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## **Reseña / Review**

Sánchez Lopera, Alejandro. *José Revueltas y Roberto Bolaño: Formas genéricas de la experiencia*. Raleigh: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2017.

### **Thinking with José Revueltas and Roberto Bolaño: Philosophical Literary Approaches to Latin America**

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In this study Alejandro Sánchez Lopera proposes a theorization of twentieth-century Latin America that opposes conventional narratives of transition, progress, or improvement. Through a mixture of philosophical, historical, and literary analysis, the author pushes against anthropocentric humanist analyses which emphasize human possibilities. One of the major problems he identifies is the tendency for humanist critics to assume that humans are essentially altruistic and naturally subscribe to an ethical moral code. He specifically challenges critiques that interpret moments of cruelty as inhuman or as outliers in an otherwise linear progress narrative. The author responds to this trend with an “anti-moralist” lens that theorizes cruelty as a natural characteristic of human experience and social processes. Through the book’s eight chapters, Sánchez

Lopera examines three social processes: the Mexican Revolution, Mexico '68, and the 1973 military coup in Chile. He demonstrates that these three moments of rupture highlight the necessity of understanding disorder on its own terms, instead of in relationship to an ideal order. The works of Revueltas and Bolaño model this anti-moralist worldview, which portrays the world as it is, without ignoring its imperfections or inventing a fantasy world.

Drawing primarily from the philosophies of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Deleuze to build his argument, Sánchez Lopera contends that the novels of Revueltas and Bolaño may be pessimistic, but they are *not* nihilistic. Although Revueltas and Bolaño often highlight the primacy of destruction and cruelty in their work, they do so because these qualities are a crucial part of life. This study, developed clearly and methodically, fills an important gap by challenging the prominent idea that Latin America is comprised of important names and events locked in a dialectical relationship with Europe, from which all conflicts emerge. Instead, Sánchez Lopera critiques the notion of recovering an Edenic, pre-European past, as a misconception insufficient to understand the destructive and cruel, but nonetheless natural, behaviors of societies.

Most of the book's analysis hinges on its proposal that events be interpreted not as successes or failures, but rather understood within their own logic. In the second chapter, Sánchez Lopera performs a material reading of *El luto humano*, arguing for a material sovereignty of the earth. Ursulo's decision to remain on the land at the end of the novel models "una experiencia que no responde al narcisismo del individuo; a la majestad de quien domina, al dueño de la propiedad o al que porta el arma" (33). Ursulo's immobility is, therefore, not a failure or a form of historical paralysis, but rather a rejection of responding to the logic of mercenary and proprietary sovereignty. Sánchez lauds the "viaje inmóvil," defined as static movement confined to a parcel of land, as a resilient strategy of resistance (31).

In the following chapters, Sánchez Lopera follows this logic of static movement to develop a cinematographic understanding of Latin America. Latin America is not an ideal in constant struggle against European conquest and discovery, but rather an island in time whose identity is reflexive and in flux. In chapter four, Sánchez Lopera adeptly uses this interpretation to elucidate the events of Mexico '68. Drawing from Revueltas's writings, he reiterates that Mexico '68 was not an isolated event, but a culmination of actions and ideologies that reflected dissatisfaction with Mexico's social and political climate. Mexico '68, therefore, was not a rupture in an otherwise linear narrative of progress, but rather a symptom of Mexico's political

climate. To support this assertion, he invokes Nietzsche's theory that cruelty occurs as a transaction between creditor and debtor, in which the creditor assumes the right to punish the debtor who is guilty of transgression. Sánchez Lopera convincingly applies this theory to the events of Mexico '68 and the massacre at Tlatelolco.

In one of the most compelling claims of the book, he argues that in the eyes of the Mexican government, its retaliation during Mexico '68 was justified because the students, who were indebted to the Mexican Revolution, had betrayed its ideals. Mexico '68 subsequently cannot be understood in terms of success or failure because the event is not an isolated catalyst, but rather a symptom of a more complex web of actions and social unrest. At the end of the chapter four, Sánchez Lopera proposes one of the book's central claims: "*El acontecimiento no explica, sino debe ser explicado*" (124). The event matters because it elucidates the material realities and ideologies whose characteristics shape and inform the past and present.

This claim propels the book towards its last three chapters, which develop the claim through a discussion of three novels written by Roberto Bolaño. Chapter five adeptly transitions from the previous chapters' treatment of *Revueltas* to a thoughtful analysis of memory in Bolaño's novel *Amuleto*, set during Mexico '68. Sánchez Lopera returns to his call for a different understanding of history which circumvents the narrative of progress, adding that this new understanding of history should consider that what has passed will return. This idea is followed by one of the most contentious claims of the book: "*El pasado no ha dejado de ser: ES. Sobrevive, pero lo hace porque está contenido en sí mismo—no en mi memoria*" (162). The author uses this assertion to support the chapter's central thesis that resistance becomes an action that must be continuously deployed because "*nada se ha ido y todo volverá...no hay un pasado que se deja atrás en un futuro que es síntoma de un avance*" (167).

Transitioning from an analysis of the 68 to an analysis of the 1973 military coup in Chile, Sánchez Lopera's theories culminate in the final two chapters of his book, which emerge as the standout sections of the book. In chapter six, through an analysis of *Estrella distante*, Sánchez Lopera explores the relationship between fascism, sadism, and the dictatorship in Chile. The combination of neoliberal economic policies and the strict censorship of the Pinochet regime wed the super relativism of fascism to the "anything goes" nihilism of capitalism. This relationship is central to the analysis in chapter seven, which traces the relationship between the Catholic Church, neoliberalism, and Pinochet's regime. By mapping the trajectory of the priest and literary critic Sebastián Urrutia-Lacroix in *Nocturno de Chile*, Sánchez Lopera asserts that

religion as a social practice was integral in the creation and rapid spread of neoliberalism during the military coup. Nihilism underlies these two systems: under capitalism, everything becomes the same because values assigned to objects constantly change; under Christianity, both the world and life lose their value because they are transitory. The Opus Dei in Chile is also of paramount importance because its theology aligned work with religious calling, thereby justifying the neoliberal values of work and wealth accumulation. Sánchez Lopera locates the considerable popular support of the military coup within the regime's unique brand of neoliberalism, which nurtured itself from both religious traditions and conservative politics. These two branches, sustained by extreme nihilism and relativism, culminate in a post-truth moment, which Sánchez Lopera describes as the true "nocturno de Chile" (240).

The book is meticulously and caringly researched and written. Although it primarily engages with the literary works of Revueltas and Bolaño, it is broad enough at moments to apply its central claims and methodology to other writers and historical moments. Simultaneously, however, Sánchez Lopera avoids generalizations and simplifications by grounding his theory in the details and nuances of historical and literary texts. The result is a fresh perspective and revitalized analysis of dilemmas central to discussions of Latin America.