

# Two Models of Latin American Philosophy

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In this paper I will examine two conceptions of philosophy that were defended in Latin America during the last century. I believe that both models have to be put away and that we must build a new one, recovering elements of both of them. At the end of my paper I will consider very briefly, what can we learn from this in order to construct a genuine philosophical dialogue between the U.S. and Latin America.

### THE MODERNIZING MODEL

Twentieth century Latin American philosophy was dominated by two models of doing philosophy, what I will call the modernizing and the authenticity models.

The phenomenon of modernization in our philosophy goes back to the XVIII century when a movement of opening towards modern science and modern philosophy took place in Spain, Portugal and their colonies in the American continent. It was until the third quarter of the XIX century, with the arrival of Positivism, that a series of what we might call “modernizing movements” began in our philosophy. Although there are important differences in each country, we may say that since then we have had at least four modernizing movements:

1. During the second half of the XIX century we had a positivist modernization. Latin American positivism presented itself as the philosophy required for the social and material progress of our people. This movement ended at the dawn of the XX century with the generation of the so called “founding masters” in which Antonio Caso, Alejandro Korn, Alejandro Deustua and Carlos Vaz Ferreira stood out.

2. After the downfall of Positivism a large modernization of German origin began, disseminating various lines of thought such as Neokantism, Historicism, Axiology, Phenomenology and Existencialism. The influence of Ortega and *Revista de Occidente* had a lot to do in this phenomenon. This is also the period when the pupils of the founding masters worked towards what Francisco Romero called the *normalization* of Latin American philosophy. In Mexico this modernization started to show signs of weakening around 1960, but in other places it continues till the present. José Gaos, Francisco Romero and Ernesto Marz Vallenilla stood out among the figures in this movement.

3. In the first half of the XX century a Marxist modernization also begun, its influences and orientations were very diverse: from Marx and Gramsci to Bloch and Althusser. This movement -which like the positivist one intended to influence social reality- addressed a wide spectrum of philosophical problems ranging from Logic to Aesthetics. Due to military dictatorships, Marxist philosophy suffered in the 1970's and in the present, since the fall of the Berlin wall, few practice it. Outstanding figures in this movement are Carlos Estrada, Eli de Gortari, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Joao Cruz Costa.

4. Finally, towards the end of the 1950's, an analytic modernization begun. Among the founding figures of this movement stand out, in Argentina Mario Bunge, Gregorio Klimosky and Tomás Moro Simpson; in Mexico, Alejandro Rossi, Fernando Salmerón and Luis Villoro. The analytic philosophers provided another impulse to the task of normalization of Latin American philosophy; they put emphasis on the mastery of techniques, like formal logic; on knowledge of the sciences, like the positivist did before them; and on the rigor of philosophical work.

This a very approximate schema. In any case I believe that our modernizing movements have shared certain features. I will point out to three of them.

First, all those movements have been projects *imported* by an initially small group. The modernizing movements have sought to impose new external models over old models in current internal use –even though the old models had been originally imported as well-. The fact that these projects had been foreign, and therefore had something of a novelty, had the consequence that modernization initially had to be limited to a mere learning of the new doctrines and techniques. This has placed many Latin American philosophers in a teacher/pupil relationship with respect to foreign philosophers. One of the problems in our modernizing movements is that they have seldom gone beyond that initial period of learning; the learning period extends itself far too long without reaching a period of original creation. There are brilliant exceptions, of course, but they are few. In the work of our modernizers it is only the work of foreign philosophers, who are recognized as authorities, that are studied and discussed. But foreign philosophers, even those that visit our countries to deliver talks, very rarely quote us in their work. There is therefore no genuine dialogue between most of the Latin American modernizers and those foreign philosophers they emulate, for -to put it crudely- there is no dialogue when some speak and the others only take notes. For the same reason on few occasions the Latin American modernizers truly belong to the

foreign philosophical communities that they believe they belong to, or wish they did. And it seems that they can achieve this only if they write in a language other than Spanish or Portuguese. But to have to abandon our own language in order to be listened is lamentable for many reasons. On the other hand the Latin American modernizers dialogue very little among themselves and consequently their philosophical communities are very feeble. Very seldom a modernizer reads another modernizer, for he is quite busy reading the foreigners authorities. When he happens to read any of his colleagues he almost never quotes him, and when he does there is no constructive dialogue between them. Among the modernizers it would seem that engaging with the work of a Latin American philosopher is a sign of lack of ambition or lack of quality in what one does, and indeed something tasteless.

A second shared characteristic of these modernizing movements is their *revolutionary* spirit. Because they have regarded the old order as caduceus and mistaken they have sought to replace it with a new one. Our modernizations have coincided in fighting traditional metaphysics and philosophical essayism, as well as in their defense of a conception of philosophy as a rigorous science. In Positivism, Marxism, Neokantism, Phenomenology and Analytic philosophy our philosophers found research methods through which they aspired to reach the levels of rigor and precision characteristic of the sciences. The coincidences of these movements, however, did not add up but got lost: Positivism fought against Scholasticism, Neokantism against Positivism, Phenomenology against Neokantism, Marxism against all of them and the same is true of Analytic philosophy. As a consequence the results of each modernizing movement got lost for the upcoming movement.

The third characteristic common to these modernizing movements is that their project of founding a new philosophical tradition in our countries *failed*. Neither Positivism, Marxism, Phenomenology nor Neokantism succeeded in guiding Latin American philosophy as they purported to do, and so far the same could be said of Analytic philosophy. Almost always our modernizing movements have lost their force during their first generation and then they have been replaced by new modernizations. Each modernizing movement has fallen to the temptation of founding philosophy in Latin America all over again. But, as I have already said, the learning periods –that some would describe as periods of mere *imitation*- last for too long while they are unable to establish deep and stable connections with other dimensions of our culture and society. This is the result not just of the lack of a genuine dialogue among the

modernizers but also of their poor *memory*. It could be replied that we are under no obligation to read our philosophical ancestors if they were simply bad philosophers - nobody is obliged to read a bad philosopher. It also may be said that if they were merely divulggers of foreign philosophers, we would do better reading those foreign philosophers directly. I agree that there are few reasons to read a bad philosopher or a mere divulger, but I am unconvinced of the apriori claim that there's nothing to learn from our philosophical past. In order to make this judgment it is essential to read diligently the works from the past and carefully criticize them. From this scrutiny we will obtain elements that will enable us to consolidate our philosophical tradition, either by *redeeming* what we find of value in it or by *discarding* with argument what we would do better to forget.

I believe that the modernizing model is exhausted. However, I do not think that our modernizations were unfortunate or harmful, on the contrary, I think they were necessary and beneficial and we still have a lot to learn from them. But I believe we must now follow different trends.

#### THE AUTHENTICITY MODEL

What I call the "authenticity model" has been a reaction against the modernizing model, but it also has been a philosophical expression of a movement that took place in all our countries since the first third of the XIX century; a movement in the arts, literature and culture in general which sought to reaffirm what is national or Latin American. If the purpose of the advocates of the modernizing model was, as Ortega used to said, to meet the high demands of our times, and in that way be better philosophers; the purpose of the advocates of the authenticity model was that our philosophical thinking should be the result of profound reflection, coherent, above all, with our social and cultural reality.

It is not that some modernizers had not wished to do an authentic philosophy. But for them to philosophize in an authentic fashion was, as Luis Villoro pointed out, to philosophize in accordance with one's own reasons, i.e. in an autonomous manner. For the advocates of the authenticity model to philosophize in an authentic fashion means, in addition to that, to philosophize in ways congruous with one's own motives and therefore with one's own personal and social condition.

Although there are several movements that follow the authenticity model -some quite different and even antagonistic to the others- we may say that they all have some points in common.

One point of coincidence has been the idea that philosophy in Latin America must have its own hallmark without thereby resigning to claims of universality. Here Latin American metaphilosophy has become a critic of European philosophy, which has been seen as disguising a kind of Eurocentrism, as well as other “isms”, behind its alleged universality. For some the hallmark of Latin American philosophy is to emerge from the themes themselves, for others it is to arise from the concrete problems which will lead us to reflect on universal topics; while for others still that hallmark is to be obtained only from the authenticity of our reflection on any subject matter whatsoever.

Another common point has been the idea that Latin American philosophy is to be a liberating philosophy. The idea has been that in order to be authentic our philosophy should not only passively reflect about the conditions of injustice and oppression imposed by the colonial powers from the outside and by the dominant elites from the inside of our countries, but it must also be an instrument of liberation. But there are differences here, while some seem to be satisfied with the idea that Latin American philosophy should liberate our conscience, others insist that it should liberate us from our concrete political and economic circumstances.

In the case of the modernizing model we talked of waves of modernizing movements, but in the case of the authenticity model we will talk about various stages or moments in the formation of such a model. I am going to point out to three of those stages: a Mexican, a Peruvian and an Argentinean one.

The Mexican stage begins early in the XX century when Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos and Samuel Ramos reflected about México from a philosophical standpoint. José Gaos advocated the systematic study of the history of ideas as a mean to gain awareness of those aspects characteristic of philosophical thought in Latin America, and as a condition for the eventual constitution of an authentic philosophy. Leopoldo Zea adopted from Gaos the conviction concerning the importance of studying the history of ideas, but he went further. In 1942 Zea published *En torno a una filosofía americana*, a seminal work where he claimed that Latin American philosophers should engage with those problems distinctive of their circumstance. A few years later, in another foundational text entitled *La filosofía como compromiso*, he held that Latin American philosophers had also a responsibility concerning those problems, i.e. do something to solve them. Midway the XX century the group *Hiperión*, where Emilio Uranga and Luis Villoro were leading figures, set for themselves the task of creating a philosophy of the Mexican. But this movement was ephemeral and their members

moved back to the modernizing model. Zea and his disciples, however, have continued along the path of Latin American philosophy.

The antecedents of the Peruvian stage are Manuel González Prada, father of Peruvian indigenism, and José Carlos Mariátegui, author of *Siete ensayos de interpretación a la realidad peruana*. But I think that the most important activity within this stage took place in the 1960's and the 1970's. Around that time Francisco Miró Quesada, one of our greatest modernizers, became interested on issues concerning Latin American philosophy and published several penetrating studies on the history and the interpretation of our philosophy. Around the same time, in 1968, Augusto Salazar Bondy published a small classic entitled *¿Existe una filosofía de nuestra América?*, where he gives a negative answer to this question (against what Gaos and Zea had said). Salazar Bondy claims that the problem of our philosophy is its lack of authenticity, which is rooted in the underdeveloped and subjugated condition of our countries. In his view, in order to be authentic Latin American philosophers must become aware of their condition as colonized men and struggle to overcome it. Within this Peruvian stage we must include Gustavo Gutiérrez, the author of *Teología de la liberación*, pioneering work in this theological movement.

What I am calling the Argentinean stage took place in the 1970's, just after the Peruvian stage. The movement known as "Philosophy of Liberation" was born in 1973; following a line of thought inspired on Salazar Bondy and the so called "option for the poor" embraced by the theology of liberation, it attempted to create a philosophy oriented to fighting the exploitation of people from all over the world but specially from Latin America. Enrique Dussel and Arturo Andrés Roig are outstanding figures among the members of this movement. This movement was repressed by the government not long after its initiation and several of its members were forced to abandon Argentina.

I want to emphasize that in talking about these stages of the authenticity model I do not want to suggest that they have been developed only in those three countries or that in each of them philosophers have worked on those projects only during those periods. The three stages schema must be seen as an approximate model only.

The authenticity model has several deficiencies. Here I am going to discuss five of them.

1. One is the mistake, which I think has now been corrected, of confusing the peculiarity of the themes of Latin American philosophy with its authenticity. One may reflect about Latin American topics in a completely unauthentic fashion. On the other

hand, it is not necessary to adopt the authenticity model in order to reflect philosophically on questions such as the cultural identity of our people.

2. A more common problem is that some advocates of the authenticity model surreptitiously backslide into the modernizing model, for they appeal to the authority, and even the novelty, of those foreign writers they find more akin to their own proposals in attacking those Latin American modernizers who embrace the ideas of other foreign authors. I think this explains the impression from within the authenticity model that certain proposals of advocates of this model are out of fashion.

3. Another problem, equally severe and actual, is that although some of the central figures in the authenticity model have been and are thinkers of exceptional culture and philosophical talent, their followers, i.e. the majority of the participants in this model, have locked themselves in the study of a quite narrow spectrum of authors, themes and methodology. A consequence of this has been what may be called the *philosophical impoverishment* of many of the practitioners of this model. The topics are repeated over and over again, the same ideas are glossed over in a thousand different ways while there are clear deficiencies in rigor and clarity.

4. A problem related to the previous one is that the advocates of the authenticity model have tended to sectarianism. They only talk among themselves, on the same topics always and seldom in a critical way. They do not engage with the work of the modernizers because they deem it not worth of careful study. The works of the modernizers are only superficially mentioned and just to be labeled as unauthentic or even as ideology of the dominant elite, without actually discussing the ideas and arguments in those works.

5. Finally, several advocates of this model assume that the cause of all the problems in Latin American philosophy is our people's condition of economic and political dependence, and therefore that their solution, and the task to be undertaken by Latin American philosophers, is to change that condition. This assumption not only involves a somehow limited conception of philosophy but it also seems to me that there's no guarantee that the so much desired political and economic liberation of our people will render us more authentic, more original or more competent philosophers.

I believe that although there are well-established groups practicing the authenticity model in all our countries, this model is today stagnant. Since a couple of decades ago there have been no new ideas in this area and no younger figures are in the offing to replace the older ones. Some of them have moved into postcolonial studies ,

but I think that in most cases they have done it in a rather acritical and opportunistic fashion. I believe that like the modernizing model the authenticity model has reached its limit. We can however recover its best lessons and with them put forward a new model for philosophy in our countries.

#### BEYOND MODERNIZATION AND AUTHENTICITY

Once we have decided to move away from the models of modernization and authenticity, I think that the main problems that have to be tackled in Latin American philosophy are practical (i.e. not theoretical or ideological), problems that have to do with the way we practice philosophy and that, hence, require practical solutions.

I believe that the central problem of Latin American philosophy is the lack of philosophical communities and traditions, and that we will not have them unless we create a genuine critical dialogue among ourselves and simultaneously exercise a constantly renewed memory of past dialogues.

I am going to propose a few very general courses of action; certainly there are others. This is a task that requires the participation of all Latin American philosophers, it specially requires the shared conviction that we have to do something, and in particular the will to dialogize. The problem is not going to get resolved from the office of a head of department or of a journal's editorial board. Nevertheless, there are some institutional measures that can be taken in order to stimulate conditions more conducive to dialogue and memory. The programs of study in our philosophy departments should seek new ways to inculcate in our students the habit of critical as well as respectful dialogue, rigorous as much as imaginative. The way we study the history of our philosophy should also change; our past should be taken as something that allows us to better understand our present but also as something that allows us to understand the new, regardless of whether it comes from within or abroad. All this without glorifying our past in a bungling and acritical manner, and also without shutting the door to other communities and traditions. On the other hand, there's a lot to do in our journals and other editorial projects. Critical exchanges and critical reviews should be encouraged. It would also be convenient to stimulate the study of our own philosophical history, in particular concerning the relations, similarities and dissimilarities that there exist among the philosophies of our countries and the various philosophical movements that we have cultivated in them. We can do this and more, but as I pointed out what matters is that the attitudes and prejudices of Latin American philosophers change.

These changes should not bury the achievements of the modernizers and the advocates of authenticity. On the contrary, in order to carry out what I am proposing it is essential to redeem the best of both movements. And it would be good to do the same with other models of Latin American philosophy, which at the moment are less prominent. One of them is Scholasticism. Another one, not less important and maybe more vital, is the pursuit of that kind of philosophical essay that is closer to a literary piece than to a scientific report.

From the modernizers let's recover their vigorous defense of rigor and professionalism, their open attitude towards the new, wherever it comes from, and its ambition to be informed of everything that happens in philosophy all over the world. The point is not to abandon the modernizer model in order to practice a self-absorbed and parochial kind of philosophy. What we should do is to construct an authentic tradition that enables the effects of the modernizations to be profound and truly permanent, that enables us to genuinely dialogize with other traditions and that simultaneously creates a fertile contact with other dimensions of our culture and our history.

From the authenticity model let's recover its defense of autonomy, its insistence that our thinking must be congruous with our reality and above all its defense of liberty. All these ideals are to be redeemed. But we must understand that in order for philosophy to be liberating it must become a channel for the tradition of the intellectual community of those men and women who wish to liberate themselves. Otherwise, that philosophy that seeks to liberate us turns into that which it repudiates, namely, yet another academic fiefdom.

In order to have the Latin American philosophy we want it is essential to build with patience and perseverance, enthusiasm and discipline, our own philosophical communities and our own philosophical traditions.

#### A PROPOSAL FOR A PAN AMERICAN DIALOGUE

I want to say, very briefly, what I believe are the conditions for a genuine philosophical dialogue between the two Americas.

I think that this dialogue cannot be produced from the standpoint of the two models of Latin American philosophy that I have examined here.

What we have now are sporadic and rather superficial encounters that do not provide the conditions for a solid and profound philosophical dialogue between the North and the South of our continent.

In particular, I believe that the brief dialogues that we can find in the fields of analytic philosophy, on the one hand, and of cultural and postcolonial studies, on the other hand, are not as promising as some could think.

North American analytic philosophers, in most cases, pay no attention to the cultural, social and political dimension of their Latin American counterparts. It is also true that many analytic Latin American philosophers are also ignorant or indifferent to their own situation. But what is even more disappointing is that there is nothing like space of dialogue between analytic philosophers from the North and the South. The dialogue takes place only in the North, only in English, dictated by the academic groups of power of the U.S. and the U.K. On the other hand, cultural and postcolonial theorists not only often assume an unsolvable conflict between our cultures, but often tend to reduce Latin American culture in terms of “Latino” culture in the U.S. or, what is even worse, to a set of deconstructable ethnological or literary manifestations. A further problem is that many of the categories of postcolonial or subaltern studies were designed to analyze the societies ex-British colonies, such as India or Trinidad, and do not fit properly in an analysis of Latin American cultures and societies.

So what can we do? I think that a good alternative for a philosophical dialogue between the two Americas could be based on an encounter between pragmatism and the peculiar version of perspectivism and ratiovitalism that originated in José Ortega y Gasset’s philosophy and spread all over Latin America in the first half of the last century. There are many things in common between these two philosophies: both reject the modern conception of reason, both take into account the cultural and social context in which philosophy is made, and both take practical issues into consideration. In any case, I believe that a dialogue between our philosophical communities is not only desirable, but urgent. The border towns of México and the U.S. are fascinating examples of the meeting point of two cultures that can be in conflict but that are also in a constant process of creating new social and cultural phenomena. The philosophers of México and the U.S. cannot afford to ignore this changing and challenging reality.