With this, I want to underline the fictional character of that which we dub 'humanity' and also draw attention to its strategic function. What follows is thus an invitation to ask, not only what the word "humanity" names, but also, and more specifically, what this word produces as well as its political consequences.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

The pedestal rises upon a granite base. It is octagonal and made of bronze, as is the rest of the monument. Its four principal sides are dressed with indigenous allegories that symbolize the Amazonas, Paraná, Madeira and Sao Francisco rivers. An indigenous man sitting next to a giant anteater and a capibara represents this last river. Another indigenous person, the one representing the Madeira River, is armed with a bow and looks as though he is about to shoot an arrow; at his side are a turtle, a bird, and some fish. The Amazonas and Paraná rivers are depicted by two figures each, one male and the other female. The forest motifs of the Amazonas River have upon their back a sleepy child. His partner rests on the foot of an alligator with a boa, a tiger, a hedgehog, and a bird next to him. In the group that symbolizes the Paraná River one can see a tapir, an armadillo and two large birds. The pedestals are ornamented



↑ *Praça de D. Pedro I* (D. Pedro I Square)
Castro y Ordoñez, Rafael, 1834-1865
Biblioteca Nacional, Brasil. (National Library, Brazil).



↑ *Estátua de D. Pedro I* (D. Pedro I Square)
Castro y Ordoñez, Rafael, 1834-1865
Biblioteca Nacional, Brasil. (National Library, Brazil).

with towered shields that represent the twenty provinces of Brazil, and upon each is a golden star. The coat of arms of the Empire is situated in the highest point at the front of the monument with the following inscription: "A D. Pedro Primeiro, Gratidão dos Brasileiros". Bragantin weapons guarded by golden dragons are found on both lateral sides. Finally, upon the pedestal, rises the bust of the monarch, dressed with a general's uniform, riding a horse, raising his right arm in the gesture of one who presents the Independence Act of Brazil to the world.

The monument presents a particular human-animal relationship, and overlays upon it another relationship of fundamental importance for comprehending the modern spiritual order: the savage-civilized relationship. In the four allegories found on the inferior sides of the pedestal, the relation man-animal has an intimate and harmonious character; the indigenous people are depicted almost as superior animals, slightly situated over the beasts, integrated with nature and maintaining with it a serene relationship. In fact, the indigenous people are placed here as allegories to the four principal rivers and are, therefore, an anthropomorphized translation of nature itself. From a structural point of view, they are found at the base of the monument at each of the four cardinal points, almost fading into the space and elements of the landscape. In these allegories, set at the base of the monument, everything seems to refer to the infinite variety of natural life. Feminine and masculine images, as well as those of adulthood and childhood, are shown. They express the variety and prodigality of the living, with their exuberant and gendered quality; the rivers' fertility, that of the beasts and that of human nature itself, clearly, melted and integrated with the rest of natural life. On the other hand, there is only one figure on the pedestal's cusp, the image of Pedro I, who does not represent nature but its opposite; hence, the entire monument acquires a pyramidal form which gives the ensemble an air of elevation that seems to go from animal plurality to human unity. In the uppermost figure the man-animal relationship works in an entirely different way: there is superiority and lordship but no harmonious integration. The monarch rides a wild horse and, upon it, dominates the entire composition. The monarch is not "with" the horse but

“upon” it, and over the rest of the figures. Nothing permits us to glimpse in the image of the monarch anything other than spiritual life; there is no gesture in the monarch that would allude to nutrition or reproduction. Rather, his stare is distant, his gesture lordly, and this makes us think about ascension, contrasted with the images of the indigenous people, whose gazes are directed at the immediate surroundings or the floor.

The entire monument presents an organic and hierarchical structure where each piece finds its meaning in relation to the whole. Above all, however, it shows itself as a mechanical monument, an emblematic figure of the spiritual itinerary that the occidental spirit traces for itself. In this sense, the monument tells a story— an odyssey of the modern spirit—while conferring a task to itself: that of humanization. The monument puts into play not only its internal structure but, above all, its dynamic. As a modern sanctuary, the monument was constructed in the venue where the cosmogonic and anthropological myth of the nation-state was told.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MACHINE

In a small book titled *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben has noted that throughout Western history “the human” has always appeared as what cannot be defined, though precisely for that reason, is also incessantly produced by way of constant divisions and articulations.

In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. What is man, if he is always the place —and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless division and ceasurae. It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from the not-man and the animal from

the human, that it is to take positions on the great issues, on so called human rights and values.⁴

Each time we try to define what is human we do so through a curious mechanism that consists of establishing a difference and a distance with relation to that which, in man's interior, is identified as a non-human element (the animal, the instinctive, the corporeal, the natural), in such a way that what is human only appears by contrast, highlighted against a background. This non-human element in man has been the object of rigorous delimitation and exhaustive domain; before it, a supplement which will be identified as that which is specifically human will appear. This supplement is not something positive; it is, first and foremost, a distance in relation to the non-human, an empty supplement. It is as if the human was defined by dominion and the suspension of the 'animality' that inhabits it. Animality is not, therefore, something merely exterior, but resides in the depths of humanity itself: in its interior and in its past. Far from being contrary to the human, animality is the strategic element through which the human can come to exist as such.

By isolating the animal element within man, a barrier is created that, like all barriers, acts simultaneously as a limit and as a passageway, as an abyss, but also as a bridge that communicates and articulates that which it has separated. That is why the division produced is also the tool with which humanity is built as a hierarchically articulated totality. If at first that which is within man is distinguished and separated as that which is animal, and that which is human, it immediately affirms the need for the second to overcome the first and, further on, the need to walk a road that will gradually turn the former into the latter. That road has been given many names, maybe some of the most notable are 'humanization', 'civilizing process', 'public instruction' or, simply, 'education'. Agamben gives this mechanism the name of "anthropological machine," a term he borrows from Furio Jesi, an Italian mythologue, and upon which the Foucaultian idea of device is echoed in a singular manner.

4 → Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 16.

This non-human element (corporeal, animal, natural), which is incessantly separated, is not, as has been said, exterior, but constitutes a type of intimate otherness: the body is not exactly the contrary to the soul, but it is through knowledge and dominion of the passionate, sensitive, and untamed body that man has recognized himself as a spiritual being. Nature is not outside of humanity, but it is in facing the idea of nature that the living human has recognized himself as something more than organic life. Since ancient Greece man has been thought of as an animal, as a living creature. Aristotle defines man as *zoon logon echon*⁵, but it is in relation to the idea of the animal (*zoon*) that human beings have thought themselves rational and speaking. It is thus that humanity's humanity has always depended on the separation and dominion of the animality that inhabits us. This is why the problem of defining the animal and establishing with it a distance has been crucial for the definition of humanity proper. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that 'the animal' too, has always been a human fiction. Nature does not exist for itself, but for culture: in other words, nature is a cultural invention. Beyond that difference it is hard to talk about humanity, for when the measure of the distance between animality and humanity, instinct and rationality, body and thought, is erased, the notion of humanity also vanishes into the air. Therefore, what is important is not to ask what is animal or what is human, but in fact, what is the strategic value of the invention of the modern anthropological discourse? It is precisely this which the monument of the emperor Don Pedro I allows us to think about.

Being human means always being in a humanizing process, and in an open battle against one's own in-humanity. It is in this sense that the monument to Don Pedro I constitutes the expression of a machine capable of producing a continuously renewed movement, an endless desire for humanization. Its strategic value consists precisely in the political capture of an intimate longing we call "being". Being human means always walking towards humanity. Being means 'getting to be', 'wishing to be'. Much more than a

5 → Rational animal or living being endowed with language.

condition, humanity presents itself as work, a perpetual effort to come out of an ever-threatening bestiality. This endless search for humanity has formed our society's moral and political angst. In the West, it has been the moral and political labor par excellence. Human substance is, precisely, that empty center which the machine itself generates and captures. This is also the substance of language, of politics, and of history.

TIME, SPACE AND OTHERNESS: THE ANIMALIZED OTHER

Beginning in the fifteenth century, the European colonial powers began to construct what can be called the "modern colonial anthropological machine" on the basis of the "ancient anthropological machine" whose origins trace back to the classical world, superimposing a new hierarchical distribution of space and time over the now classical hierarchy between animal and man.

Already in his first encounter with the inhabitants of America, Columbus believed that he was witnessing the West of the past. America's lands appeared to him as that lost paradise, the land of origin, the land where the biblical expulsion took place, the original wound that would give rise to the long road back to lost innocence. Columbus believed that he had found in this land humanity's most remote and original past. From this moment on, the Americas became for Europe a land of the future that would lead towards the origin. The ships that for five centuries would cross the sea on their way to the Americas always worked like small time machines. Leaving the metropolis equaled returning to the past.

By superimposing the distinction between the animal and the human over the strategic hierarchy of space and time, the mythical European narrative created a new categorical pair. The archaic and remote are welded with the animal: thus was born the idea of the primitive and the new distinction between savage and civilized. Oddly enough, from its creation, the term primitive has been used to name contemporary peoples, placing metaphorically in the past.

The modern colonial machine came to instill the idea of a gradual and progressive passage that would lead from the animal to

the human— which coincides with the passage from the past to the future, and from ends to a center. This set structure only became possible thanks to the notion of foreign assimilation, constructed by the church from the fourth century. Ivan Illich rightly points out that, for the Greeks, the foreigner could be a guest that arrived from a neighboring polis or a barbarian, who was not, notably, strictly thought of as human. In Rome, the barbarians could become members of the city, but Rome never considered itself as having the obligation or the mission of introducing them into the city. It was only in late antiquity, with the church, that the foreigner became someone who had to be embraced because he was needed. This vision of the foreigner ‘as charge’ became constitutive of Western society.⁶ The notion that the foreigner was an object in need of assistance takes root in the fourth century when the church was attributed a maternal role. This attitude will later take on many other successive forms. In the early middle ages the ancient ‘barbarian’ became the ‘pagan’. Along with the crusades and the encounter with the Muslim world and its resistance to conversion, there appeared the idea of the ‘infidel’, he who not only needs to be baptized, but also made to submit. With the conquest of the Americas the idea of the ‘infidel’ was replaced by ‘the naturals’ as the inhabitants of the Americas were called during that era, marking thus a new character of the educative object of humanism, that would later become, depending on the specific domain where they are studied ‘primitives’, ‘savages’, ‘indigenous’. As the nineteenth century turns into the twentieth century, the figure of the foreigner changes once again, giving place to the category of the ‘ignorant’; and throughout the twentieth century, its most characteristic form will be that of the ‘illiterate’. All these figures share two fundamental characteristics. They are emissaries of the non-human part of man (given that they represent a kind of human in which the animal prevails, meaning the corporeal, the affective, the irrational) and, on the other hand, they portray the geographical ends of the world and its remote past. Thanks to the affirmation of the gradual passage from barbarism to civilization, the American conquest could present itself, from its

6 → Ivan Illich, *Obras Reunidas II*, 58.

beginnings, as a military, political, and moral enterprise. Additionally, the job of exploring and conquering the world could coincide with the moral maxim that led man to know himself and to dominate his own animal instincts. Since then the moral epic of the westerner coincides with his voracious colonial expansion and this narrative is collected in his humanist and universal vocation.

This mechanism always implies the creation of a subtle limit (at the same time minute and infinite), populated by ambiguous and oscillating figures, within which anthropogenesis takes place: the savage, the barbarian, but also, in other domains, women, children, the ignorant, the illiterate, etc. Some of these figures appear at the base of the modern state sanctuary that is the Don Pedro I monument. It is from this non-human background— represented by the monument— which humanism tries to create a distance. However immaturity, femininity, barbarism, ignorance, and irrationality never stop threatening the adult civilized man. The machine functions because man is permanently besieged by un-humanity, and this is why, once again, his virility, maturity, or his condition as cultivated and lettered is presented as a tireless task.

The anthropological machine cannot create the human without simultaneously creating the non-human, it cannot create its own humanity without simultaneously creating the others' (intimate) un-humanity. The mechanism works because the divergence fabricates both sides of the mirror. The mechanism not only produces, so to speak, the otherness of the other, but also an interior otherness: the machine creates that "Other" which inhabits us in the form of concupiscence, irrationality, immaturity or madness. At the political level the machine has not only produced the savage, as an animalized Other that inhabits the confines of the world, but also the idea of an 'ignorant people' that as an inferior savage species, belongs to the territory of the instinctive and irrational. This propensity allows for domination with bread and circus, for his nature imaginatively allocates him in the domains of feeding and of violent and sexual passions of the ungoverned body. That is why the anthropological machine is a colonial machine that acts within each individual, just as it acts inside the modern nation-states and in the imperial game between the world powers and their colonies.

The smallest distance separates the barbarian from the civilized, the child from the adult, the corporeal from the spiritual. The distance is so small that for a moment both margins seem to come together. But at the same time the distance is so infinite that, in reality, it remains absolutely impassable. All of the humanist's pedagogical work depends on the promise—always broken—of breaching it. The transition from the animal to the human, from nature to culture, or from barbarism to civilization is impossible, the effort to surpass these distances is always destined to fail, for the border is constitutively insurmountable; it is an illusion that moves away with every attempt to overcome it. It is precisely on such an illusion that the machine feeds itself. The anthropological machine captures human potential, giving it the shape of an impossible yearning.

It is important to point out that modernity and coloniality coincide, once the idea of conceiving the subject as center of the cosmos, and the idea of ordering time according to the notion of progress, become the base of both phenomena. Often, due to our intellectual habits, we place modernity as a predominantly European problem and coloniality or decoloniality as the problem concerning those people that suffered political and economic domination by the imperial powers. However, on different occasions, modernity has consisted of concepts and social technologies born from the colonial processes that later, applied to internal political reflection, have served to organize the modern states and their ideas of reference. Thus, it is important to point out that coloniality and modernity are two names that illuminate dimensions of the same phenomenon.

Likewise, it is not possible to talk of a modern school without, concurrently, understanding it as a colonial school. And this does not depend on whether or not a school is located in Paris or in Puerto Principe, in Madrid or in Lima. It also does not depend on whether the content taught at the school is ideologically controlled or its' methods alienating. The modern school is colonial because it is built upon an anthropological machine—pedagogy—in which the creation of humanity itself depends on the infinite reproduction of the others' intimate un-humanity, without which the myth of humanization cannot take place.

THE EMPIRE OF THE LETTER

In August of 1492, as Christopher Columbus sailed the Atlantic Ocean bound for the Indies, the humanist and grammarian Antonio de Nebrija presented Queen Isabel la Católica in Salamanca with the first European romance language grammar book. The introduction reads:

Cuando bien conmigo pienso, mui esclarecida Reina, i pongo delante los ojos el antigüedad de todas las cosas que para nuestra recordación i memoria quedaron escriptas, una cosa hallo i saco por conclusión mui cierta: que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio i de tal manera lo siguió que junta mente començaron, crecieron i florecieron i, después, junta fue la caída de entrambos.⁷

After these words Nebrija presented a brief tale about the birth, splendor, and ruin of the old empires: Assyrians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. Nebrija observed that all of them had an infancy tied to orality, and a splendor that coincided with the increasing prevalence of writing. He also observed that their decadence coincided with the decadence of their language. The most advantageous empires in this tale were, for the grammarian of Salamanca, the Greek and Roman empires, whose influence and splendor were more vivid and long lasting. Their strength and influence resulted from the fact that they were the only two that possessed grammatical art. Nebrija proposed to accomplish in Castilian that which permitted Greek and Latin to become imperial languages.

Grammar is thus at the same time a guarantee of splendor and a remedy against oblivion. It guards against the linguistic vicissitudes that Castilian could suffer because of the destructive action of time.

7 → When I think to myself, my illuminated Queen, and put before my eyes antiquity and all the things that were left written for our memory, there is one thing I find as a true conclusion: language was always the partner of empire and therefor both started, grew and flourished together, and, later, together they fell. Antonio de Nebrija, *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana*, 3.

Nebrija's words echo those of the Egyptian god *Theuth*, those that Plato recalls in the *Phaedrus*. Nebrija's Grammar was presented to the Queen as a remedy against oblivion and disaggregation, as a powerful tool for establishing the unity and durability all empires yearn for and need. What the first Grammar in vernacular language aimed for, and recognized, was the necessary relation between government and the order of language, an order that can assure truth and permanence. Truth must, by force, be unifying and constant, just as the empire itself.

*Ésta [la lengua castellana], hasta nuestra edad, anduvo suelta i fuera de regla i a esta causa a recebido en pocos siglos muchas mudanças por que, si la queremos cotejar con la de oi a quinientos años, hallaremos tanta diferencia i diversidad cuanta puede ser maior entre dos lenguas. I porque mi pensamiento i gana siempre fue engrandecer las cosas de nuestra nación i dar a los ombres de mi lengua obras en que mejor puedan emplear su ocio, que agora lo gastan leyendo novelas o istorias embueltas en mil mentiras i errores, acordé ante todas las otras cosas reduzir en artificio este nuestro lenguaje castellano, para que lo que agora i de aquí adelante enél se escriviere pueda quedar en un tenor i estender se en toda la duración de los tiempos que están por venir.*⁸

Therefore, grammar clearly has a prospective character, it not only orders what exists, but also gives the coordinates for that which is to come. Spain (the Kingdom of Castile) was at that time a growing power with an imperial vocation that had just

8 → This [Castilian], till our age, has been loose and without rule and because of this it has changed much in few centuries, if we want to compare today's form in five hundred years, we will find so much difference and diversity as can be found between two different languages. And because my thoughts and will always were to increase our nations' things and give the men of my language work with which they can better spend their leisure, for now they spend it reading novels and stories enveloped in a thousand lies and mistakes, I decided that before all other things I would artificially reduce our Castilian language, so that now and from here on after whatever be written in it can endure in times to come. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

reconquered the Arab territories of the south, and that expanded to, and dominated, other regions of the Iberian Peninsula. The school of Salamanca was setting the scaffolding for international law and structuring the commercial relations of the new empire. Unification and reconquest were a reality. The Kingdom of Castile projected itself upon the world writ large. Grammar was a tool for conquest that came to endorse the empire's expansionist vocation.

*Cuando en Salamanca di la muestra de aquesta obra a Vuestra Real Majestad i me preguntó que para qué podía aprovechar, el mui Reverendo Padre obispo de Ávila me arrebató la respuesta, i respondiéndome por mí dixo que, después que Vuestra Alteza metiesse debaxo de su iugo muchos pueblos bárbaros i naciones de peregrinas lenguas, i con el vencimiento aquéllos tenían necesidad de recibir las leyes que el vencedor pone al vencido i con ellas nuestra lengua, entonces por esta mi Arte podrían venir en el conocimiento della, como agora nos otros dependemos el arte de la gramática latina para aprender el latín. I cierto assí es que no sola mente los enemigos de nuestra fe, que tienen ia necesidad de saber el lenguaje castellano, mas los vizcaínos, navarros, franceses, italianos i todos los otros que tienen algún trato i conversación en España i necesidad de nuestra lengua.*⁹

The nascent empire thrived in Salamanca through the pen and sword. The governance of language through grammar was one of

9 → When in Salamanca I gave that opus to our Royal Majesty and she asked me how it could be used, the Reverend Father Bishop of Avila interrupted and responded for me saying that, after our Highness puts under her yoke many barbaric peoples and nations of different language with their defeat they will have the need to receive the laws which the winner imposes upon the defeated and with them our language, therefore through this, my Art, they will come to know it, just as now we depend on the art of Latin Grammar to learn Latin. And it is also true that not only our faith's enemies have the need to know about our language, but also the Vizcains, Navarros, French, Italians and all others that have any sort of treatise and conversation with Spain and have a need for our language. Ibid., 10-11.

the first pillars that permitted the conquest of America to be, from the start, a pedagogical enterprise. Two impossible tasks according to Freud, governing and educating, were intertwined from the beginning, and their impossibility was exorcised with blood and fire. In government and education, between them and through them, there arose a war, less thunderous than the one waged with swords, but not less cruel. The echoes of that war still persist today. In Argentina it was still possible to hear them, centuries after, spoken by he who would be the mentor of the Argentinean education system, Don Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in the old saying *la letra con sangre entra*¹⁰.

However grammar did not only present itself as a valid tool for conquest and the administration of far away lands. As Ivan Illich states, Nebrija proposed to the Queen the fundamental construction of a new social reality which implied submitting her subjects to a completely new type of dependence, inventing thus a new kind of dominion in her own territory. It offered Queen Isabel a tool for colonizing her subjects' spoken language replacing it with a language of the state.

Nebrija sees his Grammar as a pillar of the nation-state. Therefor, the state, from its origin is perceived as an aggressively productive organism. The new state takes away the words with which people live and transforms them into a normalized language which, from that moment on, everyone is obligated to learn according to the instruction level that was institutionally allocated to them. Since then, people will surrender to a language that will be received from above, rather than develop a common language. That step, from vernacular to an officially taught mother tongue is probably the most important event—and possibly the least studied—in the advent of a commercial goods hyperdependent society (...). This is the first appearance of the modern citizen

10 → This is a very popular saying that alludes to reading and writing skills being learnt through corporeal punishment.

*and with him a language provided by the state; neither one has a historical precedent.*¹¹

Henceforth, grammar was destined, not only to expropriate the spoken language of the population of the conquered lands to introduce them into the Spanish cultural sphere, but also to taint vernacular language itself foreign and other. From then on, maternal language, which by definition is learnt spontaneously through coexistence with one's people, could only be learnt "correctly" through the intervention of the state. Necessary mediation of a group of specialists would be imposed between each individual and his own language, and thus was born the modern school. From this moment on, culture would no longer be that which is cultivated in common, but something that is attained through institutionalized teaching promoted by the state.

The church and state worked hand in hand establishing such an institutionalized education. In Illich's opinion, from the fourth century on, the church assumed the image of a mother nursing its people and it was precisely from this maternal image that, starting in the fifteenth century, the new modern state could construct itself. It is also important to note that this same exemplary metaphor is the one that makes the modern state a constitutively colonial state, for it presupposes 'tutelage' and the progressive incorporation of the other.

ORALITY AND WRITING:
THE GRAMMATICAL MACHINE
OF THE MODERNS

If, as Nebrija supposed, grammar is the partner of empire, it is so, because amongst other reasons, throughout the Western tradition, humanity has been conceived as an empire: the empire of the intelligible over the sensitive, of reason over the body, of the human over the animal. In Western thought human evolution coincides with the development of speaking. This is why the question of man's

11 → Ivan Illich, *Obras Reunidas II*, 82.

genesis is bound up in our tradition's tendency to inquire into the genesis of language. Ever since classical antiquity, language has served as a dividing mark between the animal and the human (referring to the species) and the infant and the adult (referring to human development of each individual person). But also, since antiquity language has found itself affected by the mechanism of disjunction, from within which an animal face and a human face can be distinguished. According to a celebrated fragment from Aristotle's *Politics*:

*... and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in all animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state*¹².

Coexisting in man are an animal voice, which expresses pleasure and pain, and a human word, whose function is to manifest what is convenient and inconvenient, just and unjust. Once again, in man's interior, an isolated animal region works as a basis, against which man will open a rift. Agamben reminds us that, from antiquity, grammarians opposed the confusing voice of animals to the articulated voice of humans. In Aristotle, what makes the differences between animal *phoné* and human *logos* is that the latter is "articulated" and such articulation in human voice is gathered in the *grammata*, that is, in letters. Therefore, for Aristotle, as for all grammarians of his time, what characterizes human voice is its possibility to be written, as it is formed by *articulus* (fragments) or *quantum* of voice¹³. In other words, if voice

12 → Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a 7-18.

13 → Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 16.

can be captured in writing it is because it is fragmented. This is a characteristic that opens the possibility for cultural and social life in the *polis*.

If for an instant we once again turn our sight to the monument of Don Pedro I we see that the same hierarchy that governs the piece as a whole is replicated in the sculpture of the emperor: its base is formed by the animal (the horse, traditionally a symbol of verve and courage), the middle part by a man (Don Pedro I's persona), and the highest part, by the written word (the written words of law, for the emperor waves a document of the Independence of Brazil). Therefore, the anthro-po-genetic dynamism we have been referring to is clearly represented in the monument's most important figure: man is represented as a modern centaur, where the exuberant force of the animal instinct and the lucidity of the *logos* (turned into writing) are intertwined in a dynamic tension which modulates 'the human' as a movement of elevation between both.

The written word is presented as the organizing element of the entire monument, in relation to which all the other pieces find their place in decreasing hierarchy. It belongs exclusively to the top figure and it differentiates it from the allegories at the base. Hence, a grammatical machine that orients and determines culture surpasses nature, and the intelligible surpasses the sensitive; the grammatical machine seems to operate in the inner workings of the anthropological machine.

In modernity, the dominion of *logos* over *phoné* acquired strategic relevance, for, if animal voice was already for the Greeks a trait man shared with other living beings, that animal voice, transformed into orality, came to be for the moderns a distinctive trait of primitive peoples. As we have pointed out, the ancient grammarians distinguished human being's articulated voice (*phoné énarthros*), which was also the voice that could be written (*phoné engrámmatos*), and the confused voice, which, on the contrary, was the un-writable voice of the animals, or that part of the human voice that could not be fixed by writing, like whistling, laughter, grunting, or crying. Alphabetical writing, more than anything, produced the illusion that voice can be effectively sustained and contained in writing. This is why, based on their tradition, Europeans associated

voice with peoples without writing, transforming voice into orality, and identifying alphabetic writing with the articulated human voice. The setup was perfect and extremely productive: the animal voice coincided then with the animality of the Native American and African peoples, while the human articulated word became a distinctive trait of the Europeans. With this setup, writing occupied a central role within the new modern anthropological machine. The voice, captured in grammar, took on a humanizing force and mixed it with the process of dominating the conquered peoples. The savage's animality coincided with the un-human interior and inarticulate voice of the modern subject. In this sense, to "dominate the other" was transformed into a synonym for "dominating oneself", dominating one's own instincts, one's own animality. And the written word was the vehicle for such dominion. The basis was set for a social technology that considered conquest and alphabetization, political dominion and moralization, submission and humanization, to be the equivocal. Each acquired the shape of a progressive grammatical articulation differing from the sonorous world of the savages. Sound, body, and animality (instinct) were associated with voice, and voice with a "wild" element, while rationality, spirituality, and writing constituted the essential notes of humanity, and were associated ever after with civilization.

THE GRAMMATICAL INVENTION OF THE OTHER: 'ORIGINAL VOICE' AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

Written around 1498, Frei Ramón Pané's text is considered, according to specialists, the first European language book written in the New World. The original manuscript, however, does not exist. Researchers know of it because of the Italian translation included in the LXI chapter of Christopher Columbus' "admiral's story" written by his son Fernando. But the original text by Fernando Columbus was also lost, therefore researchers have only had access to the Italian translation by Alfonso de Ulloa, written in 1571.

According to Eliseo Colón Zayas, when including the Other (the indigenous person) within the narrative, Pané fixed the territorial

limits of foreign culture and inscribed it in the European literary tradition that was produced with the fading of the medieval world. Through his writing Pane transformed the Other's word into a useful product for Columbus; let us remember that the text was ordered to be made by the latter. Its translation/inscription was not idiomatic, but strategic. What legitimates this translation is what Pane received through his eyes and ears, comments Zayas, "the eye is at the service of a discovery of the world; it is the tip of the spear of an encyclopedic curiosity, while the ear implies the decipherment of the other's voice, its translation"¹⁴.

The passage from savage orality to writing implies the capture of the indigenous people's space, perceived by the Spaniard as chaotic and atemporal, in European history. "And given that they don't have writing nor letter, they can't notice how they have heard this from their ancestors, and they can't remember what they say, and can't even write in an orderly manner what they are referring to".¹⁵

To make the text work as a machine for capturing foreign space, it is necessary to imaginatively place the other in primordial space, so that the passage from voice to writing can introduce the other into history. This way, Pane utilized an exogenetic Christian tradition to construct otherness in the New World, permitting the strange to be put in an ethical, political, and religious order that permitted its understanding and made the conquest of the other acceptable, which was of course, the expedition's primary interest.

The celebrated dispute amongst philosopher Ginés de Sepúlveda and the Dominican father and bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de Las Casas, in 1550 in Valladolid, marks the pinnacle of a discussion that was developing from the start of the conquest and which had the aim of constructing a juridical-moral discourse that would make acceptable to the eyes of Spain the appropriation of the riches of

14 → Eliseo R. Colón Zayas, "Fray Ramón Pane: la escritura y el descubrimiento del otro," in *América Latina: imágenes e imaginário*, coord. Tereza A.P. Queiroz (Rio de Janeiro: Expressão e Cultura; São Paulo:EDUSP), 678.

15 → Ibid., 679. (Our translation)

the newly discovered lands. Also called the “dispute of the naturals,” at the heart of the debate is the image that Spain made for itself as well as others, along with the way in which that image was composed of the desire for riches and the will for dominion of European power in expansion.

Two doctrines faced each other in battle, the first (based on Aristotle and represented by Sepúlveda) conceived hierarchy as the natural condition of human society and defended the inferiority of the indigenous; the second (represented by Las Casas), implored Christian universalism, and affirmed equality as the natural state. A figure appeared, referenced often by both sides of the confrontation, antecedent to what we now denominate infancy. If for Sepúlveda, and the defenders of unequal nature, the indigenous were like children by virtue of their irrationality and immaturity, for Bartolomé de Las Casas and the defenders of equality, innocence and malleability were traits we all shared. The idea of infancy became a key component in the debate that acted as a hinge, permitting the articulation of both stances.

Infancy, like the voice, possesses an ambiguous status, a type of indetermination between identity and difference, between equality and inequality, principal categories that, as Todorov points out, structured the relation with the Other during the American conquest. This intermediate status is given by the fact that children are “one of us”, in the sense that they were born from us and they prolong our own existence, but are at the same time different from us, insofar as they do not speak our language and they are not familiar with our customs. Therefore, halfway between what is ours and what is not, between identity and difference, infancy reveals itself as a key concept in the construction of a new technology of social control: colonialism.

Taken from both the Roman Empire’s juridical structure and Christian universalism, Europe invented colonialism, one of the subtlest social technologies, whose mechanism consists in establishing a differentiated identity that suspends equality in time, denying and simultaneously permitting it. This mechanism was forged by the School of Salamanca around the concept of

“evangelization”. Afterwards, deposed of its religious content, it was adopted by other European colonial powers under the name “civilizing process”.

Affirming that “the indigenous are like children” the Spanish conquistadors legitimized their dominion, transforming dominion into a benefit and inevitable fact. For, when taking the Other as child, it is natural and necessary to exercise over him a power of tutelage, in virtue of which the indigenous people must be trusted to the cares of a Spaniard in charge of making their equality effective. In this way, conquest is made into a fundamentally pedagogic endeavor.

The two positions that were confronted during the first years of the conquest, one that gravitates around equality, as well as one that gravitates around inequality, in the end reconcile in a default image of the Other. The indigenous’ equality is not negated, but suspended in an infinite “not being yet”. In Ginés and Sepúlveda’s descriptions the indigenous lack rationality, the use of writing, and modesty.

*They are more barbarian than one can imagine, because they lack absolutely every knowledge of letter, they ignore the use of money, they usually walk around naked, even the women, and carry bales over their shoulders and backs, as animals, for long tours*¹⁶.

For Sepúlveda, all difference is reduced to an inferiority that shows the indigenous as semi-human, half way between human and animal. In Bartolomé de Las Casas’ descriptions, the indigenous lack wickedness, and the unmeasured ambition and ferocity of the Spaniards. De las Casas tells a tale that presents the indigenous in the image of Adam when he still lived in paradise and therefore still resided half way between man and god.

“The Lucayos...lived...as in the Golden Age, a life of which poets and historians have sung such praise” [...] “To me he looked like our father Adam before the Fall”¹⁷.

16 → Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, 188.

17 → Ibid., 197.

THE CONSTITUTIVE AMBIGUITY
OF THE FIGURES OF PASSAGE:
INFANCY AND SAVAGERY

The image of the Other oscillates permanently between two poles—innocence and immaturity—two notes that define childhood and promise to progressively deliver a person from fault, but in reality create and sustain it infinitely. The image allows one to affirm one way or another that, “The indigenous are like children”. They have a soul, but it is a child’s soul, innocent or immature. Children represent a lack which favors the projection and appropriation of the Other in relatively tolerable terms for the European imaginary. Pedagogy, be it in the shape of evangelization or later a form of ‘civilizing’, is the mechanism through which ‘lack’ turns productive in the colonial scheme. Hence, the original inhabitants of America can be angels or demons, but this is irrelevant, for what is most important in the European scheme is that they are not yet anything, and will only come to be by way of progressive assimilation to the conquistadors’ culture. These colonial conceptions made the conquered lands an empty place to project the fears and hopes of the nascent colonial powers.

America was thought of by Europe as a new land, land of the future, an exotic place, exuberant and unmeasured, oscillating always between the barbarous and the savage. It was a Dionysian forest where the civilized world was lost and found systematically. The negation of the Other, or his assimilation in terms of immaturity, were useful to Europe in affirming its identity, experimenting with its potential, confirming its superiority, and projecting in America its utopic search for happiness, its lost origin or its long road to redemption. If Europe thought that it had reached its mature age in modernity, as Kant sustains in his celebrated article titled *What is Enlightenment?*, it was because Europe knew how to build during the two centuries before, a childlike Other against which to recognize itself as an adult, a savage Other upon which to affirm itself as civilized, and an animalized Other over which to construct humanity.

By analyzing a text from Jean de Léry (1578), *Histoire d' un Voyage fait en la terre du Brazil*, Michel de Certau affirms:

Travel literature is producing an image of the savage as a body of pleasure. Confronting it with Western work, with its actions of producing time and reason, we find, in Léry, a place of leisure and delite, party for the eyes and ears [...] The erotization of the body of the other—of nudity and a savage voice— walks beside the formation of an ethics of production. The voyage, produces a material gain at the same time it creates a lost paradise: a body-object and an erotic body.¹⁸

Infancy as well as the inarticulate voice occupy in modernity a curious role: they are simultaneously what the West desires to recuperate—because it sees in them its origin and salvation— as well as what it fears and tries to maintain under its yoke; they function as a symbol of the most radical otherness and its most intimate being. The figure of the savage incarnates both dimensions: he who does not write, is pure voice, and is closer to life, who is closer to nature; and the infant, who does not talk, and is closer to the origin. Such ambiguity makes itself evident during the enlightenment with the fascination of the figure of the “noble savage” and the enormous influence it had in the development of political and literary utopias. The “noble savage” fascinated Jean-Jacques Rousseau—who highlighted the concept in his opus *Emile* (1762)—as well as Diderot who wrote *l'infant, ce petit sauvage* and thus placed the noble savage in the category with both children and aborigines from the South seas¹⁹. The way in which infancy was conceptualized between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries corresponds with the emergence of colonial ideologies and models. It is without a doubt revealing to see the indigenous repeatedly compared to children, or to women. Consistently, the indigenous were confused with “the interior other” and “the exterior other”. But it is useless, and makes little sense, to ask if the image of the child was

18 → Eliseo R. Colón Zayas, “Fray Ramón Pane: la escritura y el descubrimiento del otro”, 683.

19 → Steiner, *Después de Babel: Aspectos del lenguaje y la traducción*, 57.

projected onto the foreigner or vice versa, because it is probable that both things happened, for such coincidence permitted conquest to be an educative endeavor and the educative systems to be the new emerging state's form of colonization.

European modernity cannot be understood only through internal causes because there is no human without animality, civilization without barbarism, maturity without the childlike, modernity without primitivism. The definition of being European and its identification with the human in general depended on the possibility of inventing an improperly human Other, an animalized man that would permit modernity to be a modernization and the human a progressive and never ending story. The School of Salamanca had an important role in the gestation of modernity, not only with its contribution to international law and economic theory, but, above all, for its participation in the construction of the image of the animalized Other. The barbarian, the savage, the primitive, the illiterate have always been European characters; characters of a modern-colonial theater in which Europe conceived of itself.

THE PRODUCTIVE LACK

The ambiguity of infancy made it possible to reconcile, in a paradoxical manner, equality and inequality, identity and difference, thus resolving contradictions through an indefinite temporal suspension: the “not yet”. This mechanism not only regulated and administered the distance between Europe and the conquered territories, but it later gave form to the relation between classes within the new emerging national states. Ascending social mobility is the contemporary translation of that same form of temporal dissolution of equality in an interminable educative process. The mechanism of temporal suspension of equality, through which the educative system creates the distance it intends to overcome, was denounced at the end of the 1970s by Ivan Illich in his work on deschooling and, in more recent times, by Jacques Rancière, in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in 1987.

The void that opens through the “not yet” is made of negativity and delay. He who is educated must comprehend that his “being”

consist in a “not being yet” and that his being will only effectively be when he manages to get to the other side of the bridge that connects his ignorance and the knowledge he was promised. However, the bridge is uncrossable and thus his existence is trapped in deferment without remedy. Education is transformed into an interminable process, an un-kept promise. The colonial anthropological machine welded with the productive power of delay, thus oriented desires, and transformed them into voluntary subjection. There are no handcuffs more powerful than the invisible and interminable hope of those who suffer and look for meaning in that suffering. In modernity this yearning/desire is called “progress” and upon it the most sophisticated form of social subjection has been built. Of course the problem is not hope, but rather its capture, and the way to capture it is confused with humanity itself.

The devices continuously migrate, they are contagious, they are advantageous and adapt to new needs. In the constitution of the new national states, the colonial device, forged during the conquest, was slowly absorbed, just as the figures of the child and the savage were superimposed and mixed slowly during the debates that accompanied the conquest. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a new figure was born and with it the illiterate that would soon occupy its place next to the savage and child, building a sort of interior savage.

As we have seen, since antiquity the passage of the confused voice of the animal to the articulated word of man was possible thanks to the written word as intermediary, and that passage, as can be read in Aristotle, opens the space for politics; but never before had the relation between the written word and politics been so explicit as it was with the creation of the nation states onward. To know how to read and write became an indispensable requisite for the exercise of suffrage. The democratizing processes of the entire twentieth century involved massive literacy campaigns. Reading and writing became the doorway to the effective exercise of politics through the vote. Writing was identified with the place of the state, with the public, and fundamentally, with the law. Beginning in modernity the law stopped being regulated by custom

and was transferred gradually to writing. For a great majority of the Latin American population the written word is not the synonym of literature, but of law and power. The written word is not the medium of poets— whose tradition is still unified with orality— but the specific medium of those who govern.

Nation states put the anthropological machine to use in creating an opposition between an ignorant people and an intellectual elite. The same mechanism of temporal suspension operated here, according to which political equality stayed suspended in an infinitely prolonged “not yet”. Between the illiterate and the literate a distance was created and administered by the state under the name of universal schooling which was graded, free, and compulsory.

THE MODULATION OF INDIVIDUALS, STATES AND TERRITORIES

The border established by the anthropological machine exists equally within individuals, within emerging national states, and between the colonial powers and conquered territories. In the individual, the division separates animal instinct from rationality, the interior form from the exterior animal, the nutritive soul from the rational, the animal voice (which lives in us as sobbing, laughter, shouting, grunting) from the rational word; in the nation states, the division separates the savage or primitive peoples, those dominated by orality, by passion, by excess, by exuberant vitality from the rational colonial powers. According to the political division promoted by the modern anthropological machine, the rational dominion man exercises upon his passions equals the educational influence the elite must give to the people, and the tutelage the colonial powers must exercise over the conquered territories; moral, educational, psychological and political make up one philanthropic, humanist, and civilizing project. This structure that simultaneously modulates and organizes the empire over subjectivity, society, and territory, is already present in Plato's *Republic*, where as we have seen, social health and the health of the individual depend on the correct hierarchical order of the soul. Only when the soul is concupiscent, dominated by the popular litters (the artisans), when

the irascible soul is dominated by the intermediary litters (the army), and when this will submits to the rational soul, dominated by the superior social litters (the philosophers), is it possible to attain a just order. In the same way, the modern anthropological machine makes enlightenment and humanization coincide with the dominion of the savage that inhabits each individual, in the state, and in the conquered states.

It follows that humanization would only be possible through the invention of foreign and personal in-humanity that permits the passage and confers upon the anthropological machine its dynamic and productive character. The interiorized Other is the “necessary” residue that the machine produces in its process of generating humanity. The educational system, related to the modern machine, cannot complete its humanizing and civilizing task without producing at the same time an un-human Other, or, better said, at the same time, inventing (presupposing) the ignorant and alienated masses as its counterpart.

It is always possible to fall into animality, it is always possible to fall into femininity, into immaturity, into temptations of the flesh or the brutal instinct proper to the inferior classes or primitive groups. There exists always a suspicion which burdens the individual of not taking enough distance between the material and animal.

The modern anthropological machine extracts its dynamism from the mediation between the barbarous and the civilized, and a distance must first be created in order for that to happen. This mediation implies the grammatical articulation, that is, a disjunction of the human voice in fragments called phonemes that can be represented through graphic symbols (letters), and rearticulated according to a combined system that follows its own specific rules. When the movement of distinction and composition is given in language it takes the name of grammar, when it is given in thought, it is called logic. In this way humanization is grammatically captured and determined, and it is implied that the possibility to build a systemic path with access to the human, something like a humanizing method, exists. To learn how to read and write means, on one hand, to learn how to think correctly, and on the other hand, to learn to adequately interpret the world. The mediation of the

distance that separates the savage and passionate voice from the written, civilized, and rational word is also a path that crosses from ingenuity to criticism, from deception to truth. That is why the anthropological machine implies the idea that it can teach one how to think well and, through thinking well, it can create a more just society. Reading and writing correctly will help one to think correctly, and thinking correctly will help one to act in a rational and just way. Grammatical mediation implies something like a rational literacy that is also a political literacy and the modern educational system presents itself, according to the colonial-grammatical machine, as a device for the production of rational and democratic individuals. But such construction presupposes the infinite and imaginary reproduction of an emotive mass, an ignorant and passionate people whom are subject to the animal voice and disordered affects. Hence the frequent accusations of populism tied to the government of the savage and ignorant people, given that the illustrated elite conceive the latter as the rational manipulation of popular effects.

Within the limits the modern colonial machine draws, the lucid and democratic educator must necessarily presuppose a lack in the other, a weakness, immaturity, or ingenuity, that can be transformed into virtue, into knowledge, into critical judgment. If the educator cannot imagine an inferior Other, he cannot make him an object of his generosity and beneficial influence. Equality needs to be promised, but never realized, for the mechanism extracts its force from the desire to have equality and not from attaining it.

Thus, the modern anthropological machine is a machine of desire totally coherent with the system of production, circulation and mercantile consumption. As Foucault affirms, if capitalism has shown itself effective and resistant (in spite of all the misery it has produced) it is because it exercises its power in a positive way, not only reprimanding, but also, and especially, creating lack and desire, that is to say, modulating time as procrastination (“not yet”) and thus producing an infinitely renewable desire (“but maybe one day...”). Cultural consumption for example, is not radically different from any other type of consumption. To desire material goods or a desire to be cultured, critical, or educated are not very different desires. The machine works by producing desire for objects, for

prestige, for power, for new experiences, emotions, virtues, truth, or beauty. The important technique for the machine is that it infinitely reintroduces the lack, the promise, in order to administer yearning.

A set of questions is thus imposed upon us: is it possible to educate without belittling he who will be educated? I am not referring to education as training in a certain art, but rather education in the sense humanism has adopted for that term. Is it possible to educate without creating a fault in the other that would make intervention beneficial and necessary? How can we think of an education that does not imply the infinite reproduction of an inferior other? To conceive of this new education we will possibly need to abandon the idea that humanity until now has served as a lighthouse in educative processes, that is to say, abandon the idea that humanity is that which remains both intimate and a foreign un-humanity which is to be dominated and overcome. This would imply also abandoning the idea of a progressive conquest of humanity. Transcending the limits of modern education means thus, to dissolve, at the same time, its lights and shadows, abandoning both the ideal of the lettered, rational and conscious man, as well as the existence of a supposed affective disorderly mass ignorance. What is left to discover is the meaning that could be attributed to the word education under these conditions. ■

