

Tradition and critical culture. About the Toro de la Vega

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When tradition is invoked to justify acts which should be prohibited or punished were it not for the qualifier of “tradition”, something is wrong.

When tradition is written with capital letters, shielded against healthy and necessary criticism, something is wrong.

When with the name tradition the exercise of violence against any living being is legitimized, something is wrong.

Among the different meanings that the term tradition has today, it must not be forgotten that tradition is always transmission, or the simple offering without any type of ceremony or ritual. This is what the term traditio means, no more no less. And this is the semantic core which conserves the different accepted meanings derived from the term tradition. From the cultural point of view, tradition is understood as a social habit, a set of acts, even a celebration which can be converted into an accepted use for a society. It is to this acceptance of tradition that we refer here.

Tradition does not in itself include perpetuity. It is also true that you cannot “inaugurate a tradition”, as a certain mayor of a town tried to do. It is true that tradition implies an acceptance by society and that it forms part of the people’s culture heritage, but this does not imply that what has been a living tradition can never change, because social habits are changing and what was acceptable at a moment in time can become something that is unacceptable and ill-adapted to society. While the law offers a limit to behaviors, tradition implies a positive background, has a dynamic sense, a principle of fecund continuity, which is reaffirmed, modified and made complete by the same internal coherence, without resistance to change, which does not always include the possibility that the traditional use disappears. Is it necessary to list examples?

Tradition should not be immune to criticism, especially when social changes reveal that a use or an act considered traditional no longer is accepted undisputedly and, above all, when social awareness rejects this tradition. When a society reacts against the uncritical perpetuation and consent of a traditional use or custom, this society must demand that the tradition disappear, especially when the tradition involves the use of violence. Traditional also cannot distance itself from the Law and become an untouchable bastion, which is placed above the Law and resists the exercise of criticism and legal regulation.

I propose these reflections as background to what I consider the current, poorly defined, controversy. The Toro de la Vega has been, for many years, the focus of protest for those who consider it to be an illegal spectacle, of legitimated violence against an animal, which strongly resists, for a little more than a half hour, against the caballistas embates (horsed riders) or the lanceros (lance holders) on foot, which take the bull down with blows by lances and finish the animal off by cutting off the bull’s head. It is a traditional celebration in Tordesillas and its defenders shield it in the rite occurring during the religious festival in honor of the Virgin de la Peña, which goes back to the Middle Ages and they have yoked their identity, uncritically, to the cruel death of an animal in an open field.

There is the error, in resisting the healthy exercise of the freedom of expression (although the insults and stone throwing should be stopped), by the part of society which has changed its view regarding animals, the part which has become aware of the suffering of those which the Law already classifies as “sentient beings”, a fact which, contemplated from a global perspective, is undeniable.

The European Union has been celebrating, specifically in 2014, 40 years of Animal Welfare. That is to say, 40 years of legislation to protect the basic interests of animals, one of which is not to die for anyone’s enjoyment. The cruel spectacles with animals are obsolete and if society has already perceived this and rejected it more day by day, it is time now for the Law, applied in concrete cases like the Toro de la Vega celebration, to no longer continue providing cover to this spectacle as a tradition in order to keep at the margin of legal regulations. Rather, any act of violence against animals must be stopped and punished. It is not necessary here to invoke Max Weber, in order to shield bloody spectacles with animals as an expression of legitimate violence, but rather the contrary, the recourse to political controversy can no longer be used. Maintaining a tradition that should have disappeared long ago is in any case a contradiction to the current legal situation.

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