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The Democratic Citizen.
A Rational Utopia of Post-Modern Education

El ciudadano democrático.
Utopía sensata de la posmodernidad educativa

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Abstract

The article states that Mexico is currently undergoing a profound social crisis which sprang from the fact that public affairs are managed without taking into account the people's interests. This makes us consider the possibility of a more democratic society. Suggesting an alternative to antidemocratic practice implies an effort to design an educational project, a rational utopia, not presented either confrontationally or hopelessly, but gathers those elements of reality which aim directly at social transformation. A democratic society would be one which would maintain true symmetry of interaction between individuals, based on the principle of the universality of mutual respect and personal autonomy. In working toward this society, educators bear in mind the figure of the democratic citizen.

Key words: Moral education, philosophy of education, values teaching

Resumen

El artículo plantea que México vive, en nuestros días, una profunda crisis social que nace del hecho de que no es el interés general el que se hace valer en la conducción de los asuntos públicos, y que nos hace pensar en una sociedad más democrática. Plantear una alternativa a las prácticas antidemocráticas supone hacer el esfuerzo por configurar un proyecto educativo, una *utopía sensata*, viable, en la medida en no se presenta como crítica frontal y desesperanzada, sino que recoge aquellos elementos de la realidad que apuntan precisamente a la transformación social. Una sociedad democrática sería aquella que observara una simetría real en las interacciones entre los individuos, aquella que parte del principio de la universalidad del respeto mutuo y de la autonomía de las personas. Para esta sociedad, deben trabajar los educadores a través de la figura del ciudadano democrático.

Palabras claves: Educación moral, filosofía de la educación, enseñanza de valores.

Introduction

In a very interesting article this past July, Dr. Pablo Gonzalez-Casanova (2000) says that all the experiences of the modern and postmodern world appear to indicate that the construction of an alternative to the various crises in what the end-of-century dateline has been loosing in Mexico or is about to loose will begin with the construction of a new democracy.

Among the crises now in evidence, says Don Pablo, are the following: “1) That of the indigenous peoples facing ever more discrimination—poverty-stricken, besieged, deprived, exploited, excluded, hungry and sick, and ever more worthy and rebellious; 2) That of the university students in their battle for free public higher education to avoid their being robbed of the future; 3) That of the great subsidy of the people to the bankers [...] ; 4) That of the Mexican fields [...]; 5) That of the small and medium-sized business people without credit or with unaffordable credit [...]; 6) That of the violation of individual and social rights [...]; 7) That of drug trafficking and organized crime linked [...] to banking [...] and to government circles [...]; 8) That of frozen basic salaries and decreased real wages [...]; 9) That of the public services of education, health, food, social security, infrastructure, grants and budgets increasingly more reduced [...].”

To those enumerated by Dr. Gonzalez-Casanova, we could add other situations like those he has mentioned, and that have already become crises among us. Such is the case of 1) The subordination, margination and exploitation of women; 2) The margination and exclusion of the visions of the world and of the collective life of the indigenous peoples and other social minority groups; 3) The subordination of the processes of generation and diffusion of scientific and technological knowledge to the interests of the transnational companies; 4) the intolerance and margination of the expressions of art and culture which carry a vision different from that of the social sectors in power; etcetera.

This picture makes us think that if anything characterizes the situation now being lived in social interactions in Mexico, it is the injustice toward the majority of the population, and that this injustice is born of the fact of that it is not the general interest, nor even the interest of the majority, that is asserting itself in the political decisions, in the management of public affairs in this country. It shows that, for Mexicans at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the essence of democracy: *the principle of universality* is not being fulfilled.

Thinking about a more democratic society is based, of course, on the recognition that today's society is not so much like that, and that there are, in the culture and contemporary social life, situations and ways of living together that do not leave us satisfied, and that make us want something that is lacking, that make us miss something we consider possible and compels us to propose an alternative, to make the effort to configure the image of the citizen who, in the framework of an unjust society—inequitable, individualistic, competitive, pragmatic, hedonistic and disenchanted with its history—takes responsibility for promoting the values of cooperative solidarity, justice and the collective construction of a better future. This image, insofar as it can become an educational project, ethical-anthropological in aspiration for the educational task of our time, will have the character of a utopia: the utopia of training the democratic citizen in postmodern culture and society.

What makes a utopia?

Whether it be in the territory of politics, literature or educational projects, a utopia brings to the scene a break with the present, achieves a critical transfiguration of what is real and shows the *other* that we are, potentially or in reality. Every utopia thus contains a vision of what is ideal/necessary, and toward that vision one must turn if one wishes to be consistent. In this sense, a utopia is always reactive. It expresses our hopes and desires, as well as confidence in man's ability to transcend himself.

The creation of an educational utopia, then, is nothing more than the practice of speculating, of imagining a different life and destiny for man, based on an inconformity toward what exists and promoting a different anthropology and vision of the world that would permit educational practice to pay its debts to society and take a new direction.

However, on delineating an *ought to be* for education, it is possible to point out both what is possible, what is moderate and relevant, and what is impossible, immoderate or irrelevant. According to Octavi Fullat (1984), the *utopia sensata* is distinguished from the *insensata*, in that, unlike the latter, it proposes a path toward an existence born of *reasonable* criticism. Its proposal appears not only as something good, as something which induces our will to act to bring it to reality, but it also fits together with other existing elements that show it as possible and necessary.

Instead, the *utopia insensata* occurs exclusively as a protest, as hopeless criticism of what is real and as the negation of all meaning for what exists; it means rebellion, withdrawal or loneliness bordering on the insane.

To formulate, then, a *utopia sensata* is to accompany the criticism of what exists with a proposal for a new, possible way, gathered from the real, and requires another way of being viewed in order to continue having value. Therefore, to present the idea of democracy as an educational utopia for postmodernity is to criticize the anti-democratic in this new social situation and is, also, the formulation of an ethic that seeks to center itself on the community, in opposition to the drawbacks of postmodern individualism.

The idea of democracy as a valuable social practice: where does it come from?

The idea that collective life benefits and enriches the community when it is conducted according to the criterion of taking into account the expectations and interests of all the members of a community, goes back at least 3,000 years, and arises in the context of the city states of classical Greece. It was the members of those communities who first considered a life in common which, as well as opening the possibility of attaining, without risks and without conflict, the interests and expectations of each in particular, went beyond that, and gave place to a new kind of reality which, without doubt, enriched it in many ways.

The idea of the citizen of the Greek city state, the, the *Zoon politikon*, is that of an active, committed subject, who finds in his[1] participation in the life of the community a form of doing good, a virtue *(arete),* and hence, what must be done. The citizen's participation, in this case, is not a right of the individual, but a responsibility assumed as inherent in his condition as a free man. It is unavoidable, since non-participation appears as lack of virtue.

Among other reasons (perhaps more fundamental than those assembled here), it has been said that that practice of democracy became impossible when the community grew, became complex and was no longer restricted to the neighborhood and the face-to-face interaction of the citizens. Because of this—they say—democracy, in order to exist in modern societies, was obliged to become representative; that is to say that the participation of community members was forced to adjust, by means of the vote, to the mediation of delegates and representatives in the effective exercise of social power.

In this way, the idea of the modern citizen (the *citoyen* of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen) is that of the *sujeto de derechos* (subject of rights), a subject who has the right to participate in the collective life, but is not forced to do so, even when her participation is considered valuable, she may abstain from it. The modern citizen enjoys the protection and guarantee of the State with respect to the dominion and use of her person, her family, her creed and her patrimony, as well as the possibility of electing or being elected for the exercise

of public power; but, on the one hand this enjoyment depends on the actual possession of a family, a creed or a patrimony, and on the other hand, it is her conviction, her commitment that leads her to participate in the collective life, and not her citizenship.

Just as in the Greek city state, citizenship constitutes the basis of possibility for the enjoyment of these rights. However, *citizenship* has become abstract: it is the law that gives the subject the ability to participate, no his own existence. Thus, while in the Greek city state, having a particular identity, family, patrimony and beliefs made him a citizen; and given this, he was obligated to participate in the politics of the city. The modern citizen, as a subject of rights, obtains from the law, as we have said, the guarantee that he will suffer no ill effects (either from his fellow citizens, or from foreigners) in the enjoyment of his identity, family, patrimony or beliefs, if he has legal possession of these goods; nor is he pressured into political participation, if his desire is to abstain—which occurs frequently and massively in our time.

In spite of these historical and conceptual particularities, it is possible to recognize the existence of three principles fundamental in the practice of democracy, in which they have been of value, social practices valuable in occidental culture, whether in the ancient Greek city state or of the modern state/nation. These principles are:

- Every individual is inevitably immersed in a community, not only in the sense of needing it, but she is the community. She exists through it.
- Collective life makes possible and enriches the quality of life, inclinations, preferences, expectations and interests (from cognitive and affective to economic) of all the individuals and makes room for new and valuable realities.
- Every individual must find, in interactions with others, the attainment of her own needs, expectations and interests.

What is it that threatens or has made these principals disappear today?

It can generally be said that the practice of democracy in today's complex society is still based upon the modern concept of the citizen as the *subject of rights.* Nevertheless, as well as the orientation toward individualism already inposed by the very abstract character of the concept to the extent that participation is mediated by the will of the individual, the concrete situations and circumstances of contemporary social practice are very different from those that were still common some seventy years ago; that is to say, today the life of the community involves actors and social subjects who neither adjust themselves to the abstract concept of citizen, nor existed in the moment in which the concept of democracy as *equality before the law* and *individual liberty* of participation had developed. All of this imposes the necessity of rethinking the problem and establishing clearly, both the limitations of the concept, and the necessities for change in the concrete terrain of social interactions.

The possibility that the term '*democracy'* might mean precisely that each individual or group would be able to be present in the making of decisions and in the government of the collective life, obtaining tangible benefits from it, now faces special difficulties, every time that, in opposition to the modern idea of a citizen unique, universal, abstract, what we really live is the forcefulness of diversity, the rule of multiplicity, the subjugation of general interest and the disillusionment with the values and "promises" of modern citizenship.

Contrary to the abstract *enlightened* definition of the individual and of his equally abstract rights and freedoms, what we face today is the overwhelming reality of ethnic, racial, identity, and socio-cultural diversity. As stated by Victoria Camps (1996:137) "Diversity is booming. It is a sign of quality. It means distinction, power and the ability to distance oneself from the masses. It is the expression of the aristocracy of our time [...] with the creation of an ideology of individuality and difference as a result of an exacerbation of the criticism of modernity and enlightenment [..]."

Faced with this situation, Camps (1996:138) believes that we must recover the achievements of modernity which have historical significance, such as individuality, privacy, freedom, autonomy and diversity, but we cannot abdicate from necessary coexistence. "It's time to recognize that universality and diversity are not always opposites or incompatible," he tells us, "but can be highly autonomous and very different, without forgetting that we live with other individuals who in turn, call for the recognition of their differences."

Because as Camps says (1996:140), "We have not known how to combine the participatory and cooperational liberty of the past with the independent liberty of the modern [...]. When searching for self-realization in the purely private, the individual tends to dispose of all social ties [...]; there is no way sharing with others in common projects. "

On the other hand, Camps (April, 2000) has pointed out that precisely because it is rooted in the individual's right to freedom, that is, in the possibility of renouncing political participation and advocating economic, political and moral liberty, oblivious to the formation of civic identity, the modern concept of citizenship is an individualistic concept that leads to passivity because citizens do not assume the other duties required by formal democracy.

Some, says Camps, today live a nostalgia of republican citizenship expressed in the fact that the liberal individualist concept of citizenship is opposed to the community-republican concept taken from Greek democracy and the Italian republics of the Renaissance which "conceived of political participation in self-government as the essence of freedom."

How do individual and community interconnect?

The term *citizen*, like the term *democracy*, refers to the subject who transcends herself and is connected with others in a new form of existence: the community. Both concepts speak to us of the *projection* from the subject toward something that is not the same, and that causes her to exist in another way, and this opens the theme of the ethical dimension of democracy. Different epochs and thought traditions have formulated different answers about the purposes (the *why?);* that is, about the *values* realized in this transcendence, thus making room for something new.

In the Greek city state and its philosophy, this functioned so that what was transcended were purely idealistic values whose existence did not depend on what individuals did, but instead were imposed upon them, compelling them to act. Those values were: the common good, the universal, man's essential being, his concept: the *zoon politikon*.

The Judeo-Christian tradition of thought has in God its horizon of that transcendence. The life of the community is transcendence towards God, is the realization of his plan; in this way, the individual becomes one with the infinite, becomes a *Person*.

In the thinking of the Enlightenment, the transcendent realities to which the life of the community leads are: freedom, history, the general will; through them, the individual becomes a *citoyen*.

As we see, both in the modern idea of citizenship, and in the Judeo-Christian or the Greek, the answer to the problem of the values realized in the life of the community has an abstract or supernatural notion of the collective life, with the idea of community placed beyond that of communities existing in fact, and of the actual benefits that this human interaction brings about. These responses do not reflect either the heterogeneity of the communities that really exist, or what they really contribute to the life of the individuals that make them up, or to mankind in general, in terms of mutual enrichment. The current communitarian movements have already insisted long enough that there is true social reality the existing communities, in which the problem of what is achieved by life in common cannot have an abstract concept as a reference, nor does it need to approach humanity as a whole.

As a result of the critical and political philosophy and politics of the transcendental-abstract subject (rational, libertarian, autonomous) of modernity, we have seen a flood of strong criticism of the abstract idea of humanity, society or community. It is a fact that at least throughout the second half of the last century, there was a gradual and complete disappearance of the historical significance of the notions of *community, citizenship* and *democracy* of modernity. Many voices have been heard from that time, pointing to the lack of historical perspective of such notions, and voicing their disenchantment with modern culture, its vision of the world, its social structures, and above all, its promises of freedom, wealth and happiness.

Modernity's failure to keep its promises, the deterioration of the quality of life for an increasing a number of the world's men and women, the radical criticism the mythical character of its foundations and hopes generated disenchantment and a pessimism that every day seems to gain greater presence among us, and that given the lack of perspective, claims as its maximum values, individual fulfillment, pleasure and comfort. For the postmodern individual, the only thing of importance is not to be subjected to anything that runs counter to his interest; nothing matters except being well and enjoying it, from sensuality to sensuousness, while it lasts.

Thus, imposing itself upon us has been what Ronald Inglehart (1994) calls the postmodern and cultural syndrome applicable to the pattern of conduct of men and women, especially in the advanced countries, whose views, criteria and feelings assume a system of values different from that which was fundamental in the emergence of the industrial society. Economic success, rationality, subjection to the will of the majority in the management of collective life, idealization of progress, and the advancement of science have become less important for these new citizens who today prefer to subordinate economic growth to environmental protection; who emphasize personal fulfillment as opposed to economic success or the rule of the general will.

"Hierarchical authority, centralization and the greatness of the State," says Inglehart, "have fallen under suspicion and have reached the point in which its efficiency becomes less and less acceptable. Postmodern mentality reflects the growing decrease of the importance ascribed to all authority, and a loss of confidence in the bureaucratic institutions and hierarchies typical of the modern state."

As for Gilles Lipovetsky (1998:12), from a perspective more focused on the ethical significance of the changes, he explains that the advent of the postindustrial society has meant going from the duty era to the post-duty era, from the ethics of obligation "to God or to the State, to ethics of responsibility. "[...] Our ethical culture," he says [...] "far from exalting the superior orders, euphemizes and discredits them [...] devalues the ideal of abnegation, systematically stimulating the immediate desires, the passion of the ego, the intimate and materialistic happiness. Our societies have eliminate all the values of sacrifice, whether ordered by the next life or for secular purposes; daily culture is no longer irrigated by these hyperbolic imperatives of duty, but by the welfare and the dynamics of subjective rights: we have stopped recognizing the obligation of joining ourselves to something other than ourselves."

What to do in the face of disenchantment and postmodern individualism?

In a recent visit to Monterrey[2], Lipovetsky himself acknowledged that the individualism, the doubts and tensions generated by individual autonomy, the shift in the patterns of identity, the radical changes in the roles and *places* and in the very constitution of social subjects, although they point to disintegration, what they

principally represent however, is the fact that we will no longer have a safe habitat. We will have to accept that current and future societies will be societies *permanently at risk,* and that it is therefore essential to reconstruct the social bond, to construct new solidarities and new reasons to practice solidarity. However, these bonds will have the character of compacts more limited, more restricted in their scope and in their contents.

Under these conditions, if one can speak today of democracy and of citizenship, it will not be to refer to the same abstract values: rule of law, equality before the law, respect for the will of the majority—"dictatorship of the majority," Tocqueville would say—that they lost their sense together with the loss of effectiveness of the *great stories* of modern times, and so will have to conceive and promote others that contemplate the heterogeneity, the diversity and the possibility that the minority's interests and expectations (which will never be those of the majority) may be realized in collective life and in the law, other values that might be a guarantee of respect for difference and for enrichment of collective life based on it, in such measure as this makes room for universalizable values.

Also in Monterrey, Jose Maria Mardones, in speaking of movements, recently highlighted[3] the democratizing potential of social movements like civil disobedience. He said, borrowing from Habermas, that without affecting the constitutional framework (that is, expressing itself within that framework) and without violence it "gives ethics" to a democratic society, because it cast doubts on the majority's sense of justice, invoking the same democratic foundations on which the society is built. Such movements are a protest directed to concrete aspects, in which are manifested a point of disagreement with the majority opinion—which must be assumed as questionable—based on the idea of a lack of justice, showing that the law does not always embody justice and that legality is not always legitimate.

"The criticism of injustice," Mardones said on that occasion, "is a kind of ethic healing, and constitutes a training exercise of the general will; that is to say, of forming new rules and principles for social interaction. Unlike the thinking of the Enlightenment, in that the norms are fixed, once and for all, in that they are incarnations of reason that result from that criticism, they are a collective construction which has been universalized because they represent the interests of all."

Based on these ideas, he formulated a concept of democracy in which only symmetrical relationships between individuals are ethical, in which are realized the principle of universality, both in the sense of the universality of mutual respect, and of the universality of the autonomy of the people.

Obviously, this would not have to do with a pragmatic stance which postulates an ethic made of negotiated remnants. According to Norbert Bilbeny (1997), we cannot accept the idea that in postmodern society the ideas lag behind the facts, which are subordinate to them, and therefore we cannot accept that ethics of these

times should govern according to objective evidence of the chosen behavior's social efficiency, but should try to govern collective life according to an ideal of humanity; because, with this, in reality, we would be facing the end of the utopias, of the existence of sense in human achievement. It is therefore very important to assert the necessity of ethics that imply a minimum of human solidarity, beyond performativity and instrumental rationality.

In accordance with what has been said thus far, a democratic society must make it possible for all its members to fulfill themselves just as they are, and from thence to contribute to the enrichment of others. The principle of *one head, one vote,* cannot be merely a form; its value does not lie in itself. If the participation that guarantees the principle of *one head, one vote* makes sense, this comes from its content: the enrichment of collective life based on individual and group contributions. The expression *government of the people* must not be the result of the universality of the vote, but of the universality of respect and the possibility of realization of the expectations themselves, as Mardones would say.

Democracy must guarantee a way of social interaction that means precisely that: the totality of the members of the community be able to tint the common landscape with the colors of their personal and collective being, so that, primarily, democracy must not signify *exclusion, discrimination*, or *subordination*, but instead, must mean the respectful coexistence of diversity.

Universalistic or particularistic ethics?

Now then, is it legitimate to aspire to construct an ethic in which the particular appears *valuable* without falling into relativism, and therefore to deny the possibility of the ethic itself? It seems clear to me that what prevents the modern ethic from having any effect is precisely the pretension of values unique, absolute, a product of the reason, that it is this remoteness from real history, from actual human coexistence, which already very early in the thinking of German romanticism, discredited the philosophy and ethic of the Enlightenment.

Of course it does not have to do with a particularistic ethic in opposition to a universalistic ethic, equally abstract. In both cases, it has to do with pernicious reductions. Villoro (1998) has already made it clear that an appeal to the existence of universal and absolute values has been a pretext for the domination of one culture over others considered inferior; and that furthermore, the idea that all ethics are relative to a culture has been a fallacious argument in the struggle of resistance against colonial rule. He points out that the idea of coherent relativism implies respect for cultural pluralism, without renouncing principles and values of universal significance.

In this same vein, Ana Maria Salmeron criticizes Kohlberg, whom she ranks as a representative of modern liberal thought, when she affirms that when the liberal education does not attempt to prescribe behavior to the individuals as learners, it only intends to "stimulate higher forms of reasoning that would allow each to derive

the norms which, individually, he considers more valuable" (1999:1). These higher forms of reasoning," says Salmeron, "are nothing but the absolute values of modernity. In opposition to the perspective of Kohlberg, she places the ideas of Carr and Sichel, for whom, says Salmeron (1999:4), " moral education must be constructed starting from the values and principles of the community's values and principles [...]. These authors sustain that moral virtues are transmitted from generation to generation, and that they finally shape the adult moral personalities."

Salmeron supports the idea that the values of a community need not be universal, but need not relinquish the possibility of being universalizable, and introduces a notion of plurality that, she says, must be understood as the notion of the *reasonableness* of plurality that John Rawls associated with the concept of *overlapping consensus.* She says (1999:6): "The Rawlsian concept of *overlapping consensus* refers to a notion of consensus which does not allow the rule of a single concept of good, but instead, the coexistence of a wide variety of doctrines [...] that can exist thanks to a *reasonable* form of plurality. This form of plurality implies the establishment of certain restrictions that not only cannot be arbitrary and which, without doubt, are necessary."

Adela Cortina (1995:11) also recalls the communitarian movement, and notes that this "reminds the liberals that morality was once indispensable on the margin of communities, where individuals developed their abilities to make the community survive and prosper, because definitely, out of the good of the community comes one's own good."

In the postmodern culture, the loss of the sense of belonging to the community has uprooted and disoriented us. In contrast, says Cortina, "In the world of communities there are maps that show us the way: there are virtues know we must cultivate; there are duties that it our responsibility to do. In them [...] the new member of the community knows herself connected, accepted, sustained by a set of traditions and companions" (1995:11). This points to a new idea of citizenship, she says, because "[...] we need signs of identity that spring from various forms of belonging to the society, and in this sense, citizenship offers two specific advantages: 1) [.. .] it is crucial for the development of the individual's moral maturity, because participation in the community destroys inertia, and considering the common good feeds altruism; 2) citizenship underlies the other identities and lessens the conflicts that can arise between people professing different ideologies, because it helps to cultivate the political virtue of responsible reconciliation of the interests in conflict. To create men it is also necessary, therefore, to create citizens"(1995:12).

Toward an ethic of difference?

It seems, then, that there is no room for doubts as to the necessity for constructing a new ethic that would offer a more democratic alternative to social interactions and, in general, to the situation that our country is living through today, and which

is characterized, as we have seen, by the lacerating, ominous presence, of the practices of exclusion and margination.

Nor does there seem to be any doubt that this alternative must be supported in a new idea of democracy, nor that it will be through the educational processes that this new ethic can be built and promoted.

It seems clear that the idea of the formation of subjects who, respecting differences, would seek and promote more democratic values and forms of social interaction—the democratic citizen for postmodernity—constitutes indeed a rational utopia—a utopia that, based on the reasonable criticism of the antidemocratic in our society, proposes a new meaning for what exists, which, in the idea of a democratic citizen, opposes the principles of universality and symmetry of individualism and postmodern disenchantment.

All this, then, points out the necessity of the collective construction of an ethic that will rise above the criticism of modern concepts of citizenship and democracy, and the practices associated with them; an ethic that will take into account the changes in the values system of the new communities, of the changes in the social structure and in the forms and contents of presently-existing social relations; and that will meet the challenge of integrating and harmonizing the individual and the collective, the local and the universal, giving a new meaning to the exigencies of equality and fairness. No doubt, this is the point: to remain united in diversity.

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[1] Earlier in the twentieth century, English, like Spanish, used the masculine possessive pronoun in generalized statements to indicate both genders of humankind. Since the advent of the feminist movement, however, such usage in English has been considered sexist, is generally avoided, and has been replaced by expressions such as “his and her”, “s/he” etc. (Fennel, Francis, 2002). While these non-sexist devices can be comfortably employed now and then in a work, their constant and continual use becomes awkward. In this work, in order to avoid the annoying repetition of such constructions, we shall at times use the feminine pronoun (she, her, etc.) and at times, the masculine (he, him, his, etc.).

[2] Conference "The third woman" given in the film library of the Council for Culture of the State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, April 21, 2000

[3] Comments made in the framework of the course "Discourse ethics" given by the Technological Institute of Upper Level Studies of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico in January, 2000.