

CRITICA / REVIEW

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. xiii, 366pp.

History on Edge: Josefina Saldaña's *Revolutionary Imagination***Brian Gollnick****University of Iowa**

The object of study in María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* is the revolutionary subject, which is to say, how the agent of social change has both been theorized and (to a lesser extent) enacted by the radical left during the second half of the twentieth century in Spanish America. Following a theoretical and historical overview in the first section of her book, Saldaña defines a dominant form of the revolutionary subject through the rural *foquista* model of the Cuban revolution as found in the writings of Che Guevara and in some texts by Guatemalan revolutionary Mario Payeras. She also offers a chapter on the Sandinista agrarian reform in Nicaragua during the 1980s. Her approach to these examples is critical: Che and Payeras serve as paradigms of the effort to imagine a vanguardist subject of revolutionary change based on what she sees as flawed historical principles while the Sandinistas serve as an example of how social reforms based on those principles failed. In all of these examples, Saldaña faults the radical left for imagining a revolutionary subject who addresses the popular sectors from a position of superiority defined by a modernizing social agenda and a self-conscious, modern understanding of history. For Saldaña, this model presents the subaltern as pre-modern and in need of guidance from a more enlightened social subject (the elitist agent of progress). Her critical exposition of this dominant revolutionary model is followed in the third section of the book by two examples of how the

revolutionary subject has been imagined in a less hierarchical manner: the testimonial writing of Rigoberta Menchú and the communiqués of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas.

The context which Saldaña uses to render these examples as a coherent object of analysis comes from the first section of *The Revolutionary Imagination*. Here Saldaña writes a critical genealogy of what she calls “developmentalism,” which she understands as a discourse that allows for the expression of distinct and even apparently antithetical paradigms of economic and social modernization. She holds that both Liberal capitalist and Marxist revolutionary models of modernization converge around precepts about the progressive nature of history. For her, the result has been similar “regimes of subjection,” by which she means the prescriptive definition of social subjectivities assigned to the subordinate classes. On this point, her scheme is indebted to Foucault’s maxim that a characteristic of discourse is not its unity, but its capacity to organize difference (that is, one may speak of “medical” discourse not in the sense of an increasingly precise delineation of trauma, disease, and their remedies, but in the sense of multiple practices for the control of the body through these phenomena). In this sense, Saldaña’s work is deeply, if not always overtly, Foucauldian, and one of the primary stakes in her book is the construction of political subjects through a variety of disciplinary practices adopted by the revolutionary left. Her specific object of critique is what she sees as “the disturbing resemblance between [Liberal] developmental and revolutionary regimes of subjection” (85), which even in the theories of the radical left from the 1960s and 1970s led to the “privileging [of] the modern, self-reliant subject as the model of oppositional consciousness” (107). Against that flaw, her objective is to point in the direction of a counter-project in which the subject of liberation can be built in a more productive relationship with the discourse of “developmentalism.”

Saldaña traces the origins of “developmentalism” to the Bretton-Woods conference in 1944, which, in her estimation, established a new vocabulary for international political and economic relations by replacing older terminologies of colonialism and imperialism with apparently less politicized concepts like development and underdevelopment. In two introductory chapters, Saldaña first criticizes this discourse in its Liberal, capitalist mode and then turns to what she sees as commonalities with Marxist formulations of economic development. In both paradigms, Saldaña rejects a formula of economic growth through predictable stages defined in a teleological history that produces a normative sense of the human subject best suited to function as the agent of progress and modernity. This convergence between Marxist and capitalist understandings of development provides the over-arching framework for Saldaña’s subsequent analyses of how that teleological history has failed the revolutionary left by leading to political agendas whose objectives for economic growth and social modernization have not differed greatly from the capitalist programs which Marxism-Leninism sought to oppose.

Saldaña approaches her material from a perspective informed by multiple fields of inquiry, but she locates herself primarily within the effort to move American Studies towards a more openly hemispheric academic practice. Here her work follows along the lines set out by studies like José David Saldívar’s *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991) and more recent efforts to theorize the cultural impact of the rise of the United States to political and economic domination in the Americas. Examples would include the articles collected by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease in *Cultures of US Imperialism* (1993) or those in Lisa Lowe’s and David Lloyd’s *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (1997), as well as Shelley Streeby’s recent study, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002).

Within the project of linking ethnic minority literatures in the US with Spanish American cultural traditions, Saldaña's concluding chapter touches on the autobiography of Malcolm X, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La frontera*, and Tomás Rivera's novel, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Saldaña criticizes Anzaldúa's unself-critical deployment of Latin American discourses of ethnicity and *mestizaje*, but she finds in Malcolm X and Rivera an effort similar to what she identifies as the subalternizing of revolutionary discourse in Menchú and the Zapatistas. When set against the second and third sections of *The Revolutionary Imagination*, Saldaña's conclusions can be taken as an effort to distance Anzaldúa from what might be called a "Third World" or subaltern position of enunciation while claiming such a status for Malcolm X and Rivera. The purpose of this gesture is clearer in the case of Anzaldúa than in that of Malcolm X and Rivera. *Borderlands / La frontera* is too often taken up in an uncritical way by scholars seeking to work in border or ethnic studies without an adequate understanding of the Latin American discourses (especially those of Mexican nationalism) that inform some of Anzaldúa's key gestures. It has also been taken up uncritically by Latin American scholars like Walter Mignolo, who has pointed to Anzaldúa as a primary example of what he calls "border gnosis." The stakes of delineating a historical or even discursive / structural resemblance between Rigoberta Menchú, the Zapatistas, Malcolm X, and Tomás Rivera are less clear. The goal of broadening American Studies is laudable, but on this level *The Revolutionary Imagination* seems to point primarily to the limitations of inter-regional comparisons when commonalities are established on a high level of historical or theoretical abstraction to the detriment of more specific contexts.

On the broad canvas of issues that Saldaña hopes to address, her book also represents an effort to rethink the political and social history of the second half of the twentieth century in a

hemispheric or even global sense. There she is concerned with helping to write a critical narrative that sees the United States not as a primary agent for the diffusion of freedom, but as the central pole in a world economy whose progressive expansion forms the engine behind a model of development whose acceptance across the spectrum of Cold War ideological conflicts can now be addressed in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Finally, although Saldaña does not explicitly locate her work within this debate, *The Revolutionary Imagination* can be seen as an intervention in Latin American subaltern studies. To date, Latin American subaltern studies has been divided between historians, such as Gilbert Joseph and Florencia Mallon, who have sought to identify interactions between elite and popular politics, and cultural critics, such as Ileana Rodríguez and John Beverley, who have asserted the need for a self-critical subalternist practice in order to deconstruct the failures of elite discourses. Saldaña's work engages the same theoretical matrix that informs Rodríguez and Beverley's project (particularly Gayatri Spivak), but in the second half of *The Revolutionary Imagination*, Saldaña addresses how elements of a popular social agenda and historical experience can be made visible within structures that bridge subaltern and dominant forms of discourse. While her analysis of these structures is not entirely convincing, Saldaña's effort to assert this second research agenda marks a space of convergence between social science theory and fieldwork, historical research, and cultural criticism. On this point, Saldaña brings the focus to a new path for Latin American cultural criticism. Unfortunately, the few steps she takes down that path carry an uninformed reader dangerously close to the edge of an historical precipice in which important concerns fade from view. The result is a genealogy of the Spanish American radical left that in some cases foreshortens its objects of study almost beyond recognition. This foreshortening finally produces a serious question about the very area in which Saldaña seeks to make her intervention, namely, the

subject position from which a counter-hegemonic history of the Americas can best be imagined and the methodological or theoretical framework necessary to identify that subject position.

The Revolutionary Imagination seems to have in mind a reader largely unfamiliar with Spanish American cultural and political history. The first section summarizes important scholarship on economic development theories and policies, but it adds little to work by figures like Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli, Jorge Larráin, and especially Arturo Escobar, all of whom contribute in important ways to Saldaña's general framework. Moreover, there are weaknesses even in Saldaña's deployment of these sources. For example, she draws quotes from Marx out of Larráin's *Theories of Development* (1989) in order to support her argument that Marxism and capitalism converge in their understanding of colonialism. The passages in question are frequently used to argue that Marx supported colonialism, but Saldaña fails to note that Larráin himself quotes this material as part of an argument that they represent one moment in the development of Marx's thinking. Contrary to Saldaña's position, Larráin concludes that understanding Marx's approach to colonialism requires locating these examples within a broader trajectory. Overall, with the exception of her chapter on Sandinista agrarian reform, Saldaña's interest in "regimes of subjection" seems finally to serve as a gesture to authorize textual analysis as a tool to study how the subject of popular history is interpellated in a variety of texts. On this point, her project seems less an extension of existing scholarship on development theory than an effort to engage with a different and not entirely compatible object of study.

A danger of miscommunication arises from the uneven fit between Saldaña's definition of her project and the sociological or historical framework that she draws for it. This danger is most apparent when Saldaña elaborates a dominant model for the Spanish American revolutionary subject. She relies initially on Che Guevara's memoirs of the guerrilla war in

Cuba during the late 1950s to demonstrate how a heroic urban, male subject projects, his desires, and what she sees as his own troubled masculinity onto the rural population by means of an historical scheme that first requires an act of personal redemption or conversion on the part of the guerrilla fighter and then an act of social redemption aimed at converting the rural populace to the cause. Initially, this use of Guevara's writings extrapolates them from the moment of their composition, which involved intense debates within the emergent Cuban government over the best model for national development. Without greater contextualization, many of Saldaña's points about Che's writings seem either over-read or insufficiently elaborated to sustain the conclusions she draws. One example would be Che's account of being wounded during an early combat and his sudden memory of a Jack London character who meditates on the best way to die. Saldaña reads this detail as suggesting that "Guevara must free himself from a sense of US/white colonial propriety over the American wilderness in order to free Latin America from the clutches of US neo-colonialism" (73). The claim seems more engaged with contemporary theoretical concerns than with the issues at stake in a chaotic fire-fight or the context of post-revolutionary Cuba. However, I am not primarily interested in disputing the specificities or even the broad outlines of Saldaña's position on Che. Rather, I want to point out that she assumes his texts can serve as a paradigm for the radical left in Spanish America during the second half of the twentieth century. That claim isolates one moment from a complex theoretical and practical history of armed struggle. Particularly following the Che's death in Bolivia, the Latin American left turned away from many elements in his *foquista* model in order to develop strategies such as urban struggle and new approaches to rural insurrection. That history is not part of Saldaña's account, which presents Che and the other figures she relates to him less as elements in a dynamic tradition than as instantiations of a development discourse understood to be stable over

a fifty year period. The limitations of this approach become evident when Saldaña turns to the subject of history as she sees it posited in the post-Guevara guerrilla writer Mario Payeras.

Payeras was a founding member of the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), among the most important armed movement to arise in the countryside in Guatemala in the 1970s. He became famous as a cultural figure for his book *Los días de la selva* (1980), a memoir of his time working to start an insurgency in the jungles of northern Guatemala in the 1970s. Payeras consolidated his position as an innovative figure in the Latin American left through subsequent writings which criticized the strategies of urban guerrilla movements and which made some of the most important efforts to re-conceptualize the relationship between ethnicity and social class in the context of armed struggle. Towards the end of his life, Payeras expanded his thinking even further and became one of the first intellectuals to incorporate ecological issues into an agenda for the radical left in Latin American. In this sense, he is a second and third (and perhaps even a fourth) generation activist and thinker of the Latin American revolutionary tradition after Che. Saldaña, however, focuses only on two of his earliest texts, *Los días de la selva* and “Los pueblos indígenas y la revolución guatemalteca” (1982), an article which first appeared in one of the EGP’s official publications.

Saldaña sees these texts as exemplifying Payeras’s “pre-autocritical” period (92), a descriptor that incorrectly suggests that it was only later that he began to advance new strategies of armed struggle and radical social change. Saldaña understands the “precritical” Payeras as participating in the same regime of subjection she finds in Che’s war diaries, even though it would be more accurate to see the EGP as a response to the failures of Guevarista *foco* theory. The *foco* theory implied that successful incursions by small bands of insurgents against poorly defended state installations would spur the rural populace to join the guerrillas, while the EGP’s

model sought to develop a base of support among the rural population and recruit new members before engaging in offensive actions. Most unexpectedly, Saldaña claims that Payeras repeats an elitist and ethno-centric understanding of the guerrilla fighter's position as the historical subject of progress. For her, Payeras's writings on Guatemala's Maya population coincide with Che's assessment of the Cuban peasantry by implying that "indigenous culture is suspended at the vanishing point of a pre-capitalist dawn to the horizon of a socialist future for humanity." Thus she concludes that Payeras maintained that "new productive forces will not only evolve into Marx's communist vision of a solution of class antagonism but also necessarily entail the erosion of ethnic particularity." In this sense, Payeras serves as a further example of how Marxist theories rest on the supposition that "agency depends on a cultural deracination of the racialized subject" (104-5). Essentially, Saldaña finds a racially hierarchized theory of social change in Payeras's early works, going so far as to assert that "Payeras's regime of revolutionary subjection is not all that different from the 19TH Century assimilation policies of liberal independence movements in Latin America" (106-7).

The comparison to nineteenth-century Positivist discourses on race is a facile gesture that seems impossible to sustain in any meaningful sense, but I am not convinced that any of Saldaña's assessment accurately reflects Payeras's thinking even in the "pre-auto-critical" writings which Saldaña addresses. Payeras does favor the final importance of class relations over ethnic identity in "Los pueblos indígenas," but his point is closer to the opposite of what Saldaña understands. Payeras's main argument is to identify racism as a critical ideological construction designed to separate different social sectors within Guatemala. His counter-project is then to create linkages across Guatemala's complex ethnic structure, and his conclusion is that a new or revolutionary national culture in Guatemala can be imagined only in opposition to

racism and in recognition of Maya ethnic identities. As he argues, given that Guatemalan society is built on the oppression and exploitation of an ethnically marked majority sector of the population, “nuestra tarea no puede consistir simplemente en trazar una política sobre las minorías étnico-nacionales o en reducir su problemática al plantamiento clasista, sino que ha de traducirse en todo un planteamiento programático que englobe ambas contradicciones y plantee su resolución al nivel de la sociedad en conjunto” (84). This conclusion seems a far cry from the ethnic exclusion that Saldaña rejects. Even more importantly, this conclusion marks a pivotal movement in Payeras’s thinking as a revolutionary activist, a movement which makes the definition of “pre-auto-critical” and auto-critical periods difficult to sustain. Rather than insisting that Payeras function as a further instantiation of an encompassing discourse of development, Saldaña would have done better to make an ally of him for her critique of what she sees as the failures of the radical left in Spanish America.

What is missing in both Saldaña’s assessment of the failures of the revolutionary left and her identification of alternate models for the revolutionary subject is a sense that her objects of analysis emerge from cultural traditions within Latin America and, even more importantly, a sense that they are the products of collaboration among intellectuals and popular social actors. Saldaña sees Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial and the Zapatista’s writings as texts which employ different strategies to posit a revolutionary subject articulated in a non-elitist manner, at once fully engaged in modernity but also in indigenous structures of knowledge and social practice. For Saldaña, Menchú and the Zapatistas thus exemplify the potential of the popular classes to assume aspects of modernizing discourses while maintaining the specificity of their identities and participating in wider struggles for change. The problem with her approach to both of these examples is a tendency to posit them as autonomous subaltern assertions, as when she speaks of

“Menchú’s revolutionary theory” (163) as a paradigm which emerges solely from the text of her testimonial narrative rather than out of Menchú’s work in social movements built through the work of indigenous leaders and non-indigenous organizers. Saldaña’s position oversimplifies both sides of the contrast it tries to draw between failed elitist projects and emergent subaltern models of a modern subject. A crucial aspect of both Menchú’s story and that of the Zapatistas is precisely their collaboration with elite intellectual life. I am not referring to the engagement between Menchú and Elizabeth Burgos or Sub-comandante Marcos’s role as the Zapatista spokesman. I am referring to the tradition of study by political scientists, anthropologists, social organizers, liberation theologians, and revolutionary theorists who have all helped to create historical and methodological frameworks to conceive of the popular sectors as modern subjects and agents in their own history. If the efforts of the popular classes to generate alternate modes of subjection is told as part of these collaborations across social sectors, it would again be possible to see Payeras and even Che Guevara as antecedents to current models of revolutionary discourse rather than repudiating them outright, along with the traditions from which they emerged and those which they helped make possible.

Ultimately, what is most frustrating about *The Revolutionary Imagination* is that limitations such as this clearly do not emerge from a research failure. Saldaña’s bibliography includes much of the information she would need to offer a more nuanced assessment of the problems I have outlined. There is now a large bibliography on social movements that arose in many parts of Latin America in the 1980s as part of the efforts to push for re-democratization after military rule and for openings in authoritarian regimes. Jorge Castañeda’s *Utopia Unarmed* (1993) offers only one synthetic statement on how those movements emerged from the rise and decline of the same insurrectionary ideologies Saldaña criticizes. Héctor Díaz-Polanco’s

introductions to the editions of Mario Payeras's works used by Saldaña locate him as a key figure in engaging the questions of ethnic identity and revolutionary struggle. Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara's *Anthropological Perspectives on Rural Mexico* (1984) offers an excellent outline of the historical process through which the relationship between indigenous culture and modernity were debated in Mexico and implemented through the institutions of the state. Given Saldaña's evident familiarity with these sources, the problems I have noted in *The Revolutionary Imagination* are best seen as resulting from a methodological choice. For Saldaña, the discourse of development constitutes a structure of knowing whose various incarnations repeat a similar set of suppositions. It is an epochal or epistemically stable concept of the discourse in power. The result is a form of discourse analysis disengaged from a dialectical sense of history, which is to say, Saldaña offers a study of figures who manifest an epistemic structure of power without changing it and without participating in a cultural project that includes both difference and continuity along a spectrum of conformity and resistance.

Perhaps the greatest danger in this model of discourse analysis is not simply the flattening out of historical contexts. By themselves, historical contexts can be reconstituted. But a greater problem arises when methodological choices generate models of understanding that render the reconstitution of the past more difficult. *The Revolutionary Imagination* comes close to generating such models through several theoretical confusions. The first of these is a confusion of theory and praxis along with the relationship between them. There is a certain irony in the fact that Saldaña's examples of failed revolutionary regimes of subjection emerge largely from struggles which succeeded in overthrowing repressive regimes, seizing state power, and implementing reform. In contrast, her examples of successful alternate models of revolutionary regimes of subjection emerge from movements that have failed to implement such change.

Many historical factors mitigate and explain these differences, but the fact remains that there is a great difference between discourses articulated from a praxis based in state power and those articulated from a praxis based in opposition. That difference needs to be addressed centrally or the nature of the object of study becomes obscured.

The second theoretical confusion produced by a non-dialectical model of discourse analysis is that of how the historiography of power is to be written. Saldaña frames her argument through the structures of international relations established in the Bretton-Woods agreement and the dominant definitions of development discourse that she derives from those structures. Ultimately, what she is pointing out is the way in which the development of productive forces under a hemispheric or global control of capitalism generated conditions that she sees as overdetermining even for the efforts of oppositional thinkers to create alternate perspectives. For Saldaña, this definition of development discourse serves to displace the now dominant narrative of US exceptionalism and the perception of the United States as a force of freedom in world history. That point may need to be reiterated in the current global context, but it is hardly a new argument from the perspective of Latin American historiography. Moreover, it is a definition of development discourse that periodizes history from the perspective of power while erasing alternate periodizations of resistance and alternate genealogies for the figures Saldaña addresses. Che Guevara is by now a historical figure whose life and activities bear little resemblance to his on-going deployment as a cultural icon. But he remains a cultural icon in much the same way that Emiliano Zapata does or that Sub-comandante Marcos is rapidly becoming: as figures of dedicated resistance whose appeal is as much emotional or moral as it is specifically historical or political. In that role, their importance is not to be overlooked as part of the on-going dissemination of an oppositional imaginary. That imaginary can be criticized from the position

of power, as Saldaña does, but it can also be understood from a counter-genealogy of resistance and struggle defined within the contexts of Latin American political and cultural life.

The final stakes in this discussion relate to the recognition of a Latin American counter-genealogy. One need not defend Che Guevara, Mario Payeras, or the Sandinista regime as paragons of revolutionary virtue in order to see them as part of a series of efforts to establish spaces of freedom. I have no interest in suggesting that any of these examples provide tools for revolutionary action in the present. I do, however, fear that a turn towards a discourse analysis that is not informed by a dialectical sense of history will recreate many elements of the same historiography it seeks to oppose: that Che Guevara was a dangerous and authoritarian idealist who today might even be described as an international terrorist; that the revolutionaries in Guatemala are responsible for bringing down a genocidal counter-insurgency campaign against that country's Maya populations; or that the Sandinistas sacrificed the loyalty of the Nicaraguan people on the altar of Stalinist corporatism. Clearly Saldaña repudiates these arguments as much as I do. But she does so within the same broad historical framework that sustains them, namely, the framework which suggests that the twentieth century after the Second World War has been the history of an ever-expanding developmentalist paradigm. She is critical of that paradigm. Liberal capitalism (now called Neo-liberalism) sees it in a heroic framework. Both approaches operate at the expense of a counter-history of resistance built through collaborations across social sectors and marked by a different structuring of time with its own successes and failures as well as its own internal critique. In the end, it may be equally important to ask not simply how the subject of historical progress is interpellated, but also how the subject and tradition of critique is best constituted.

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**A Journal on Social History and
Literature in Latin America**

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Una revista de historia social
y literatura de América Latina