

INTRODUCTION TO ECHEVERRÍA

Bolívar Echeverría (1941–2010) was one of the leading radical thinkers in Latin America, both an imaginative interpreter of Western Marxism and practitioner of its critical methods, which he applied to the continent's realities. Born in the highlands of central Ecuador—at the foot of the Chimborazo volcano—he grew up in Quito, where he paired a philosophical education with a political one, reading Sartre, Marx and Heidegger while listening to broadcasts from revolutionary Havana. In 1961 he went to study in West Berlin, where he forged links with the student and Third World solidarity movements. In 1968, a few months before the crushing of student protests at Tlatelolco, he moved to Mexico City, and began teaching philosophy at UNAM. He was to work there until his death, playing a significant role in intellectual life, notably as a founding editor of the Marxist journal Cuadernos políticos (1974–90). Echeverría also translated into Spanish key texts by Marx, Sartre, Brecht, Horkheimer and Benjamin—‘The Author as Producer’ (2004), ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (2005). While much of his early work focused on Marx—a translation of the 1844 manuscripts (1974), El discurso crítico de Marx (1986)—Echeverría is best known for his engagement with the question of Latin American modernity. In a series of elegant essays—notably those in Las ilusiones de la modernidad (1995), La modernidad de lo barroco (1998), Valor de uso y utopía (1998) and Vuelta de siglo (2006)—he argued that modernity in the Americas was characterized by a ‘baroque ethos’, distinct from the ‘realist’ one that marked the advanced capitalist world. It had emerged in the 17th century among the indigenous population, who after the destruction of their own civilizations had to adopt, or better imitate, the cultural forms of the colonizers; a practice of ‘cultural mestizaje’ in which ‘victorious forms are reconfigured through the incorporation of the defeated ones’. The essay translated here appeared in Spanish in the spring of 2010, to mark the bicentenary of Latin American independence. Published only a few weeks before Echeverría’s death, it similarly asks if the region’s nation-states—the hollow forms of an oligarchic capitalism—might be remade from below, reclaimed through the dynamism of a protean popular identity.

POTEMKIN REPUBLICS

Reflections on Latin America's Bicentenary

THERE IS NO little irony in the fact that the national republics established in Latin America in the 19th century ended up, despite themselves, behaving precisely in line with a model they claimed to detest: that of their own modernity—a baroque modernity that took shape in the Americas during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the hope of ‘modernizing themselves’, the continent’s powerful strata abandoned their own model for one that was more commercially successful—if not the Anglo-Saxon model, then the modernity that originated in France and was imposed on the Iberian Peninsula by Enlightened Absolutism. This compelled them to set up republics or nation-states that did not, could not, turn out as they wanted them to, as copies or imitations of European capitalist states. They had to be something else: representations, theatrical versions, mimetic repetitions of the latter; constructions in which, in unmistakably baroque fashion, the imaginary tends to take the place of the real.

These attempts to imitate capitalist production were repeatedly blocked off by rejection on the part of the ‘invisible hand of the market’, which seemed dedicated to finding a special, ancillary role for Latin America’s ‘state enterprises’ in global capitalist reproduction.¹ Within the contested composition of the capitalist rate of profit, the role of these states was to reduce systematically the proportion that necessarily corresponded to ground rent, thus recuperating for productive capital a part of the surplus value it had apparently generated but then ‘diverted’ to pay for the use of the natural environment forcibly occupied by the landlords (whether private, like the *hacendados*, or public, like the republics). Thanks to those ‘state enterprises’ and their ‘living forces’, the world-market prices

of raw materials and energy—which, together with the cheap labour at their disposal, formed the basis of their wealth—were notably reduced. In states such as those in Latin America, landowners were forced ‘by circumstances’ to trim their rent, and with it, indirectly, ground rent in the entire Western world-economy—to the benefit of productive capital concentrated in Europe and North America. In so doing, they condemned the mass of money-rent in their own republics to remain a form of mercantile capital, without ever reaching the critical threshold of money-capital required to make the leap into the category of productive capital. They themselves remained, despite the handful of examples of ‘great men of industry and progress’, simple rentiers disguised as merchants and usurers, condemning their republics to the subordinate existence they have always had.

However, even in this reduced form—a discreet ‘bite’ out of that devalued ground rent—the mass of money that the market placed at the disposal of Latin American enterprises and their states was sufficient to finance the vitality of those living forces and the ‘discreetly sinful’ wastefulness of the *happy few*² that gathered around them. The survival of the rest—the quasi-‘natural’ populace, the non-full members of the state, semi-citizens of the republic—was left in the hands of wild nature and the magnanimity of ‘those above’; that is, left to a miserly divine will. But above all, the profits of these enterprises and their states were sufficient to lend verisimilitude to the feeble imitation that allowed the latter to play at being what they were not, to behave as if they were states established by productive capital rather than gatherings of landowners and merchants at the service of the same.

Deprived of that key moment or phase in which the capitalist reproduction of national wealth passes through the reproduction of the technical structure of its means of production—its expansion, reinforcement and renewal—the republics that were erected on the territories and populations of Latin America have always been forced to have an overly mediated or indirect relation to capital—the ‘real subject’ of modern history, product of the alienation of human subjectivity. Since the ‘independence revolutions’, these republics have been dependent on other,

¹ The term *empresas estatales* is used here to mean not state-owned firms, but states themselves; Echeverría elsewhere describes them as ‘private collective enterprises for the accumulation of capital’; see *Vuelta de siglo*, Mexico 2006, p. 147. [NLR]

² In English in the original.

larger states, closer to that determining subject; a situation which has meant a substantial reduction of their real power and, consequently, of their sovereignty. The political life that has unfolded in them has thus been more symbolic than actual; nothing that is contested on these stages has truly decisive consequences, or at least none that go beyond the cosmetic. In view of their economic dependency, the Latin American national republics have only been allowed to convey to the domestic political realm the decisions made by capital after these have been suitably filtered and interpreted in the states where capital has its preferred residence. They have been capitalist states adopted by capital only at arms' length, fictitious entities separated from 'reality'.³

Neo-classical bourgeoisies?

In any event, the question remains: is there not cause for celebration in the outcomes today of the foundation two centuries ago of the nation-states in which Latin Americans now live, and which define what they are? Should Argentinians, Brazilians, Mexicans, Ecuadoreans, etc. not be proud of being what they are, or simply of being *latinos*?

To be sure, even in the midst of the most calamitous loss of self-esteem it is impossible to live without a certain degree of self-affirmation, of self-satisfaction, and thus of 'pride' in what one is, although that satisfaction and pride may need to be so hidden as to be imperceptible. Self-affirmation means reaffirmation of identity; and we may well ask if the identity of which Latin Americans might be proud amidst their bicentenary celebrations is not precisely that trick identity, apparently capable of reconciling the insuperable contradictions between oppressors and oppressed, that was invented ad hoc by the creators of the 'post-colonial' republics after the collapse of the Spanish Empire and the 'revolutions' or 'wars of independence' that accompanied it. Moreover, this is an identity which, judging by the ostentatiously Bolivarian rhetoric of the mass media, seems to melt into another identity, which possesses the same essence but now with a continental reach: that of an all-embracing nation, the *nación latina*, which a Latin American capitalist mega-state

³The illusory nature of actual political life in these republics is illustrated perfectly by the ease with which certain artists or politicians have shuttled between politics and art: there have been novelists who were good rulers (Rómulo Gallegos), revolutionaries who were great poets (Pablo Neruda), while others were good politicians when painters, and good painters when politicians.

still in the making would be able to set on its feet. Examined more calmly, any pride in this identity would have to be of a faltering, broken kind; for we are dealing with an identity suffering from ailments that turn it into a source of shame, provoking a desire to distance oneself from it.

The ‘revolution’ of independence, founding event for the Latin American republics that celebrated themselves in 2010, brought a ‘revised and expanded’ version of the abandonment by Enlightened Despotism of the practice of coexistence that had prevailed in American societies throughout the long ‘baroque century’—the practice of *mestizaje*.⁴ Despite the strong hierarchizing effects of the monarchical institutions to which it was subordinated, this practice had tended towards a relatively open form of integration of the entire social body of the inhabitants of the continent. But then Enlightened Despotism arrived, imported from France. Welcomed by the Hispanicized half of creoles and rejected by the other, ‘indianized’ half, it brought with it the distinction between metropole and colony, with the former consecrated as sole bearer of civilization to its overseas branches. If it was to be consistent, the metropole’s way of life had first to be distinguished and separated from those of the natural, colonized populations, in order for these latter modes of life to then be subjugated and annihilated. This abandonment of *mestizaje* in social practice—the introduction of a Latin apartheid which not only hierarchized the social body but split it into two parts, one invited to participate and the other rejected—lies at the base of the creation and continued existence of Latin America’s republics.

These are republics whose exclusionary or ‘oligarchic’ character, proper to any capitalist state, is exaggerated to the point of absurdity or even self-mutilation. The many who have remained outside them are nothing less than the great population of the indigenous that survived the ‘cosmicide’ of the Conquest, the blacks enslaved and brought from Africa, and *mestizos* and mulattos ‘of a low sort’. Almost a century later, having cut the umbilical cord binding them to the mother country and unencumbered by peninsular Spaniards, the same Franco-Iberianized creoles who since the first half of the 18th century had imposed themselves on their ‘indianized’ counterparts—‘neoclassicals’ winning out over the ‘baroques’—became the dominant class of the republics that are today delighting in their eternal youth.

⁴ The term *mestizaje* (from the Spanish *mestizo*, a person of mixed race) here connotes the mixing of Iberian and indigenous peoples, cultures and practices. [NLR]

In the 19th century these national republics began to float like arrogant islands over the social body of the continent's population. The implicit project behind their establishment included one essential task: to resume and conclude the process of conquest begun in the 1500s, which had become distorted during the long baroque century. It is this identity defined around exclusion, bequeathed by the enlightened creoles, that—lightly transformed by two hundred years of history and the conversion of European modernity into 'American'—was being celebrated in 2010 to the sound of drums and cymbals, albeit under 'strict security measures'. This is an identity that could only be seen as a source of pride with the aid of a strong dose of cynicism. Unless, by dint of some powerful *wishful thinking*,⁵ like that which is hanging in the air in South America at present—accompanied by a desperate will for confusion—one sees it as having already been replaced by another, future identity that has been totally transformed and democratized.

One can only be surprised by the insistence with which those who today claim to be constructing the new Latin American republic continue to imagine, under the name of the fatherland, a supposed continuum between the marmoreal, neoclassical nation-state and the 'natural nation' itself, with its dynamic, varied and evanescent identity; a continuum which, to put it sarcastically, has consisted in nothing other than the repression of the latter by the former. It is as if they wished to deny all knowledge of the unending, unremitting—though suppressed and unspoken—civil war that has been and still is taking place between the nation-state of the capitalist republics and the Latin American community as such, marginalized and oppressed by these states and thus opposed to them. This is a confusion that serves to obscure the revolutionary meaning of the social movements' wishful thinking, and to dismiss the supersession of capitalism as the central element of the new republics; those embracing it must content themselves with removing the destructive component supposedly confined within the 'neo' of economic 'neoliberalism', restoring economic liberalism 'without adjectives' and refurbishing it as 'capitalism with a human face'. It is a quid pro quo which, assuming a transhistorical identity common to oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, those integrated and those expelled, asks us to judge it a historically 'productive' deception, useful for reproducing the unity and permanence that are indispensable to any

⁵ In English in the original.

community with a will to transcendence. A *quid pro quo* whose abolition would be a treasonous offence against the fatherland.

Rituals of denial

From a certain point of view, the bicentenary celebrations are not so much festivals of commemoration as ones of self-defence against repentance. At their foundation, the new republics had a great opportunity: to break with the Enlightened Despotism of the past and recompose the social body that it had sundered in two. Instead, however, they preferred to exacerbate that division—‘last day of despotism and first day of the same’, read an inscription painted on a wall in Quito at the time—giving up the possible integration as citizens of those members of the community whom an enlightened productivism had rejected as ‘dysfunctional’. They decided, moreover, to add to the exclusion a parcellization of the organic totality of the population of the Americas, which was an undeniable reality despite the geographical difficulties that are so often invoked.

Faced today with the catastrophic results of their two-hundred-year history, the least that could be expected of these republics would be a spirit of contrition and remorse. But what they are engaged in is denial and the ‘transformation of vice into virtue’. This self-willed blindness before the unnecessary suffering they caused for so long leaves them far removed from any self-critical attitude, and compels them on the contrary to raise triumphal arches and encourage scholars and artists to compete in historical apologias. Yet amidst all the displays of self-satisfaction, the celebrations of 2010 could not conceal a certain pathetic quality; these were ceremonies that betrayed themselves, displaying at bottom the character of spells against a death foretold. Amid uncertainty over their future, Latin America’s oligarchic republics are now seeking a way to restore and repair themselves, even if it involves cynically doing more of the same, squandering the crumb of sovereignty that remains in their hands. They celebrate the bicentenary of their existence and at the same time, without admitting as much, they use the celebrations as amulets to ward off the threat of disappearance that hangs over them.

The republican institutional apparatus was designed in the 19th century to organize the lives of the relatively few property-owners, the only true citizens acknowledged as such by the republics. With the passage of time, however, this apparatus had to be put to political use to carry out

another, dual task: it had, first, to deal with matters relating to a 'social base' that the republics themselves needed to broaden, which they did by opening themselves in small doses to the structurally marginalized population—but without affecting, much less shedding, their inherent oligarchic character. It was an apparatus condemned to live in permanent crisis. The determination of these suicidal, 'anti-Lampedusan'⁶ republics to practise a form of 'internal colonialism'—ignoring the general historical tendency towards the extension of demographic support for democracy—led them to allow their political life to wither until it reached the bounds of illegitimacy, thus causing the collapse of that apparatus. Expanded and patched up without rhyme or reason, the institutional apparatus was bureaucratized and distorted by having to carry out such a contradictory task; its dysfunctional nature became increasingly acute, to the point where the ruling class itself began to lose interest in it. The elite abdicated the well-paid duties with which capital had entrusted it, and which had turned it into a structurally corrupt, in-bred stratum. It threw to the floor the political chessboard of representative democracy and returned to capital direct, 'unprocessed' control over public affairs. The ruling class even shrank itself, until it was no more than an inorganic conglomerate of de facto powers, dependent on other transnational powers with their mafias of various sorts—whether legal or criminal—and their media manipulators.

Practically dismantled and abandoned by its 'real' owners, the political superstructure with which these republics originally endowed themselves, and without which they said they could not exist, is today at the centre of a strange phenomenon: it is passing into the hands of anti-oligarchic and populist socio-political movements, which formerly repudiated it as much as or even more than it rejected them. Having 'won the prize at the fair', these movements are now looking to break out of their perplexity, hurrying to decide between the alternatives of refurbishing and revitalizing that institutional structure or rejecting it and replacing it with another. These are dynamic social formations that have emerged within that 'politicized' mass of the marginalized and the poor that was generated as a by-product of the so-called 'democratization' of Latin America's oligarchic republics; a mass which, while

⁶ In the original, '*anti-gattopardiano*'; referring to the famous line in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*: 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.' [NLR]

remaining excluded from republican life, has been semi-integrated into it as a 'reserve electoral army'.

The bicentenary celebrations, proclaimed in unison by all the governments of Latin America's republics and organized separately in each of them, would appear to be events completely alien to 'those below'—'ancestral' republican spectacles, broadcast in all their splendour by the television monopolies, which the majority of the population would only attend as spectators, whether open-mouthed, enthused or bored. However, these majorities have made these celebrations their own, and not only to confirm the proclivity for partying for which they are known across the world, but rather to make apparent—often armed only with irony—the reality of exclusion that was being sidestepped by the fiction of the bicentennial republic.

The oligarchic nations and their respective, artificially singular and unifying identities, to which different portions of that population only tangentially belong, have been unable to form themselves into totally convincing and agglutinating entities. Their weakness is that of the historic state enterprise that sustains them; a weakness which exacerbates the debility that gave rise to it in the first place. Two hundred years of living under a state or national republic that systematically marginalizes them, but without letting them escape its gravitational field, have prompted the majority populations of Latin America to appropriate that imposed nationality, and to do so in a singular manner.

The national identity of each oligarchic republic has been confected on the basis of the apparently 'unique' characteristics of the given state's human patrimony, settled on that state's territorial patrimony, with all its particular habits and customs. It is the product of a functionalization of the identities already existing within that human patrimony, adapting and popularizing said habits and customs to meet the requirements of the state enterprise in its economic struggle with other states on the stage of the world market. The indisputable arbitrariness, the unnecessary character, of the national artifice is in evidence in Latin America with much greater frequency and much more starkly than in other historico-geographical situations within capitalist modernity. But it is an arbitrariness that, besides weakening the state, has effects of another order. It is the instrument of a modern civilizational project, repressed within existing modernity, concerning the identitarian self-affirmation

of human beings. Not only was the Mexican or Brazilian 'natural nation' not replaced by the nation-state of these countries; rather, it was the former that overcame and gradually absorbed the latter.

For the Latin American nations, the very precariousness of the nation-state's imposition made it stand as proof of the arbitrary, groundless nature of all self-affirmations of identity. This was the ideal means to overcome the tendency towards regionalist substantialism that is proper to any modern, well-maintained nation. For example, in Ecuador—a republic designed on the lap of the Liberator—there are very few common traits among the population, whether derived from history or invented in the present, that would give cause to think the Ecuadorean nation-state solid and unshakeable. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the existence of an 'Ecuadorean-ness'—floating in the air, as it were, artificial, evanescent and with many faces—which Ecuadoreans recognize and claim as an important identitarian feature of what they do and what they are; and which at the same time, above all through the hard school of migration, makes them open to cosmopolitan *mestizaje*.

This disposition towards self-transformation, this dialogic acceptance—not just toleration—of the identities of others, stems precisely from the assumption that there is something contingent in every identity; that identities are founded on pure political will, and not on any mythic, ancestral bequest which, however much it is presented as being bound to the earth, always ends up taking on a supernatural and metaphysical character. It is this disposition that lends the identitarian affirmations of Latin America's majority populations—concentrated in something very subtle, almost an arbitrary fidelity to a 'preference for forms'—the dynamism and capacity for metamorphosis which will be required by an imagined modernity, lying beyond capitalist stagnation.