

Nicolas Gomez-Davila's Critique of Modernity

[Nicolás Gómez-Dávila](#) (1913-1994) is a Colombian thinker who only recently began to receive attention in Spanish-speaking countries, Italy and in Germany, where his thought has gained much attention. His work has been translated into several languages, including Polish and English.

Two things loom large about Gómez-Dávila's work: He was a fierce critic of modernity and he was an insatiable reader, especially of the Western Canon. His personal library surpassed 30,000 volumes. He set down his ideas on paper – even though he was not interested in publishing them – as aphorisms, which he called escolios (glosses).

Gómez-Dávila suggests that the mere act of reading would become the purview of reactionaries late in the twentieth century. This is an astonishing suggestion, when we consider that reading has always been the cornerstone of knowledge. Gómez-Dávila points out that knowledge and reading will always share a sacred marriage. However, post-modernity has destroyed the bond between education and reading. The only salvation left for readers is to go underground, as it were, for knowledge can only be salvaged in works that place on display the wisdom of the ages. Gómez-Dávila considered post-modern man's spurious attention span and servitude in a world dominated by base images responsible for the destruction of "implicit knowledge."

Many of his best aphorisms have been collected in [Scholia to an Implicit Text](#). The world of post-modern man has become corroded by vulgarity, and aesthetic and moral ugliness, the source of what he considers to be man's explicit inability to practice common sense: "Modern clatter deafens our soul." The corrective to the eradication of traditional values is to take

refuge in the implicit knowledge supplied by history and tradition.

Genuine thought, the Latin American thinker suggests, is the shepherd of dignity and man's ability to cultivate the soul. Gómez-Dávila's reaction to post-modernity is fueled by man's pathological desire to become God. Philosophical reflection, he cautions, cannot be found in academic institutions precisely because thought is an act of salvation that is encountered and practiced by individuals: "The only possible progress is the inner progress of each individual. A process that comes to a halt with the end of each life." Thought is a solitary business that education cannot assuage, for, "There is an illiteracy of the soul which no diploma cures."

Aphorisms are powerful tools in the hands of those who ponder their meaning. They are pithy, concrete expressions of truth that convey mountains of knowledge in a few words. Yet the clarity and vision of aphorisms has been lost in post-modernity. Part of this has to do with the corruption of language and man's inability to decipher the most basic tenets of wisdom. This is why Gómez-Dávila believed that wisdom is the acumen of a community of "readers," non-conformists who do their own thinking: "Civilized individuals are not the result of a civilization but its cause," he warns us.

Many of Gómez-Dávila's aphorisms stand out for their power in enabling man to recognize all that has been lost in Western civilization. For instance, he writes: "Our soul has a future. Humankind has none," "Anything that makes man feel surrounded by mystery makes him more intelligent," and "Silly ideas are immortal. Each new generation invents them again."

The following is Gómez-Dávila's aphorism that best describes the plight of solitary readers in post-modernity: "In a century when advertising media broadcasts infinite nonsense, the cultured man cannot be defined on what he knows but on what he does not know."

Like the Spanish thinker, José Ortega y Gasset, who wrote in [*The Revolt of the Masses*](#) that modern man is demoralized, Gómez-Dávila also suggests that for people who mold their lives on moral principles, post-modernity is a tragic, self-consuming spectacle. It is a spectacle because the post-modern is oblivious of what he has destroyed, and thus, how to make life pure and meaningful once again, for “principles are bridges over the sudden overflows of life.” How many today even suspect the truth of the latter truism?

Post-modern demoralization is propagated on the idea that if all values are relative, then man is not responsible for estimating the worth and impact of ideas and values on human behavior. As long as demoralization continues to defame Western values, post-modern man will believe that he has freed himself from the chains that bind us to tradition. This is why post-modern man fears collective death more than “its own increasing depravation.”

In an age when vacuous, exploratory values slander human reality, knowledge disappears leaving only the residue of smoke that lacks fire. Gómez-Dávila is correct that in an age nourished by moral noise, the cultured person is best characterized by their lack of timely, sensual knowledge. Of course, who will recognize this as timeless wisdom but people who recognize the hierarchy of values. In that respect, nothing ever changes.

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