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ANTONIO CASO: A REJECTION OF THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

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“El progreso (*pro* hacia adelante *gressus* marcha) no puede afirmarse como ley de la humanidad.”

CASO

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper¹ is to ascertain and analyze the *Idea of Progress* as found in the writings of Don Antonio Caso,² a Mexican philosopher and educator of the twentieth century. To this end Caso's concept of progress shall first be established and then related to his larger views on history and society, and his observations on the Mexican scene both past and present.³ At the close of the paper

¹ Perhaps in a discussion which has as its point of departure the idea of progress, this paper is a negative statement. But in view of the fact that our larger area of study is Latin America, an examination of Antonio Caso is well worth the effort, and in his own right as a representative of a tradition.

² Antonio Caso y Andrade was born on December 19, 1883 and died on March 6, 1946. He rarely left his native Mexico City. He received his degree in law. His most influential teacher was Justo Sierra. Caso repaid the debt to his mentor in the beautiful essay “Justo Sierra, el amante”.

He was appointed professor of philosophy in 1910 and held this post, along with other appointments, until his death. He often suffered from shifting political winds. The cause and the nature of these political embarrassments are obscure; they are referred to obliquely here and there.

Caso held various administrative posts: head of the National Preparatory School, Secretary and Rector of the National University, and Director of the University's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. During his life he received many honors, both at home and abroad. For a brief period he was appointed roving ambassador to Perú, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

Shortly before his death he was working on a series of lectures entitled, “The Problem of the Philosophy of History”. He would no doubt, at least in passing, have addressed himself to the question of progress. But in my opinion it is doubtful that he would have presented a radically different viewpoint. For further information on his life see Luis Garrido, *Antonio Caso una vida profunda* (México 1961) and the essay by the Spanish philosopher José Gaos “Las mocedades de Caso”, in Roberto Gómez Robledo, et. al. *Homenaje a Antonio Caso* (México, 1947) hereafter cited as *Homenaje*.

³ Antonio Caso has received the attention of a number of writers and his ideas have been examined to some extent. However, his rejection of progress has not been related to his other views. Hopefully this paper does. In the writing of this paper I am most heavily indebted to: Juan Manuel Terán, “Caso y la filosofía de la historia”; José Gaos, “Las mocedades de Caso” in Gómez Robledo, *Homenaje*; and Patrick Romanell, “The Christian Dualism of Antonio Caso”, in Romanell

a series of critical summaries and conclusions shall be presented and an attempt shall be made to relate Antonio Caso to the larger intellectual spectrum.

In the course of the analysis, scant attention shall be paid to biographical data (see footnote two) and to the writings of the man which are exclusively aesthetic and critical in nature. In addition, a general familiarity with modern Mexican history shall be assumed. If by chance the argument compels attention to any of these factors, the matter shall be dealt with in a footnote.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of progress holds that man in community, and man alone, is capable of infinite perfectability; and that continual amelioration occurs and that it is discernible and obtainable through the rational faculties of man. Optimism is the touchstone of this doctrine.⁴ Some, however, demur from this Penglossian perspective.

The idea of progress has within its premises two contradictory elements: the absolute and the relative. If their conflict is not resolved, the value of the abstraction as a conceptual frame of reference is negated. Both elements are due to the expression of progress as a continuum. On the one hand, an absolute is posited toward which the continuum is in motion; but on the other hand, the goal is relative to the notion made. Achilles never overtakes the hare. Thus the idea of progress is reduced to the most vain of philosophical conceits: a syllogism which denies its own premises. Pervading this concept is a nebulous teleological air which is at once distasteful and untenable to an age of quantum physics in which the only certainties are those of the abstruse mathematics of probability.

A REJECTION OF PROGRESS

The teleological aspect of the idea of progress leads Antonio Caso to reject the entire concept as a philosophical tool. He was aware of the significance of the concept of man's intellectual evolution and was acquainted with its historical trajectory.⁵ To him, it was

The Making of the Mexican Mind (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1952). The two monographs dealing with the subject's life and thought, Luis Garrido, *Antonio Caso una vida profunda* (México, 1961) and Rosa Krause de Koltenink, *La filosofía de Antonio Caso*, though enlightening do little more than provide background and sketch his ideas.

⁴ The best treatment available on the concept of progress is J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*. New York, 1955.

⁵ Antonio Caso, *El concepto de la historia universal y la filosofía de los valores*. México, 1933 — hereafter cited as *El concepto*, p. 15.

handmaiden to the philosophy of history which held that there was design and purpose in the historical continuum and which made of the abstraction "humanity" a concrete entity. The works *El concepto de la historia universal* and *La existencia como caridad* contain his most extensive considerations on the subject. In them he categorically denies the possibility of attaining the perfection of man, because in his opinion it implies an acceptance of a collective improvement which is verifiable through the course of history. This he disdained as a modern myth. It was his opinion that progress can only be considered within the premises of extreme rationalistic philosophies such as positivism. Socially he characterized it, somewhat disdainfully, as:

es la ilusión de la burguesía,
militante y triunfante.⁶

Caso pointed out that belief in progress had resulted from confusion between the technological and moral spheres, a confusion which could be dated as far back as the first Bacon. On examining three fields of man's endeavors, the technological, the philosophical and the moral, Caso could find evidence of progress only in the first.⁷ Neither philosophy, nor art, nor morality could demonstrate comparable advancement. After two thousand years, it is difficult to make an empirical evaluation between Democritus and Hegel. In the field of art, relativism reigns supreme for genius makes all works equal. Similarly, in the moral sphere, he found variety but not progress. Caso labeled as anthropomorphic vanity, all efforts to discover perfectability. On viewing history, the *pensador* agreed with Schopenhauer, and echoed the poet:

... a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

As can be seen from the foregoing, the eminent philosopher found himself in the worst of possible philosophical quandaries. In working his way clear of this intellectual morass, Caso established premises for a more vital relationship between man and universe, and in so doing, issued a call for a more positive dialogue among Mexican thinkers. To a certain extent, he gave impetus to the Mexican cultural renaissance which continues to this day.

His doubts on the validity of the idea of progress are not the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷ Caso, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*. México, 1943 — hereafter cited as *La existencia*, pp. 150-152.

whole, only a part of his larger philosophical opinions. Intimations of these doubts are found in the premises of his personal philosophy and in his discourse on history and society; and they cast a shadow on his reflection on México.

A PHILOSOPHIC SYNTHESIS

Accepting philosophy as that discipline which endeavors to establish the relationship between man and the universe, i. e., nature, arriving thereby at a verdict on life, philosophers may be separated into two broad camps: those who preach *attachment to life* and those who counsel *detachment from life*. In the latter group belongs Antonio Caso: He styled his philosophy *Cosmovisión cristiana*.⁸ He first wrought his synthesis in an attempt to exhibit the development of Christian Ideas and sentiments through the centuries,⁹ The cornerstone of his philosophy is that the universal law in operation is death; nature is in a constant process toward death.* In view of this, Caso concludes that man in his existence must somehow transcend the universal law; he must overcome time and nature.¹⁰ The methodology the Mexican selected was "intuitionism",¹¹ his general ethical outlook is an agnostic Christian¹² skepticism.

Before life and the world environment, Caso distinguished two attitudes which he generalized as the "Christian" and the "Utilitarian". The latter was life as economy, the governing principle being *life: the most for the least effort*.¹³ In contrast to it, arose the Christian attitude which views life as charity. The categorical imperative as formalized by Caso in this case is, *life: the least for the most effort*.¹⁴ In sum, his synthesis holds that existence could only achieve meaning through *caridad*, the virtue of self-denial. In this effort, man is alone.

Along with the antithesis between the utilitarian and the moral, there are those between the aesthetic and the logical and between

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ It is significant to note that those who are distinguished in this outline are nay-sayers to life, Christian pessimists such as John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assis, Kierkegaard, Tolstoi, etc.

* the energy of the universe is constantly diminishing.

¹⁰ Caso, *La existencia*, pp. 25-32.

¹¹ Intuition is a direct apprehension of truth which is not the result of reasoning or sense perception; an immediate, non symbolic, non discussive penetration into the nature of the object.

¹² Caso's religious beliefs are difficult to define. He was not an orthodox Catholic. He considered himself an agnostic Christian. He called himself "Christian" because he believed that Christ exemplified the most ethical of lives. In ethics we should strive to imitate him.

¹³ Caso, *La existencia*, p. 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

the metaphysical and the historical. He believed that the task of philosophy is to synthesize these contrasts through the employment of intuition. He never did; hence, the inconsistencies in his work. Caso, in effect, presupposes a dualism: Culture and Nature. However, he apparently did not recognize this. His thought moves on two planes one is the universal, the realm of the spirit in which man is alone; the other is the plane of the biological, the social and the concrete. He rarely bridges the gap.

The American philosopher, Patrick Romanell, has distinguished three stages in Caso's intellectual development: 1) the anti-intellectualist; 2) the pragmatist, and 3) the dualist.¹⁵ Our reading has led us to believe that this is too fine and arbitrary a distinction and comes from a consideration of works individually. Considering his avowed intuitionism and mysticism, he could never be considered a pragmatist: the dualism was always present in his thought and, from the time of his rejection of positivism, he remained an anti-intellectualist. From the beginning, Caso chose a philosophical path and stuck to it.

In sum, Caso's general philosophy is a call to individual realization; in essence it is a rejection of the world. His view of history and society, as well as his observations on México, were deeply affected by this.

A VIEW OF HISTORY AND SOCIETY

History, to Caso, is an effort at reconstruction of the particular; a study of particular acts related in time.¹⁶ As such, it is not a science, but a very special form of knowledge. In itself, as a process, it has neither sense nor value; it acquires these only through the individual —man provides contingency for the events isolated in time. If it were to have independent validity, one would have to accept the abstractions, "humanity" and "progress" as concrete; they are, however, merely ontological notions, illusions. In Caso's view, the term "philosophy of history" is a contradiction, since philosophy is a universal synthesis and history has reference only to things and beings unique and individual whose relation is contingent: Again, it is an individualistic view:

Toda esta marcha de la historia, toda esta sucesión de sociedades, Estados, naciones, religiones, filosofías, técnicas, artes, litias y ciencias por todos elaborada cobra sentido, únicamente en la integración de individuos humanos superiores. Por esto se ve que la humanidad no va reali-

¹⁵ Patrick Romanell, *The Making of the Mexican Mind*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Caso, *El concepto*, pp. 136-137.

zando ningún plan o propósito trascendente. Su fin es inmanente: realizar hombres cabales.¹⁷

Caso relegates society, like history, to a subordinate role in the process of man's individual development. He acknowledges that man is a social being, but he is also a spiritual being, and the spiritual takes precedence. Society is not an end in itself; neither it nor culture, of which it partakes, are justifiable except as they serve man. Caso conceives societal values as norms existing between the human and the divine; they are real and objective and serve to normalize relationships between men by counseling mutual respect.

In view of his larger philosophy, it is not surprising that Caso could regard the State as a necessary evil. He visualized the state as the formalization of social intercourse amongst men. In its purpose there was no equivocation:

El Estado es la fuerza coactiva
que debe garantizar a cada quien,
la posibilidad de desarrollar su
propia personalidad.¹⁸

All forms of government are bad, or at least imperfect; government is a sad necessity of communal life. The ideal of sovereign individual liberty is very far off. For Caso, civil and political liberties are only means to the achievement of personal development. To this end the state must preserve liberty of conscience, private property and political freedom. He believed that the best government would be one of enlightened despotism, but even this would be the lesser of many evils.¹⁹

Of the many political alternatives, Caso acknowledges Democracy as the most viable, given the realities of the twentieth century.²⁰ Democracy is the vehicle for individual self-identification with the governing process, an irritating necessity in Caso's opinion. Technological change and the resulting social upheaval have wrought havoc on former traditions and ideals. In surveying this century's society Caso saw only one ideal, only one tradition: the masses. This made democracy imperative. However, Caso observed that the very nature of mass culture will prohibit its perfection. He posed the internal conflict of democracy as this: Modern social and psychological temperament demand it, yet the reality of poverty and ignorance make it difficult to fully develop. Nevertheless he counseled that it must

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

¹⁸ Caso, *La persona humana y el Estado totalitario*. México, 1941, p. 201.

¹⁹ Caso, *Discursos heterogéneos*. México, 1925, p. 29.

²⁰ Caso, *México* (apuntamientos de cultura patria). México, 1943 — hereafter cited as *México*, p. 7.

be accepted and be given loyalty, for in the face of reality it is at once a necessity and an ideal.

In the concept of progress, man has a positive relation with society; man improves as society improves. There is a mutual beneficial intercourse. History is testimony of this in the past, and sheds light on future development. Reason is the key for the interpretation of history and the tool for the establishment of the proper relations between man and society. Life is seen in positive terms. Caso establishes his philosophic premise on a negative view of life and in his quest for meaning in the individual existences he rejects society and history. The *Pensador* has convinced himself that man can create good only within himself and in this effort he cannot depend on reason.

OBSERVATION ON MÉXICO

Turning to México, the mild, individual, Christian skepticism of Antonio Caso served him no less well in letter, but perhaps not in spirit. If there are contradictions in his views on society and history, they occur when he deals with problems of his native land. Barely would he admit to even the possibility of material and political improvement in the Mexican situation, and yet, reading between the lines, one almost senses, on his part, a desire to believe in positive cultural and moral progress. But in the end he remains faithful to his avowed skeptical individualism. He concludes that national problems will never be solved in his final analysis they are "Un arcano problema de amor".²¹

On consideration of his own country Antonio Caso at times displayed acute perceptivity; on other occasions his personal intellectual proclivities led him to rather unreal considerations. Perhaps this is because he could never bridge the gap between the ideal and the concrete. A biographical incident in his life may illustrate the point: In the 1910 elections, he was in the forefront of the Re-eleccionista * ranks, editor of a party organ and leader of the younger generation. At the opening session of the party convention he made an elegant speech in behalf of electoral and constitutional liberties; he could not understand the wild applause of the galleries ** and the stony silence of his fellow delegates.²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

* The sham party advocating the re-election of Porfirio Díaz. In later years he repudiated his adherence to the regime.

** Madero was already developing his campaign.

²² José Gaos, "Mocedades de Antonio Caso", in Gómez Robledo, *Homenaje*, p. 38.

His general pessimism did not preclude his making perceptive remarks. Caso believed that two factors operated to the detriment of the national scene: one was the propensity of the Mexican mentality to a *Bovarismo nacional*,²³ and the other was the sad fate of societies such as México to live at *destiempo*. More often than not such societies are out-of-step with the ideological march of the more advanced societies, often necessitating violent remedial action in order to keep abreast. He believes that both *Bovarismo* and *destiempo* are rooted in the Conquest, which initiated the assimilation of two radically opposed societies.²⁴ The synthesis of these two groups, in his opinion, is still far off; and not until it is accomplished will México be able to embark upon a more orderly evolutionary development. Above all, cultural unity must be achieved so that the country can face the future with one countenance. As yet México has not realized, has not discovered, its true identity. To Caso, Mexican history, politics, and society gave ample evidence of this lack of self-awareness. Mexicans suffer from a myopic vision that has frequently led them to place their faith in a lie, an involvement often resulting in death and sacrifice. His contribution to the national dialogue lies in the fact that he counseled generations of Mexican students to, above all, root their thought in the national reality; that they must actively seek to form and direct the intellectual currents of their time—but as Mexicans. He did not ask that they accept his own ideas, but only that they take into account the national needs in forming their own philosophies.

Caso maintains that México has experienced three ideologies:²⁵ *Catolicismo*, *Jacobinismo*, y *Positivismo*, and is now in the midst of a fourth, *Revolucionarismo*. The nation never fully assimilated the first three; what it will do with the fourth the future will decide. Catholic humanitarian ideals never entirely took hold in Indian Mexico. Caso considers the nineteenth century Jacobin liberals as Don Quixotes after the chimera of liberty. They distinguished themselves in the twin malaise of *Bovarismo* and *destiempo*. To them, the word was reality. The Indian past, the colonial experience, the very society around them was dismissed, and the Constitution of 1857 came into being. The skeptic Caso is amazed at groups of men seriously proposing to legislate the perfect government. To Caso, the imperial interlude was no less of a Quixotic venture. Positivism was as absurd as Jacobinistic idealism and lacked the saving nobility of the latter. Under the banner of *organic progress* and *social stability*, it served the interests of an extremely mediocre

²³ Caso, *Discursos a la nación mexicana*. México, 1922, p. 80. After Flaubert's character Madame Bovary who lived in a make believe world.

²⁴ Caso, *México*, p. 24.

²⁵ Caso, *Discursos a la nación mexicana*, p. 53.

bourgeoisie. Positivism in his eyes was a disruption of the normal intellectual evolution.²⁶

Demonstrably, Jacobinism and positivism had failed. In the Mexico of Caso's day, it is the ideology of the Revolution which demands allegiance. The Revolution is a justifiable moral reaction, its task is no less than the construction of the foundation of the future. Caso warned, however, that to be viable a creed must be rooted in the imperatives of the national realities and must partake of the ideal and the concrete: "Alas y plomo".²⁷ These two must be cautiously mixed.

In one essay, Caso outlines a number of factors that must be taken into account in the formalization of a political structure.²⁸ These are: the army, capital, labor, the Catholic church, and the United States. Recognizing the general nationalistic milieu, Caso admits, the last two must be considered, but not formally recognized. In effect, Caso is suggesting the vague outlines of the then nascent PRI. As far as current ideologies he felt that perhaps Socialism had relevance and justice. Any ideology, the philosopher pointed out, must pay special heed to two areas: education and industry. There must be an industrial and educational patriotism. For México, he stated, the day of the warrior and the apostle are over; it is now that of the industrialist.

Caso points out that through the centuries México has sought the ideal of liberty; the various revolts have had it as a goal. In a skeptical way he suggests that perhaps the lie will, in time, become a truth, but he very much doubts it. Yet, nonetheless, the ideal must be sought. In order to accelerate the process, Caso states that three spheres must be satisfied: the economic, the judicial and the intellectual; in other words, the nation must endeavor to obtain wealth, justice, and enlightenment.²⁹ These he believes are found already in most of the western democracies. Díaz began the obtainment of the first, but his error was in ignoring the other three. Madero deserves praise for calling attention to the disequilibrium, if for nothing else, in Caso's eyes. Mexico must develop the three spheres; if not, it will continue as before. Caso advised his students that México is imperfect, but this does not make of it a freak among nations; it is one among many. Considering the liabilities under which it labors, this is understandable. He told his listeners that if they wished to improve Mexico to begin with themselves.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁷ Caso, *México*, p. 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Philosophically, Caso's thesis is, in many instances, analogous to *Idealistic Pessimism* and *Religious Perfectionism*. The former, as exemplified in Schopenhauer, maintains that nature and man are manifestations of will, and therefore, existence is a never-ceasing struggle, meaningless in itself. Salvation temporarily may be obtained through denial of the will-to-live and aesthetic contemplation of ideas. Caso combines this with the more transcendent metaphysical way of Christian self-denial, as exhibited in Aquinas. This perfectionism defines purpose as supernatural and subordinates the natural; it gives as a guide to the moral life, the cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity.

Caso offered a moral ideal. Since the universe is a process toward death, in his brief life man must transcend the universe or he lives meaninglessly. Through a life of charity and self-denial, the individual provides himself with purpose. For Caso, sense is good action. Each man alone must be his own saint.

Caso's philosophy is a moral reaction in face of world circumstance. Reflecting of the World War and its aftermath, he concluded the age to be one of decline, with moral magnanimity absent and with vague and sterile ideals. The two contending ideologies, Capitalism and Communism were only shades apart; their base was the same, avarice and selfishness.³⁰ These same vices were no less evident in his own country. The first edition of *La existencia como caridad* which propounded his basic thesis, came out in 1915 when the savagery of the Revolution was at its height, as the country was being devastated in the three-cornered war between Villa, Zapata and Carranza. Mexico was a part of his pessimism.

This writer cannot accept the efforts of Zea³¹ to make the philosopher into a nationalist spokesman. This comes from considering exclusively his essays on national affairs and often taking statements out of context. Caso was aware of his country's travails but would never consider himself merely a nationalist spokesman. The leading intellectual of a country undergoing radical transformation was not vitally concerned or involved.³²

Caso, upon occasion, could make perceptive generalizations on the Mexican phenomena. But they were just that, generalizations. His

³⁰ Caso, *Discursos heterogéneos*, p. 45.

³¹ For his argument see Leopoldo Zea "Antonio Caso y la mexicanidad" in Gómez Robledo, *Homenaje*, pp. 95-108.

³² For a very caustic view of Caso with special reference to his intellectual pretensions and ivory tower attitude, see Antenógenes Pérez y Soto, *La simulación filosófica y educativa del Lic. Antonio Caso*. México, 1919.

comments were always on the abstract plane; never did they deal with concrete means, problems or solutions. He considered himself an academic philosopher and so acted: "Serenó meditador intelectual". His contribution to the national dialogue is, nonetheless, not insignificant. He is one of the initiators of the search for national identity; he urged concern for: "México y lo mexicano...", though he himself did not practice what he preached. He taught several generations of Mexican intellectuals that regardless of what avenue they took in their quest their base should be their own native environment. A list of his more distinguished students is nearly a who's who of Mexican intellectual and political life. He was more than a professor to many of these; for the more serious and outstanding, he cultivated a life-long friendship.

As an intellectual, he was well-acquainted with the concept of progress, its origins, development and significance. But he could not accept it as valid, his rejection was consistent with his philosophy and his views on history and society. Though one senses, in his writings with reference to Mexico, that at times, he wished that his conviction would be otherwise. There is no doubt of his perceptivity concerning the historical and contemporary travails of his country, and that he earnestly sought to provide insight and solutions to the national problems; but his personal inclinations and philosophical orientation precluded the suggestion of viable alternatives. In a world of hard and ugly facts, mystics have little to suggest.

Antonio Caso chose a different route. In action, he does not cut the figure of the romantic and heroic Martí; in style he does not breathe the fire of the satanic iconoclasm of González Prada. Instead of the masses, he chose the individual; instead of the material, the spiritual. Life to Antonio Caso was:

"un arcano problema de amor".

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