

EPILOGUE

WHAT IS LATIN AMERICAN IN LATIN AMERICAN POST-NEOLIBERAL PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION?

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A few years ago, I volunteered to chair the Latin America Special Interest Group for the Comparative and International Education Society. My idea, like that of other people involved in the SIG, was to carve out a space for Latin American scholars to commune, share ideas and approaches, and become more visible in the American academic scene. However, as soon as I began my term, I was faced with the central question grounding the existence of the SIG: Is there something beyond geographic location that brings us together? What ties me, a post-foundational curriculum studies scholar who happens to be from Argentina, to a policy maker studying indigenous universities in Mexico, to a post-positivist sociologist looking at class-based differences in high school examinations across the Caribbean? The answer at the time led me to distance myself from such geography-based groups, and form instead one grounded on theoretical affinities. But the question still haunts me, and I believe it haunts this issue of *Lápiz*. What is specifically or uniquely Latin American about Latin American post-neoliberal philosophies of education? Is there even a point in searching?

As I read the contributions to this issue, I had troubles at first locating an anchor for that question. Let me illustrate this with one specific case. Lilia Monzó's piece presents us with a paradigmatic paradox: she seeks to undermine Western thought by using a Marxist

frame to issue a call for critical pedagogy, and anchoring hope in the concept of *Buen vivir*. This is the trap that encapsulates the issue at hand, as Marxism is in fact one of the foremost framing devices we inherited from specific strands within European Enlightenment.

Orlando Hernández, on the other hand, seeks to save us from the 'Big Bad West' by rescuing a Latin American historical figure from obscurity. His narrative about Eugenio María de Hostos is engaging and powerful in its attention to detail and its call not to be swept by the latest trends, opting instead for a search of the intellectual wealth within Latin America's rich history. Hostos emerges from Hernández's writing as a true humanist, a constructivist pedagogue, and a Latin American cosmopolitan. That is, as a (western) man of the Enlightenment. Not only that, but the very tradition that Hernández draws from and needs is a system of thought foundational to the West. The idea of a linear timeline, in which the past serves as inspiration for the present, the notion of progressivist salvation inherent in it, and the role of the scholar as agent of change are all ways of thinking about the world and ourselves that would be unthinkable without the West.

The issue here, illustrated most clearly by the two texts discussed above, is related to two deeply interrelated problematics. The first one was famously termed by Michel Foucault the "blackmail of the Enlightenment."¹ Foucault responded to critics that accused him of being against the Enlightenment—and thus against reason—by explaining that one cannot be for or against western Enlightenment thought. Any critique of the Enlightenment is necessarily grounded on the critical tools given to us... by the Enlightenment. Western Enlightenment thought contains within it its own critique (by introducing, for example, the notion of the human being as agent of change—a change that could potentially be critical of the Enlightenment—, of an uncertain future that is in our hands, by creating the notion of freedom² we require to be critical). This is not, by any means, a conservative cry

1→ Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" In *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32-50.

2→ Nikolas S. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

about the impossibility of being *truly* critical. It is a strong statement, however, about the impossibility of stepping completely outside the power-knowledge relations that have constituted us, but it is also a call to embrace the critical, contradictory, paradoxical potential of Western thought, perhaps even to undermine itself, but always from within.

The other problematic, perhaps even more relevant to *Lápiz*'s readers and to the articles comprising this issue, is that Latin America itself is a construct of western colonial thought. It is there in the name we use for it, *Latin*, *Latino*, the language (and system of thought) of the colonizer. *Lxs hermanxs latinoamericanxs*, *el continente unido*, even its open veins, are all necessarily an outcome of the ways in which Latin America was conceived as a product of colonial relations of power, regardless of whether we call it Latin America or *Latinoamérica*. Unfortunately, the extra vowel, the accent, and the beautiful pronunciation do not erase historical contingencies.

Does this mean there is nothing to search for in terms of Latin American identity? Going back to the question opening this epilogue, does the colonial production of Latin America make impossible the location of what is specifically Latin American about Latin American post-neoliberal philosophies of education? Yes and no, and it's complicated.

I hope that at this point one thing is clear: Latin American exceptionalism cannot simply be found in some absolute origin. Since geography itself, as social science, is also a product of western thought—no surprise there—, locating a particular thinker, concept, or trend on a specific location on a map will not get us closer to the answer. But what about that which has not been *tainted* by the 'Big Bad West'? What about one of the latest objects of salvation in our field, the "indigenous forms of knowing"? Aren't they, by definition, opposed to the western episteme? In one way, they may well be, but that does not get us out of the conundrum.

The act of studying the other in its uniqueness, in its difference to ourselves, to our normal ways of knowing, is a deeply colonial project. Attempts to rescue either them or us through exposition to, and explanation of, that which is seen as *native* have embedded in them a will to knowledge (and to power) that once again cannot escape their legacy. The issue here is not that the Mapuche way of knowing is inherently western, but the ways in which it is transformed the moment we study it, write about it, and try to save ourselves through it.

Here, we run against another one of the limits of our search for what is specifically Latin American in Latin American post-neoliberal philosophies of education. Not only are Marxism, progressive historiographies, notions of agency and linear time part of the legacies of the Enlightenment, but so are the institutions that support them, namely schools and universities, together with the ways in which they produce, circulate and organize knowledge.

When thinking about how to engage in pedagogical practices that valorize, humanize, and critically engage with local ways of knowing as ways of resisting western hegemony, it is easy to forget that schools as we know them not only originated in central Europe, but they were instrumental for the colonial project. Schooling was used as a tool to simultaneously *civilize* the natives—at least those possessing a soul and thus worth saving—as well as to effect an epistemic genocide aimed at eliminating from the field of possibility other ways of understanding and acting upon the world. I can see here the astute reader pointing at my complicity with this project by stating the impossibility of escaping western Enlightenment, thus re-inscribing the epistemic injustice more than five centuries later. I would like to respond to this potential accusation on two fronts. First, by making clear that I'm not saying that it is impossible to see the world otherwise, just that it is impossible *for us*. With this statement, I recognize myself as part of the academy, and as part of a system of thought that is definitely complicit with the colonial project. However, a return to Foucault's insight might allow for something more than a simple mea culpa. The tradition of the university, its ways of producing, circulating, and organizing knowledge, and the role of the intellectual as its agent contains both the seeds of the colonial project, and the tools to critique it and perhaps imagine it otherwise. But this is certainly not a west vs non-west, or west vs Latin America struggle. Critical pedagogy may very well play a crucial role in furthering a social justice agenda in schooling, but not by coming from outside western traditions, but by helping expose the contradictions of western thought—and schooling—from within.

Perhaps the way of understanding the problem I am proposing here is better understood by considering some aspects of two of the texts presented in this volume.

Rodrigo Nunes's piece makes significant strides at refusing to engage in larger narratives about (post)neoliberalism as a whole, treating the post-neoliberal as a conjuncture instead. That is, he does not attempt to define neoliberalism or post-neoliberalism, but looks at the actual political forms taking place in Brazil as a response to particular policies, in specific places at specific times. In doing this, Nunes both posits these responses as uniquely Latin American, yet not necessarily in opposition to the west, or to the Enlightenment. Yet then, Nunes attempts to *learn* from this, which as I will explain later on, has its own set of related problems.

Aleksandra Perisic on the other hand, is clearly *not* proposing to solve the problem. Perisic formulates a beautiful question to frame her text: "How can we construct an education based not on what the world is, but on that which is missing in the world, in an attempt to bring it into being?" Perisic's call for the cultivation of utopian thinking, grounded on franco-phone Caribbean traditions, is never proposed as a guaranteed solution for the problems of the world (in this case, the neoliberal common sense that predetermines the given coupled with her understanding of the limits of critical thinking for actually imagining things otherwise). In fact, it cannot work as a guarantee in the way in which narratives of progress—both on the left and the right—assure us of the future to come, because of her emphasis in how Deleuze and Glissant focus on what is missing. That which is missing cannot be predetermined before the enactment of utopian thinking, thus it cannot serve merely as a promise to fulfill. That which is missing is renewed in each pedagogical act, thus it is always to come. Could it be that Perisic's work can be seen as one way of approaching the attempt to escape the western episteme without pretending to engage it from the outside? Her focus on what is missing is dependent on the critique from within, as what is missing could never be assessed from outside western/neo-liberal thought. The people that are missing and the place that is missing emerge as a Latin American pedagogical cultivation of utopian thinking, precisely because they are the people and the place that is missing from Latin America, from the perspective of Latin America. In this sense, I am not certain that it is Perisic's text that is specifically Latin American, but maybe its practice in Latin America, as long as it is fully aware of the implication of Latin America in producing the absences of that which is missing.

And that which is missing, right now, is the 43 Mexican student teachers. If there is one thing that is indisputably Latin American, it can be located in Jason Wozniak's introduction to this issue of *Lápiz*: Ayotzinapa. Not our interpretations or readings of it, not our re-presentations of it, but the singularity of the event. Sadly, Latin America does not hold exclusivity rights over oppressive actions of a state against its people, and over targeting educators or youth. However, there is a surplus to Ayotzinapa that cannot be contained by previous or future categorization. As an event, Ayotzinapa cannot be anything but Latin American. Deleuze's and Glissant's call for the people that is missing is transformed from utopian thinking to an impossible cry for justice: *¡Vivos los queremos!*

What do we do with this? How is that absence, the specificity of a horror that is impossible (both conceptually and ethically) to compare to anything else, help us figure out the purpose of a publication such as *Lápiz* and its call for Latin American post-neoliberal philosophies of education?

The first path signaled here points to the need to event-alize Latin America, as opposed to seeking commonalities and categories of analysis that are solely geographically based. Ayotzinapa forces us not to try to force it into an analysis that compares it to "similar" atrocities. Such a move, or even the attempts to *explain* Ayotzinapa by placing it within the linear history of the continent, might provide us with some kind of insight, but it will undoubtedly also generate a loss in our efforts to come to terms with the specificity of the event. Furthermore, we need to mourn the requirement to *understand*—and thus in some way control (another legacy of Enlightenment thought)—what happened, as any such attempt will inherently present violence against what took place in Guerrero. Related to this point, seeing Ayotzinapa as an event stops the endeavor to learn from it in its tracks, to use it as a building block for critical thought, as the response to the issue may not lie outside of thought after all. This is a particularly difficult point for educators to deal with. As Biesta and Lewis have pointed out,³ the learning paradigm demands from us that we establish

3 → Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and*

goals and objectives in advance of the pedagogical encounter, that we value planning and fulfillment of potential, and that we establish ways to assess what has been learned. I would add that the learning paradigm also expects us to categorize the learning that is taking place, be it in a particular discipline or epistemic regime, or, in this case, as part of a larger narrative about the history of a people and/or a place. To relinquish the expectation to learn from Ayotzinapa opens up a set of interrogations into the event: what does it feel like to have an aesthetic encounter with the 43? What to do with the surplus that Ayotzinapa forces into the frames we have available for thinking? In what ways are we moved to consider the people and the places that are missing? Note how while none of these questions mentions Latin America, all of them are screaming at it.

If *Lápiz* is a publication dedicated to Latin American philosophies of education, then it needs to keep the question open as to what makes something Latin American. While the answer that points to the birthplace of the scholar or to mentions of particular countries and regions may be easier to implement as a gatekeeping mechanism, my essay has attempted to point out the limitations of such approach. Instead, I suggest treating Latin America as an event, irreducible to a progressive historical narrative or to oppositions towards what it purportedly is not (i.e., the Big Bad West). The search for Latin American philosophies of education, post-neoliberal or others, will have to give up on the attempt to understand Latin America, to encompass it in the totality of thought and learning. Instead, it will have to be moved by it. ■

Educational Potentiality (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

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