



Latin American Identity and Mixed Temporalities; Or, How to Be Postmodern and Indian at the Same Time

Author(s): Fernando Calderón

Source: *boundary 2*, Autumn, 1993, Vol. 20, No. 3, The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America (Autumn, 1993), pp. 55-64

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/303340>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *boundary 2*

Latin American Identity and Mixed Temporalities; or, How to Be Postmodern and Indian at the Same Time

Fernando Calderón

Why, in Latin America, do millions of peasants and artisans coexist with factories, computers and electronic equipment of all sorts, and now even a few nuclear power plants? Why do almost all Latin Americans watch North American television programs, which, most of the time, implant in us the new values of the market and atomic violence? And why does the new programmed, postindustrial culture threaten to fragment us even more and to condemn us, like the rest of the world, to be numbers? Or, to ask the question another way, why does the revolutionary Gabriel García Márquez write with a hygienic, electronic computer about the magic world of Mauricio Babilona and his yellow butterflies?

Maybe because we live in incomplete and mixed times of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity, each of these linked historically in turn with corresponding cultures that are, or were, epicenters of power. That is why our cultural temporalities are, in addition to incomplete and mixed, dependent.

Maybe this coexistence also explains why the Latin American cultural personality is ambiguous as well as multiple, metamorphic as well as

boundary 2 20:3, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Duke University Press. CCC 0190-3659/93/\$1.50.

dynamic, and why our identity, in its many spaces and times, is many identities, so that it is possible for us to find in ourselves many "I's." Maybe this is what the Peruvian César Vallejo wanted to teach us when he said from Paris, "Today I have spoken about myself with myself."

The times of colonial Christianity are not dead facts of the past, they are socioculturally reconstituted times. How else can we explain the presence of strong feudal and patrimonial traits or the persistence of political and military elites of such long standing in almost all the countries of our continent? Even more, how can we explain why a small group of families, independent of class connotations (landowners, industrialists, bureaucrats, bankers) or specific ideologies (conservative, republican, liberal, socialist), had, and has, an important presence in the cultural system of political decision-making in our countries? How do we explain that more than 90 percent of the parliamentary representatives of the Andean countries do not speak the vernacular languages of their constituents? How do we explain why a Brazilian peasant, when asked by North American pollsters who the president of Brazil was, answered Pedro Cabral?

Colonial culture, by the intrinsic fact of its constitution, was incomplete. The colony could not develop or confront itself or the world in order to grow toward modernity, not only because it imported Christian gods, who, unable to replace our old gods, only adapted themselves to the polytheism of our indigenous cultures, but even more because the colony defined its fundamental ethos around the cultivation of land: *pachamama* (mother earth) for some, *encomienda* for others. The cultural dispute was over the land and opposing values connected to it, and it was as difficult for the great landowners, ecclesiastics, generals, politicians, and colonial agents, as much as for Indian peasants, to fully undertake the difficult and audacious task of modernity.

In reality, modernity came to us from the outside in various ways. The first was by ship: It was called The Social Contract, and it was loaded with African slaves. Then came the revolutionaries and the liberators, influenced by the American Revolution and by French liberalism. Later, a deformed nineteenth-century modernity was introduced to the continent by the old colonial elites, now republicans. Two faces, two identities: one modern, white, and liberal, turned to the exterior in order to legitimize their relationship with the world; the other black, plagued by religious hypocrisy, uncivil, racist, feudal, and brutally repressive, turned inward, in order to organize domination.

A review of the congressional records of these republics in the sec-

ond half of the nineteenth century shows that all of our parliamentarians cited Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and even Hobbes; but if one also examines the laws they passed that declared, for example, the “freeing from mortmain of land,” their anti-Enlightenment character will be evident as well. Thought itself was, in general, very poor, trapped in a foreign, pragmatic modernity that did not arise from its own exercise of reason, the basic condition of Enlightenment. Even art was limited and impossible to compare with the expressive richness of the Brazilian, Mexican, or Andean baroque. Many colonial cities changed their physiognomy, but often for the worse, as their architecture found itself invaded by French-inspired, and in general poorly imitated, “modern,” pastry-cake buildings.

In reality, modern European thought of the late nineteenth century spread in Latin America only in the twentieth century. By the same token, we have absorbed only partially the modernist production of the twentieth century, although no one can deny that in making ourselves part of it, we have also enriched it. (It is enough to mention Rubén Darío in this respect.) While Freud was not extensively read until the sixties, Weber was translated into Spanish in Mexico before he was in the United States. Nietzsche (I do not know whether for good or evil or beyond them) is still not read, but Sartre is.

Industrialization and Marxism would also arrive from the outside but would spread with much vigor on the continent. Capitalist industrialization did not come through the “Junker” path of the self-transformation of a traditional elite into a bourgeoisie, nor through a religious reformation, but rather through the penetration of international monopoly capital. Latin America was incorporated into the industrial world via interimperialist conflicts that sought raw materials, markets, and cultural domination. Marxism (a classic modernist production of the nineteenth century) similarly arrived already transformed into Leninism, a phenomenon that can be appreciated with greater clarity in the constitution of the first Latin American Communist parties and in the rich polemics that broke out among intellectuals who jumped on its bandwagon.

Perhaps the most genuinely Latin American contribution to this “modernist” impulse was the intellectual elaboration of revolutionary nationalism and of national popular, or populist, movements, particularly by Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, but also by Lombardo Toledano and others, who invoked specifically Leninist concepts and goals to be attained through the instrument of the vanguard party and its leadership: anti-imperialism, national self-determination, class alliances, and so on. The exception was

Mariátegui, who, like Gramsci in Italy, conceived of Marxism from a less Leninist and more cultural and nationally specific perspective.

But the actual historical processes and cultural changes we lived through were as important as the ideas that populism depended on. Because of this, even with all its incoherencies, populism was the most genuine social and cultural creation of Latin America in the twentieth century. Populism changed even those who were opposed to it. It modified the culture of our peoples, their sexuality, their ways of loving, of thinking, and even of dancing and walking: in short, all of daily life. Only under populism, with the integration of the masses into the market, import substitution, urbanization, and other social changes of different degrees of intensity and rhythm, was modernity finally imposed in Latin America, with a Latin American style. Thus, from the Mexican and Bolivian Revolutions to the timid, but tragic and parodic, experience of Vargasism in Brazil, populism was the instrument of our fuller integration into the universal and paradoxical experience of modernity. Universal, as Marshall Berman would say, because it united us (culturally) with all of humanity, and paradoxical because it brought us nearer to the uncertainty of reason in the face of the absolute dangers of life and death, to the most wonderful utopian projects and dreams of equality and freedom, as well as to the Nazi extermination camps and nuclear war. To put it in Weberian terms, we were incorporated by populism into the modern game of living between bureaucratic rationalism and existential freedom. As the Mexican joke says: "If Kafka were Latin American, he would be a realist."

From the twenties to the sixties, in a thousand forms, populism reigned in the streets of Latin America, attempting to integrate processes of democratization and industrialization with an autonomous national state on the basis of relations of patronage. It did not achieve this, but it did something new that could not be destroyed by the subsequent brutal dictatorships nor by the confused maneuvers of the populist leaders themselves.

Social scientists, with all their hesitations, hairsplitting, and regrets, were also part of the ambience of this movement, and some of the most innovative were responsible for introducing modern sociology and economics and university reform to the continent. They sought to give a rational basis for the self-understanding of the age through evolutionary schemes, such as the one that describes the "stages" of modernization. They proclaimed the necessity of scientific analysis and understanding, and also of planning and state action. But history itself, at least political and economic history, was regressive and irrational, not only because of the problem of au-

thoritarianism but also because of the strange directions that Latin America and the international system took in the course of the pursuit of modernity. As Latin Americans, we learned that it was possible to change for the better, but also for the worse.

Later, populism broke up into little pieces or became mechanical, in Durkheim's sense, and its axiological, totalizing, Latin Americanist orientations lost the social impulse that sustained them. The sixties gave rise to new modernist, and even postmodernist, impulses. For someone from the sixties to write about the sixties, is, however, to write about nothing and about alchemy, trapezes, and infinite and immeasurable utopian horizons. They were years of a tragic and lucid schizophrenia. Despite our adherence to what were essentially Enlightenment or neo-Enlightenment ideologies of progress (even Marcuse's), the idea was to believe in nothing except the present, and to make this last through time. At least this is what happened with students and revolutionaries, while society, with some exceptions, was left orphaned and isolated. Could it be that in its excessive cult of the present, the radical vanguardism of the sixties was, in effect, conservative? The problem, the big problem, is that in Latin America, the vanguardism of the sixties cannot be seen in isolation from other coexisting times and cultures. Admitting this, we would see how the sixties also gave rise to something like Allende and the Chile of the Popular Unity, a project that, with a syncretism peculiar to Latin America, achieved with great effort a totalizing identity between the vanguardism of the sixties, classical Latin American populism, and the nineteenth-century modernism of Marx. It was defeated by the other face of Latin American modernity, the technocratic authoritarianism of Pinochet.

Beginning in the seventies, with the military dictatorships and the consequent reappraisal of private life and then of democracy, it becomes possible to think that various processes and systems of thought coexist in Latin America, some complementing modernity, others developing a confused postmodernity, and others maintaining premodernity, but all in a mixed and subordinate manner. Vargas Llosa's magnificent novel *The War at the End of the World* is a good example of this. It narrates a curious nineteenth-century peasant rebellion in the Brazilian *sertão*, or backlands, led by Antonio Conselheiro, part bandit, part magician. But in my opinion, what the novelist really speaks to us about is contemporary Peru and himself: of a Peru that is falling apart and changing shape, and of the frustrations that this creates and re-creates in Vargas Llosa; in short, of the coexistence of faded or residual identities with strong emergent ones.

The Lion of Natuba in the novel is calculation or reason, dirty but effective, deformed but human, ugly but beautiful, something like Nietzsche's superman: a synthesis of many men who love danger and the infinite. It dies but also wins many battles. Conselheiro, sustained by the premodern saints who surround him, is clearly messianism, which criticizes and fights against the injustice of the traditional Brazilian oligarchy of the north-east (Baron Canabaras is the decadent oligarchy of Lima) by proposing a return to the past, to a millenarian Christianity, a utopian project that finds an echo in popular faith, but, and this is the brilliant twist of the author, that is also a form of instrumental rationality, seeking to achieve military victory in confrontation with the Brazilian state and to communicate with the world through a journalist. Isn't this rebellion a phantasmagorical mirror of Shining Path? And isn't the confused journalist Varguitas the same "little" Vargas who, having lost his glasses, or more precisely his paradigms, cannot understand what is decisive in the situation of Peru today? Isn't he perhaps one more intellectual detached from his reality who, while worrying about his fallen glasses on the ground, does not see what is growing in that very ground?

All of Latin America is experiencing a difficult time of the redefinition of its identities in the midst not only of democratic reappraisal but also of brutal and strange transformations that tie it to a new (the old) post-industrial and programmed world, to a modern world in decline and perhaps to another emerging postmodern world: that is, to a world that simultaneously tends to a greater production of wealth and to a growing social marginalization and terrifying cultural homogeneity, a world of increasing noncommunication between races, of cages, more legal than legitimate, of pastiche and of schizophrenia, which tends to completely negate the search for liberating identities. The foreign debt, the declining Latin American economic participation in the world market, the greater concentration of power in transnational elites and corporations, the loss of influence and capacity of the nation-state, the technological revolution and the interstitial, binary role of data processing, the subjugation of everything to the market, the internationalization of national conflicts (such as the conflict in Nicaragua, which was turned into an East-West confrontation), the enormous growth of the informal sector, the emergence of political actions void of social meaning, the fragmentation of social actors and the loss of centrality of the working class, the anomalous urban violence, and the perverse economic logic of drugs: Phenomena such as these make one confront the limitations to the creative reproduction of Latin American and international

society and thought. The great challenge to Latin America today consists in finding ways of adapting these unignorable phenomena to the construction of democracy and of a new social order that would enable the creative expansion and mutation of our social identities without abandoning the need for economic development and equity. More apocalyptic authors, such as Gino Germani, see intrinsically totalitarian features in the very process of modernization. Others, such as Alain Touraine, point to the possibility of a new Enlightenment; and there are also those who visualize the possibility of a communal reconstruction of our societies from the base up.

The phenomenon of cocaine and the new social movements are perhaps extreme and opposite cultural facts in Latin America; nevertheless, in their crudeness and nakedness of their difference, they may demonstrate the limits and possibilities of this new order. The report of the Select Committee on Narcotics of the United States House of Representatives estimated that the illicit narcotics industry did an annual business of approximately \$110 billion, which indicated an annual growth rate of 10 percent. Of these \$110 billion, \$40 billion, approximately, corresponded to the cocaine industry; for every dollar invested in coca leaves in the regions of production, \$300 are earned in the streets of the United States. Only \$1 of the \$300 remained in the hands of the growers. Cocaine production is a large-scale industry that affects highly industrialized societies as well as a considerable number of Latin Americans living in rural poverty. Cocaine is not only a new and transcendental economic fact; it is, above all, a new cultural fact that involves a breakdown of significant social relations, and a loss of notions of time and space, and of personal and social identity.

State or private programs for confronting the problems caused by cocaine have remained mostly at the level of police actions, interdiction, individual or small-scale psychological therapy: that is, the effects of the problem are confronted, but not its causes. Cocaine perversely unites the humble peasant of tropical Chapare with the sophisticated atomic physicist of the Silicon Valley. Why are drugs being consumed now as never before? Because among the youth of the industrialized societies and in the middle classes of our own countries, there is an ever-decreasing possibility of constructing an autonomous personality, as Bettelheim defines this concept. This is because of, among other things, the new social roles of men and women, the breakdown of the classical model of the patriarchal, nuclear family, decreased familial or collective communication and socialization, the growth of aggressive behaviors without outlets, solitude controlled by self-aggression, the predominance of feelings of death, a pedagogy that

no longer inculcates Enlightenment values but rather teaches by rote technology and uncritical competency: in short, a society that demands greater maturity of its youth while at the same time providing fewer means of acquiring it. Paradoxically, the very virtues of productivity, competency, and thrift characteristic of the Protestant ethic and the capitalist spirit contain their own condemnation, among other reasons because of the progressively more restricted and selective channels of upward social mobility. It is possible to imagine that many young people in the process of integration into market society consume drugs in order to achieve greater productivity and efficiency, which, in fact, they do; but in the process, they lose, in the long run, their vitality and identity. In this sense, the sociocultural reproduction of the fabled American Way of Life has become problematic; it is a way of life that needs to commit suicide in order to live. Some take drugs because they are brutally excluded from this way of life, others because they are perversely included in it.

And upon this cultural demand of drug consumption is built a hidden world of mafias and gangs that feed on and become wealthy from their own carrion and that have ever-more real and formal power, including functions in the new transnational consumer capitalism. Such is their power in the empire of the North as well as in, for example, the villages in the south of my own country, Bolivia, which cannot be understood apart from this phenomenon not only because of the decadence of the mining economy and the uncertain future of its workers but also because of the erosion of its socioeconomic fabric and its ethical standards by the effects of narcotraffic. But, how can one ask a group of poor peasants who cultivate coca and who, for the first time in history, have favorably modified the terms of trade to comprehend that they are harming North American youth, when one cannot make even a nuclear scientist comprehend that the elaboration of certain models of atomic decomposition is helping to create bombs that will destroy humanity? In any case, what is certain is that the peasants would prefer to plant oranges and live in legality.

This is, perhaps, a postmodern phenomenon, but one that also underlines the inability of states to confront the problem of drugs, permitting unconscious suicide: an alarming and pathological symptom of a society incapable of facing itself. It is the new and perverse logic of capitalism stripped of its historical sense.

I cannot think of a better way of mapping the current Latin American scene than astronomy. Seen from the point of view of modernity, social movements have lost their vital impulse, and their former order has been

replaced by a kind of big bang; those subjects and actors who constructed history are today fragmented and dispersed, and the new social practices and actors are more expressive and symbolic than political. The social universe is like a great galaxy in formation, incandescent and embryonic, but also spastic, with restricted identities, but also with great ethical cohesion. It is like a joining around a black hole of dispersed energies, which perhaps will be stars tomorrow.

Sociologically, however, this state of things need not imply a dramatic change in the real content of the system of historical action but rather the resignification and restructuring of previously given forms of behavior. It is true that there existed tendencies of social fragmentation before, that many of the social or cultural movements such as populism had strong monist tendencies, that in many cases identities were presented in a restricted way; but this is not really the point. Historically, we should be experiencing a kind of "uneven" disturbance of identity, stronger in some places and groups and weaker in others. But something different is taking place, and the course of this movement is uncertain.

The social movements seek to reconstitute their past identities in a new way and with other actors; however, it is impossible to understand them with the Cartesian eyeglasses of little Vargas (that is, of modernism), methodologically organizing Picasso's paintings, with eyes looking up on the right, hands perpendicular to each other on the left, and a horse at bottom center. Instead, it is a question of finding the signifiers of the multiplicity of figures and symbols and perhaps of a new historicity; for example, to say in Latin American: behind those two little eyes, there is a vision; or a horse that falls down but also gets up again; or better yet, Latin America stands up falling down, but it stands up; or the dead child dreams. And in this way, we can try to identify something common to all these figures, not something that homogenizes or classifies them, but something that permits them to coexist and to oppose that which oppresses them, something constructive in them. Because no one can deny that the figures of *Guernica* are somehow confined, that there is something that oppresses and affects them, something that is alive and can be imagined even though it cannot be seen, that is there with its pressure and immense power. How do we reaffirm our identities if we are no longer what we wanted to be? How do we coexist respecting and alternating with others, at the same time fighting against what oppresses us, if not by accepting ourselves as we are, but without ceasing to dream?

Some texts of recent artistic creation in Latin America perceive or

describe aspects of this new universe in formation. For example, Rubén Blades, who sings while people dance to his *salsa* “Buscando America”: “I’m looking for America, and sometimes I’m afraid I won’t find her, and if I find her, I’m afraid I won’t know her”; or the Aymara group WARA, which plays ancestral Indian flutes to the accompaniment of electric guitars and which sings, “To your roots you must go, leaf by leaf, with sweet and sad lucidity”; or the poet Hugo Mujica, who tells us,

There is a god looking at itself,
in the blindness of every human being.