

Smiling Jesus
On Jorge Portilla's *Songs of Innocence* and Emilio Uranga's *Continental Prophecies*. Exploring the Crisis of American Reason and the Ontological Responses from Mexico*

Riccardo Valenti**

Abstract

Questo saggio esamina la critica di Jorge Portilla all'innocenza ideologica americana e la risposta ontologica di Emilio Uranga alla modernità coloniale, come articolata all'interno del Grupo Hiperión. Attraverso una lettura di *La crisis espiritual de los Estados Unidos* di Portilla e *Análisis del ser mexicano* di Uranga, esplora come il potere culturale americano si basi su un mito di innocenza e di eccezionalità provvidenziale, esemplificato dall'immagine di un «Gesù sorridente». Al contrario, Uranga offre un'antropologia filosofica alternativa radicata nell'insufficienza, nella fragilità e nella responsabilità storica. Attingendo dalla fenomenologia, dall'esistenzialismo e dal pensiero libertario, il saggio presenta un umanesimo radicato nel postcolonialismo che cerca l'emancipazione non attraverso il trionfo, ma attraverso l'incompletezza condivisa e la responsabilità etica.

Parole chiave: America; innocenza; colpa; crisi; ragione.

This essay examines Jorge Portilla's critique of American ideological innocence and Emilio Uranga's ontological response to colonial modernity, as articulated within the Grupo Hiperión. Through a reading of Portilla's *La crisis espiritual de los Estados Unidos* and Uranga's *Análisis del ser mexicano*, it explores how American cultural power relies on a myth of innocence and providential exceptionalism, exemplified by the image of a «smiling Jesus». In contrast, Uranga offers an alternative philosophical anthropology rooted in insufficiency, fragility, and historical responsibility. Drawing on phenomenology, existentialism, and liberation thought, the essay presents a postcolonially-rooted humanism that seeks emancipation not through triumph but through shared incompleteness and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: America; innocence; guilt; crisis; reason.

* Ricevuto il 30/06/2025 e pubblicato il 09/03/2026.

** Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia e Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. Email: rvalenti94@gmail.com.

1. Introduction. The Importance of Being Mexican...

During the Franco regime, numerous Spanish scholars migrated to Mexico and established affiliations with UNAM¹. In the late 1940s, they founded *Grupo Hiperión*, which incorporated Mexican, indigenous, and European leftist influences, promoting cross-cultural experimentation beyond Europe². The *Grupo* epitomised an intellectual movement that flourished approximately from 1948 to 1953 under the leadership of José Gaos³. Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Luis Villoro, Ricardo Guerra, Salvador Reyes Navares, Antonio Gómez Robledo, Fernando Salmerós, Joaquín Sánchez MacGregor, and Luis Pérez were its most distinguished exponents. After 1953, most members pursued divergent paths; some became involved in politics, while others faded into obscurity, as did Portilla. Although it remains relatively unknown in the Old Continent – partly due to the limited translation of its principal works into English – the *Grupo's* influence on Latin American culture has been significant. Additionally, it contributed to shaping and reinforcing Mexican identity in relation to the *mundus vetus* and North America. The profound sense of estrangement and *otherness* from Spain, the former territory of the *conquistadores* with which they shared a language, and the United States, enabled these intellectuals to develop a distinctive *ontological* perspective regarding what it means to be *Mexican*, as primarily exemplified in Uranga's fundamental work⁴. This ontological stance was not merely political or nationalist; rather, it questioned the very foundations of Western metaphysical thought, seeking a means for human existence to transcend national flags and fixed – and somewhat *unfair* – identities.

Often aligned with phenomenological and Marxist interpretations, the *Grupo* endeavoured to propose a theory of *liberation* and progressive emancipation of the Mexican people from a particular mode of thinking and self-perception, even prior to translating these ideas into revolution or social upheaval. Considering these reasons, I believe Jorge Portilla adopts an approach that merits particular attention. Similar to Uranga, Portilla endeavours to uncover the essence or *mexicanidad* of the Mexican people. However, rather than pursuing this through a strictly ontological inquiry into being – as Uranga does in his phenomenological anthropology – Portilla grounds his reflection in a more critical and sociological investigation. His method is more concrete and historically situated, emphasising the lived expressions of Mexican identity as they manifest through social practices, discourses, and ideological structures. Trained in both philosophy and sociology, Portilla brings a sensitivity to collective behaviours and the concealed rationalities of everyday life – concepts he would elaborate in *Fenomenología del relajo*. Indeed, this sensibility enables him to identify not only structural asymmetries between Mexico and the United States but also the subtle ways in which cultural imperialism infiltrates the ethical and emotional dimensions of subordinate societies.

¹ In preparing this text, I used AI-based language tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, exclusively for stylistic editing, improving clarity, and refining grammar. All content and ideas are entirely my own; no AI-generated material was used to create original arguments, interpretations, or research findings.

² G.J. Mañón Garibay, *Historia de las ideas en México. El Grupo Hiperión: reflexiones sobre el problema de la obediencia y el cumplimiento del deber*, in «Revista Mexicana de la Historia del Derecho», XXXIV (UNAM), 2015, p. 54.

³ V.C. Hernández Torres, *Jorge Portilla y la presencia de la fenomenología en el Grupo Hiperión*, in «Pensamiento» (UNAM), 2011, pp. 111-112.

⁴ C.A. Sánchez, *Emilio Uranga's analysis of Mexican being: A translation and critical introduction*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 1952.

2. ... And Being American (?). Portilla's Diagnosis of Modern Reason's Cracks

Indeed, Portilla's critique extends beyond metaphysics; it encompasses the very *conditions* under which thought and subjectivity are produced. While Uranga's diagnosis operates within the philosophical domain – drawing on existential categories such as insufficiency, fragility, and contingency to construct a metaphysical image of the Mexican being – Portilla examines the symbolic and cultural circumstances that shape the postcolonial context. His critique directs outward: where Uranga deconstructs the legacy of Spanish colonization and the internalization of European metaphysics, Portilla more directly analyses the cultural hegemony of the United States, exploring how the ideology of «American innocence» influences not only global power structures but also the Mexican psyche and sense of identity. In this regard, Uranga's *pars destruens* targets the metaphysical residues of colonial thought, whereas Portilla's concentrates on contemporary issues: how soft power, media, religion, and American pragmatism obscure historical accountability and moral profundity. His inquiry resonates with the critique articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, who condemned the «culture industry» as a tool of mass deception – a theme echoed by Portilla in his reflections on Hollywood, consumerism, and American ideological *imagery*.

In my reading, both in scope and tone, Portilla's analysis attains a *prophetic* dimension: it not only condemns the distortions of modern power but also seeks to ignite ethical *vigilance*. His stance is akin to William Blake's opposition to the mystifications of British imperial morality through ironic visions of innocence and prophetic *wrath*; in *La crisis espiritual*, Portilla transforms the figure of the «smiling Jesus» into a cultural symbol – one that, beneath its tranquil exterior, exposes the disavowed violence and ideological apparatus of an in-visible empire that has ceased seeking *forgiveness*, having never acknowledged *guilt*. Below, I will outline Portilla's conceptual framework for critiquing American behaviour and the main principle guiding American actions. I will also include elements from Uranga's reflections. This involves developing an underexplored theoretical perspective focused on the members of the *Grupo*, particularly criticising North American thought. What is interesting to observe is that the assessment originates from Mexico, one of its closest and culturally most distant neighbours, and mainly targets the dominant Western nation. In this spirit, as a *negative* counterpoint to Uranga's *positive* ontological proposal, Portilla's arguments on American *innocence* warrant further examination, not solely due to the temporal proximity of its publication⁵.

3. From Existentialism to Mexican Humanism: Grupo Hiperión and the Politics of Fragility

The current edition of *Fenomenología del relajo* collects some of the most mature and ambitious essays by Jorge Portilla, offering insight into the full scope of his theoretical project⁶. Alongside the main focus of this paper – *La crisis espiritual de los Estados Unidos* – it includes texts such as a commentary on Sartre's *Nausea* and *Comunidad, grandeza y miseria del*

⁵ Portilla and Uranga published in 1952 some of the most representative documents of the Grupo's anti-American controversy. Given the happy temporal placement of the essays that here I will take mainly in analysis, namely the *Fenomenología del relajo* and the *Análisis del ser del mexicano*, and which coincide with the formal closure of the production and joint season of the Grupo, I consider these essays strongly representative of the expression of the Grupo itself, and for this reason among the most suitable to be deepened in this sense.

⁶ J. Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Città del Messico 1966/1984.

mexicano, the latter clearly echoing Uranga's ontological concerns, which will be examined later. As previously noted, the members of Grupo Hiperión were deeply influenced by key European intellectual movements, especially phenomenology – through Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, whose 1947 visit to Mexico City left a lasting impression – and existentialism⁷. These philosophies motivated the Hiperión thinkers to develop a passionate critique of idealism and the positivism that had shaped Mexican intellectual life since the 19th century, a stance already articulated by Samuel Ramos⁸. In particular, existentialism provided them with a *language* to resist the most extreme forms of individualism and to valorise human *fragility* – one of the central categories later developed by Uranga, who interprets fragility and contingency as defining traits of the Mexican condition. Importantly, this fragility is not understood as deficiency, but rather as a critical standpoint against metaphysical *arrogance*: it reveals the vulnerability of human life as the basis for community, humility, and ethical *responsiveness*.

Sartre, alongside Gabriel Marcel, was among the leading exponents of existentialism and became a key reference for the group⁹. Indeed, Sartre's growing concern with social responsibility, historical experience, and group belonging also resonated deeply with the Group's ambition to articulate a communally oriented form of *humanism*. Although *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was published after the active years of the Grupo Hiperión, its emphasis on praxis, historical totality, and the formation of collective subjects reveals a striking thematic proximity to the concerns already present in the writings of Uranga and Portilla. Both Sartre and the Hiperión thinkers attempted, in different ways, to move beyond abstract individualism and to reimagine human agency in relation to contingency, memory, and collective transformation. Indeed, the Grupo Hiperión sought to craft a new humanism that addressed social redemption, historical affirmation, and the ethical transformation of Mexican society and beyond, grounded in a shared existential *horizon*¹⁰. However, what makes them particularly remarkable is that they did not stop at appropriating European thought. Rather, they forged an original philosophical project aimed at confronting the existential and cultural dilemmas of post-revolutionary Mexico, at a time when the country faced the challenge of rebuilding a more just and meaningful society from the ruins of colonial legacies and global conflict. This *Mexican humanism* stands as one of the earliest postcolonial responses to European philosophy articulated in ontological terms – an effort to think from the South, not in reaction, but in *affirmation*.

Building upon these foundations, Portilla's critique expands beyond abstract metaphysics and enters the domain of *cultural symptoms* – those seemingly anecdotal but ideologically charged manifestations through which a worldview legitimises itself. If Uranga explored the ontological dimension of Mexican identity by analysing its inner structure of fragility and tension, Portilla, in turn, engages with the *symbolic* expressions of

⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Conférences à Mexico*, in Id., *Conférences en Amérique. Inédits II, 1947–1949*, Mimésis, Milano 2022; R. Pérez, *La filosofía francesa en México: Recepción y resonancias (1930–1960)*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Città del Messico 2006. Much of this intellectual mediation occurred under the guidance of José Gaos, the exiled Spanish philosopher who played a crucial role in introducing continental thought to Mexico and fostering a space of philosophical experimentation.

⁸ A. Guy, *Samuel Ramos y el humanismo filosófico de México*, in «Dianoia», 6, n. 6, 1960, pp. 163–169.

⁹ R. Sánchez Benítez, *El proyecto humanista del existencialismo en México. Notas para una reconstrucción intelectual*, in L.R.D. Capeda, S.B. Ayala, G.H.P. Damien (eds.), *Postglobalization, decolonización y transmodernidad. Filosofía de la liberación y pensamiento latino-americano*, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, Ciudad Juárez 2021, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰ J. Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, cit., pp. 107–113.

American identity, exposing its apparent harmony and optimism as deeply ideological. His analysis of *La crisis espiritual de los Estados Unidos* exemplifies this move: the critique of reason becomes a critique of cultural theology, where the divine itself is reshaped in the image of national myth. It is in this context that Portilla recounts the story of Dr. Hubert Eaton, a figure whose quest for a «smiling Jesus» becomes a revealing parable of American innocence.

4. *The Contest No One Could Win: Exploring Dr. Eaton's Quest of the American Cara*

So, Portilla's critique targets not only the metaphysical underpinnings of modern imperial reason, but also its symbolic expressions. In *La crisis espiritual de los Estados Unidos*, he turns his attention to the «American Way of Life», condemning it as rooted in a hypocritical and profoundly arrogant ideology. His essay opens with an apparently trivial anecdote from a 1952 issue of *Time* magazine, which becomes, in Portilla's hands, a parable of civil religion and cultural *pathology*¹¹. The story concerns Dr. Hubert Eaton, a cemetery director in California, who launched a competition among artists to create a portrait of Jesus Christ smiling triumphantly. Eaton, described as profoundly optimistic, envisioned a Jesus radiating serenity, confidence, and divine joy – something like a «personal Jesus» who could reassure the faithful with his radiant, unburdened face¹². Yet, to his dismay, no painting matched his vision. The contest ended with the prize money split evenly among participants, and no image of a smiling Christ ever hung in Eaton's office or cemetery¹³.

Portilla interprets this failure not as anecdotal, but as *symptomatic*: the artists – mostly European – could not produce the kind of Jesus Eaton desired because such a figure belongs not to Christian iconographic tradition, but to a distinctly American theology. In religious art, when Jesus smiles, it is typically a melancholic gesture, charged with the foreknowledge of suffering. The smile is never pure – it is tempered by the Passion, by sacrifice, by the tragic awareness of redemption through pain. But Eaton was not looking for *that* Christ. He wanted no trace of anguish, no cross, no shadow of Golgotha. His Jesus needed to smile not because he had suffered for us, but because there was, in fact, *nothing to suffer for*. He had already won. And in that sense, he was not merely commissioning a

¹¹ Portilla's reading of the Eaton episode resonates with the concept of civil religion developed by Robert N. Bellah (*Civil religion in America*, in «Daedalus», 134, n. 4, 2005, pp. 40-55) which refers to the fusion of religious symbolism and national ideology in modern secular states. In the United States, this often takes the form of a providential narrative that merges Christian themes with patriotic self-image. Eaton's «smiling Jesus» thus becomes more than an artistic fantasy: it represents the spiritual armature of a nation that sees itself as innocent, exceptional, and divinely favoured.

¹² Eaton's vision of a «smiling Jesus» also anticipates a broader trend in 20th-century American evangelical iconography, where depictions of Christ increasingly emphasised accessibility, friendliness, and emotional warmth. Popular images of the «friendly Jesus» – often marketed through illustrated Bibles, posters, and Sunday school materials – sought to construct a personal, consoling figure of Christ aligned with postwar optimism and individual salvation. This «personal Jesus», far from the suffering servant or apocalyptic judge, reflects a theology of reassurance, therapeutic comfort, and divine endorsement of success. Such images supported the emergence of charismatic and prosperity-oriented movements, where God was no longer distant or severe, but smiling, supportive, and available (see R.H. Balmer, *Mine eyes have seen the glory: A journey into the evangelical subculture in America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006 and D. Morgan, *Visual piety: A history and theory of popular religious images*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998 on this topic).

¹³ See E. Oring, *Icons of Immortality: Forest Lawn and the American Way of Death*, in P. Stewart, S. Siporin, C. W. Sullivan, S. Jones (eds.), *Worldviews and the American West: The life of the place itself*, University Press of Colorado, Louisville 2000, pp. 54-64.

painting – he was venerating his God. Not the God of Gethsemane, but *Eaton's God*: a divinity in his own image, beaming with the certainty of success, untouched by guilt, and radiant with providential justification. This Jesus, Portilla argues, embodies an American «cara» – a *face* of optimism, labour, innocence, and self-affirmation¹⁴. It is not a portrait of salvation, but of sanctified victory. It is, ultimately, a personal Jesus tailored to confirm not divine mercy, but the cultural myth of righteousness. To understand how such a figure could become not only possible, but *desirable* – even necessary – we must now turn to the *logic of innocence* that sustains this vision, and to the ideological function it performs in the American worldview.

5. *Too Much Heaven on Their Minds... Exploring American Secular Religion and Its Aftermaths*

As said, Portilla's account of the smiling Jesus is more than anecdote – it's a *symptom*. A symptom of a theological and political ideology so confident in its righteousness that it no longer needs a Redeemer, because there is nothing left to redeem. Eaton's Jesus is not the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, but a glorified projection of American self-image: confident, prosperous, serene – and above all, *innocent*. This American Christ smiles not because sin has been conquered through suffering, but because sin never existed to begin with. In Portilla's reconstruction, Americans no longer see themselves as *fallen*. There is no *caída*, no original guilt to acknowledge. And where there is no guilt, there is no need for forgiveness, no need for sacrifice. The Gospel is *rewritten*: not all have sinned, and certainly not the Americans. The myth of universal innocence becomes the foundation of national ideology. However, for Portilla, this is not just bad theology – it is the cultural scaffolding of empire. Portilla identifies here the core of American ideology: a secularised religion in which innocence is no longer a gift but a *right*, not something preserved through humility, but claimed through *dominance*. In such a world, success is synonymous with moral worth. Quantity becomes the measure of quality. The bigger, the better – and therefore, the more righteous¹⁵.

But innocence, maybe paradoxically, here needs guilt. Indeed, Jesus's redemptive role depends on the existence of sinners. And so too with America: the belief in its own purity creates the need for others to be *impure*. The United States acts not because it is perfect, but because it must save those who are not. From this position, even violence becomes salvific. War, intervention, cultural hegemony – all are cast as acts of liberation. And this fantasy is reproduced *endlessly*. As Portilla argues, American ideology recycles itself through every cultural and political apparatus. Hollywood plays a crucial role here – an

¹⁴ J. Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, cit., p. 140.

¹⁵ In this sense, Portilla's critique intersects with classic analyses of the Protestant ethic and capitalism. He explicitly references Richard Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, highlighting how Protestant doctrines of vocation and election evolved into moral justifications for economic activity and power. Although Max Weber is not cited, the resonance with his thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is evident – particularly the transformation of religious asceticism into secular economic rationality. For Portilla, the American obsession with growth, verification, and productivity is not merely pragmatic, but spiritual: a theology of success where economic performance signals divine favour (J. Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, cit., pp. 144, 149). For a decolonial reading of this dynamic, see E. Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid 1998, pp. 237, 243.

observation that aligns him with critiques from Horkheimer, Adorno, and Anders¹⁶. According to Portilla, in Frank Capra's films, for instance, innocence is not earned – it is *presumed*. The hero defeats evil not through transformation, but by *default*. His purity is unquestionable, his right to act unchallengeable. Thus, the myth self-perpetuates. A country that claims to be good no longer needs to be good – it only needs others to be worse. Portilla warns that this equilibrium holds only if the rest of the world accepts its guilt.

But what happens when they no longer do? When Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Korea, and Vietnam expose the grotesque underside of the *smiling mask*? When the world begins to suspect that the redeemer may be the real transgressor? For Portilla, this marks the beginning of a profound spiritual *crisis*. Americans begin to sense vulnerability – but without understanding it as *guilt*, as Mexicans would conversely do, according to Uranga's claim. Instead, he diagnoses a cultural condition of *imminent guilt*: an anxiety that cannot be acknowledged within the existing myth, yet cannot be entirely suppressed (Portilla, 1984, p. 154). At this breaking point, the mask of innocence fractures – and with it, the entire theology of American exceptionalism. Yet, to fully grasp what this fracture entails – and how it may offer not a collapse, but a possibility of renewal – we must now turn to Emilio Uranga. Unlike Portilla, who critiques the myth from without, Uranga reflects from within: embracing fragility, contradiction, and historicity not as failures, but as conditions for meaning.

6. *The Insufficiency That Liberates All (and the Inferiority That Dooms All). On Uranga's Cynicism in «Análisis del ser mexicano»*

As seen with Portilla, the moral crisis afflicting the United States stems from its deep discomfort in eventually acknowledging its own guilt – its implication in violence and injustice. This denial undermines the universalist claims of American singularity. The revolutionary ideals of 1776 disintegrate, like helicopters falling into the ocean in the final scene of *The Deer Hunter*, as Meryl Streep and Robert De Niro mourn and sing the national anthem, hollowed out by betrayal. Nick's tragic end becomes a metaphor: innocence, when preserved through *denial*, becomes unbearable. What, then, can the Hiperión Group offer in response? Can a peripheral, postcolonial perspective break the spell of imperial innocence? Uranga, in *Análisis del ser mexicano*, offers one of the most provocative alternatives. Rather than appealing to universal humanism – as in the thought of Leopoldo Zea – or aspiring to the cultural models of European or white identity, Uranga begins from a humble but radical premise: to be Mexican is to be *insufficient*¹⁷. Not inferior, not defective

¹⁶ Indeed, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Anders exposed the cultural machinery of late capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, dissect the «culture industry» as a system of mass deception that turns ideology into entertainment. Similarly, Anders, in *The Obsolescence of Man*, warns of the aestheticization of ideology in technological societies, where cinema becomes a tool for habituating the public to alienation and systemic violence.

¹⁷ This insufficiency should not be mistaken for a lack to be overcome by assimilation to dominant models – be they European, American, or even Latin American modernities. Instead, Uranga elevates insufficiency to a structural and ethical condition: a non-closure of the self, a permanent openness to historical contingency, relationality, and the recognition of fragility as the shared ground of human existence (H. Sánchez Benítez, *Emilio Uranga: Ontología y tiempo histórico*, Herder, Freiburg 2021). While Zea sought a universal Latin American humanism able to reclaim historical agency within the dialectic of modernity (L.

– insufficient. This is not a judgment imposed by others, but a lived experience of *limitation*, fragility, and precariousness. The distinction between insufficiency and inferiority is crucial.

Here, inferiority depends on comparison – it is imposed by those who declare themselves superior, as Americans are supposed to do, for instance. Insufficiency, instead, names an inner truth, an ontological condition. According to Uranga, the tragedy of Latin American peoples has been to internalise inferiority: to await salvation from outside, to desire a redeemer who never comes¹⁸. To be saved, Uranga says, is to wait for what one lacks to be given. But liberation, by contrast, is not a gift, as American innocence was. It is a *mission*, a destiny, a task to be assumed¹⁹. This is Uranga's radical turn: salvation is not about payment or worthiness, but about finding meaning. The Messiah, in this view, is not external or divine, but internal and collective – a *people* discovering the capacity to act, not to be acted upon²⁰. In contrast to the American model of imposed redemption, Uranga posits an ethics of emancipation rooted in self-recognition. From this angle, Uranga's so-called cynicism becomes a *call to action*²¹. In this text, indeed, he denounces a passivity he

Zea, *El pensamiento latinoamericano*, Siglo XXI Editores, Madrid 1978) Uranga refuses the terms of that dialectic altogether. For him, the Mexican being is not simply a delayed version of the European subject, but another ontological mode: one marked by accident rather than essence, by the event rather than the system, by woundedness rather than mastery (M. Domínguez, *Emilio Uranga y el ser accidentado*, in «Revista de Filosofía», 70, n. 3, 2015, pp. 1265-1280). From this standpoint, the Mexican experience speaks beyond itself. It calls for a new anthropology where emancipation does not mean becoming like the powerful, but affirming one's own vulnerability as a resource for meaning. Uranga's radical move is to posit that only those who recognise themselves as insufficient – yet not inferior – can imagine a future no longer structured by domination, compensation, or the myth of innocence. His thought aligns, at times obliquely, with later critiques of the coloniality of being (A. Quijano, *Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, in «Nepantla: Views from South», 1, n. 3, 2000, pp. 533-580), and with Dussel's proposal for an ethics of liberation grounded not in strength but in the suffering of the excluded (see E. Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*, cit.). In this sense, Uranga's accidentalism anticipates decolonial efforts to delink ontology from Eurocentric metaphysics, offering a philosophy from the South that insists on historicity, partiality, and the redemptive power of incompleteness (W.D. Mignolo. *The idea of Latin America*, Blackwell, London 2007).

¹⁸ C.A. Sánchez, *Emilio Uranga's analysis of Mexican being*, cit., p. 145.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 148.

²⁰ The projection of messianic figures into national or ideological narratives – whether in the form of a smiling Jesus for American optimism or a monumental Christ overlooking Rio de Janeiro – reveals the persistent appropriation of religious symbols for identity-building. I return to this point in the conclusion.

²¹ In this light, Uranga's so-called cynicism should not be understood as resignation, but rather as a strategic act of unmasking. It is a refusal to be seduced by metaphysical consolations, salvific narratives, or external promises of redemption. Like Portilla, Uranga dismantles the ideological fictions – be they colonial, liberal, or nationalistic – that sustain systems of power through affective myths. If Portilla's critique of American innocence reveals how the United States maintains its dominance through a self-image of providential blamelessness, Uranga offers a philosophical complement: he shows how entire peoples may internalise their assigned roles – as guilty, inferior, or in need of salvation – and thereby perpetuate the very logic that subjugates them. Yet, neither author stops at diagnosis. For both, critical thought must open onto a generative horizon. In Uranga's case, the recognition of insufficiency is not an end point – it is the condition for beginning otherwise. Once stripped of the illusion of adequacy or inherited greatness, the subject becomes available to a new task: that of forging meaning in time, through situated effort, relational humility, and collective re-creation. This task is not abstract – it is historical, grounded, imperfect. It is the generativity of insufficiency and eventual normativity (see E. Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*, cit.). In this way, Portilla's cultural criticism and Uranga's philosophical anthropology converge in a shared insight: only those who confront the failure of inherited myths – of innocence, of destiny, of superiority – can begin to think otherwise, and build otherwise. Their work calls us not simply to reflect,

sees as pervasive: a lethargic expectation of being saved by forces beyond one's control²². His antidote is philosophical anthropology: a new vision of the human based on «accidentalism» – a concept that opposes the essentialist and eternal categories inherited from European and American metaphysics. Where others seek substance, Uranga embraces accident; where others proclaim certainty, he affirms doubt; and where others claim innocence, he insists on the ethical *depth of guilt*. Mexican identity, for Uranga, is not something to be overcome, but inhabited and interpreted. His ontology, though he never formulates it systematically, becomes a political proposal: to replace the search for purity or mastery with a commitment to provisional, fragile structures that must be reinterpreted and repeated within history²³.

7. Conclusion. Whom Does Jesus Smile At?

In contrast to the myth of American innocence – rooted in self-justification, expansion, and denial – Uranga offers a profoundly different vision of the human. His proposal begins not from strength but from fragility, not from certainty but from doubt, not from purity but from impurity and imperfection. This ontology, anchored in the Mexican historical experience, is not exclusive. On the contrary, it invites all who recognise themselves in the drama of insufficiency, in the refusal to be saved by external powers, to embrace a task rather than a *deliverance*. In Uranga's thought, insufficiency becomes the condition for emancipation, and the starting point of an ethics that privileges the humble over the triumphant, the unfinished over the final, the *local over the imperial*. This perspective offers not only a philosophical anthropology for Mexico, but a possible response to the global crisis of meaning exposed by Portilla: a crisis provoked by the collapse of the ideological scaffolding of innocence and longstanding imperial ambitions. Thus, in Uranga's accidental ontology and Portilla's cultural critique, we do not find a nostalgic appeal to identity or tradition, but a universal gesture rooted in *locality* – a gesture that challenges imperial myths and opens space for a new kind of humanism: one that emerges not from sufficiency and domination, but from shared limitation, historical woundedness, and the collective task of *re-signifying existence*. In this fragile openness to the other – rooted not in strength but in *shared limitation* – one can trace the beginnings of what Enrique Dussel, following Emmanuel Levinas, names *responsivity*: a form of ethical relation that emerges from vulnerability, not sovereignty, and that calls each subject to act not as a saviour, but as one who is summoned. To engage with Uranga and Portilla's legacy today is not only to understand Mexico – it is to ask how the world, in its fractured plurality, might rediscover dignity not in power, but in self-aware incompleteness.

These reflections invite a broader question: what happens when the figure of Christ becomes not a redeemer, but a symbol – domesticated, aestheticized, instrumentalised? In the United States, Portilla exposes how Jesus becomes a smiling emblem of providential success, stripped of suffering and mystery, recast in the image of optimism and enterprise. In Latin America, by contrast, the figure of Christ has often been monumentalised – literally, in the case of Rio's Cristo Redentor. Raised above the bay of Guanabara in 1931,

but to act: not in pursuit of transcendence, but in fidelity to our fragile, accidental, and therefore fully human condition (check H. Arendt, *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, on this latter aspect).

²² C.A. Sánchez, *Emilio Uranga's analysis of Mexican being*, cit., p. 149.

²³ Ivi, p. 159.

this statue has come to symbolise a protective, all-embracing national identity. Yet even here, the messiah is claimed and framed: his open arms are read as a gesture of welcome, but also as a reminder of the Catholic centrality in Brazil's foundational myths, and later as a rhetorical counterbalance to military repression or populist regimes. In both hemispheres, then, Christ smiles – or doesn't – not because of divine mystery, but because *we ask him* to. In Eaton's America, the smile is required to bless productivity; in Latin America, solemnity affirms transcendence or nationalist compassion. Portilla's intuition remains striking: perhaps the real scandal lies not in whether Jesus smiles, but in the *desire to make him smile*, as if redemption required aesthetic approval, or innocence needed divine endorsement. One may wonder, then: does Christ truly smile in the face of these projections? Or does he, perhaps, smile only when he is not being looked at, when no one asks him to perform innocence or promise salvation? Perhaps the only honest smile is the one that escapes ideology – a smile unclaimed, undesigned, unproduced. In that sense, maybe the messiah Portilla and Uranga both evoke is not found in monuments or paintings, but in the quiet and fragile affirmation of those who, in recognising their insufficiency, begin to build anew – without guarantees, without glory, but *with others*. This, perhaps, is the hidden root of any real redemption: a response born not of power, but of ethical proximity.