

**SPECIAL THEME:
REFLECTIONS ON 20TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY IN MEXICO**

**SOME LESSONS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF 20TH CENTURY
PHILOSOPHY IN MEXICO**

CARLOS PEREDA

ABSTRACT: *The paper begins by criticizing the usual division of Latin America philosophy into three stages: founders, forgers and technicians. Then the history of philosophy in 20th in Mexico is narrated with the help of four maps that indicates the main positions and names. Towards the end, two kinds of lessons are drawn. The first is to promote the destruction of the vices of such a philosophy to regain its virtues. The second lesson comes from interpreting the metaphors of the previous maps: we are victims of shipwrecks living in archipelagos and thus we may explore their transitions.*

Keywords: *chronology, figures, history, lessons, Mexican philosophy, movements, virtues and vices*

As an auxiliary to history, each chronology structures a certain time, gives some order to events, and gives food for thought. In what way? When a chronology presents ideas of a time lapse, that chronology usually invites us to investigate it in more detail; for example, to elucidate one of the movements or figures of that time. But research can become more ambitious and aim to compare chronologies and point out continuities and ruptures, with developments of ideas in similar times in other places. However, these historical, or historiographical lessons are not the only type of lessons that a chronology can offer. That is why, although the main goal of this paper is to introduce—just to introduce, very briefly—a chronology of Mexican philosophy in the 20th century by way of enumerating its main movements and figures (section II in this paper) in a small complementary discussion, I will suggest some other lessons to draw from these developments. This second type of lessons can be generated from questions that provoke discussions such as the following: Why have philosophical discussions

PEREDA, CARLOS: Researcher Emeritus of Philosophy, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico. Email: jcarlos@filosoficas.unam.mx

shifted from having an interest in certain topics to others? What internal and external factors led to those changes? What are the epistemic and practical virtues and vices that generated the changes, or are these virtues and vices a byproduct of those changes? What can we learn for our own research in the present times about those past discussions and their changes? (sections 3 and 4). However, before these reflections at the very beginning of the paper, I will make some general observations (section 1)

1

Telling a story about philosophical thought is not an innocent task: it at least involves evaluating those thoughts and organizing them with justification. If these tasks are carried out from what we might call “nomadic thought”—a way of thinking freely that does not adhere to received distinctions and that risks crossing unknown territories—then any typology or chronology becomes disputable. At most, we should think of these as proposals to be taken up in discussion. Such thinking relies on various procedures. One of them is the “strategy of detours,” or horizontal nomadism, wherein many side paths are taken in order to locate a problem in relation to other problems of the past or present. So, before offering this short history of philosophy in Mexico, I want to take two preparatory detours.

First preparatory detour: Mexican philosophy, and Latin American philosophy in general, are sometimes reconstructed teleologically across three stages, which together are supposed to display an ascending character, or to constitute signs of progress (Miró Quesada 1974). These stages are: the stage of the founders, that of the forgers, and that of the technicians. However, so that we can dismiss this false teleology, I think it would be advisable, among many other corrections, to replace the word “founders” with the rather ugly word “forgetters.” This is because the word “founders” seems to overlook—or rather to obliterate—the very rich philosophical past of New Spain in many Latin American countries like Mexico. In a similar fashion, efforts have been made, even presently, to disregard the significance of nineteenth-century liberal republicanism in these countries; but surely these movements contain more interesting philosophical ideas than is usually assumed. Moreover, and quite unsurprisingly, the vast, varied, and extremely rich body of indigenous thought is routinely despised in these histories of Mexican philosophy.

Also, the meaning of the word “forgers” is not very clear. Leaving aside the usual sense of the term in English—a “forger” is typically a “falsifier”—the word “forger” is sometimes meant to refer to someone who creates something with a great deal of work and effort. Thus, “to forge” is sometimes used almost interchangeably with the verbs “to build,” “to devise,” “to imagine,” “to invent,” or “to project”. In the history of philosophy, thinkers like Plato, Augustine, or Hume are fittingly called “forgers”: those who “forge”—imagine, construct, invent—arguments and theories that, from different perspectives and with profound originality, illuminate realities. If to those venerable names we looked for their equivalents in Mexican philosophy, specifically among writers in Spanish, we should immediately include Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, José Vasconcelos, and Rosario Castellanos, among others. But one might immediately

object: some of these Mexican figures expressed themselves mainly in poems or in essays. But, by the same token, would we thereby consider Plato (who wrote dialogues), Augustine (the author of confessions), and Hume (an essayist), minor thinkers? Starting with irreverent or perhaps silly questions like these allows us to understand that this three-stage teleology of Latin American philosophy has been built to exalt the third stage. It's as though one can hear the following veiled remark: "At last there are people in these second-rate, desolate lands who read the latest papers published in academic journals. Finally, and fortunately, these folks no longer think for themselves, but now, with discipline, limit themselves to commenting on and discreetly introducing questions or, perhaps, minor doubts—if they are bold enough—regarding whatever might be discussed in the Headquarters of Thought." For this reason, the stage of the "technical philosophers"—the third, and supposedly most glorious level in this teleology—is perhaps better understood as occupied by people completely dominated by the vices of *subaltern fervor* and *craving for novelties*.

I said that I was going to introduce two preparatory detours. My second detour aims to tell this short history of philosophical thought in Mexico as a succession of maps. With maps we usually organize space for the purpose of providing guidance. Thus, maps are drawn on different scales depending on our needs. An undetailed map might help us if what we need is a very general sense of direction. But if we want to find a precise place, we need very specific maps. At the same time, in a manner similar to how maps of spaces are constructed—and this is my conjecture—we can also use nomadic thinking in order to draw maps of times and histories. These successive maps allow us to articulate yet another procedure of nomadic thinking, namely the "strategy of transitions," or vertical nomadism, which serves to shift the level of abstraction with which we attend to a problem.

Of course, in the following four maps we won't find a teleology, but rather different thinkers who are preponderantly founders, or preponderantly forgers, or preponderantly technical thinkers, or who, throughout their lives, have moved from one role to another. But, just in their characters as maps, the first two can be considered preparations for the third map and its successive submaps. The fourth map should be seen as a coda that projects into the 21st century and that will need to be analyzed and evaluated in the years to come. Unfortunately, with these maps I will be merely *listing* some positions and names. A first approximation, then.

2

As I have already insinuated, the following four maps—which I offer as ways of rethinking the history of philosophy in Mexico in the 20th century—are close to caricatures:

Map 1. *The generation of those who strove to restart* a fresh culture that emerged in Mexico around 1910 as a challenge to the "official ideas" current during the Dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). This effort was sponsored academically by Antonio Caso (1883–1946) and further promoted in public life by José Vasconcelos

(1882–1959).¹ Although they were both trained in positivism, they reacted strongly against it in their youth. Among other aspects, this renewal in philosophy was launched with a call to disengage from yet another colonial vice, namely *nationalist enthusiasms*,² and thus with a call to listen willingly to the voices of universal philosophy without paying much attention to local currents of thought (Spanish neo-scholasticism, French-style positivism in the manner of Comte, the remains of nineteenth-century liberalism). However, we also find in Caso and in Vasconcelos a deep and persistent concern for the particularities of the Mexican situation, albeit a concern that did not always succumb to the vice of *nationalist enthusiasms*. At the same time they displayed a strong interest in metaphysics and aesthetics. (Vasconcelos produced a systematic metaphysics, “aesthetic monism.”) Additionally, both thinkers displayed confidence in education as an instrument of social progress. In particular, Vasconcelos’s project was to rebuild mestizo culture as the basis for Mexican identity and to promote the study of the country’s natural and cultural history. Thus, the concepts of the “cosmic race” (“*raza cósmica*”; cf Miller 2004) and of “indianology” (“*indialogía*”) played a central role in this reconstruction.

We should also mention Samuel Ramos (1897–1959) as this generation’s third member. Caso was Ramos’s teacher as well as the one who led him to take an interest in aesthetics. However, the extremely negative criticisms that Ramos leveled against the psychology of the Mexican people and the culture in Mexico were incompatible with the reflections of Caso and Vasconcelos.³ (This fact has led many to question whether Ramos really fits within this first map.)

Map 2. *The “Spanish Exiles.”* Following the defeat of the Second Spanish Republic and the establishment of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, a contingent of philosophers arrived in Mexico. These newcomers did not experience exile⁴ as the situation of banished people or as “*desterrados*,” they instead experienced it as those who had changed their country but not their cultures or traditions, and who continued enriching those cultures and traditions by looking to new horizons—as “*trasterrados*,” to use José Gaos’s expression. Gaos (1900–1969) was the most influential thinker in this group for his teaching, for his work in phenomenology and existentialism, and for his immense

¹ Translations of important excerpts by both thinkers are included in Gracia (1986). By Antonio Caso are included excerpts from *The Human Person and the Totalitarian State* (1941) as well as excerpts from his main book *Existence as Economy, Disinterest, and Charity (Obras completas, 1972)*. By José Vasconcelos are included excerpts from *Todología* and from *Philosophy Manual (Obras completas, 1961)*. There are also other important translations of texts by Caso and Vasconcelos in Sánchez and Sánchez, Jr. (2017).

² For a characterization of these three vices—*subaltern fervor, craving for novelty, nationalist enthusiasms*—see Pereda (2006: 192–203), and Pereda (2013).

³ Ramos’s (1962) main book on the collective psychology of Mexican society was originally written in 1934.

⁴ Throughout the 20th century, exile was a frequent experience for many Spanish and Latin American writers and philosophers. Cf. Pereda 2019.

and generous interest in the past of Mexican thought.⁵ The brief stay in Mexico of María Zambrano (1904–1991) also left traces of poetic thinking that were diffuse but deep. In addition, the works and teaching of José María Gallegos Rocafull (1895–1963) and of Eduardo Nicol (1907–1990) were of some importance.

Map 3. *The “Era of the big blocs.”* These blocs were formed directly or indirectly from the teachings of the Spanish exiles. (Of course, these teachings also promoted, among many good things, a few colonial vices.) Appealing now to more specific maps, I refer to the following “big blocs”:

The “Mexicanism” of the Hyperion group, with thinkers such as Jorge Portilla (1919–1963) and Emilio Uranga (1921–1988).⁶ We might also mention, apart from this group, the historiographical work of Carmen Rovira (1923–).

“Latin Americanism.” The best-known philosopher with more enduring work in this field was Leopoldo Zea (1912–2004). According to Zea, there are reciprocal relationships between historical facts and ideas. Zea defended the idea of a united Latin America, and—with no less force—the idea that the discovery of 1492 in fact gave way to a concealment of cultures and knowledge.⁷ This bloc might also include the comprehensive theories—indebted to liberation theology and Marx—of Enrique Dussel (1934–), the most influential representative of the Latin American philosophy of liberation.⁸

Marxism, whose most decisive philosophical figure was Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (1915–2011), with his reasoned and energetic proposal for a philosophy of praxis. But it is also important to mention Bolívar Echevarría (1941–2010), with his reevaluation of the baroque ethos as a way of thinking about Latin America and his attack on the “metaphysics of whiteness” as the generator of modernity. Nor should we overlook fragments of the work of Carlos Pereyra (1940–1988), especially those indebted to Althusserian Marxism and his pages bearing witness to a progressive critical departure from such a perspective.

-The analytic tradition. With his contributions to deontic logic, Eduardo García Máynez (1908–1993) in the 1950s introduced analytic philosophy to Mexico. Soon afterwards, Luis Villoro (1922–2014), Fernando Salmerón (1925–1997), and Alejandro Rossi (1932–2009)—based on their severe criticism of the phenomenological training imparted by their teacher Gaos—hailed the importance of studying and practicing analytic philosophy, with the purpose of “professionalizing” and “normalizing” philosophy in Mexico. According to their proposal, philosophy should no longer be a form of “personal confession”—as Gaos once characterized it—or a set of social and political proclamations, but rather a rigorous body of research like the other sciences. (It should be noted that, regarding Luis Villoro, his work in analytic philosophy was just one of many stages in his vast and illuminating

⁵ In Sánchez and Sánchez, Jr (2017) we find translations of Gaos’s “Two Ideas of Philosophy” and “My Two Cents: ‘American’ Philosophy?”.

⁶ Both thinkers have recently been of some interest, having been translated and received commentaries in English. On Portilla, cf. Sánchez (2012), and Gallegos and Sánchez (2020). On Uranga, cf. Sánchez (2021).

⁷ Some of Zea’s works in English were published in 1963, 1959a, and 1959b; in Sánchez and Sánchez, Jr (2017) we find from Zea, “Philosophy as Commitment” (1952).

⁸ Cf. Dussel 2008, 2011, and 2013.

trajectory.⁹ Indeed, his work began with a more or less paternalistic interest in the indigenous problem.¹⁰ However, throughout his life this interest was transformed, on the one hand, into the ability to listen to the needs and projects of indigenous people and, on the other hand, into contributions to policies meant to promote their well-being.¹¹

The metaphysical tradition. In contrast with the other factions, in this case we have a “negative bloc”—which might also be referred to as the bloc of “the heterodox.” Its members have little or nothing in common with each other, beyond their resistance to belonging to other blocs. The figures worth mentioning here are Antonio Gómez Robledo (1908–1994), certain fragments of Uranga's thought, Ramón Xirau (1924–2017), as well as Juliana González (1936-). One might also place in this group Mauricio Beuchot (1950-), who, belonging to a younger generation, has nevertheless attracted attention with his theory of analogical hermeneutics.

Feminism. If we are to reconstruct the beginnings of feminism in twentieth-century Mexico—and nothing more than its beginnings—we must not overlook the theoretical contributions made in essays by the great writer Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974),¹² nor overlook the pioneering academic work by Graciela Hierro (1928–2003).

Map 4. *The “irruption of the Archipelago.”* Starting in the late 1980s with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxism lost much of the interest it had garnered in Mexico and as well as some of its public appeal in the Western world. It must be remembered that in Mexico—as well as in many regions of Latin America—the cause which provoked the most widespread versions of Marxism was the vice of *subaltern fervor*, as in the maddened desire to multiply the franchises of Louis Althusser and his disciples in our universities and colleges. Moreover, a strong criticism of Marxism had emerged in Paris by that time, including attacks that amount to silly misunderstandings of Marx. (It is well known: you never fight more harshly and unfairly than against beliefs you used to embrace passionately, and that today are no less recklessly considered old-fashioned.) On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that academic Marxism in Mexico was not just another bloc: it was the “provocative bloc.” Thus, when it fell apart, its militant resistance lost its meaning as a binding force. Hence the metaphor of the archipelago. But the image of a shipwreck is also appropriate. Indeed, the latter is a metaphor much appreciated by Guillermo Hurtado (2016), though he does not simply refer to a shipwreck but rather to a “dialectic of a shipwreck”: that is, to a situation in which, if we know how to take advantage of it, allows the shipwrecked people—or archipelago dwellers—that we have become to

⁹ A book belonging to this period is Villoro 1998.

¹⁰ Cf. Luis Villoro, *The Major Moments of Indigenism in Mexico: Conclusion*, in Sánchez and Sánchez, Jr (2017).

¹¹ On this later period in Villoro's thinking, it is useful to take into account Pappas (2017).

¹² Cf. Rosario Castellanos, *On Feminine Culture*, excerpted in Sánchez and Sánchez Jr (2017).

risk entering into a “dialogue as an adventure”¹³ and, in this way, to be able to combat those colonial vices afflicting us.

3

In this very short and disputable account of twentieth-century Mexican philosophical thought, the presence of colonial vices, namely *subaltern fervor* and *craving for novelty*—as well as their opposite, compensating, and equally dangerous vice, namely *nationalist enthusiasms*—have popped up everywhere. However, I am more interested here in reconstructing the lessons of a nomadic thought: one that teaches us that destroying these vices would allow us to rescue certain virtues, which can in turn aid us in continuing to think. Clearly, every vice is a deformed virtue, owing to some lack or excess. Now, I think that if the above-mentioned vices are destroyed, we can extract valuable materials.

For example, *subaltern fervor* and *craving for novelty* are passive attitudes. Those who fall prey to these vices try to empty their minds in order to administer in their localities only what is discussed in the *Headquarters of Thought*, or whatever happens to be the academic fashion of the moment. The motto of these people could be: “Let's not dirty our thoughts with anything in a *personal* tone.” Fortunately, this passivity is frequently left aside in Mexico, and there is presently in Mexico a kind of recovery of attention to personal needs and personal capacity for judgment. Thus, these vices can be transformed into virtues, specifically into such virtues as openness, the drive to address new problems, or the drive to try to address problems in various ways. In contrast, the vice of *nationalist enthusiasms* develops into attitudes that, in defending one's own identity, are not only active but in fact hostile. All thought becomes not only a closely personal affair but also a closely group affair. Consequently, the opposition between “us” and “them” is the spur to all cognitive activity. People then become unable to think that, in order to be dealt with properly, some issues require an *impersonal* point of view. But once this incapacity is overcome, this vice also becomes a virtue: by reaffirming our own identity, we become willing to engage in dialogue with other identities, to enrich ourselves with their points of view.

We can also extract valuable lessons from those efforts typified by the maps picturing stages of Mexican philosophy in the 20th century. For, without a doubt, metaphors invite us to continue thinking, and sometimes even force us to explore unexpected thoughts. For example, Caso's and Vasconcelos's efforts to restart a new culture in Mexico exhibit features of deep and rigorous thinking. Furthermore, a way of thinking that takes itself seriously cannot fail to make a temporary “clean slate” of previous theories. Consequently, it is important from time to time to reexamine our problems as if no one had examined them before: to think from the very beginning. Of course, such a liberating gesture can also be seen as nothing more than an attitude of methodological hygiene as well as an act by which we might recover our strength and

¹³ Hurtado (2016: 107) not only discusses such a kind of dialogue but also “an archaeology of hope.”. Elsewhere (Hurtado 2011) he qualifies his diagnosis.

drive. Because no one is ever actually at the beginning. We are rather always *in the middle of something*.

No less important was the effort carried out by refugees from the Second Spanish Republic. Real philosophy is often generated in coexistence with strange thoughts and with people from other lands, often exiles who desperately flee from countries that have become unlivable. But we do not simply inherit these situations. The difficulty lies in knowing how to distinguish—again, something very slippery—between the virtue of appropriating new horizons and the vice of *subaltern fervor*. However, it is important to insist that we bear many such inheritances: some from friendly outsiders, others from distant foreigners and even from those who, at least at first glance, would appear to be unpleasant or hostile—if not enemy—aliens. Thus, let us not be confused: the attitude of openness is a way of continuing to think for oneself, while recognizing that inevitably one thinks *in the middle of something*.

On the other hand, the establishment of large and conflicting blocs of thought frequently awakens dogmatic dreams and, thus, spurs both cooperative and non-cooperative debates. Consequently, we must make an effort towards arguing in a renewed way and in various directions; towards answering reasons to the contrary, and towards questioning deep-rooted beliefs and interests. In this way an opportunity arises for examining others' positions as well as our own: because—let us never forget—we always think *in the middle of something*.

Finally, let's return to the metaphor of the archipelago. The sea not only separates those islands composing an archipelago—in this case, the various participants in philosophy in Mexico; it also relates those islands to each other in a fluid way. This observation leads us to recall one of the aims making up the background for any reflection: the aim of integrating—that is, the practice opposed to exclusion—since it is through nomadic thinking that we know ourselves to be *in the middle of something*.

4

It is still worth emphasizing that practices of restarting and of appropriating new horizons are forms of nomadic thought in which we interrupt distinctions, concepts, arguments, and debates, as well as those different forms of consensus that we should never accept simply because they are generally taken for granted. Therefore, questioning each of these opens up possibilities for thinking and acting along overlooked or unimagined paths. Additionally, practices of argument and of connecting ideas help us to introduce and to consolidate our need for recognizing and acknowledging ourselves in an interactive ecology. Therefore, practices of nomadic thinking operate as decisive therapies so that we can continue to think more creatively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Dussel, Enrique (2008), *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- Dussel, Enrique (2011), *Politics of Liberation: A Critical Global History* (London: SCM Press).
- Dussel, Enrique (2013), *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- Gallegos, Francisco, and Carlos Alberto Sánchez (2020), *The Disintegration of Community: On Jorge Portilla's Social and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- Gracia, Jorge J. E. (1986), *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books)
- Hurtado, Guillermo (2016), *Dialéctica del naufragio [Dialectic of the Shipwreck]* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica).
- Hurtado, Guillermo (2011), *México sin sentido [Meaningless México]* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores).
- Miller, M. G. (2004), *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- Miró Quesada, Francisco (1974), *Despertar y proyecto del filosofar latinoamericano [The Awakening and Project of Latin American Philosophizing]* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica).
- Pappas, Gregory F. (2017), "The Limitations and Dangers of Decolonial Philosophies: Lessons from Zapatista Luis Villoro," in *Radical Philosophy Review* 20.2: 265-295. <<https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev201732768>>
- Pereda, Carlos (2006), "Latin American Philosophy: Some Vices", *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20.3: 192–203. <DOI:10.1353/jsp.2007.0007>
- Pereda, Carlos (2013), *La filosofía en México en el siglo XX. Apuntes de un participante [Philosophy in México in the 20th century: Notes from a Participant]* (México City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes).
- Pereda, Carlos (2019), *Lessons in Exile* (Leiden & Boston: Brill/Rodopi).
- Ramos, Samuel (1962), *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, translated by Peter G. Earle, with an introduction by T. B. Irving (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- Sánchez, Carlos Alberto (2012), *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla, With a translation of Fenomenología del relajo* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- Sánchez, Carlos Alberto (2021), *Emilio Uranga's Analysis of Mexican Being: A Translation and Critical Introduction* (New York & London: Bloomsbury Press).
- Sánchez, Carlos Alberto and Robert Elí Sanchez, Jr. (eds) (2017), *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century, Essential Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Villoro, Luis (1998), *Belief, Personal, and Propositional Knowledge*, translated by David Sosa and Douglas McDermid (Leiden & Boston: Brill/Rodopi).
- Zea, Leopoldo (1963), *The Latin American Mind*, translated by J. H. Abbot and L. Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma).