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Remarks on Latin Americanism

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I'd like to take up in abbreviated form three issues that pertain to the essays and discussions included in this volume. First, the question of Latin Americanism as such. What is it? What is it in the context of conflictive globalization, as the title proclaims? Second, the question of the role of literature and the humanities in Latin Americanism and in Latin America's historical development or underdevelopment. Third, the question of the indigenous populations of the Americas. How does their existence and status necessarily redefine and resituate the project of Latin Americanism?

Let me start by jumping ahead for a moment to the second question, the question of literature. It is assumed in the modern university that literature plays a secondary role in questions of social formation and development. This is basically, I think, because literature is seen as a reflection or representation of society as it already exists. First there is society then literature and art.

That is why literature carries a relatively low status among research departments. This is especially true in the US academy of literatures in foreign

languages like Spanish. In my experience of some fifty years, Deans are usually looking for ways to curtail or merge foreign language departments. (One exception was N. John Cooper, the former Dean of Arts and Sciences at Pitt. When as chair of my department in the early years of this century I expressed to him my worries on this score, he reassured me that, in the U.S., "Spanish was not a foreign language," a point that bears repeating today.)

But what if we flip the proposition: first society then literature, upside down and posit that literature is actually *formative* rather than simply reflective of the social, to the extent that it is formative of ideology, and ideology is the glue, so to speak, that holds society and the state together? Then not just literature but any phenomenon in the field of culture as such (that is, as part of the superstructure), is not secondary but primary. An example: Christianity and aristocratic codes are not secondary or derivative products of feudal relations of production. Rather feudal relations of production, centrally the exploitative relation between aristocracy and peasantry, are the product of the imposition mostly by force of aristocratic and religious ideologies.

This idea of the overdetermination of the social field by cultural phenomena is associated with the work of the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, and most particularly with his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," published originally in the French journal *La Pensée* in 1970, and quickly translated into many languages. Returning to the question of Latin Americanism, we can say then that there is a Latin Americanism *before* Althusser's essay and its consequences, and a Latin Americanism *after*. This is a way of speaking metaphorically or telegraphically, of course, but I think it is not too far off the mark.

Latin Americanism is generally taken to mean the academic conceptualization, mainly in the humanities and to some extent in history and anthropology, of what Walter Mignolo has called "the idea of Latin America." The purpose of that reflection is not disinterested knowledge, but rather the active involvement of thought in potentially political or hegemonic articulations of what Latin America has been, is, or could become. But Latin Americanism is not just a "cheering section," so to speak, for Latin America past and present. Instead in its contemporary forms, it puts into question in some ways the very identity of Latin America. That makes it something more like what in American Studies in or about the United States came to be called The New Americanism, or Critical American Studies. (Just to say Critical American Studies and note its echo in the idea of Critical Race Studies suggests that we are at the very heart of national ideology and the

current struggle over what should be taught in schools about American history and values.)

The New Americanists defined themselves in a post-Vietnam War conjuncture—the late 1970s and 80s—as questioning the two main assumptions that underpinned American Studies in both the US and global academy up to that point: the idea of American exceptionalism—i.e., that the United States is/was a "special" society in some way—and the idea that American culture was democratic and at least in principle egalitarian. In a 2002 collection called *The Future of American Studies*, the New Americanists spoke of developing:

> theoretically engaging analyses of the post nationalist impulse of current scholarship in American Studies, the field's historical relation to imperialism and social movements, the status of theory, the state of higher education in the United States, the impact of ethnic and gender studies on area studies, [and] the influence of poststructuralism, postcolonial studies, sexuality studies, and cultural studies on U.S. nationalist—and anti-nationalist—discourses.

Perhaps the proper term to use when addressing the question of Latin Americanism today then is to speak of a New Latinamericanism, an idea that was advanced in a conference at the University of Manchester in England in the 1990s. Roughly at the same time Duke University Press began to publish the work of the New Americanists, it also committed itself to a massive volume representing the emerging field of Latin American Cultural Studies, *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*. As the idea for the collection evolved, there was concern from Latin American scholars that the projected contents were elaborated too much from theoretical and professional positions outside of Latin America itself, which, it was claimed with some justice, had its own rich prior tradition of cultural thought. Indeed, the question of the growing predominance of English itself as the language of "theory" in Latin American Studies became an issue, particularly in a widely circulated essay at the time by Antonio Cornejo Polar, "Mestizaje e hibridez: Los riesgos de las metáforas". The editors shared or at least acknowledged the criticism and made a point to reference in their introductions canonical Latin American thinkers about nationality and culture like Sarmiento, Martí, Rodó, Vasconcelos, Mariatégui, Carpentier, both Alcides Arguedas and José María Arguedas, Lezama Lima, Octavio Paz, and the like, and to include examples of recent Latin American thinking about culture and cultural studies. They chose to conclude their volume with a translation of the essay by Antonio Cornejo Polar noted above, with its anguished sense of "el poco honroso final del hispanoamericanismo".

But here, as is often the case, the pursuit of political correctness—attention to both the conceptual and affective value of "local" knowledges and discourses—

produced a misunderstanding: Latin American cultural studies whether launched from the North American academy or from Latin America itself (in Spanish or Portuguese) were *not* a continuation of a prior tradition of cultural thinking in Latin America. Nor were they connected with the rise of Latin American Studies in the US academy in the earlier 20th century as a form of pan-Americanism (as Fernando Degiovanni has described it in his study *Vernacular Latin Americanisms*), a phenomenon represented organizationally by the Latin American Studies Association. Rather they involved a critique of, or unarticulated dissatisfaction with, both those traditions, and a search for new or different points of origin. It is in relation to this critique that postcolonial or "decolonial" criticism and the idea of a Latin American form of subaltern studies functioned tactically in the late 1990s sometimes in tandem, sometimes separately. *Mutatis mutandis*, the distance the New Americanists marked in relation to a prior tradition of American Studies richly embedded in the academy is akin to the difference late 20th century Latin Americanism marked in relation to Latin American Studies and its accommodation via LASA and other academic venues to interdisciplinarity. The gesture here was of a *break* rather than a continuity, in other words. It goes without saying that the radical promise of the "break" remained unfulfilled or wandered into its own version of "the garden of forking paths," to recall the Borges story, and that Latin American cultural thinking, particularly in the form of the *ensayo nacional* as a genre between history and literature, sometimes anticipated rather that foreclosed the positions advanced in favor of a "break." But the desire for the "break" and the constellation of intellectual formations related to it (subaltern studies, deconstruction, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, feminist and queer theory) still need to be seen as such.

This development was not missed by the majority of social-science oriented members of LASA, who launched what was an ultimately successful counterattack against "taking the linguistic turn," as if this were some kind of moral as well as intellectual failing, and seeking to restore the mainly positivist frameworks of traditional disciplinary methodologies and authority. The issues raised by the anthropologist David Stoll about Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio and his critique of "postmodernist anthropology" were part of this "Thermidorean" reaction within Latin American Studies, to give one example.

The reaction to the New Latin Americanism did not mean a rejection of literature and cultural studies, but rather their proper "location" in academic disciplines, whereas the slant of the New Latin Americanism was at least partly "against literature" (to refer to the title of one of my own books). In Latin American

cultural thinking (which I am distinguishing here, or trying to distinguish, from a "new" Latin Americanism), there had always been present the implication that literature itself was the model for the newly emerging nationalities. The clearest expression of this idea or trope was in Rodó's well-known essay *Ariel* at the end of the 19th century, in which Latin America was pictured as the character of Ariel in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, the poet, "the spirit of the air," whereas the United States was Caliban, grossly deformed, ill spoken, vulgar, lacking a usable past. In one of the first and still defining books of the New Latin Americanism, *La ciudad letrada* (1984), Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama began to sketch a critique of this assumption, arguing perhaps more implicitly than explicitly that Latin American development had to break free of the boundaries of the lettered city, which were at once class, ethnic, and racial boundaries passed down to modern Latin America by its colonial heritage. I hasten to note that for Rama this was not just a question of being anti-elitist and pro-populist, but rather of understanding the historical and social limits of certain kinds of elite thought. One could argue then that literature, rather than being a form of agency for social development was/is actually a barrier to the flourishing of egalitarian and multicultural forces in Latin American culture and thus a barrier to the formation of a modern, democratic nation-state (Rama did not himself go this far).

In my own essay at the end of this *festschrift* volume, "The Failure of Latin America," I suggest seven reasons for that failure, alluding to Mariatégui's famous and still compelling *Siete ensayos sobre la realidad peruana*, from the 1920s. One of those reasons, I argue, is the persistence of the idea of the Baroque as an essential component of Latin American culture, even among modern thinkers of both the right and the left. That idea depends, however, on the perpetuation of a separation of the sphere of literary high culture from the sphere of popular or mass culture that it inhibits.

In his *Prison Notebooks,* Antonio Gramsci arrived at a similar conclusion about the role of literature in Italy since the Renaissance (which in a sense "invented" modern literature as such). As a literary language Italian had existed from Dante through and beyond the Renaissance; however, it had never become a genuinely "national" language, in the way, by contrast, Spanish had in Spain itself (but not in its colonies) with writers like Cervantes or Lope de Vega in the 17th century. The "people"—*popolo*—spoke or wrote in dialects, or in oral versions of literary Italian.

But these dialects did not function at a national level: they were regional or local. France or England, by contrast, had a strong tradition of serialized novels and

theater written in modern national languages understandable by most of the population. Thus, literature could not serve in Italy as a cultural force productive of what Gramsci called a "national-popular" spirit. Rather it continued to mark the line of division between the *senores* and *popolo,* upper classes educated in high culture, and illiterate or partially literate lower classes. From this cultural weakness, Gramsci concluded, stemmed the crisis of the new Italian state at the end of the 19th century, which opened the way for Mussolini and fascism. (Readers of the novels of the Neapolitan Quartet of Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, or viewers of the TV series based on them, will note this is still a central contradiction in Italian culture.)

This thought takes me to my third question, which is that of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, because those peoples have few and/or highly fraught relations with what Rama understood by the lettered city. I recall here the well-known distinction by Raymond Williams of dominant, emergent and residual cultural formations. Dominant in Rama's view was the Latin American lettered city as the vehicle for ideological modernity. Indigenous peoples and their own expressions (including drama, narrative, and poetry) were residual, still there, and having some impact on modernity (an earlier Latin Americanism would have called it a result of underdevelopment and dependency, that is, of an "incomplete" modernity), but basically a problem to be solved by further modernization, a modernization that Latin American boom literature with its aesthetics of literary modernism and transculturation pointed to. They were residual in the sense that, for example, LP records are to contemporary internet culture. I have a closet full of old LPs from the 1960s and 70s, and people still talk about the virtues of analog as opposed to digital sound. But that's about it. LP records are not coming back, nor for that matter are CDs, which are now residual too. Emergent on the other hand is what isn't dominant yet but may well be soon. In the 1980s and 90s digital culture was emergent; now it is dominant.

I want to use Williams' distinction to put forward what is more like a hunch than a fully researched or data-founded hypothesis. This is the idea that indigenous peoples in the Americas (and, beyond, in Canada, the Artic, Greenland, the Canary Islands, the Pacific Islands, Australia, Siberia…) are no longer a residual identity, but rather an emergent one. I mean this in both demographic and ideological or cultural terms. In demographic terms, the population of the Americas that is identified or self-identifies as indigenous has been growing steadily, not disappearing because of modernization (in Canada, for example, indigenous peoples are the fastest growing population, with a growth rate of 42.5% between 2006 and 2016). In cultural and ideological terms, these populations are (sometimes)

positing forms of counter-hegemony to an Anglo-European model of modernity and modernization, in ways that they mean to address not only themselves but also the non-indigenous inhabitants of shared territorialities, for example, in a kind of "Green" resistance to mining or mineral and energy extraction projects.

One of the clear characteristics of traditional Latin Americanism or Latin American cultural thinking is its failure to deal with indigenous peoples in any other way than the problematic discourses of mestizaje and indigenismo, which presume the sublation of indigenous culture and identify as a form of "modern" citizenship. But there is another problem with the older, literature-based Latin Americanism that I would like to mention briefly, to bring these remarks to a close: that is the question of the Latinx population of the United States, now the second largest Spanish speaking population in the world, after Mexico. Surely that should be part of the scope of Latin Americanism too. But Latin Americanism and Latin Americanism are, in general, still rooted in the opposition between North and South America. Can there be a map of Latin America that is not the familiar one, that ends at the top at the US southwestern and Caribbean borders, or that is a simple inversion of this, familiar from images in Latin American art, putting South at the top and North at the bottom? Is there a different diasporic, Afro-Latin American, Jewish-American, Islamic-American, Asian-Latin American, or indigenous "map" of multiple territorialities and histories overlapping? I am thinking here for example of the spaciotemporal diagram, centered on the city of Tucson in Arizona, that the American indigenous writer Leslie Marmon Silko provides in the end papers to her deeply insightful novel *Almanac of The Dead*.

I think we need as Latin Americanists (and Americanists) old and new to put the question of indigenous and Latinx populations as emergent cultural formations at the center of our concerns. Not that they must be our only or even main concern, but rather because they indicate a space of *lack* in Latin American Studies and the discourse of Latin Americanism. The lack is not that there aren't multiple sections of LASA and other professional venues dedicated precisely to these topics; it is rather that the challenge they pose to the idea of Latin America itself as a unified field or territory is still working itself out. Now that the Earth itself has become a central issue of concern for everyone, indigenous cosmologies may be relevant conceptually not only as remnants of the past but as ways of thinking about the present that challenge, without negating, the academic sciences, or that anticipate the way the sciences are themselves now working in new forms of disciplinarity and multidisciplinarity in directions already anticipated by indigenous cosmologies. I pass here, however, from the range of things that I can

talk about with some authority to the domain of emerging new knowledges related to the question of the fate of the Earth itself.

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