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## THE DAWN OF THE ECO-SOCIAL DEBATE IN IBERO-AMERICA\*\*

EDUARDO NICOL VERSUS ORTEGA Y GASSET

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**Abstract:** A considerable prolegomenon to the debates surrounding the eco-social crisis in Latin America can be found in Nicol's early critique of Ortega y Gasset's ideas on technique. Considering Ortega's theory, we will discuss how Nicol argues the need to move away from the modern assumptions implicit in contemporary culture and philosophy. Nicol problematizes a certain univocity in the conception of human action as a technical domain and points to the need to recover the independence of its ethical and moral dimensions. The civilizing ideal (present in Ortega) of humanizing and molding the world by projecting human ends onto it is unsustainable. It leads to an eco-social crisis that is difficult to overcome. For this reason, Nicol will propose ways of inhabiting that are not related to this ideal of progress and technical mastery, but to moral progress based on the expressive and communal dimension inherent in the human being himself.

**Keywords:** Eco-social Crisis, Ethics, Latin America, Nicol, Ortega, Technics.

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### INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of his career, Eduardo Nicol kept a clear distance from Ortega y Gasset. His work was characterized by adopting positions largely distant from or opposed to Ortega's. What is little known, however, is that Nicol was one of the first philosophers to receive Ortega's ideas on technique critically. A year after *Meditation on Technique's* publication (1939) in Argentina, the Catalan philosopher published a review in which he problematized a fundamental aspect of Ortega's ideas: their implicit theory of action.

This review is of special interest, because it shows how Nicol detects one of the most problematic aspects of Ortega's philosophy of technique very early on. The Catalan philosopher perceives these reflections as based on an

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ideal humanity, defined by the capacity for technical mastery of the world. Nicol criticizes Ortega for putting forward a univocal conception of action as technical action and leaving aside its moral dimension.

From these coordinates, Nicol will devote a large part of his work to criticizing civilizing projects based on the technical mastery of nature. In his eyes, they become unsustainable, leading to an eco-social crisis and a threat of civilizational collapse. For his part, Nicol will argue that human action is not only technical but also moral or self-transforming. In this sense, he will point out the need to articulate vital projects focussed on the development of this sphere of action and not on the implementation of a growing development of the technical transformation of the world. This fact may allow us to interpret Nicol's critique of Ortega as a prolegomenon to the debates surrounding the eco-social crisis in Latin America.

#### ORTEGA'S SHADOW IS LONG.

NICOL: AN EARLY CRITICAL READER OF THE MEDITATION ON TECHNIQUE

This section will analyze Nicol's review of Ortega's *Meditation on Technique*, published in 1940, to question Ortega's possible influence on Nicol. It will show Nicol's problematization of Ortega's univocal understanding of human action and how this problematization connects with Nicol's later theoretical proposal and with his critique of the unsustainability of the modern ideal of progress and technical mastery.

In his *Sociology of Philosophies*, Randall Collins (2000) points out that thought is a great conversation. Authors elaborate their ideas and position themselves in an ongoing dialogue with their peers. The ultimate aim is to make their ideas become a vehicle for the conversation. This way, the thinker's work and position would be consolidated and socially validated. This fact allows us to understand the multiple interrelationships between philosophers' different positions in the face of certain problems. Yet, above all, it allows us to account for the generative dynamism that underlies intellectual production in its history.

Within Spanish philosophy, José Ortega y Gasset played a fundamental role. It could well be said that he was one of the key figures in the constitution of this field, which owes to him its consolidation and international positioning. However, not all philosophy in Spain was Ortega. The country had other relevant intellectuals and currents of thought, especially in Barcelona, the second city of the peninsula and home of the Barcelona School.

All in all, Ortega set the standard that all Spanish thinkers had to deal with—either follow, re-signify, or criticize. Ortega constituted, to use

his own words, an authentic “philosophical mountain range” within the discipline’s geography in Spanish — a mountain range with which every passerby would have to deal in a certain way (Ortega y Gasset, 2006: 137; Sánchez Cuervo, 2019: 613).

Eduardo Nicol was a Catalan thinker from the Barcelona School (Linares, 2008). He developed all of his work in exile, and, from the beginning, was distant from Ortega’s theoretical positions (Sánchez Cuervo, 2019). Nicol never directly polemicalised with the latter, but he did have serious philosophical clashes with his main disciple: José Gaos, with whom he shared a faculty in Mexico (González Hinojosa, 2017). Studying the imprint of Ortega’s thoughts on Nicol’s would take up an entire doctoral thesis and lead to a systematic review of their solutions to the most complex theoretical problems of the twentieth century. However, there is a very specific motif in the thought of the two philosophers to which we would like to draw attention in this work: technique. Nicol’s critique of Ortega in this respect is highly topical, as it implies a pioneering reflection on the limits of the modern ideal of technological mastery and its eco-social unsustainability.

Ortega and Nicol approach the problem of technique from very different and, to some extent, opposite perspectives. Moreover, Nicol was a very early reader of Ortega’s *Meditation on Technique*; he reviewed this work just one year after its publication. This review, published in 1940 and undiscovered by specialists until now, already contains what will be the core of Nicol’s thoughts on the question. Therefore, it allows us to understand to what extent Nicol’s most original ideas on the subject are a critical response to Ortega’s.

The review was published in issue 3 of the *Revista Mexicana de Formación*. Nicol deals with *Ensimismamiento y alteración* and *Meditación de la técnica*. These are two independent texts, but they were published together in 1939 by Espasa-Calpe Argentina. The review is structured as follows: first, Nicol gives a succinct and somewhat tendentious account of Ortega’s main ideas from the two texts, then makes a personal and critical reflection on them. In broad terms, Nicol critiques the theory of action that follows from Ortega’s ideas on technique. The Catalan problematizes the univocal meaning that Ortega confers in human action by relating it solely and directly to technique and the transformation of the world. Nicol, for his part, will point out the need to consider theory itself in its ethical and self-conscious dimensions as an independent form of human action and not reducible to technique.

Ortega begins his theme of self-absorption as he usually does: affirming with irony and a certain verve that all those who have dealt with it in the past have done so improperly or insufficiently. Thus, we discover that sociologists have not yet described what society is. From there, the analysis and the chain of ideas begin. Let us distinguish between man and beast. The latter lives in perpetual fear of the world; it does not live from within itself but is dependent on the other, altered. Man can think and meditate; that is to say, he can turn away from the other, from that which is outside, and go within himself, and become self-absorbed. Because he can carry out this operation, he can undertake the reverse: he can object to things, transform them, and elevate himself to the other, that is to say, humanizing the world. But this is not achieved by the simple fact of existing; to achieve it is a task for man, a task that he performs in three different moments, which are repeated throughout human history: 1st alteration: man is lost among things; 2nd self-absorption: man withdraws into his intimacy and speculates on things, forms ideas of them; and 3rd action: man returns to the world with a project or plan of action. Therefore, man's destiny is action: we do not live to think but to survive.

[...]

When he exercises his reason, man is unlike a fish in water. Man is not a rational animal, like the swimming animal fish (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 116g).

As Nicol rightly points out, Ortega understands human action as a single process characterized by three moments. Each moment is distinguished by a specific way of relating mankind to the real: a first moment, in which mankind is practically dissolved in the world, lost among things; a second moment, in which mankind manages to distance itself from the real and reflect on it; and a third moment, in which mankind applies its ideas to the world, humanizing it, organizing it based on his projects.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, for Ortega, human action is a question of transforming the real and thought is a moment within this process. Thought is the moment that allows mankind to become more effective and that distinguishes humans from other animals. Since animals live without taking distance from the real, they are “pending on the other, altered.”

As Nicol rightly points out, Ortega tries to overcome substantialism and rationalism in this way. There are no ideas that adhere to stable substances, but these are the fruit of mankind's self-absorption and detachment from reality. Reason is not the defining faculty of what is human, but simply an instrument of human life to establish itself more comfortably and efficiently

<sup>1</sup>A systematic study of Ortega's philosophy of technique can be found in Alonso, 2021.

in the world. Now, Ortega tries to overcome both philosophical diatribes from a basic presupposition that Nicol criticizes. This involves relating human dignity and fulfillment to the capacity to impose on the real and mold and adapt it to human ends.

The animal has needs to eat, warm up, etc. The man also has them, but there are other priorities besides these needs. The animal has nothing else to do. On the other hand, man has to satisfy these needs to live, which is the original need of all the others. Man lives because he wants to, and when circumstances, nature, and his surroundings are not enough for him to live, he does not let himself die like the animal he invents. And if it is sufficient and surplus to requirements, he limits himself and restrains himself.

These acts that man invents and executes have a common structure: they modify the circumstance. They are technical acts, but the technical is not exhausted in them. They are also technical acts that man executes to achieve the superfluous. The superfluous is as necessary as the primarily necessary (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 116g).

It is not only that man must transform the real to overcome the limitations that affect his survival. It is not only that truly human life emerges from the space liberated by technology in response to these needs. Rather, it is that this new space will only be valuable and significant, in turn, when it makes it possible for man to transform reality more and more. In other words, when a greater humanization of the real is possible, that is to say a growing absorption of the real within the human. Ortega understands that the dignity of life lies in its capacity to impose itself on circumstance.

The animal cannot withdraw from its repertoire of natural acts, from nature, because it is nothing but nature, and if it distances itself from it, it would have nowhere to go. But man, it seems, is not his circumstance, but is only immersed in it and can at times step out of it, and withdraw into himself, withdraw, become self-absorbed, and occupy himself only with things that are not directly and immediately attending to the imperatives or needs of his circumstance. In these extra or supernatural moments of self-absorption and withdrawal, he invents and executes this second repertoire of acts: he makes a fire, builds a house, cultivates the fields, and builds the car.

[...] Well, these are the technical acts specific to man. The whole of them is technique, which we can, of course, define as the reform that man imposes on nature to satisfy his needs. These, as we have seen, were imposed by nature on man. Man responds by imposing a change on nature or circumstance that leads to the creation between nature and man of a new nature, a super-nature (Ortega y Gasset, 2015: 62–63).

Human life is, therefore, distinguished by the fact that it can introduce its being into the world, and it does so in various ways in different periods of history. Each epoch is marked by a specific project or way of facing reality. This creative activity of vital projects is human action itself and is what guides technique. Human action is a self-conscious project of humanizing, transforming reality. Consequently, action is technical. In other words, the technique is — for Ortega — man’s way of being in the world as the basis of his transformative praxis. In the words of Nicol,

What is most important is, first, the breadth with which Ortega approached the problem of technique and, consequently, his way of articulating and metaphysically grounding human action. From all this, we obtain the principle of a philosophy of action, which starts from a radical distinction between man and the world and considers technique the link between the two (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 1171).

In his review, Nicol problematizes this philosophy of action. The Catalan philosopher points out that human action is based not only on the transformative praxis of reality. Theory also constitutes an independent and differentiated form of action and, consequently, a manifestation of human freedom. For Nicol, theory is not simply a moment of transformative action — the moment in which the project that transforms reality is articulated. Rather, human action occurs in different ways, and theory is one of them.

Theory is an independent manifestation of human freedom, likewise the creation or transformation of reality. However, Nicol specifically understands theory by conceiving it as the condition of possibility for the ethical and moral growth of the human being. Through theory, man becomes aware of his freedom and exercises it by choosing and rejecting options. Hence, in contrast to Ortega, Nicol understands that the greatest dignity of human beings lies in their capacity to forge an ethos and to produce themselves consciously and freely.

In short, Nicol replies to Ortega that human action is not only the transformation of reality, but also the action and transformation of oneself. This shaping action of personal intimacy differs from technique. For this reason, Nicol questions the weight that the philosopher from Madrid confers on it in his “metaphysics of human action.” For him, technology will play an important part in the configuration of man because of its role in the transformation of reality. Yet it cannot play a central role, since human action goes beyond this transformation. It also encompasses one’s self-production and the forging of one’s ethos.

Therefore, Nicol opposes Ortega in that he proposes a different conception of action concerning technique. Instead of singling out man as a transforming and humanizing agent of reality, he emphasizes the existential and ethical component that action possesses insofar as it forges the subject. Precisely, the prioritization of the ideal of a technical and reality-transforming humanity will lead, in Nicol's eyes, to the failure of contemporary civilization due to an eco-social crisis that will be difficult to overcome.

Certainly, man makes himself by elaborating and executing his life project. But this project is not exhausted in action, understood as the transformation of the world. In other words: action is not only this transformation. It is also that I exercise on myself [...] transforming or elaborating or simply seeking intimacy. And for this action, we cannot say that technique exists, nor that it is a technique, nor do we conform to the definition of technique as PRAXIS. Moreover, it consists of precisely rejecting technical work (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 1171).

#### NICOL'S PROPOSAL ON TECHNIQUE AS A RESPONSE TO ORTEGA'S

This section will expand and develop Nicol's ideas outlined in the review of Ortega's text. It will look in depth at Nicol's critique of the modern ideal of humanity and its relation to technology and try to show how these ideas can critically respond to the Madrid philosopher's approach.

The ideas that Nicol notes in his review will be developed in detail during the rest of his life. The Catalan philosopher will defend theory as an ethical and essentially human activity. The theory would imply a way of relating to reality and to others based on giving reason for the being of the real through intersubjective dialogue. In this sense, Nicol will defend the theory's expressive and communitarian nature and understand it as the authentically human way of being in the world (Nicol, 1974; 1977; 1978).

Human beings do not live to transform reality and impose themselves on it but rather to express it by giving a reason for their being and, in this way, to generate a community based on the reason. This theoretical activity has also an ethical component because it implies the very forging of the human. Theoretical activity implies a personal self-production that internally constitutes each human being, subsequently permeating each epoch through the ideas about oneself that mankind elaborates on (ibid.).

This is not to say Nicol denies reality's transformative dimension and rejects the technique's importance. Nicol gives it an important role, but he understands it as the basis on which he subsequently establishes this other self-conscious activity that theory consists of. Nicol develops these ideas in two main works: *El porvenir de la filosofía* and *La primera teoría de la praxis*.

Based on what was pointed out in the review many years earlier, Nicol detects a kind of hiatus in human action that prevents it from being understood as something univocal. Human action has an external dimension, the transformation of the world, and an internal dimension, the transformation of oneself. Based on the former, man is a “worker-being.” For Nicol, human existence implies a continuous work with reality, an appropriation of circumstance, as Ortega would say. Man transforms the natural and creates artificial worlds. He generates new orders of things and organizes his existence differently from the rest of the animal species (Nicol, 1972; 1978; 1980).

This form of organization of man as a worker is the basis of civilization and culture. Certainly, in Nicol’s eyes, it already implies a certain degree of freedom; for man develops the possibilities of the real in a creative and unprecedented way. He is a “poet of nature.” However, this freedom is relative, for it is always subverted to the inherent necessity of life. Work and technology respond creatively to biological necessity. In doing so, they generate a new balance between the human and the natural, a super-nature that did not exist before (Nicol, 1972).

However, this humanized reality is not an end in itself for Nicol. Rather, it enables the emergence of a new way of being in the world: theory. Work and technology enable man to organize himself efficiently and free him for leisure. However, leisure has become a new kind of activity. In contrast to Ortega’s view, “the superfluous”<sup>2</sup> does not imply more transformation of nature or more humanization of nature.

On the contrary, leisure becomes an end through which man shapes his free existence in unprecedented ways without imposing himself on reality. Moreover, leisure allows the emergence of cultural and political spheres, completely independent of the direct transformation of the real, such as politics, art, and philosophy. These spheres do not necessarily have to be focused on the technical transformation of the real but are ends in themselves, leading to the self-realization of the human being (Nicol, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>For Ortega, “the superfluous” is inherently technical. It implies technical acts that sustain it and enable the emergence of a kind of well-being absent in nature. “The superfluous” is related to the technical in the sense that it must be produced by it. Technique frees man from natural needs; it generates new needs, which Ortega relates to “well-being”; these new needs, in turn, require more techniques to satisfy them, and so on progressively. Ortega’s idea of well-being implies adapting the environment to the subject’s will (Ortega y Gasset, 2015: 70). Nicol captures the unsustainability of this ideal of well-being very well.



In *La primera teoría de la praxis*, Nicol (Nicol, 1978) develops this idea further. He points out how theory implies a specific form of augmentation of being (*anabasis*) that is distinguished from the transformation of the real. Through theory, being is increased as the human becomes increasingly self-conscious. It is a qualitative transformation. Theory makes people deeper and more self-conscious, thus making them more aware and knowledgeable of the real. A reality that is changeable and ungraspable once and for all, but to a certain extent apodictic and regular in its changes, which allows for knowledge of it.<sup>3</sup>

To put it briefly, Nicol makes his proposal based on the crack he finds in Ortega's ideas. By focusing exclusively on transforming external reality, Ortega leaves aside the inner dimension involved in human action. He forgets that action has an important moral component that progressively makes man become complex and self-conscious and capable of advancing ethically and morally simultaneously as he transforms reality externally. For this reason, Nicol's ideal of well-being is radically opposed to Ortega's: well-being does not imply transforming reality more and better, imposing oneself more on it, but growing internally and morally. With this, Nicol reworks Ortega's notion of the "vital project."

Although Ortega defended that human action was based on a vital project, he always subsumed this project into the transformation of reality itself. Nicol gives a more relevant role to the project. The project is not a means to the transformation of the real but an end in itself. The project implies a concrete idea of life called to be carried out by mobilizing all possible means. The project transcends the transformation of reality and configures a new type of human life based on the realization of free activities such as philosophy, art, politics, etc. (Nicol, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>This expressive and symbolic dimension of the theory that Nicol seeks to highlight and recover contrasts with what Ortega proposes. In Ortega's words: "By this I mean that life is not fundamentally, as so many centuries have believed, contemplation, thought, theory. It is production and manufacture, and only because production and manufacture demand it, thought, theory, and science appear. [...] The world, the circumstance, presents itself as the first matter and as a possible machine. Since to exist, mankind has to be in the world [...] mankind resolves to seek in it the hidden machine that it contains to serve it. The history of human thought is reduced to the series of observations that man has made to bring to light the possibility of a machine that the world carries latent in its matter. Hence, technical invention is also called discovery. And it is no coincidence, as we shall see, that the technique par excellence, the full maturity of technique, began around 1600, precisely when, in his theoretical thinking about the world, a man came to understand it as a machine" (Ortega y Gasset, 2015: 88).

This idea of life starts from one's self-awareness and ethical growth within individuals. As mentioned above, it starts from a very concrete form of praxis: theory. Theory is called upon to guide transformative praxis so that both constitute a unity of meaning.

Thus, there is a certain parallelism between Ortega and Nicol. However, as we have said, Nicol detects a crack in Ortega's ideas and uses it as a prompt to develop his own reflection. Human well-being does not lie in the transformation of reality but in one's inner development and growth; the transformation of reality without this can become unbridled and even threatening to him.

Nicol shows how the vital project can only be understood with a very particular type of praxis called to make the human itself grow. A theory of action that neglects or undermines this question will lead to an overdimensioning of the transformation of the world that ends up endangering humanity itself. Nicol connects ethics with praxis and affirms that theory as internal action guides man. If there is no ethical growth in tandem with the transformation of reality, the latter becomes unsustainable and dangerous. Technical development must go hand in hand with moral development. However, Ortega leaves this question aside; he undermines it. And if the theory undermines the question, what will the consequences be? This note that Nicol makes on Ortega's theory is particularly valuable when considering the ways of inhabiting the world that follow from both ways of thinking.

Nicol (Nicol, 1980) considers that modernity has been based on a civilizing project characterized by leaving aside the ethical dimension of action. Hence, Ortega's conception of the human and the technical are modern. In Nicol's eyes, modernity was based on the Baconian idea of mastery of nature. The ideal of humanity was to achieve emancipation from any vulnerability through ever greater and more efficient control and mastery over nature. Man was to make himself lord and master of the world, transforming it completely without accepting any restriction. The human being was to cast his shadow over all that was real, humanizing it. Reality was thus to become a kind of ontological clay at the disposal of the human being, turned into a new demiurge.

In Nicol's eyes, this vital project focused on mastery and left aside precisely the ethical conception of praxis. He forgot that technological progress had to go hand in hand with moral progress if the former was really to come to fruition. And, if he did not forget it, he blurred it by confusing it or relating it — as Ortega does — directly to the technical mastery of the world.

Nicol (Nicol, 1972; 1980) points out in this respect how the modern project of existence has become unsustainable. He realized how the ideal of unlimited domination of the natural world had brought with it the consequence of its destruction and, on a more dire note, the destruction of humanity itself. If human beings had once been characterized by maintaining sustainable balances with reality and building civilizations on their basis, modern civilization undermined these balances by destroying the environment and generating an eco-social crisis that could lead mankind to extinction (Linares & Iglesias Granda, 2023).

It is precisely this question that Nicol's most systematic and thorough reflection on technology deals with. Nicol (Nicol, 1972; 1980) radically questions modern technological civilization for having derived in an almost totalitarian regime, where human freedom loses its place and the logic of efficiency prevails. In contemporary society, technology is no longer governed by any human project or ideal. It has taken on total autonomy, conditioning, and determining human action. Thus, Nicol points out how contemporaneity is characterized by a sort of "force majeure" that subsumes human freedom and ends any hint of agency (Iglesias Granda & Sánchez Cuervo, 2024).

Nicol (Nicol, 1972; 1980) distinguishes between the contemporary regime of force majeure and the modern emancipatory project based on technical mastery. The modern emancipatory project was indeed based on a specific idea of man, on a project. This unsustainable project led to a situation in which man no longer had room for maneuver to guide his actions. The modern project, by focusing solely on technical progress and neglecting moral progress, has led, in Nicol's eyes, to a situation in which technology becomes destructive and ungovernable. In saying so, Nicol does not depart entirely from Ortega. The latter had noticed how contemporary civilization was characterized by the absence of projects guiding technological development.

The very progress of technology has created a new problem; or rather, it has aggravated the problem which is essentially man's life itself, because today he does not know what he can do with his leisure, nor what plans he can forge for his settlement in a world which technology is transforming with seemingly limitless rapidity. It is as if technology had turned from a means into an end, and man no longer had any other project — any other life plan or idea of life — than that of technical progress (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 1171).

The review shows that Nicol realizes that Ortega has a good grasp of the overflow of technological power. However, the thinker from Madrid needs to perceive that the basis of his technology theory leads to this

situation to a large extent. The metaphysics of Ortega's action is based on technique and the transformation of reality, which leads, as Nicol helps us see, to the oblivion of the moral and ethical dimension of action. Hence, it leads to a univocal conception of progress, where it is understood only as technological, not moral, progress. Ortega criticizes the fact that there are no projects that guide contemporary technology. Still, he needs to realize that it is precisely inherent to the modern project to omit the moral or guiding dimension of action and to focus solely on mastery of nature. Its metaphysics of action and the conception of technology that follows from it implicitly suppresses the moral dimension of action.

In short, Nicol shows that Ortega's conception of technique cannot account for its contemporary drifts. Ortega needs to take more distance from the modern postulates on technique and mastery of the Baconian project. This fact prevents him from grasping the root of the contemporary problems he rightly detects, which can be summed up in man's loss of the capacity to take charge of technology. Nicol would tell Ortega that the lack of projects to guide technology is not casual. These projects do not exist because the univocal modern ideal of mastery and humanization of reality undermines the moral dimension of action and theory. That is to say, the undermining of moral progress in the face of technical progress. Ortega precisely reproduces this undermining in his theory without realizing it. How can there be projects on par with technology if the moral dimension of action, which would make the emergence of these projects possible, is left aside?

#### TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE WAY OF INHABITING THE WORLD.

#### THEORETICAL POSSIBILITIES OF NICOL'S CRITIQUE IN THE PRESENT DAY

This section will reflect on the political and ecological consequences of Ortega's and Nicol's proposals. It will show how the notions of inhabiting that follow from both are radically opposed. While Ortega's argument leads to unsustainability and eco-social crisis, Nicol points to a way of life that is more respectful of the environment and less inclined to stress it. This confrontation of the two notions of inhabiting will allow us to defend how Nicol's critique of Ortega's ideas, pointed out as early as 1940, constitutes an interesting prolegomenon in the debates on the eco-social crisis in Latin American philosophy.

The Catalan thinker detects how Ortega's approaches to technology have unsustainable natural and eco-social implications. They imply a conception of man as the dominator and humanizer of reality, making reality a moldable clay at man's disposal. Man inhabits reality by transforming it; he must

make it his own and construct a new reality (over-nature). In Nicol's words, Ortega develops a philosophy "that starts from a radical distinction between man and the world and considers technology as the link between the two" (Nicol Archive. Folder 141, folio 1171)... In Ortega, there is an idea of nature as something opposed to human beings that must be appropriated and shaped for survival. In brief, human well-being lies in transforming nature technically.

However, this ontology of man and technology is more than merely descriptive or enunciative. It is a theory from which operational or normative consequences follow. Let me explain: Ortega's ideas implicitly carry the defense of a way of acting on the planet. Suppose the human being is an "ontological centaur" who has to create his reality by humanizing the real. In that case, he must do so without considering nature as a limit to his actions. That is to say, it is taken for granted that man can transform and manipulate nature at will to the point of projecting himself onto the whole of reality and making it an extension of his thoughts. Ortega's words are obvious in this respect:

Far from losing himself in this return to the world, on the contrary, he brings himself to the other; he projects it energetically, lordly onto things, that is to say, he makes the other—the world—gradually become himself. Man humanizes the world, injects it, impregnates it with his ideal substance. It is conceivable that one day in the future, in the depths of time, this terrible external world will become so saturated with man that our descendants may walk through it as we mentally walk through our intimacy today—we may imagine that the world, without ceasing to be so, may become something like a materialized soul and, as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the gusts of wind will blow, pushed by Ariel, the elf of ideas (Ortega y Gasset, 2015: 150).

These operative consequences, which in texts such as the one above almost become imperatives, lead to a particular (lordly) way of relating to the natural, which tends not to accept and respect its limits and modes of ordering. Man must impose himself on reality and not take it as it is, and he must do so as the primary goal of his life. Hence, what will follow from a theory that puts virtue in nature's progressive and exponential transformation without any brake? A progressive degradation of nature.

As we have seen, Nicol grasps this question very well. Our philosopher focuses on how Ortega's theory, unable to distance itself from the modern idea of technological mastery, ignores the moral dimension of action. This leads to an unbalanced progress in which morality cannot take over the

technical. The focus is only on technical development, and morality is forgotten, so morality does not align with technical development. The technical becomes the end of the action, giving rise to an accelerated and exponential transformation that subsumes any possible project. Thus, the ideal will be to humanize the world to the ultimate consequences without respecting this world as it is, as a reality independent of human beings, a reality to be inhabited without violence or force.

Nicol detects very well how Ortega's ideas do not distance themselves from modernity and how, in this sense, they continue to reproduce implicit conceptions of what is human, despite consequences that were already harmful in his present. Ortega's notion of inhabiting leads to the deterioration of nature and destroys the balance between nature and society, on which humanity has been based until now. Ortega's exaltation of technology, the transformation of reality, and his neglect of the moral dimension of action lead to an eco-social crisis that questions humanity's survival capacity.

Nicol's reading of Ortega coincides with his reading of Bacon's civilizing project (Nicol, 1980). Nicol advocates the need not only to recover the ethical dimension of theoretical action, but also to make it a way of life. Nicol's work implies a conception of inhabiting that is radically different from Ortega's. This conception involves his interest in recovering philosophy and theory as the basis of a different way of being in the world, based not on the mastery of the real, but on its disinterested expression (Nicol, 1982).

This fact implies an attitude of respect towards reality, not of mastery. Man must transform it to a certain extent to inhabit it, but without forcing it, simply by developing his intrinsic possibilities, like a "poet of nature." However, this transformation must never be an end in itself. In Nicol's eyes, this transformation makes possible a new way of being in reality that is free and disinterested, based on the expression of the real. This new way of being would respect nature and give rise to forms of community organization based on its expression (Nicol, 1974; 1982).

Thus, Nicol proposes inhabiting the earth based on respect for the real rather than its unbridled transformation — a coexistence that certainly transforms it, but always maintaining respect for its being and dynamism. Human life and well-being should not oppose nature, but develop in harmony. It must express and develop its intrinsic possibilities and not act as a "centaur" marked by a split between humanity and nature. Human life is not fulfilled by imposing itself on reality, but by developing it harmo-

niously and expressing it collectively<sup>4</sup>—something close to what Walter Benjamin wrote against the unquestioned illustrated ideal of progress in his *On the Concept of History*.<sup>5</sup>

Nothing has corrupted the German working class as much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there, it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant work ethic was resurrected among German workers in a secularized form. [...] The new conception of labor is tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which, with naïve complacency, is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat. Compared to this positivistic view, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. A kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her to give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb. The sort of nature that [...] "exists gratis" is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor (Benjamin, Löwy, 2005: 72).

In contrast to Ortega's, this Nicolian idea is, thus, incompatible with the ideology of technological progress present in contemporary societies. This idea does not require unlimited progress in the technical transformation of reality, but rather moral progress that implies a greater self-awareness on the part of humanity from which to articulate a regime of organization based on the expression of real and intersubjective cooperation. Therefore, Nicol's ideas point to a way of inhabiting that fully questions modern capitalist societies with their unlimited growth and development imperatives.

<sup>4</sup>For his part, Sánchez Vázquez criticizes the Nicol's position and points out the risks of it becoming an ideology that legitimizes capitalism (Iglesias Granda, 2023).

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin criticizes how the ideology of progress has permeated Marxism without realizing that the domination of nature ultimately leads to man's domination over man. Benjamin pioneered moving away from the positivist and technocratic ideology that permeated much of European culture in the early 20th century. An ideology that was the hallmark of Marxism and of Ortega y Gasset. In this sense, Benjamin anticipated ecological concerns, as did Nicol. In response, Benjamin looks to Fourier and his working day as a game. A play that unfolds the real instead of dominating it and that seeks to generate scientific discoveries that, instead of dominating nature, restore the relations between society and the environment (Löwy, 2005: 75–76)

It should be borne in mind that Nicol is not a thinker in the Marxist tradition. However, he agrees with Benjamin's early critical conception of the modern ideal of progress.

Nicol developed many of the ideas present in Ortega's review at a time when these issues were becoming current. This was the time of the emergence of environmental awareness. In 1972, the Club Rome report *On the Limits to Growth* was published, and the Stockholm Conference took place. It became clear that modern theories leading to unlimited development were inefficient in dealing with a civilization marked by a progressive depletion and destruction of nature and its resources.

It was more necessary than ever to set a course toward other civilizational horizons. The theory had to set a precedent for subsequent action, and the first step had to be to distance itself from the modern theoretical assumptions that were at the root of the consequences suffered in the present. Thus, from the outset, Nicol distances himself from the ideals of technical mastery of the real present in Ortega's work, warning of the risks of reducing human action to transformative praxis. A civilizing project or ideal must guide the technical transformation of the real, and these can only be understood by bearing in mind that human action has a moral component that must be cultivated and developed independently.

Thus, Nicol will point out that the threat of eco-social crisis and civilizational collapse is due to having been governed by a mistaken ideal. The fact of making technical progress the civilizational ideal destroys the natural foundations that sustain life. It is, therefore, a question of changing this ideal. Human beings must return the focus of their lives to moral rather than technical growth and development. We will have to move towards a civilization where the important thing is not to grow technically and economically, but humanly. This must involve transmuting the spheres of value that govern individuals' decisions and priorities.

How can this be achieved? Nicol advocates replacing the desire for production and enrichment, the desire to dominate the real, with respect for it and acceptance of its reality. Expressing and reflecting the real as it is, without violently harming it. To generate communities based on this collective and inter-subjective expression and not on mercantile or merely pecuniary interests. In short, to look back at those ways of inhabiting the world that were not reduced exclusively to the dimension of *homo faber*, but which cultivated the freedom and creative capacity of human beings as expressive, communicative, and communitarian beings.



## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to show how, practically from its publication, Ortega's ideas on technology gave rise to a topical debate today: the eco-social crisis. The Catalan philosopher Eduardo Nicol quickly detected how Ortega's thought implicitly carried the ideal of human domination over nature, of questionable sustainability. Nicol criticized Ortega's univocal conception of action as technical action. He pointed it out as the root of the gap between technical and moral progress that was already clearly evident in the 20th century. Nicol defends the need to consider human action both as technical and moral. This implies that individuals' development and ethical growth cannot be assimilated into technical action. Hence, Nicol proposes a conception of human existence radically opposing Ortega's. Faced with the eco-socially unsustainable ideal of molding reality based on human ends, he defends a way of life based on developing the possibilities inherent to the real and its communitarian expression.

All this shows how Latin American philosophy was characterized by its pioneering contribution to the global philosophical panorama with a critical perspective on technological development and the ideal of control and domination of nature. This work points to how it not only anticipated debates of great relevance from the 1970s onwards, such as those related to ecology, but could also outline cultural diagnoses of great insight that are still very relevant for thinking about the present.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Nicol Archive                      Archivo Eduardo Nicol Franciscá, Archivo Histórico de la UNAM

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ХОСЕ МАНУЭЛЬ ИГЛЕСИАС ГРАНДА

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## РАССВЕТ ЭКОСОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ДЕБАТОВ В ИБЕРОАМЕРИКЕ

ЭДУАРДО НИКОЛ ПРОТИВ ОРТЕГИ-И-ГАССЕТА

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**Аннотация:** Начало обсуждения экосоциального кризиса в Латинской Америке можно найти в ранней критике Николем идей Ортеги-и-Гассета о технике. Рассматривая теорию Ортеги, мы обсудим, как Никол утверждает необходимость отхода от современных предпосылок, заложенных в современной культуре и философии. Никол ставит под сомнение однозначное понимание человеческой деятельности как исключительно технической сферы и указывает на необходимость восстановления независимости ее этических и моральных аспектов. Цивилизационный идеал очеловечивания и формирования мира через проекцию на него человеческих целей, присутствующий у Ортеги, является несостоятельным. Этот подход приводит к экосоциальному кризису, преодоление которого крайне затруднительно. По этой причине Никол предлагает способы обитания, которые

не связаны с данным идеалом прогресса и технического мастерства, а основаны на моральном прогрессе, вытекающем из выраженной и общественной природы, присущей самому человеку.

**Ключевые слова:** экосоциальный кризис, этика, Латинская Америка, Никол, Ортега, техника.

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