Things I Have Learned from Interesting People

An Interview with Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz



Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz in an official photograph, courtesy of the Fundación Disenso.

Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz *is the academic director of the Instituto Superior de Sociología, Economía y Política (ISSEP) in Madrid. He is a professor in the postgraduate program Expert in Social Communication at the Pontifical University of Salamanca. He has been a Lonergan Post-Doctoral Fellow at Boston College and a postdoctoral researcher under the direction of Gianni Vattimo at the University of Turin. Among his books are* Sapere aude, o ¿cabe llamarnos aún ilustrados? *(Dare to know, or Can We Still Call Ourselves Enlightened?);* Reglas. Una introducción a la hermenéutica de manos de Wittgenstein y Sherlock Holmes *(Rules: An Introduction to Hermeneutics Through Wittgenstein and Sherlock Holmes); and* Normatividad, interpretación y praxis *(Normativity, Interpretation, and Praxis). He is a regular contributor to the digital newspaper* The Objective, *as well as to various television channels. We discuss his latest book,* Cosas que he aprendido de gente interesante *(Things I Have Learned from Interesting People).*

In your book, you mention that Nietzsche said every era has a disguise. What is the disguise of our era?

Following Nietzsche's simile, the peculiarity of ours is that we can use all the others. The incorrect way to use a disguise would be to believe that we are returning to that era, and the correct way would be to change disguises according to needs. The characteristic of our era is that we have an entire wardrobe of disguises at our disposal, and there is no official uniform.

Is that the disguise of postmodernity?

It's that Nietzsche speaks of postmodernity in the 19th century. He thinks that human beings have discovered history and are oppressed by it because the 19th century is the century of history; people suddenly discover that we depend on history, not just on nature or society. And there Hegel is very clear, or Marx with a historical narrative of oppression that will be overcome by communism, which will represent the end of history; an end of history that, in another sense, Fukuyama also announces much later. Architecture and painting are also historicist, with neo-Gothic, neo-Romanesque, and neo-Renaissance styles, and great paintings recreate historical motifs. For Nietzsche, such historical weight prevents creativity because we are aware of how much precedes us, and that does not allow us to create anything new; that is, historical consciousness prevents us from making history. That's why he talks about playing with historical disguises, taking advantage of that consciousness to create something new by combining old fragments. All of this is already postmodern.

Fukuyama's end of history, although an end in a more ideological sense, has not come to pass. But a few years after his book, wokeism has tried to end history, or even biology, and has become a new religion.

Yes; if we had discussed this in the '90s, we would have stopped there, but we wouldn't have imagined what was coming. Nevertheless, deep down, Fukuyama also spoke in terms similar to Nietzsche; in fact, his book *The Last Man* is a clear reference to one of the last chapters of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and he speaks of the postmodern man who doesn't fight for anything in general and who is non-violent due to sheer incapacity. It's a very contemporary vision: the man without strong convictions is not willing to risk more. But in 2025, we must add something called wokeism that doesn't want to play with disguises, nor be flexible, and that takes advantage of the lack of dogmas or strong beliefs to impose a dogma and a strong belief—a new rigidity that recalls old Puritanism. That postmodernity, combined with a democracy lacking strong convictions that lets itself be carried by the majority, empties the public space, culture, nations, communities, families, and our own minds. Taking advantage of that vacuum, wokeism arrives.

We see this in the case of political parties. The old right-wing parties cannot be forceful because they would see themselves as totalitarian; but, at the same time, they face parties that do not recognize their right to exist in a bourgeois and democratic society where everyone is free in their home and debates what to do in the public space. No; now we are told what we must do in our homes and private lives.

It's not the first time; in the 1930s, the classical Right wanted to play by the rules, but the revolutionary Left had other rules.

Yes; with the difference that, back then, there were many strong ideas in competition. There



BELOW:
A theater company, l'Arche de Noe, performing in the cloister of the **Abbey of Moissac**. They wear big papier-mâché heads modeled after figures of saints from the facade of the Abbey. But they also represent the former pilgrims along the road of Saint James. Photo by Francois LE DIASCORN/ Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

was still a democratic fervor willing to fight, like Churchill, against a revolutionary Left and fascism. Now we are lax and without convictions, and whoever arrives with a strong program of 'social transformation,' has a much easier path. Moreover, when someone has strong convictions, the moderate Right immediately points fingers along with the Left: 'fascists!' That Right has gotten itself into a false dilemma, into an alley where either they must walk toward the extreme Left's target or, if they change direction, they are called fascists; they can only keep advancing. This is demonstrated in the European Parliament, where the *Populars* prefer to vote with the group that includes Bildu, rather than with Patriots for Europe or ECR.

Returning to your book: how did you choose the different characters?

I chose the characters based on the theme. When dealing with each of the themes, I realize that I am using the wardrobe of disguises like Nietzsche, using historical consciousness, and I refer to all those from whom I have learned. Their inclusion in the book is a kind of recognition for having helped me realize where things come from.

"Only the rich can afford the luxury of not having a homeland." This is one of the most famous quotes by Ramiro Ledesma, and you use it in your book. Why?

In a lax world, if you have a good economic situation, you can easily dispense with the homeland, with God, or even with the family. The rich have greater ease in not feeling nostalgia for strong bonds, while the poor are left unprotected. We see it every day: whom does the delinquency from outside affect when the homeland is dissolving? The humblest neighborhoods. That approach, which Ramiro captures in that phrase, is brilliant and announces what we are now suffering. I combine this with what I discuss in other chapters about the middle classes, and it is that those rich will be fewer and fewer, and those poor will be more and more of us. It also connects with the chapter related to elites, where I talk about luxury beliefs, the "luxury beliefs" of Rob Henderson, which are ideas that you can only sustain if you are rich and that you defend to show that you are rich. Now it is easy to use material symbols of status, so the rich who want to truly differentiate themselves increasingly resort, according to Henderson, to ideological symbols of status: I can afford this belief, and you cannot. For example, I can afford to say that the family doesn't matter, that it's something obsolete and medieval, because I am rich. The idea that the homeland doesn't exist is a "luxury belief."

The idea is of the 'citizen of the world,' who is in a hotel in Paris one day, another day in Berlin, and the next in Rome—but one must be rich to be such a citizen of the world.

Of course; or when a rich person boasts of the large number of people from other cultures they know thanks to their travels and talks about how cultural differences don't exist. If we transfer this to a humble neighborhood, we see that there are also many people from different cultures, but despite being surrounded by them, the possibility of establishing a relationship is much more remote. In an elitist environment, everyone is very similar, but when you are not rich, everything is very different.

You use Greta Thunberg to talk about right-wing environmentalism. Unfortunately, most people identify environmentalism as a left-wing idea.

Because of that false prejudice, there are already right-wing people who repudiate environmentalism. Repudiating leftist environmentalism is correct because it is perverted, but environmentalism *per se*—that is, defending nature, the beauty of the world, and God's creation—is something profoundly conservative. Even *conservative* and *conservationist* have the same etymology. The Left is parasitic on great ideas, which in some way corroborates that the great ideas are on the other side.

You say that your purpose with this book is to present these characters to the reader so that they can better understand the world in which they live and so that they can better themselves.

Yes, in the last chapter, there is the reference that this is the West, the civilization in which we are. I want to share with the reader the same experience that I have had while writing the book, an experience of constant debt, of gratitude for being the heir to our entire civilization. If you are aware of that heritage, you are willing to fight for it, to improve and reform what is necessary to make it stronger. That's why, in the last chapter, I take the two figures that are most representative of the West: Socrates and Jesus.

I combine both using an idea from Anatole France: Socrates represents irony, but not a sarcastic or destructive irony, but irony as detachment from things to rethink them; Socrates is Athens, is Greece, is reason. And Jesus represents compassion. Irony and compassion must be combined, because an excess of compassion leads us, for example, to wokeism. Irony is critical and rational, and it allows us to use compassion intelligently, as the classical tradition defends: I must have compassion for those who deserve it. This sounds very obvious, but wokeism tells you to have compassion for a multimillionaire because she is a woman or for a criminal because of his race. Quoting the classics, we must apply *prudential* compassion.

Wokeism has brought tremendous discredit upon many universities that have allowed themselves simply to go with the flow, and there are shelves full of books defending all kinds of madness. If you had written this book not now, but in 20 or 30 years, would there be a blank page for all the damage this has caused to Western thought?

I think it's enough to enter a university classroom, especially in the United States, to see it. The process of destruction of our civilization, protagonized by exaggerated postmoderns, combined with the construction of a new civilization—the woke project—has advanced quite a bit on both sides. Of course, there has been resistance because we are talking about a civilization of 1,600 years, taking as reference the 4th century and Constantine, the moment when Athens and Rome mix with the biblical message, what we call Christendom; it is very difficult to defeat in a few decades. The question is how long those pockets of resistance will last, and that's why it is necessary to protect them, nurture them, and talk about them—here comes the function of the book—and how much we are going to recover from the lost ground. With Trump, we have gotten excited because a fallen column has been recovered, but there are still domes and chapels to recover from our civilizational cathedral. The woke project as a long-term civilization cannot survive, because it would self-destruct, but in historical terms, a failed civilization can last centuries, and that means many lost generations.

There is a very French debate about all this. Will a woke civilization come, or will a foreign civilization replace us, Islam, with strong principles? Michel Houellebecq defends that it will be Islam, and on the other side is Chantal Delsol, with her book *The End of Christendom*, who defends that wokeism will triumph because the Muslims themselves will become woke-ized and Christendom has already died. There is a bit of both; in France, the number of non-religious or atheists among Muslims in the first generation was 11%, and in the second it was 33%.

But, curiously, many jihadists come from that group, from those who did not consider themselves religious.

Yes, this is also a debate in France, because many terrorists do not come from precisely fundamentalist lives. In fact, to a certain extent, they would be nihilists, who destroy because they think society has not accepted them or that it is decadent, but they do not have a strong faith, but rather an identitarian weariness toward what is outside. It is the thesis of André Glucksmann in *Dostoïevski à Manhattan* (Dostoevsky in Manhattan), that the 9/11 terrorists were nihilists who deep down only wanted to destroy.

This brings us back to what we mentioned earlier about the moderate Right and the problem it has with firm beliefs. Sometimes, those who destroy do not have firm beliefs, and the lack of those beliefs has led us to a world like the one we are in now. As Hannah Arendt points out, Nazism or communism did not triumph because people had firm beliefs; quite the opposite, they triumphed because people bought this damaged merchandise due to the lack of firm beliefs. ■

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