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Chapter 1

A Scourge without a Name

> Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.[1]

From Xenophobia to Aporophobia

At the beginning of his extraordinary novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez recreates the setting of the book of Genesis, but situated in Macondo, the Colombian village where the saga of the Buendía family takes place, rather than in the Garden of Eden between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. His text, like the biblical one, states that at the beginning of time, many things lacked a name and had to be pointed out with the finger.

Human history, at least to an extent, consists of naming things in order to incorporate them into the human world

through dialogue, consciousness, and reflection, through words and writing, without which those things cannot become a part of us. The adobe houses and the polished stones of the river can be pointed out, but how do we describe personal and social realities in order to recognize them when they lack a physical form?

It's impossible to point a finger at democracy, freedom, conscience, totalitarianism, beauty, hospitality, or finance capitalism; it's impossible to physically indicate xenophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia, Christianophobia, or Islamophobia. These are social realities that require names which allow us to recognize them and know of their existence—to analyze them and to take a position with respect to them. Otherwise, they linger in the fog of anonymity, where they may act as an ideology in a sense similar to the one Marx intended: as a deformed and deforming vision of reality filtered through the dominant class or dominant groups in a given time and context to maintain their dominant status. The more silent it is, the more effective an ideology is, because it cannot even be denounced. It distorts reality by concealing it, wrapping it in a cloak of invisibility, making it impossible to see its outlines. It is for this reason that history consists in part of naming things, both those we can point out and those we can't, because they form part of the fabric of social reality rather than of the physical world.

This has occurred with xenophobia and racism, which are old as humanity itself, but which can be addressed now that they have been given a name. What is unique about such phobias is that they are founded not in a personal history of hatred toward a given person who has been a source of bad experiences for oneself or for one's ancestors. Instead, it is something stranger. It is a distaste for certain people with whom, most often, one isn't even acquainted, because they bear the characteristics of a group that the person experiencing this

phobia considers deserving of fear or contempt, or of both at the same time.

In all cases, the person who feels this contempt adopts an attitude of superiority vis-à-vis the other, considering his own ethnic group, race, sexual tendency, or belief—whether religious or atheistic—to be superior and thus a source of legitimacy for rejecting the other. This is a key point about group-based phobias: the conviction that there exists an asymmetrical relationship, that the race, ethnic group, sexual orientation, religious belief or lack thereof of the person who feels contempt is superior to that of the person being rejected. And this justifies attacking that person physically or with words—which are themselves a mode of action.

In the task of legitimating such doubtful choices, the interpretive capacities of the brain play an important role, the way they work to weave a calming story that allows us to remain in equilibrium. The belief in one's own superiority is one that works well in day-to-day life, even if this presumed superiority has no basis whatsoever in biology or culture.

As we will see in the following chapter, in democratic countries, which declare themselves in favor of the equality and dignity of all human beings, recognizing cases of xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and abuse is a task for the courts and the police—an arduous one, too, not simply because hate crimes or instances of hatred are rarely reported or because there is a lack of resources for dealing with them. It's true that it's extremely difficult to tell when a discourse against a given group may be considered a hate crime of the kind legally proscribed and subject to sanction and when it is falls under the protections accorded to freedom of expression. What makes matters worse is the abundance of political parties that have opted for xenophobic discourses as a mark of identity and an incentive for getting votes. Alas, it has

proven a winning strategy, particularly in moments of crisis, when a sacrificial lamb is just the thing for those who have nothing positive to offer.

However old xenophobia and racism are, they were not recognized as such until a certain moment in history, when people finally pointed a finger at them, gave them a name, and analyzed them with reference to the social demand of respect for human dignity. It is impossible to respect people as such and at the same time attack individuals for the mere fact of belonging to a group. We must keep in mind that hateful words are not merely a provocation to the violation of another's dignity—they themselves constitute such a violation.

And yet, although xenophobia is clearly on the rise in the countries of the European Union, particularly since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis, it isn't clear, if we look at things from a broader perspective, that mere hatred of the other accounts for what is happening.

To take an example already mentioned in the introduction to the present book: on June 25, 2016, no sooner than the results of the Brexit referendum were made known, with a small majority of voters declaring themselves in favor of leaving, the press published stories of interest for residents of Great Britain and Spain. It turned out the British were worried because Spanish immigrants working in the health care sector constituted a large number of the country's doctors and nurses and were, moreover, highly qualified. These were skilled immigrants, highly educated, who contributed to the country's GDP and to improving the well-being of the population.

Naturally, no matter how *foreign* they were, there wasn't the least interest in expelling these people; rather, it was a relief to realize that the process of abandoning the European Union would be long enough that there was no reason to worry about

these fine professionals being forced to leave the country. The famous *in-in* and *out-out* was suspended as pragmatisms from both sides of the divide worked slowly through the actual process of separation. The famous affirmation *Brexit is Brexit* was an attractive slogan for a meaningless proposal. No one knows what the real nature of this departure of Britain from the European Union will bring, and no one seems particularly to desire it, not even the many people who voted Leave and then excoriated their politicians for lying to them.

Curiously, at the same time, in Spain we were asking ourselves about the fate of the large number of British immigrants living on the Spanish coasts, especially in the south and east, who bring a great deal of money wherever they reside. These foreigners took advantage of the sun and the national health care system, but Spain also had an interest in keeping them in the country. Here, too, the ambiguity concerning what the Brexit process would actually consist of, and the lack of clarity around the famous Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union, served as a kind of life preserver.

And so, specialized health care personnel interest the United Kingdom, and British retirees looking to spend their last days in the sun interest Spain. In neither case is there the least sign of aversion. Hence, it is not the foreigner as such that inspires rejection. There may be an uncertainty in given dealings, because language differences and distinct habits make interactions less clear than they are with those who share our language and our traditions, but this is not the same as aversion and rejection.

Nor are we repulsed by people from the East who buy up whole soccer teams or bring what used to be called "petrodollars," or soccer players of whatever ethnic group or race, who make millions and are essential for winning games. We don't mind those Romani people who make their name in the flamenco world, and

we don't reject foreign investors who build automobile factories, bars, and clubs in our country. In these and many other ways, foreigners contribute to the growth of the country's GDP.

Our doors close, however, before political refugees, poor immigrants who have nothing to lose but their chains, Romani people selling tissues in rough neighborhoods and digging around in trash containers, when in reality they are no less native to the country than anyone else, however much their culture pertains to a minority. The doors of conscience close before homeless beggars, who are condemned to invisibility worldwide.

And so the problem isn't race, ethnicity, or foreign birth. The problem is poverty. And worst of all, whereas there are many racists and many xenophobic people, almost everyone is aporophobic.

It is the poor person, the *aporos*, who is an irritation, even to his own family. The poor relative is considered a source of shame it is best not to bring to light, while it is a pleasure to boast of a triumphant relation well situated in the academy, politics, art, or business. It is a phobia toward the poor that leads us to reject individuals, races, and ethnic groups that in general lack resources and that therefore cannot—or appear unable to—offer anything.

History of a Term

The conviction that rejection of the poor is more widespread and ingrained than other sorts of aversion, that it is a powerful personal and social reality, as we see constantly in our daily lives, is one I expressed in a column I published decades ago in a newspaper in Spain. José Antonio Marina and I shared a section of *ABC Cultural* entitled Ethical Creation, where once a week we presented articles, book reviews, and columns devoted

to ethics in the broad sense of the term, examining not only morals but also the economy and politics. This is how Adam Smith understood it, and as a professor of philosophy he both engaged with the moral sentiments and also sought the sources of wealth and poverty among nations. Politics and economy were essential to our Ethical Creation because without them, the vision of the moral world would remain truncated.

It was on December 1, 1995, that I published a column with the title "Aporophobia." In it, I made reference to a Euro-Mediterranean conference that took place in Europe around that time and attempted to address burning issues in the countries of that region, issues that remain points of contention to this day: immigration, terrorism, and peace processes. Nowadays, we must include among them the economic crisis and unemployment. It was easy to predict that experts all over the world would describe racism, xenophobia, and religious fundamentalism as the greatest problems in the Mediterranean region. But I already sensed—and I continue to feel this way—that the basis of all of those was a rejection, aversion, fear directed toward the poor, one that still didn't have a name.

And a label for this social pathology was urgently needed in order to diagnose it more precisely and propose effective treatments. Doing so would be a fitting objective for Mediterranean culture, which has been accustomed to dialogue since the time of Socrates—accustomed, in other words, to what is by definition an inclusive activity. For the same reason, at the end of the twentieth century, it was imperative that dialogue be the medium of exploration of the necessity of providing the underprivileged with what belongs to them by birth: the enjoyment of a culturally and materially dignified life.

Convinced that we do not so much reject foreigners as the poor, I looked in my Greek dictionary from my student days for

a term that designated the poor person, the person lacking in resources, and I found the word *aporos*. I used it to coin the term *aporophobia* by analogy with *xenophobia* and *homophobia*.

A second milestone in the history of this word was a chapter in a textbook put together by a team of professors for the publisher Santillana and published for the first time in 1996. Domingo García-Marzá, María Begoña Domené, Emilio Martínez, Juan Manuel Ros, Norberto Smilg, and I collaborated on it, and the experience was exhilarating. The title was *Ethics: Moral Life and Ethical Reflection*, and it was for a required course for students in their fourth year of secondary school that boasted two virtues very rare in our country: it provoked no objections on the part of any political or social group, and no one demanded it compete with any other subject in the curriculum. If only the situation had continued that way—as a mandatory course in ethics, period—we could have saved ourselves more than a few sterile arguments.

As the title clearly reflects, the book intended to approach its subject matter from two perspectives: that of daily life, in which people follow distinctive patterns of personal conduct dictated by ideals, norms, or conceptions of the life well lived, and that of ethics and moral philosophy, which have contributed to our understanding of duty and led us to search for the bases of norms, ideals, or projects.

In the book's sixth chapter, we discussed a basic challenge to human dignity and democratic life in common, namely the undeniable reality of social and economic discrimination. After explaining that discrimination is a social matter and what exactly it comprises, there was a section entitled "Aporophobia: The Poor and the Disabled Are Pushed Aside." Accompanied by Eduardo Galeano's extraordinary text, *The Nobodies*, it analyzed the vice of aporophobia, and suggested the solution we

will attempt to sketch out briefly in this book: the creation of equality through education and institutions.

Later, the text dealt with other forms of social discrimination: racism, homophobia, and prejudice against other, less talked about groups like the old or the physically disabled. The message was clear: a moral and political culture based on the equal dignity of all would need to replace those everyday hatreds.

A third milestone in the present history of the word *aporophobia* was an article I published in *El País* on March 7, 2000. In it, I discuss the Royal Spanish Academy's debate over including the neologism "aporophobia" to its *Dictionary of the Spanish Language*. It offered as a possible definition: "hatred, repugnance, or hostility toward the poor, the underprivileged, or the homeless." And they added, in one of those illuminating parentheses that follow the word, "(From the Greek *aporos*, poor, and *phobos*, fear)."

To my knowledge, this expression doesn't exist in other languages, and I am not sure it is the best term we could contrive. But what cannot be doubted is there is a need to put a name to the rejection of the poor and helpless, because the attitude is only worse to the extent that it is unnamed. Without recognition, this undeniable reality cannot be effectively addressed.

The Royal Academy has strict criteria for introducing new words into its dictionary, which includes expressions from all Spanish-speaking countries. So far as I know, the most common justifications are that the word appears in classic works of the Spanish language or proceeds from a foreign language but has come to be widely used in Spanish. For example, many English terms have been added in recent years. But I believe that beyond that, what matters as much or more is that the term *aporophobia* designates a reality so present in social life that it cannot

be fully understood without it. Today, life cannot be understood without naming those phobias that produce rejection of people whose characteristics place them in a group that is despised, feared, or both. One of these is aporophobia, the rejection of the poor.

In my opinion, we need a name not to add a few paragraphs to the dictionary, but to aid us in recognizing this very present, very painful reality, to recognize it, study its causes, and decide whether it can be accepted or whether it is our duty to suppress it. This must be done because rejection of the poor degrades the person who practices it and is a constant assault on the dignity of real people with names. Not against the abstraction of "human dignity," but against the dignity and welfare of flesh-and-blood people who suffer rejection. In this book, we will argue that there is no one who has nothing to offer. Emilio Martínez, author of the entry *Aporophobia* in the *Glossary for an Intercultural Society*, published by the Bancaja Foundation in 2002, says the same.

Finally, we must point out that the term *aporophobia* has aroused the interest of many people committed to empowering the poor. It has served as a rubric for conferences and meetings of civil society organizations; the RAIS Foundation has used it to better explain the violence suffered by the homeless; and it has also figured in recent analyses of integration policies for immigrant communities in Europe, among them the publications of Professor Silveira Gorski. The media have employed it to discuss the abuse of the poor and indigent, and it has been the subject of more than one dissertation. Wikipedia has added the term to its dictionary, and the Spanish Ministry of the Interior uses it to describe crimes committed against the poor.

More significant to me, however, is that when I speak of aporophobia in a conference or workshop on either side of the

Atlantic, my listeners, young and old, smile and nod understandingly, as if to say, "That's true, that's something we see every day."

Ortega y Gasset said that what's happening is that we do not know what's happening, and for this reason, we must become aware of what is happening with us in regard to the constant contempt for the poor. When I see the agreement on the faces of people when I explain what aporophobia is, I realize it is a reality that is very close—all too close—to us.

Socrates's imperative to know oneself initiated the first enlightenment, which took place in Classical Greece. In the same line, the Kantian invitation to employ one's own reason gave rise to the glow of the Enlightenment proper. Knowing more and more about ourselves, recognizing that this form of discrimination we have dubbed *aporophobia* for lack of a better word exists, inquiring as to its causes, and searching for ways to overcoming it, is one of the challenges of our time. The name is a simple path to recognition, because, as an excellent professor of mine, Fernando Cubells, used to say, questions of words are solemn questions of things.

Throughout this book, we will attempt to offer an antidote to this wound, one that will require both formal and informal education and the creation of institutions aimed at overcoming prejudice. The antidote is active respect for the equal dignity of people in daily life, and it demands the cordial recognition of that dignity. This will be the wellspring of compassion, but not just any sort of compassion: rather the kind that Stefan Zweig describes at the beginning of his splendid novel *Beware of Pity* with the following words:

> There are two kinds of compassion. One is faint-hearted and sentimental, it, in essence, is nothing but the impatience of the heart, hurrying to quickly get rid of the painful sensation

> at the sight of someone else's misfortune; it is not compassion, but only an instinctive desire to protect your peace from the suffering of your neighbor. But there is another compassion—true, which requires action, not sentimentality, it knows what it wants, and is full of determination, suffering and compassion, to do everything that is human and even beyond them.[2]

Recognition of equal dignity and compassion is the key to an ethics of cordial reason and is indispensable to the overcoming of inhumane discrimination.[3]

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