

The Bankruptcy of Beliefs

Ricardo Mella

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To my brother J. Prat:

Faith has had its moment; it has also had its noisy bankruptcy. There is nothing left standing at this hour but the lonely ruins of its altars.

Ask the learned people—or those who still wear the intellectual loincloth—and if they wish to answer you conscientiously, they will tell you that faith has died forever: political faith and religious faith, and the scientific faith that has defrauded so many hopes.

When all the past was dead, gazes turned longingly toward the rising sun. Then the sciences had their triumphal hymns. And it came to pass that the multitude was given new idols, and now the eminent representatives of the new beliefs preach right and left the sublime virtues of the dogmatic scientist. The dangerous logorrhea of flattering adjectives, and the never-ending chatter of the sham sages put us on the path to what is rightly proclaimed the bankruptcy of science.

Actually, it is not science that is bankrupt in our day. There is no science; there are sciences. There are no finished things; there are things in perpetual formation. And what does not exist cannot break. If it were still claimed that that which is in constant elaboration, that which constitutes or will constitute the flow of knowledge goes bankrupt in our time, it would only demonstrate that those who said it sought something in the sciences what they cannot give us. It is not the human task of investigating and knowing that fails; what fails, as faith failed in the past, is the sciences.

The ease of creating without examination or mature deliberation, coupled with the general poverty of culture, has resulted in theological faith being succeeded by philosophical faith and later scientific faith. Thus, religious and political fanatics are followed by the believers in a multitude of “isms,” which, if fertilized by the greatest wealth of our understanding, only confirm the atavistic tendencies of the human spirit.

But what is the meaning of the clamoring that arises at every step in the bosom of parties, schools and doctrines? What is this unceasing battle between the catechumens of the same church? It means, simply, that beliefs fail.

The enthusiasm of the neophyte, the healthy and crazy enthusiasm, forges new doctrines and the doctrines forge new beliefs. It desires something better, pursues the ideal, seeks noble and lofty employment of its activities, and barely makes a slight examination, if it finds the note that resonates harmoniously in our understanding and in our heart. It believes. Belief then pulls us

along completely, directs and governs our entire existence, and absorbs all our faculties. In no other way could chapels, like churches, small or large, rise powerfully everywhere. Belief has its altars, its worship and its faithful, as faith had.

But there is a fateful, inevitable, hour of dreadful questioning. And this luminous hour is one in which mature reflection asks itself the reason for its beliefs and its ideological loves.

Then the ideal word, which was something like the nebula of a God on whose altar we burned the incense of our enthusiasm, totters. Many things crumble within us. We vacillate as a building whose foundations are weakening. We are upset about party and opinion commitments, just as if our own beliefs were to become unbearable. We believed in man, and we no longer believe. We roundly affirmed the magical virtue of certain ideas, and we do not dare to affirm it. We enjoyed the ardor of an immediate positive regeneration, and we no longer enjoy it. We are afraid of ourselves. What prodigious effort of will is required not to fall into the most appalling emptiness of ideas and feelings!

There goes the crowd, drawn by the verbosity of those who carry nothing inside and by the blindness of those who are full of great and incontestable truths. There goes the multitude, lending with its unconscious action, the appearance of life to a corpse whose burial only awaits the strong will of a genius intelligence, who will strip off the blindfold of the new faith.

But the man who thinks, the man who meditates on his opinions and actions in the silent solitude that leads him to the insufficiency of beliefs, sketches the beginning of the great catastrophe, feels the bankruptcy of everything that keeps humanity on a war footing and is aware of the rebuilding of his spirit.

The noisy polemic of parties, the daily battles of selfishness, bitterness, hatred and envy, of vanity and ambition, of the small and great miseries that grip the social body from top to bottom, mean nothing but that beliefs go bankrupt everywhere.

Soon, and perhaps even now, if we delved into the consciences of believers, of all believers, we would find nothing but doubts and questions. All men of good will soon confess their uncertainties. Only the closed-minded belief will be affirmed by those who hope to gain some profit, just as the priests of religions and the augurs of politics continue to sing the praises of the faith that feeds them even after its death.

So, then, is humanity going to rush into the abyss of ultimate negation, the negation of itself?

Let us not think like the old believers, who cry before the idol that collapses. Humanity will do nothing but break one more link of the chain that imprisons it. The noise matters little. Anyone who does not feel the courage to calmly witness the collapse, will do well to retire. There is always charity for the invalids.

We believed that ideas had the sovereign virtue of regenerating us, and now we find ourselves with ideas that do not carry within themselves elements of purity, justification and truthfulness, and cannot borrow them from any ideal. Under the passing influence of a virgin enthusiasm, we seem renewed, but at last the environment regains its empire. Humanity is not made up of heroes and geniuses, and so even the purest sink, at last, into the filth of all the petty passions. The time when beliefs are broken is also the time when all the fraudsters are known.

Are we in an iron ring? Beyond all the hecatombs life springs anew. If things do not change according to our particular theses, if they do not occur as we expect them to occur, this does not give in to the negation of the reality of realities. Outside of our pretensions as believers, the modification persists, the continuous change is accomplished and everything evolves: means, men and things. How? In what direction? Ah! That is precisely what is left at the mercy of the

unconsciousness of the multitudes; that is what, in the end, is decided by an element alien to the work of the understanding and the sciences: force.

After all the propaganda, all the lessons, all the progress, humanity does not have, it does not wish to have any creed but violence. Right? Is this wrong?

And it is force that we accept the things as they are and that, accepting them, our spirit does not weaken. At a critical moment, when everything collapses in us and around us; when we grasp that we are neither better nor worse than others; when we are convinced that the future is not contained in any formulas that are still dear to us, that the species will never conform to the mold of a given form of association, whether it may be called; when we finally assure ourselves that we have done nothing more than forge new chains, gilded with beloved names,—in that decisive moment we must break up all the rubbish of belief, that we cut all the fastenings and we revive personal independence more confidently than ever.

If a vigorous individuality is stirred within us, we will not morally die at the hands of the intellectual vacuum. For man, there is always a categorical affirmation, the “becoming,” the beyond that is constantly reflected and after which it is, however, necessary to run. Let’s run faster when the bankruptcy of beliefs is done.

What does it matter that the goal will eternally move away from us? Men who fight, even in this belief, are those who are needed; not those who find elements of personal enrichment in everything; not those who make of the interests of the party pennant connections for the satisfaction of their ambitions; not those who, positioned to monopolize for their own advantage, monopolize even feelings and ideas.

Even among men of healthier aspirations, selfishness, vanity, foolish petulance, and low ambition take center stage. Even in the parties of more generous ideas there is the leaven of slavery and exploitation. Even in the circle of the noblest ideals, charlatanism and vanity teem; fanaticism, soon intransigence toward the friend, sooner cowardice toward the enemy; fatuity that rises up swaggering, shielded by the general ignorance. Everywhere, weeds sprout and grow. Let’s not live delusions.

Shall we allow ourselves to be crushed by the grief of all the atavisms that revive, with sonorous names, in us and around us?

Standing firm, firmer than ever, looking beyond any formula whatsoever, will reveal the true fighter, the revolutionary yesterday, today and tomorrow. Without a hero’s daring, it is necessary to pass undaunted through the flames that consume the bulk of time, to take a risk among the creaking timbers, the roofs that sink, the walls that collapse. And when there is nothing left but ashes, rubble, shapeless debris that will have crushed the weeds, nothing will not be left for those who come after but one simple work: to sweep the floor of the lifeless obstacles.

If the collapse of faith has allowed the growth of belief in the fertile field of the human being, and if belief, in turn, falters and bows withered to the earth, we sing the bankruptcy of belief, because it is a new step on the path of individual freedom.

If there are ideas, however advanced, that have bound us in the stocks of doctrinarism, let us smash them. A supreme ideality for the mind, a welcome satisfaction for the spirit disdainful of human pettiness, a powerful force for creative activity, putting thought into the future and the heart into the common welfare, will always remain standing, even after the bankruptcy of all beliefs.

At the moment, even if the mind is frightened, even if all the pigeonholes rebel, in many minds something stirs that is incomprehensible to the dying world: beyond ANARCHY there is also a sun that is born, as in the succession of time there is no sunset without sunrise.

Sources:

La bancarrota de las creencias, by Ricardo Mella, «La Revista Blanca», 107, Madrid, December 1, 1902.

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