

# Horacio Labastida A Likeness<sup>1</sup>

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**H**oracio Labastida was an intellectual who joined his generous, proverbial cordiality to his recognized wisdom. His long, fruitful, intelligent life was never dedicated to subscribing to other spurious interests that we all know about and painfully suffer from, but to the kind though devastating critique of ideologies presented in packages of supposedly irrefutable certainties, sold and disseminated *urbi et orbi* by the dominant powers and the communications media.

Labastida was a judge, the rector of the University of Puebla, head of the UNAM's Office of Cultural Dissemination and then of Social Services, as well as editor of his magazine. He was a founding professor of the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences and a member of its Institute for Legal Research, a journalist, international public servant, legislator and ambassador to Nicaragua, the author of more than 20 books on topics ranging from politics, philosophy and sociology to literature and the arts.

In his distinguished career, he always tried to passionately study and teach our country's history as a means to shed light on solutions

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to contemporary problems, without breaks, assuming the characteristics of the culture, institutions and, above all, aspirations of all Mexicans. For Horacio Labastida, true humanism was based on the notion that history is made by man in his capacity to create knowledge and make mistakes. Humanism, then, is not a neutral, unfeeling science like mathematics, inured to human suffering and limitations, but a necessarily historic discipline, capable of unexpectedly finding untrodden ways forward, of coming up with innovative solutions, whether in the social and political or the scientific and technological realms.

Labastida would agree with Jürgen Habermas that the tasks of the Enlightenment had not been completed and that they should be, because with-

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out emancipating equality, no democracy is possible. For this reason, together with Amyarta Sen, he subscribed to the principles that freedom should include the right to economic, cultural and political development for all citizens, and that peace is indeed precarious in the absence of equality. He would agree with the Marxist, structuralist and post-modern philosophers that Man, regardless of his individuality, is to a great degree a product of the society in which he lives, that there are cultural and institutional differences and differences in perception between the pretensions of universalism of Western civilization and the realities of other peoples and groups (particularly of those excluded from power and from the exercise of established rights), differences that should not be overcome through segregation, oppression or violence, whether within countries or among them.

This is why he looked at the historic documents by José Joaquín Granados and Friar Bartolomé de las Casas in his book *La grandeza del indio mexicano* (The Grandeur of the Mexican Indian) with the aim of emphasizing the unjust

conditions to which Mexico's indigenous had been subjected in the colonial period and underlining their contributions, rivaling those of the Spaniards and the *criollos*, to the society of their time.<sup>2</sup> Similar reasoning led him to criticize Juárez's laws of amortization and nationalization because they legislated the confiscation of the poorest peasants' communal lands.<sup>3</sup> And for that reason, he also defended sovereignty and nationalism as necessary tools in the defense of relations between the weak and the powerful, between those who have little and those who have everything. With the historical background of colonial liberation and Napoleon III's expansionist onslaught, when the North American Free Trade Agreement was negotiated, he warned of the danger that the industrial powers could seek once more to exchange our nations' sovereignty for the will of an ecumenical empire. And he added, "No material well-being—which has not been forthcoming with globalization—justifies the spiritual malaise of an undesirable commitment."<sup>4</sup>

An enemy of hegemonic presidentialism, of authoritarianism, he denounced the old practice of violating or amending our constitutions to legalize the illegitimate acts of whoever was in office and then invoking them in the defense of the government or using them against the political opposition.<sup>5</sup> He distinguished, then, between legality and legitimacy: legality is a juridical value (sometimes falsified), while legitimacy is a moral value. Legality denotes agreement with legislation, legitimacy with the people.<sup>6</sup> Thus, he pointed out that the Mexican project of 1917 constitutionally established "a social, not an individualist, democracy leaning toward the social justice demanded since the time of the debates of the constituent assembly of 1856."<sup>7</sup> As a result, he was wary of the privatization and de-Mexicanization of the banking system and the sale of public companies, as well as the changes to the Constitution in agrarian matters and many, many other areas that tend to tailor the legal regime to the demands of trade liberalization.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he thought that the supposed economic or political truths in vogue were not universal or applicable to all times and

places, above all when they ride roughshod over the culture and institutions of poor countries. He found here a depraved attempt based on the economy to surreptitiously breathe new life into an authoritarianism that, with globalized trappings, sought to put an end to national sovereignty and restore foreign will (a risky undertaking since only self-determination guarantees cultural unity, the identity and legitimacy of collective actions).<sup>9</sup>

The last point I want to make to finish up this incomplete review of Horacio Labastida's work is something enormously relevant to the crisis we are going through. In the transition to democracy and in an open, interdependent, competitive world economy, we do not seem to be able to manage to agree, which we need to do to deal with changing

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planetary problems. According to Labastida, in every plural, democratic society, it is only natural that there be different, contradictory points of view about social objectives. Despite this, there must be a balance and mutual influence between social and economic development so that one supports and promotes the growth of the other. Or, more directly in the spirit of the 1917 Constitution, economic development must be a democratic instrument of social justice.

The mechanism for resolving those tensions and satisfying those objectives is none other than the healthy game of politics.<sup>10</sup> But a kind of politics freed as much as possible from the iron-clad universal economic paradigms that today run counter to the legitimate aspirations of the citizenry, make a caricature of democracy and create more poverty than well-being.

This idea gives Labastida's 1976 work *Pongámonos de acuerdo en lo fundamental* (Let's Agree on What's Fundamental) enormous timeliness. In it, he reminds the reader of the liberal formula that solved the crisis resulting from the Santa

Anna decades, emphasizing common interests, putting aside differences and cementing consensus, which made it possible to rebuild Mexican society in the nineteenth century. If only he could be heard today.

It can be said that Labastida's language, regardless of its linguistic rigor, is not the language of post-modernity. He could even be accused of somewhat overlooking the demanding realities of economic interdependence that make the concepts of nation-state and the Westphalian idea of sovereignty obsolete. However, the values of social democracy Labastida defended have not lost their relevance, nor has history ended, even if the struggle must be renewed and we must wait until the global economy is limited, humanized by the establishment of social rights of a similar, that is, universal scope. **MM**



NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Horacio Labastida Muñoz died December 22, 2004. This article was first published January 14, 2005 in the "Economy" section of the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*. [Editor's Note.]
- <sup>2</sup> Horacio Labastida, *La grandeza del indio mexicano*, Cuadernos del Archivo Histórico Universitario Collection (Puebla: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Horacio Labastida, "Presidencialismo autoritario y transición democrática," *La transición difícil* (Mexico City: La Jornada Ediciones, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> Horacio Labastida, *Semanario político 1988-1994* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1995), p. 697.
- <sup>5</sup> Horacio Labastida, "Presidencialismo..." op. cit., p. 95.
- <sup>6</sup> Horacio Labastida, *El PRI ante la realidad de la nación*, 17th National Assembly of the PRI in Zacatecas, 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> Horacio Labastida, *Filosofía y política, cinco ensayos* (Mexico City: Editorial Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 1986).
- <sup>8</sup> Horacio Labastida, "Elites intelectuales en la historia de México," Octavio Rodríguez, comp., *Reflexiones del futuro* (Mexico City: Colegio Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, 1994).
- <sup>9</sup> Horacio Labastida, "Evaluación política del Presidente Fox," Samuel Schmidt, comp., *La nueva crisis de México* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Horacio Labastida, *Filosofía y política...*, op. cit., p. 60.