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Review/Reseña

Ignacio Sánchez Prado, *Naciones intelectuales: Las fundaciones de la modernidad literaria mexicana (1917-1959)*. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2009.

Counter-Hegemonic Narratives

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Over the past two decades, scholarship in Mexican studies has been engaged in an effort to dislodge the once persistent notion of a monolithic, homogenous “Mexican” nation. Consequently, scholars have also been engaged in a reevaluation of the cultural nationalism that accompanied the political project of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In these complementary critical endeavors, cultural critics have largely focused their attention on film, music, popular culture and other forms of symbolic

representations and practices. Literature, however, viewed as traditional and, complicit with the development of an essentialist view of Mexican culture, has been notably absent from this necessary revision. Addressing this oversight, Ignacio Sánchez Prado's *Naciones intelectuales: Las fundaciones de la modernidad literaria mexicana (1917-1959)* examines the emergence of the Mexican literary field and its institutionalization in Post-Revolutionary Mexico while offering a reassessment of the intellectual and political praxis of several canonical Mexican authors of the first half of the twentieth century. Proposing *naciones intelectuales* (intellectual nations) as an analytical term for understanding the critical projects of Jorge Cuesta, Alfonso Reyes, Luis Villoro and others, Sánchez Prado demonstrates how these intellectuals articulated alternative imaginaries to the hegemonic discourse propagated by the emergent Mexican state. Pointing to the political agency of Mexican literature, Sánchez Prado's study is a significant intervention in the field that will help reorient future studies of Mexican literary history.

The first part of Sánchez Prado's book, "La fundación del campo literario (1917-1939)," is divided into two extensive chapters. Chapter one "De la nación a la literatura nacional: los orígenes del campo literario (1917-1925)," examines the origins of the literary field in Mexico, while chapter two, "El alquimista liberal: Jorge Cuesta y la invención del intelectual," renders a scrupulous portrait of Jorge Cuesta's intellectual and political ethos. The second half of *Naciones intelectuales* is titled "La fundación de las instituciones (1940-1959)" and is also divided into two lengthy chapters. Chapter three, "Hispanidad, occidentalismo y las genealogías del pensamiento nacional: Alfonso Reyes, José Gaos y las fundaciones de las instituciones educativas," studies the importance of Alfonso Reyes in the development of cultural and educational institutions in Mexico while meticulously examining his Occidentalist ethos. This chapter concludes with a study of the exiled Spanish philosopher José Gaos, whose hispanism served as a catalyst for the development of philosophy in Mexico. Chapter four, "El 'ser nacional' en el diván de la filosofía," discusses the understudied *Hiperión* group, a cluster of philosophers—Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Leopoldo Zea and Luis Villoro—who, under the guidance of

Gaos, employed various methods for the exploration of the Mexican “being.” This chapter concludes with a critical analysis of Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad*, a work that according to Sánchez Prado signals the conclusion of the revolutionary cycle of “naciones intelectuales.”

Spanning four decades of intellectual history, *Naciones intelectuales* calls for a measured recognition of critical projects (or “naciones intelectuales”) that resisted the dominant discourse of cultural nationalism. More specifically, Cuesta, Reyes, Gaos, and Villoro allegorized through their work the liberalizing possibilities of the Revolution and wrote about its potential to foster a historical conscience. As Sánchez Prado demonstrates, at the inception of the modern Mexican cultural field, these authors searched for a language that could envision and re-negotiate the relationship between the new Mexican state, its culture, and its body politic (26). For example, Cuesta imagined a liberal republic, while Villoro proposed a class alliance between mestizos and indigenous peoples. Each from distinct intellectual traditions offered different political utopias capable of demanding certain liberties from the revolutionary state. Sánchez Prado writes: “Las naciones intelectuales, entonces, se definirán como alternativas contrahegemónicas, producidas desde la literatura, al discurso hegemónico sobre la nación” (19). The purpose of this critical term is to “decentralize” traditional narratives about Mexican literature and to reactivate the alternative possibilities these authors constructed. Finally, for Sánchez Prado, “naciones intelectuales” as a critical term is not stable nor set in stone, but rather requires a constant theorization about the practice of writing in opposition to the institutionalization of a “nation.” Borrowing a phrase from the post-colonial thinker Homi Bhabha, Sánchez Prado believes these authors questioned the “borders of totality” (128) and offered exit strategies from the narrow construction of a “Mexican” nationhood.

According to Sánchez Prado, in the wake of the ratification of the constitution of 1917, the modern Mexican literary field began defining its parameters and cultivating a relationship with the nascent state. During this period of gestation, elite circles debated the future of Mexico and vied for control over the country’s growing cultural institutions. As Sánchez

Prado examines in the first half of his book, in this indeterminate, yet open space, writers offered different visions of what a national literature should look like and how it should function *vis-à-vis* the nation-state. For example, Francisco Monterde proposed a literature grounded on Mexico's colonial and catholic identity, while Manuel Maples Arce's *estridentismo* called for an avant-garde poetry that coupled an urban aesthetic with a Soviet ideology. Sánchez Prado concludes that the work of these authors represented an early example of "naciones intelectuales" as they each suggested different aesthetic and critical projects that could address the cultural needs of the emerging post-revolutionary state.

In 1925, the emergent literary field—spread across a network of ephemeral magazines and newspapers—culminated in an intense debate among several intellectuals regarding the nature of Mexican literature. For Sánchez Prado, the polemic of 1925 was, by and large, the first time Mexican literature operated as an autonomous institution. Pitting "nationalists" against "cosmopolitans," the dispute illustrated how sectors of the literary field—*virreinalistas* and *estridentistas*—recommended a "revolutionary" literature that could represent national identity and proposed (in Pierre Bourdieu's terms) laws for its functioning ("nomos"). For Sánchez Prado, this debate was symptomatic of the larger process of the institutionalization of a "Mexican" culture and thereby led to the construction of an unprecedented intellectual ethos. While the early years (1917-1925) of the Mexican literary field were characterized by its openness and diversity, the debates of 1925 signaled a closure. After the polemic of 1925, literature would be defined by the particular space it occupied within the state.

In this context, the *contemporáneos*, especially Jorge Cuesta, distanced themselves from the dogmatic inscription of literary culture and called for a less rigid and more universal understanding of the role of the intellectual in society. Jorge Cuesta's writing and ethics represented a different way of inhabiting history (124). Cuesta exhibited a belief that the literary, more than an aesthetic exercise, was a civic principle. His *cause célèbre* was his opposition to the notion that intellectuals should be committed to promoting the "revolutionary" government's political and

cultural agenda. Cuesta's most significant battle occurred in 1932 when his magazine *Examen* was censored and forced to close for allegedly publishing "obscene" material. From a liberal perspective, he questioned the cultural rhetoric of *cardenismo* and proposed an intellectual project that was secular and the product of an updated libertarian tradition. For Sánchez Prado therefore:

Cuesta[...] encarna una nueva forma de moralismo político, el cual no se funda en criterios conservadores, sino en un deber público del intelectual frente al poder... [Cuesta] es un intelectual casi único en la historia de la literatura mexicana: un intelectual siempre fuera del estado (124).

By rejecting the political and cultural norms of the day, Cuesta exemplifies a "nación intelectual" *par excellence*. For Cuesta, the intellectual was not to be seated at the center of power; rather, as a moral imperative, the critic should occupy a space outside of it. This independence, coupled with a unique understanding of intellectual authenticity and commitment, allowed Cuesta to think through the consequences of the revolution and to form an early critique of its subsequent crisis precisely at a moment when elites worked to institutionalize a particular version of it (127). Marked by a profound skepticism towards state power, Cuesta's critical ethos would, in time, acquire a cultural capital that surpassed all previous iterations. Cuesta is therefore post-revolutionary Mexico's first public intellectual. His independence from the state would become a defining feature of the Mexican literary field.

Sánchez Prado also renders an authoritative portrait of Alfonso Reyes's early intellectual praxis. Through a careful re-reading of "Visión de Anáhuac" and "La Sonrisa," Sánchez Prado offers a unique and comprehensive re-interpretation of two of Reyes's most important essays. In these canonical writings, Sánchez Prado argues, Reyes produced the "first" substantive counter-hegemonic narrative of Mexican history. Since Reyes wrote these essays in Spain, removed from revolutionary fervor, they functioned as a counter narrative to nationalist discourse. According to Sánchez Prado, in questioning nationalist propositions, Reyes's vision of history, represents a critical resistance to ossified notions of Mexican history. Stemming from a liberal education and humanist sensibility,

Reyes's unorthodox understanding of Mexican and Western history, made him, in fact, more revolutionary than his contemporaries (78). In this regard, Sánchez Prado's reading is innovative and works against aged notions of Reyes as a conservative, anachronistic Hellenist, out of touch with contemporary history. Moreover, Reyes's dialectical reading of the Mexican revolution as an event where oppressed subjects acquired a historical conscience differed greatly from the nationalist interpretation made by "organic" intellectuals. Reyes's *nación intelectual* considered the process of revolution, both universally and locally, and proposed a rupture with canonical conceptions of history. This nuanced reevaluation of Reyes is important and does significant service to an author who in recent contemporary debates has been unfairly trivialized and discredited by writers and critics alike.

Although Sanchez Prado's rereading of Reyes and Cuesta are examples of the important revision to literary studies that *Naciones Intelectuales* proposes, perhaps Ignacio Sánchez Prado's most significant contribution to Mexican literary studies is how he successfully places Jorge Cuesta, Alfonso Reyes, José Gaos and Luis Villoro, in a critical engagement with more contemporary thinkers including, Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Edward Said and other post-colonial theorists, pointing to what was uniquely modern about their writing. This is the case in his discussion of Alfonso Reyes's *Occidentalism* and José Gaos's *Hispanism*. According to Sánchez Prado, Reyes and Gaos looked towards other literary and philosophical traditions to foster their own counter narratives of the nation. In examining their work he is interested in addressing a point he finds absent from contemporary discussions regarding the legacy of cultural nationalism, mainly that: "[E]l pensamiento occidental, pese a sus rasgos coloniales, se [convirtió] para algunos autores en una instancia emancipatoria en momentos en los que el nacionalismo de Estado ocupa la posición hegemónica[...]" (153).

Instead of viewing the Western canon as a colonial imposition, Sánchez Prado concludes that drawing from other traditions was strategic. Reyes's *Occidentalism* did not call for the preservation of Western culture, *per se*, but rather for its use as a subversive mechanism (154). The same is

true of Gaos, who transformed the country's philosophical archive by encouraging the study of existentialism and phenomenology—both critical traditions that were absent from cultural nationalism. From this perspective, the dispute between “revolutionary nationalism” and the alternative *naciones intelectuales* can be understood as a clash between modernizing projects: one produced by the state, and the other produced by authors who sought alternatives from outside the nation (154).

In the closing chapter of *Naciones intelectuales*, Sánchez Prado compares two authors whose most important books were published in the same year, 1950, and had different fates: Luis Villoro and Octavio Paz. For Sánchez Prado, these authors represent two different intellectual projects and offer an opportunity to consider the end of the revolutionary cycle of *naciones intelectuales*. Villoro's *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (1950) was an innovative text that signaled some of the limitations of the construction of a Mexican identity emanating from cultural nationalism. More significantly, this was the first book in which indigenous people were not studied from an anthropological paradigm, but rather from the problem of alterity (218). In this respect, Villoro's “nación intelectual,” constructed a conceptual apparatus years before postcolonial studies would, that permitted the deconstruction of the *cosmic race ideology*, as well as theories about the Mexican “being” created by Manuel Gamio, Samuel Ramos, Emilio Uranga and other members of *Hiperión*. Sánchez Prado asserts that by recognizing the “indigenous being,” from beyond the stereotypes propagated by the state, Villoro created “one of the most powerful” *naciones intelectuales* in the history of Mexico (224). Finally, Sánchez Prado discusses Octavio Paz's *nación intelectual* noting how in *El laberinto de la Soledad*, Paz reimagined Mexico through mythical and aesthetic strategies. Thus, instead of deconstructing traditional representations of the nation, as Villoro had, Paz proposed a strategy for imagining the nation based on its archetypes (226).

Si la obra de las naciones intelectuales significó[...] la alegorización de la posibilidad utópica de lo revolucionario, la obra de Paz es el punto más acabado de su institucionalización, del proceso en el cual la cultura se desactiva políticamente y se convierte en un elemento más al margen de la hegemonía del Estado. (237)

According to Sánchez Prado, *El laberinto de la soledad* closes the cycle of *naciones intelectuales* because it does not offer alternatives for imagining the nation but rather institutionalizes a certain image of the nation, one based on an essentialist psychology.

Sánchez Prado acknowledges that *Naciones intelectuales* engages the work of his mentor Pedro Ángel Palou and considers Palou's *La casa del silencio* (1998) and *Escribir en México durante los años locos* (2001) as precursors. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's sociological insight to the history of Mexican literature, Palou successfully mapped the literary field of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s in painstaking detail. However, his account was often schematic and at times resorted to listing, books and authors, according to either genre or generation. If Palou articulated a singularly useful guide to Post-Revolutionary Mexican literature, Sánchez Prado deploys Bourdieu's analytical methodology—as outlined in *The rules of Art* (1992)—more thoroughly and seamlessly than his mentor. Moreover, Sánchez Prado advances Bourdieu's sociology of institutions to illustrate the emergence of an institutionalized Mexican literary field not only through books, but also across the critical, political and intellectual practices of key figures that challenged and shaped its formation. Scholars of twentieth-century Mexican literature will necessarily have to read Palou and Sánchez Prado's books to understand the formation of the modern literary field. While Palou offered a preliminary and necessary description, Sánchez Prado completes the task of illuminating the field by setting it into motion with theoretical insight absent from most surveys.

Among the many merits of *Naciones intelectuales* is Sánchez Prado's able re-inscription of the literary into a conversation about politics and cultural criticism. This study therefore belongs to a tradition of inquiry that in the past few decades has worked to displace the central narratives that have dominated the study of Mexican culture. Following the important work of Carlos Monsiváis, Roger Bartra and Claudio Lomnitz, *Naciones intelectuales* dismantles several entrenched stereotypes about Mexican literature and boldly calls for a redefinition of the critical canon. Moreover, a primary concern for Sánchez Prado is whether literature continues to be a site for constructing new ways of imagining the nation. For Sánchez Prado,

as Cuesta, Reyes, and Villoro prove, literature indeed maintains a political agency that should to be recognized and further studied. *Naciones intelectuales* therefore, contributes to deactivating platitudinous notions of *lo mexicano* while activating new critical perspectives.