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Latin-Americanism without Latin America: 'Theory' as Surrogate Periphery in the Metropolitan University

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Latin-Americanism, at least as practiced in humanistic disciplines within the North American university exists today as a strange kind of ritualized enclave, outwardly cosmopolitan, but, beneath the surface, increasingly provincial and sectarian. It has become a form of 'study' that, over the last couple of decades, has succeeded in inventing for itself a theoretically 'regional' object with almost no remaining connection to any real place. This is the disturbing and no doubt contentious observation with which I begin today, in a polemical spirit but also in a self-critical and reflective one. I stress the word 'humanistic' here—by which I effectively mean literature and cultural studies—since my sense is that the situation of

US Latin-Americanism in disciplines such as history or anthropology is a somewhat different and, I think, healthier one. The difference here has, in fact, everything to do with the far more minor role played by so-called ‘theory’ in the latter disciplines—which is not to say that the neo-positivist methodologies that still function as the default setting in academic social science—especially in economics, sociology and political science--are in any way to be preferred, say, to identity politics or post-colonialism. It is simply to say that a historian or ethnographer who works in some fashion on Latin America must, like it or not, and for purely methodological reasons if for no others, still encounter the place itself, even if only in an archive. A historian in the US working, say, on colonial Mexico may never have to travel farther than her university library, but were she to travel to Mexico she would almost certainly find that she and her Mexican counterparts lived and worked in roughly the same intellectual universe. That, I think, would not be the experience for many US Latin-Americanists working in literary and cultural studies, who, upon arriving in Lima, or São Paulo or Buenos Aires—unless my own experience here is entirely idiosyncratic—would, if they cared to look, discover an intellectual universe about whose existence they might otherwise never have known.

The reasons for this have, superficially at least, nothing to do with attitudes of imperial hubris or disdain for regional or local forms of knowledge or ‘loci of enunciation’ in Latin America. Quite the contrary. Most of us who work on and teach Latin-American literature and culture in the US profess a scrupulous concern and respect for the local, non-metropolitan ‘subjects’ for whom our disciplinary objects are an immediate, concrete and lived reality and whose rights to cultural and literary autonomy we acknowledge as virtually an ethical absolute. The supremely paradoxical irony here is that it is precisely this highly developed consciousness of *difference* and the conscientious insistence on protecting such difference

against the dangers of hegemonic assimilation and erasure that have, in the end, produced the ‘theory’-driven simulacrum I refer to here as “Latin-Americanism without Latin America.” The fact that, in the US as, I would imagine, in Britain also, many Latin-Americanists are themselves Latin-American in origin does not on the whole seem to act as much of a corrective here, well though, under changed conditions, it might. The kind of ‘theory’ that—in ways that I will say much more about momentarily—has inserted itself within literary-critical Latin-Americanism in the US as a “surrogate periphery” does not itself appear to have any cultural barriers built into it. Though it certainly bears within itself, at some level, the (subtly colonializing) authority of its own metropolitan origins, its intellectual authority—if not outright hegemony—in North American academia is conjuncturally and ideologically, not culturally determined. It is a way that a contemporary *institutional* form of thought, regionally based but not restricted to one region, draws boundaries between North and South, center and periphery, self and other, etc.

But—to cut at last to the chase—what ‘theory’ am I talking about here? In a word, post-structuralism, though that is not, for some time now, the term one uses in US Latin-Americanism to refer to it. In fact, though attempts have been made now and then to invent a specifically ‘Latin-American’ variant, complete with official theoretical manifestoes—most notoriously in the case of a short-lived “Latin American subaltern studies” in the 1990s—it is a form of what, adopting the critic Robert Scholes’ term, might simply be called a “secular post-structuralism,” designating itself, when necessary, in a variety of partially overlapping and interlocking ways: postmodernism, post-colonialism, ‘cultural studies,’ certain varieties of feminism or queer theory, performance studies, etc. The further one descends down the ladder from the general trend to the sub-disciplinary *cenâcle* to the individual academic theoretician with cult following, the more arcane and idiosyncratic the designation

becomes: Dussel's "philosophy of liberation," or one of Walter Mignolo's many coinages, say "border gnoseology" or "post-occidentalism." The more general designations inhabit and cut across Latin-Americanism the way they do virtually all areas of literary and cultural studies in the US, even if Latin-Americanism—though perhaps here, after all, 'Hispanism' is the better word--has typically been 'the last to know.' Witness the endless and caricatured 'debates,' continuing to this day, over the possible contours of a "Latin-American Cultural Studies", a "Latin-American Post-colonialism," etc.

It is, however, less a question, for my purposes, of what to call such 'theory' than of what its intellectual content is, and, even more importantly, of when and how it came to occupy the dominant position it now effectively enjoys in US Latin-Americanism. The story here begins, as with so much else, with the period of revolutionary nationalism in Latin America, popularly epitomized, on the level of politics, in the Cuban Revolution, on the level of the literary, in the "Boom," and, on the level of the theoretical, in dependency theory. The real historical and intellectual intricacies of the period—stretching from roughly the end of World War II to a variable endpoint located somewhere between 1973 and 1990--considerably complicate this picture of course, but it does effectively triangulate an emerging critical and theoretical consciousness of Latin America in the US, beginning in the 1960s. Whether politically or culturally inflected, revolutionary nationalism projects back onto Latin America itself a kind of meta-historical image of the whole that it then in turn projects outward onto a global intellectual consciousness (and unconscious) with the US in the front row: that of a 'periphery' advancing with critical and utopian momentum on the 'center,' and perhaps even poised to breach its walls and overthrow the existing neocolonial structures of inequality and exclusion. It is this meta-historical image—one in which the

periphery does not stop at declaring its independence from the North American center but supplies to that center a mirror in which to imagine its own social and cultural alienation and possible redemption from Cold War pathologies –that pervades and, in a sense, founds the modern study and critical theorization of Latin American literature and culture in the US academy, beginning roughly in the early 1970s. Post-structuralism, understood here in its broadly ideological reach as a rigorously theoretical but radically anti-'humanist' hostility to all such visions of *systemic* redemption, is already by this time percolating its way into French and English departments, and even, via Althusserianism, into left-wing intellectual circles in the metropolis and in Latin America. But, as long as the critical and intellectual energies of revolutionary nationalism in Latin America are still felt to be in the ascendant, and the literature of the Boom can still be read, in however mystified a way, as the latter's aesthetic embodiment, the Derridean/neo-Nietzschean variation on the avant-garde cannot appear as much more than a quirky metropolitan hothouse plant and thus remains an ideological nullity.

But the stage is already set for this to change. Although the events of 1973 in Chile, and the general descent into "bureaucratic authoritarianism" in the Southern Cone as a whole do not at first shake the meta-historical, North-South radical-ideological relay I have sketched out above—in fact, for a time it is strengthened by the outrage over the violent suppression of the 'Latin-American' revolution, especially in Chile, and by the increased flow of political/intellectual exiles from the Southern Cone into the metropolitan university—the waning of the "sixties" in the North already begins to sap the energies of "solidarity." By degrees, the meta-historical gravitational field that had seemed to fuse, say, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *foquismo* and the economic and political theory of Cardoso and Faletto into one 'Latin-American' whole

weakens. The sense of the ‘periphery’ as meta-historical demiurge, as, in effect, the name for a real social and historical movement, complete with its own vanguard aesthetic, breaks down, and in its place one is left with the ‘periphery’ as the merely abstract idea of all this, but lacking historical possibility—with the ‘periphery’ as just, in itself, an absolutized ‘difference.’

Revolution and counter-revolution in the Central America of 1979-1990 and the euphoria over *sandinismo* and the Salvadoran and Guatemalan insurgencies along with a revolutionary poetry epitomized in Cardenal and the poetry workshops slow the process but do nothing in the end to thwart the theoretical shift underway in US Latin-Americanism. This can be traced, I think, in the history of the so-called ‘testimonio’ debate among the more ‘theoretically’ oriented US Latin-Americanist critics, and especially in its obsessive and effectively exclusive focus on Rigoberta Menchú. Although Menchú’s testimonial initially attracted attention because of its enormously compelling narrative account of the atrocities of US-backed counter-insurgency warfare in Guatemala, the ‘theoretical’ debate over text and author almost immediately shifted its attention from the larger social and political situation to questions of hermeneutics and the ethics of ‘reading’ Rigoberta from positions outside her own cultural, ethnic and gendered alterity. I won’t take the time here to rehearse the moment intellectually—one with which I’m sure many of you are familiar—but only to remark on what it already, I think, unmistakably revealed about the newly ‘theoretical’ orientation of US Latin-Americanism: that the ‘periphery’ was no longer of theoretical interest primarily because of the different perspective it afforded on a common social and historical reality—on a *totality*—but because the ‘periphery’ (here ‘testimonio,’ as embodied in the figure of Menchú) *was* itself, in a cultural, ethnic and sexual but, in the end, essentially *textual* sense, *difference*. I’ll venture an intellectual-historical theory of my own, one which I don’t

have the space or time to prove here, but of which I'm personally quite convinced: this is that the entire 'testimono'/Rigoberta affair, one which effectively dominated US Latin-Americanism in the 1980s, was premised not only on the sensationalized 'culture wars' over Rigoberta's inclusion in the Stanford humanities curriculum but on the impact of Gayatri Spivak's now celebrated essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," which had first gained the attention of US literary theory, including its Latin-Americanist wing, in 1983. The critical and ideological shift that would eventually produce the grotesque caricature known as "Latin-American subaltern studies" in the US academy of the 1990s was already detectably at work in the earlier creation of the 'testimonio' industry and, though its deeper intellectual sources clearly stretched back of and beyond it, this shift took its rhetorical cues virtually exclusively from Spivak's epoch-making re-tooling of Derrida for more 'secularly' post-structuralist and identity-political purposes. Rigoberta was...well...one couldn't exactly say *what* she was, only that she was whatever Spivak was talking about when she used the term 'subaltern.' The radicalized, bicephalous ideologeme of Rigoberta/testimonio, together with Spivak's more ghostly and writerly authority, were, it seems, all that were needed to give birth to a 'post-colonialized' and Latin-Americanist variant of deconstruction. And, insofar as the history and the urgent political and ethical crisis her story dramatized had to be routed as well through Rigoberta's own purportedly inscrutable and inaccessible alterity and 'subalternity,' that history too crossed over into the realm of a post-structuralized, Nietzschean 'periphery.'

The rest of this history—including the contemporaneous 'debate' over postmodernism in Latin-America, the ensuing cult of García Canclini and 'hybridity,' and the somewhat more politicized and still ongoing obsession with how to negotiate the Latin-American franchising of 'cultural studies'—simply works out the terms of this theoretical re-organization. Gradually, the critical engagement with

the transitional, but still quasi-'dependency'-based theories espoused by critics such as Angel Rama, Antonio Cornejo-Polar, Beatriz Sarlo or Julio Ramos—work that is still imbued with certain concretely national-intellectual traditions in Latin-America itself—gives way, surrendering the field of Latin-Americanist 'theory' to a more and more firmly institutionalized and secular-poststructuralist consortium of US identity politics, post-colonialism and 'cultural studies,' into which Latin-America itself is more and more successfully integrated as simply another 'minority subject-position.' The 'periphery,' sheered away from its own basis in a *historicized* theoretical practice, whether in the form of 'dependency' or, more broadly, in that of Marxism, becomes conceptually synonymous with abstract 'difference' as such, so as, at last, to find itself firmly located *within* a multi-culturalized United States.

This is not to say that all other theoretical options are closed off for contemporary US Latin-Americanism. The picture is a rather more eclectic and 'theoretically' diluted one than it was in the heyday of 'dependency' or even of the 'testimonio' revisionism. The effective failure of a movement such as "Latin-American subaltern studies" to extend its life beyond the circuit of a few well-placed tenured professorships and a couple of Duke University Press anthologies before collapsing back into its own sectarian ambitions suggests that the cultural capital of 'theory' itself has been significantly de-valorized, and perhaps that, relatively speaking, is just as well. But a PhD student studying Latin-American literature in the US today and in search of 'theoretical' vanguards, will, in most cases, be restricted in his or her search to a gambit of choices set in advance by a few influential graduate programs in US universities, or by the handful of still solvent university presses working in tandem with elite local faculties. If lucky, such a student may even find his way past the universal portals of 'theory' with names such as Butler or Bhabha and make it as far as the smaller, 'Latin-American' subdivisions with

names such as García Canclini, Mignolo, Dussel or Nelly Richard.

The alternative to this, it seems to me, is to do something for which Latin-Americanist ‘theory,’ in its current avatar, really no longer has a concept: to forget “Latin-America” as currently theorized, and go to the place itself, albeit here in the form of more discretely and modestly situated ‘loci of enunciation’ with names such as Mexico City, São Paulo, Havana or Buenos Aires. But to go, in this case, not in search of the ineffable traces of ‘subalternity’ and an ethical warrant to produce the latest, Latin-Americanist variant of “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” but in search of what Latin-American intellectuals themselves are doing under the heading of ‘theory.’ This is not to romanticize the situation ‘on the ground’ in the regional intellectual centers mentioned above. Neo-liberalism’s enforced austerities, brain-drain and the version of cultural imperialism we today call “globalization” will often mean that the first person one meets for intellectual conversation in UNAM or USP will ask us about Jameson’s latest theorizings or whither post-colonial theory. But, if I can be permitted to draw on my own, unfortunately far too infrequent contacts with local, Latin-American theoretical and intellectual culture—in this case in and around the University of São Paulo and the intellectual circles centering on the work of the critic Roberto Schwarz—I think such experience will show that where ‘theory’ remains firmly planted in *national* questions and problems, without in any way slighting cosmopolitan standards, the mindless, de-historicized ‘theoretical’ loop into which US Latin-Americanism has been sucked, can be exited. In my last trip to São Paulo, in August of 2004, I basically spent a week listening to Brazilian Marxists of various stripes arguing furiously about the policies of Lula and the ruling faction of the PT and came away with the sense of having learned more about Latin-America as well as ‘theory’ than I had in ten years of MLA or LASA panels. Physical location and proximity may not be the crucial factor here, however: in my case,

much the same kind of re-encounter with theory as the “self-understanding” of a real, concrete historical object has been the result of reading the works of theorists and intellectuals such as Roberto Schwarz—or, for that matter, of Sarlo or Carlos Monsivais. Such reading/travel can in no way, any more than travel to the place itself, count as some mythically-promised return to the golden age of revolutionary nationalism, before Latin-American politics, aesthetics and theory went their separate ways. There never was such a golden age, and the ways have never been separate. It simply means exiting, however momentarily, the hegemonic, secular-poststructuralist terms of a language-game in which “Latin-America” has come to signify, always already, only one thing—a thing, that, by constantly evoking the periphery as omni-presently ‘other,’ makes its intellectual experience into something, ironically, always the same.