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Review/Reseña

Beatriz Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas del racismo en México (1920-1950)*. México: Tusquets Editores México, 2007.

Were All Mexican Indigenistas Racists?

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The elaborate game of racial gotcha that has upended the careers of many impertinent public figures increasingly seems aimed at obscure historical figures. Just as Al Campanis and Jimmy the Greek will forever wear a scarlet *R* on their foreheads, so too must Lucio Mendieta y Núñez, Gilberto Loyo, and of course, the father of Mexican anthropology, Manuel Gamio. Still, are the returns on this practice beginning to diminish? Are readers surprised at this point to discover that once revered historical figures uttered racist sentiments? It is now nearly twenty years since Alan Knight famously noted that Mexican Indigenismo was an elite formulation of the “Indian Problem.” It is nearly forty years since Arturo Warman and

Guillermo Bonfil critiqued the work of two generations of Mexican anthropologists for orientalizing Indians, treating them as museum pieces destined to disappear. Along the way numerous intellectuals, including Claudio Lomnitz, Guillermo de la Peña, Mary Kay Vaughan, Jan Rus, and others, have unpacked the contradictions, complexities, and influences within Mexican social science, state-craft, and peasant-state relations to reveal the ambiguities and “wars of position” that have always been characteristic of power in Mexico. At this point, it seems insufficient to simply elaborate the ways in which a certain generation of intellectuals articulated views we now recognize as objectionable.

Urías Horcasitas offers a detailed examination of certain public discourses that are today viewed with a jaundiced eye. Anthropology, eugenics, criminology, gynecology, psychiatry, demography are examined together, revealing the shared tendencies in each. Each was elitist, used race as a discrete category, and tended to define normality and abnormality in opposition to one another. In turn, they were promulgated by a small number of closely linked intellectuals—many of whom turn out to have been masons—who ultimately re-inscribed racial hierarchies even as they professed a desire to redeem indigenous and other poor Mexicans. Relying heavily on their own words, Urías Horcasitas shows the ways Mexican intellectuals of this era fused a language that was not entirely distinct from the genocidal views of the Nazis with a claim to lift the nation into modernity, and ultimately argues that the racism inherent in these projects underpinned Mexican authoritarianism. The entire mandate towards progress and the incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the national polity thus becomes part of a larger genocidal project.

The shock with which we respond to Lamarckian eugenics, anthropometry, and other racial sciences today is informed by the horrors of 20th century genocides. Yet in our revulsion we risk overstating both their power and their coherence. When we look outside of the journals and lecture halls where these ideas were expressed, we see that their implementation on the ground was far from a sure thing. Indigenous Mexicans resisted, negotiated, and at times simply denied outsiders any power. Rural Mexicans often found the trappings of modernity appealing,

but they wanted them on their own terms, and often undermined all efforts by elite intellectuals to transform their lives. More simply put, orientalist discourses may be hegemonic in their aspirations, but real people live within these systems, and real people have a tendency to mess up the projects.

Indeed, if as Urías Horcasitas claims, theories of cultural evolution, mental hygiene, and degeneration were developed to control and marginalize the “silent majority” (144-145), should we not ask who this silent majority was? Mexico’s 20th century was an often noisy and contentious affair, as the groups the state sought to control did not easily or readily cede control over their lives, and the bargains struck in these conflicts rarely involved any fundamental submission to the ideological apparatuses of the Mexican state. They were, rather, momentary truces in long-standing struggles. And they remind us that inasmuch as Foucault is very useful for helping us understand elite aspirations in Mexico, he is much less useful in illuminating practice on the ground in a society where hegemony, and the state, have always been weak.

Leaving practice aside, Urías Horcasitas could also use a much more nuanced approach to ideology. Mexican intellectuals living in the first half of the 20th century were part of a global intellectual climate where assumptions about race were paramount. Intellectuals in all the pre-eminent powers—the US, Britain, Germany, and France—were famously racist. We should therefore not be surprised that many Mexican intellectuals also used the language of racial uplift, of assimilation to modern values, to describe their projects. What is interesting, and largely missing from this text, is the extent to which they deviated from European and North American norms. What is interesting is the extent to which the Mexican state aimed to produce (and in some senses did produce) participatory projects that eschewed racism. What is interesting is the extent to which the very intellectuals cited by the author sometimes rejected racist beliefs.

Yes, many of these intellectuals were contradictory, at times rejecting race and at others embracing the concept, but it is insufficient to note contradictions in any intellectuals’ body of work and then imply that

the benign statements were somehow less true than the more racist ones. Following Gramsci, I would instead argue that it is possible to be both racist and anti-racist at the same time. And it is even easier to be both over time. Mexican intellectuals were committed to uplifting their nation. Their country, after all, was both poor and had recently suffered a revolution that took the lives of 10% of the population. They believed that difference was one of the reasons for their country's poverty, or if you will, backwardness. They believed that an educated and healthy citizenry was the key to a prosperous and stable nation. They saw that the most impoverished and exploited members of the national community were in fact the members who were most clearly living outside of the national community. And, living in an era before the tragedy of enlightenment was made so clear by the Holocaust, they believed in progress—economic progress, social progress, cultural progress. Given these pressures, it is perhaps remarkable that over time a considerable number of intellectuals questioned the simple demand that they promote the social and cultural evolution of rural people, and in turn became advocates of a more pluralistic national community. Moisés Sáenz and Luis Chávez Orozco, both powerful public figures in the 1930s, turned against the narratives of progress and evolution in notable ways.

Eugenicists are an even easier target than Indigenistas. The chapter on eugenics effectively establishes the ways in which anxieties about “improving the race” were central to the project, and shows how important certain eugenicists were over time, but again seems so concerned with proving this point that it misses others. Hygiene, sanitary campaigns, and concerns with healthy motherhood were compelling because they were tied to vast and observable problems. The slippage from hygiene to race cannot be overlooked, but neither can a reasonable concern with the endemic or epidemic conditions in which poor Mexicans lived. What is more, one can wonder about the extent to which the racist undertones of these programs really mattered to rural, indigenous Mexicans, most of whom would see nurses and doctors extremely infrequently, if ever, and were quite capable of ignoring their directives when these medical practitioners offended local sensibilities.

Was every advocate of healthy motherhood a racist? Did every psychiatrist advocate sterilization of the mentally infirm? Were sexual education and anti-alcohol campaigns simply codes for genocidal impulses, a desire to limit the tendency of the unfit to reproduce? Did all Indigenistas imagine Indians as racially primitive? In linking all these together, and not offering a more nuanced understanding of the individuals involved, Urías Horcasitas suggests that the answer to these questions is “yes”. But at this point we are familiar with most of these accusations, and while they provide a valuable corrective to the tendency of earlier generations to lionize these erstwhile do-gooders, at this point we need something more. We need to understand these projects for the immensely heterogeneous phenomena they were. And we need to understand how these ideas worked in practice. Otherwise we risk simplifying both the past and the present.