

EDUCATING WITH A [DE]COLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Educating with a Colonial Consciousness: Latin American
Philosophy and its Implications for Education

Growing up in Florida, I remember only one teaching unit concerned with Latin America in 12 years of attending southern public schools. In third grade, we composed a large map of the continent of South America with our ubiquitous and plentiful construction paper on the classroom bulletin board. National borders went unmarked, and hence identifying their names was unnecessary: this was simply a map of “South America.” But what did get marked on this helpful map were the areas of the continent rich in copper, those abundant in tin, and the places one could find lead, zinc, coffee, and, of course, silver. At the age of eight, I was taught the export commodities of South America, and required to memorize them. There was no discussion of the political culture, literary history, religious and artistic traditions, or anything else. Instead, we were treated to an imperialist perspective whose only concern was resource extraction.

Philosophies of education are always informed, overtly or covertly, by such class-based and nationalist projects. Curricula are subject to critical interrogation by competing interests concerning how well they advance these varying, sometimes conflicting, projects. The worst scenario is when the political project putting demands on education remains covert, its perspective cloaked by claims of universalism or neuroscience or political neutrality. Hegemonic projects often attempt to function in this way: as a covert operation.

In this brief essay I want to suggest that Latin American philosophy might provide an antidote to such hegemonic lesson plans as I experienced in Florida. The ever-present linkages of knowledge and power, as well as political philosophy and colonial location, are thematized in this tradition resulting in more overt and reflexive debates over the best education policy given a colonial, and racist, context.

The philosophical work that has been done in Latin America encompasses an expansive heterogeneity in both content and orientation, and yet there can be discerned a running thread of colonial self-consciousness. Against persistent Eurocentric and Anglo dismissals, still ongoing today, Latin American philosophers have had to justify their right, and their ability, to contribute to the normative debates over the good, the right, and the true. This required defense, and concomitant defensiveness, has had the beneficial result of making visible the context in which knowing occurs, and of disabling the usual pretensions, still found in European influenced philosophical traditions, of being able to make transcendent abstractions removed from all concrete realities. Hence, a general approach to knowledge has emerged that renders it self-conscious and reflective about its context and social location. Thus, I will argue that, compared to European and Anglo philosophies, Latin American philosophy has an advanced set of explorations on the topic of contextualization. From here we can consider the implications of this contextualized approach to education at every level.

Such a contextual approach swims upstream of current trends in the global North, even among the left. It is not only imperialist lesson plans and philosophical perspectives that go unmarked, or unlocated, but liberatory ones as well. Today in the midst of worldwide economic catastrophe, some are looking to the discourses of a past era, to the theories and events of positive transformation from the 1960's, among other periods of historical ferment, when ordinary people were able to change the terms of power enlivened by philosophies that declared injustice to be transitory and impermanent, based only in delusions and paper tigers. In these old dreams and old languages, and specifically in the call to reinvigorate class consciousness and put aside our differences, many today find hope. But the old languages often carried a covert Eurocentrism.

The liberatory theories that enlivened the transformative hopes of much of the world developed from the theoretical and practical realities of basically five countries, all from the global North. These theories were born of that local experience, of those movements and their specific challenges. Social conflict was not given a racial or ethnic cast, nor was the international division of labor a central

analytic. Capitalism was not explained as a development out of colonialism, but only as a replacement of European feudalism. As a result, liberatory social theories, including the truly rich resources of the Marxist tradition, developed no theory of race, no conceptualization of xenophobia, no critique of Eurocentrism, no concept of indigeneity, no understanding of the link between colonialism and culture, and no analysis of the ways in which geographical hierarchies affects the making of theory itself.

Most importantly, there was no recognition that theories of justice, of progress, of liberation or of oppression emerge within specific contexts, and that in fact these contexts play a constitutive role in the formulation of theoretical tasks and projects, setting the agenda but also affecting how reasons and arguments were judged in regard to their plausibility, adequacy, even intelligibility. Hence, the theories that emerged in these contexts faced a foreshortened arena of debate.

Unable to ignore or dismiss the thought developing in other continents, and other contexts, the tradition of Latin American philosophy has necessarily had to engage with a larger frame of debate. As a result it has developed in a different way, with a different set of theoretical tasks and projects. Some of these have important implications for the philosophy of education.

Consider first the infamous arguments of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda to defend the rights of the Spanish Crown to do as they wished in the New World. The debates between Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas in Valladolid, though staged between two Spaniards, brought the experiences of colonialism in the New World into a very public discursive arena as grounds for ethical and religious argumentation. Most importantly, Sepúlveda developed his defense of Spain's unilateral rights on the basis of the specific cultural and social identities of the Indians. "I assert that barbarian refers to those who do not live in accordance with natural reason and who have publicly endorsed bad customs, because...they have been brought up as brutes....It is demonstrated by those who have returned from the new world that those men have little mental capacity and fearful customs..."¹ NEXT PAGE Thus, although the Valladolid debate concerned competing definitions of the concept of "barbar-

ian”, it also turned on the specific attributes of specific groups, in particular, the Indians and the Spanish. Bartolomé de Las Casas, in his rejoinder to Sepúlveda, introduced a nascently universalist characterization of human rights, but did so through relativizing the category of barbarian to local conventions.² He allowed that the Indians might look brutish to the Spanish, as Sepúlveda claimed, but this was only because the conventions within which their practices were embedded were strange and unknown to the Spaniards. The context of judgment was here brought into relief.

Sepúlveda’s claims won the day. Though the judges hedged on a definitive ruling, the policies Sepúlveda defended were enacted with little restraint. Ostensibly, this debate turned on general definitions— of barbarism and rights and the doctrine of the Christian mission. But the judgment was made in the concrete case based on particular human groups in particular places, rather than generic, undifferentiated tokens of humanity. The capacity of the Indians for religious and political self-determination depended on their capacities as human beings, in so far as the Spaniards could discern the latter. Importantly, Las Casas raised the epistemic context in which the latter judgment was made.

This, then, presaged the debate over autonomy and the right of self-determination throughout European modernity. Echoing Sepúlveda, the great liberal thinker John Stuart Mill opposed the autonomy of the Indians of the Asian Sub-Continent—the other Indians—on the grounds that, as a people, they were not yet collectively advanced enough to self-govern. The countries and peoples of Latin America, even the criollos and mestizos, continued to face similar judgment from Europeans even after independence movements swept most of the continent of their Spanish overlords by the early 1800’s. All of the great thinkers, from Simón Bolívar himself to José Martí, José Enrique Rodo, José Carlos Mariátegui, Domingo

1 → Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, “Prologue to the Members of the Congregation,” in *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, ed. Susanna Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 40.

2 → Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*. Translated and edited by Stafford Poole, C.M. (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1999).

Faustino Sarmiento, José Vasconcelos, and Che Guevara, had to respond to claims of the sort Sepúlveda and Mill made against the political aspiration for self-determination. In the writings of each of these thinkers one can see how they engaged with the question of Latin American cultural, racial and ethnic identities and histories.

Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of the discussions turned on the various methods of advancing, or repairing, the cultural context so that it might 'deserve' self-determination. Conservatives like Rodo argued that more immigration from Europe would be vital to advance the society by augmenting the racial mix, while others, such as Vasconcelos, held that the mix itself rendered Latin America more vital than old Europe. Martí no doubt developed the most radical position: eschewing the need for racial or ethnic improvement of any kind, and rejecting any form of race-based superiority, he instead argued for a political culture that would embrace, include, and come to an understanding of its own peoples, in all their variety and diverse histories.

By contrast, political philosophers in the global north did not need to approach questions of their own autonomy or human rights through explaining and defending their cultural, ethnic, and racial identity. They assumed no need to justify their particularity, improve it, educate it, or validate its position vis-à-vis other great nations of the world. They invented categories such as "class" and "nation" and "public/private distinctions" intended to apply globally. They elaborated a philosophy of universalism with an implicit particularist location, applying its ethical directives quite narrowly, without noting the contradiction.

The philosophy that was developed in the colonized world during the emergence of European modernity did not have the luxury of such universalist pretensions or obliviousness. This provides an avenue into understanding the common threads marking off the tradition of Latin American philosophy. It is true that the category is too impossibly diverse to name any kind of a coherent school: it is too huge, too at odds with itself. And yet the requirement of justifying the right to autonomy in terms of a specific attentiveness to their own particularity led to a general exploration of the relationship between thought and identity, cultural location and philoso-

phy. Because Latin Americans were epistemically dismissed out of hand on the basis of their location, their racial mix, their ethnic, racial and cultural hybridity, their 'pre-modern' culture and religious practices, and so on, Latin American thinkers who wanted to ask philosophical questions, or pose normative arguments were forced to explain and defend their right—indeed, their ability—to do so. The very doing of philosophy required a contextual justification against context-based dismissals; hence, Latin American thinkers were forced to develop a contextual consciousness.

Latin American philosophy's hermeneutic horizon still includes to this day a powerful context of disbelief that had to be overcome. There was no question of not addressing this foreign context of disbelief because (a) it was coming from the powerful metropolitan centers of the modern/colonial world, (b) these were the very intellectual communities that political thinkers in Latin America considered important, if not crucial, interlocutors, and (c) many of the Latin American thinkers were of course a part of the European context themselves, in lineage and education.

Over the last two centuries, this intellectual engagement with Eurocentric hegemony (or what many have come to call "coloniality") thus sparked a rich tradition of work on cultural identity and its relation to normative political theory. Sepúlveda's arguments were themselves normative ones: his descriptions are put forward as a way to justify invasion, conquest, enslavement, and death. Because the Indians were a people beyond reason, with whom one could neither negotiate nor share power, and incapable of self-governance, unilateral action by Spain was justified. This is a logic that remains as powerful as it ever was, applied to many peoples, religions, and nations across the globe. Political rights and treatment thus turns on claims made about specific peoples and cultures. Latin American thought, then, had to engage with the conditions of its own context. Writers could not speak in universal, decontextualized terms, but were forced to speak as Latin Americans, self-consciously *from* Latin America.

Broadly, two general proposals were developed in answer to the question of Latin America's particular genealogy. On the one hand, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Sarmiento, José Enrique

Rodo (all Argentines), emphasized in various ways the dominance of the European lineage of Latin American culture, and proposed highlighting or expanding this dominance as a means to solve Latin America's inferior status. The theorist and diplomat Juan Bautista Alberdi, for example, forthrightly declares: "The Americas have been discovered, conquered, and populated by the civilized race of Europe...what we call independent America is nothing more than Europe established in America...Everything in the civilization of our land is European."³ Alberdi went on to propose the startling idea that Latin America relinquish autonomy, and spontaneously "offer to civilization (that is Europe) our land." To be clear, such ideas as these are the ideas of criollos, or a class willing to play a comprador role within the global colonial division of labor. In this way this group hoped to ensure their high social status and critical administrative position within neo-colonial conditions, not turning over their nations to foreigners so much as inviting the 'superior' Europeans to lead the way toward progress. Rodo's proposal to promote more immigration from Europe was similarly intended to strengthen this cultural and ethnic strain in Latin American elites, and solidify their comparative ethnic position on the continent.

What I want to call attention to here is that this first proposal for progress was not made on the basis of transcending the particular context of Latin America, or via a claim that they too could partake in the universal rights of Man, but via a claim of location and specific connection—ethnic and historical and genealogical—to a different particular location, and the source of modern civilization: Europe. Alberdi, Sarmiento and Rodo made their arguments in light of identity claims with a consciousness of space and time, not in terms of the Platonic form of justice or of the just society, but grounded in the specific conditions of a continent with a specific mix of peoples at a specific historical moment. The way forward was not to convince the peoples of Latin America to follow a universal ideal of just social development, but to alter the mix of peoples and hence the available skills and dispositions.

3 → In Sussana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, eds., *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, 132-133.

The major competing trend to these capitulationist views were developed by Simon Bolivar, the Cuban Jose Martí, and the Peruvians José Carlos Mariátegui and Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, among others. Bolivar's normative political orientation was localist, rather than universal, and this idea is echoed most forcefully in Martí: "To govern well one must see things as they are. The able governor in America is not the one who knows how to govern the Germans or the French, he must know the elements that compose his own country...the government must originate in the country"⁴. This is just to say that there is no single universally valid polity for all peoples, and hence we must take into account the particular characteristics of a people, their needs, and their possibilities. Martí called out "those born in America who are ashamed of the mother who reared them, because she wears an indian apron"⁵. Alberdi's capitulationism may be the self-interested strategy of the creole class, but it may also reflect the general inferiority complex diagnosed by Mexican philosophers Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos.

To lose our shame, Martí says, "the European university must bow to the American university. The history of America from the Incas to the present, must be taught in clear detail and to the letter, even if the archons of Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece that is not ours, we need it more....Let the world be grafted onto our republics, but the trunk must be our own."⁶ As this last and very famous statement makes clear, Martí's is not a narrow nationalism, nor a racial separatism. The world may be part of the curriculum, as long as we make sure our students know their own people, place, and time. In other works Martí made clear his rejection of the idea of biological race, but he also called on all of the Americas to take note of the fact that the actual people living in Latin America include not only Europeans but Africans and native peoples. Only when we acknowledge this will our thought begin to be "American."⁷

4 → José Martí, *José Martí Reader: Writings on the Americas*, Deborah Shnookal Mirta Muniz ed. (New York: Ocean Press), 113.

5 → *Ibid.*, 112.

6 → *Ibid.*, 114.

7 → *Ibid.*, 117.

One can note a third proposal in North America, given that it too experienced, in its intellectual and cultural arena if not its economic one, the sense of an inferiority to Europe. In numerous works from Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur to John Dewey and Arthur Schlesinger, one can find an elaboration of the idea that in North America a new people are being created. De Crèvecoeur was a farmer writing in the 1700s who called upon Europeans coming to the new world to shed their old world identities. He hoped to inspire them to see the new possibilities that immigration could bring, by which they might cast a new shadow, but this would require being able to come together under conditions of equality without the old class lineages. Becoming American required leaving the old world and its old ideas of divine rights and aristocracies behind. Whether Africans and native groups also needed to shed their 'old world ideas' was not discussed. We should note, however, that Crèvecoeur's proposal has often been interpreted more as a project of elimination than of understanding. In other words, the idea is that immigrants should shed their history and culture, a proposal that is not compatible with Martí's idea that we should come to understand the full diversity of peoples here. In the latter part of the twentieth century, liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger echoed this call for elimination in order to repudiate identity politics as a species of old world ideas rearing up once again, replete with what he called their 'tribalisms' and particularist politics. Notice also that for Crèvecoeur, unlike for Martí, there is no real hybridity or amalgam in this hemisphere: one transcends one's history rather than refashions it for a new context. And the peoples who are already found here, or those forced to be here through enslavement, are not included or considered in their specificity as affecting the terms of this transition. Although he criticized slavery and praised many of the practices of native peoples, Crèvecoeur's plan for becoming American was modeled on an experience of voluntary European migration. Non-Europeans must follow the same plan as voluntary immigrants from Europe. Schlesinger's inability to acknowledge the need for a pluralist political culture can be traced to this lineage.

In sum, Latin American philosophy exhibits, I would argue, a colonial consciousness, that is, a reflexivity about the relationship

between the intellectual and cultural productions of Latin America and its location within the global landscape of power and capital. Although, as we've seen, this can produce multiple, and conflicting, political tendencies, I agree with Nelson Maldonado-Torres that there is a potential here for a colonial awareness to fuel a critical decolonial project.⁸ We can follow traces of this development from Las Casas and el Inca Garcilaso de la Vega all the way to the present.

Such an awareness of one's position within the coloniality of power, to use Anibal Quijano's phrase, is not by any means unique in the world, and yet there remains a distinctiveness to the Latin American tradition of thought for the following reason. Unlike any other area of the world, colonized or otherwise, new amalgams of peoples were created in this hemisphere through the specific connections and influences among the indigenous, the Africans, the Europeans, as well as multitudes of peoples from Asia who also populated parts of the Caribbean as well as the western coasts of Latin America. In the northern part of the hemisphere, this amalgam was more often segregated, legally sanctioned, subject to violent reprisal, and usually disavowed even when it did occur. In the southern part of the hemisphere, the new amalgams of people became a central feature of nationalist narratives of legitimation. These new identities have been continually foregrounded, exhaustively catalogued, hierarchically organized, and often instrumentalized in Latin American political thought and discourse, but rarely ignored. Their existence demanded new narratives of identity, history, progress, national unity, aesthetic beauty, and the possibility of universality.

There are a number of ways in which this unique legacy informs philosophy of education. Radical theorists, of course, such as Martí, Mariátegui, Freire, and others, famously called for decolonial educational projects that would dismantle Euro- and Hispano-centrism and enhance the agency of the poor. And yet, even beyond the radi-

8 → For related arguments see Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Post-continental Philosophy", *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*, 1.3 (Fall 2006) and "Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique", *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011).

cal works, I would argue that the contextual consciousness that can be found in the tradition in general gives support for an educational orientation with a decolonial intent.

Such an orientation would necessarily include the following three important ideas: 1) the critique of assimilation, 2) the inculcation of a contextual self-awareness, and 3) the approach of non-ideal theory. I will elaborate on these below.

THE CRITIQUE OF ASSIMILATION

Assimilation is often assumed to be the necessary price one must pay for advancement in educational achievement. The acceptance of and assimilation to the culture of one's 'host,' and subsequent experience of alienation from one's prior context, whether this happens in the process of migration from country to country or rural village to central school, is taken to be the inevitable price one must pay for advance. It is assumed that education will incur alienation from one's home language, culture, and general way of being in the world. One must learn the common culture, the common canon, and the common dialect in order to achieve social competency and economic success. However, what is "common" is never neutral, and may in fact represent the practices, ideas, and interests of a minority.

If we assume that forcible assimilation is a necessary inevitability, then the painful difficulties of alienation from one's home context are interpreted—by those who must endure these as well as by others—as simply the expected price of travel. But notice that, unlike for Crèvecoeur, Martí's call is not a replacement strategy—wherein one's prior identity, in effect, is replaced by one's new identity—but a localism that calls for coming to an understanding of the peoples in one's locale. To 'graft the world onto our republics', as Martí calls for, is not to repudiate the canons of the larger world, but to situate them in relation to a center that understands its own substantive location. No one can really leave their prior selves, histories and cultures entirely and completely behind: this is the conceit of willful and total self-creation typical of Eurocentric liberalism. Given the impossibility of such transcendent models of selfhood, we must reject the attempt to assimilate our students (or ourselves) in a

manner that requires alienating the existing or prior self. This is simply an unproductive denial of history that can only obscure the present, blocking our ability to understand our society and, indeed, ourselves.

THE INCULCATION OF A CONTEXTUAL SELF-AWARENESS

The ideals of a liberal education aiming for a politically effective citizenship requires a way for students to gain awareness of their agency as individuals but also as thinkers operating within a cultural context. The effort to render Euro-and Hispano-centrism more overt mandates that one's own perspective also be made more perspicacious. Knowledge requires self-knowledge. This is not because we are doomed to a solipsistic perspectivalism, with incommensurable world-views incapable of cross-communication, but because the self, i.e. the local and immediate context, is always a part of what is brought into a new domain.

Any given context has a specific history and set of political conditions, and the context of Latin America, as well as of Latinos in the global north, has a specific context as well, involving specific opponents and obstacles to democratization and progress. Just as importantly, one must come to an understanding of the specificity of others sharing one's location, others who co-habit a community but who also co-constitute one's contextual self. The tradition of Bolivar and Martí in particular provide an antidote to exclusivist nationalist narratives that tell the history of only some groups, highlighting only some lineages, while obscuring others. The point of such education is not, as conservatives claim, to bolster egos and feed narcissism, but to achieve a sufficient level of collective and individual self-knowledge required for democracy. Universals are not sufficient; neither is an account of only part of one's context.

Perhaps most importantly, the purpose of inculcating a substantive, contextual self-awareness is to begin the process of noting what it takes to theorize from this place, and with this place. Toward that end, the following point is critical.

THE APPROACH OF NON-IDEAL THEORY

Related to the need for contextual self-awareness is the idea of what some today are calling “non-ideal theory”⁹. The notion that one can do philosophy in a non-ideal rather than an ideal fashion has only recently come to surface in philosophy in the global North. This is the idea that our aims and values should be rooted not in the abstracted, decontextualized concept of an imaginary just society, using a counterfactual analysis that moves from what is not the case to what should be the case, but in an analysis of the actual non-ideal conditions we currently aim to overcome.

Ideal theories are the mainstay of the European tradition, from Plato to Thomas More, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Thomas Jefferson. The ideal approach asks us to imagine a republic on a hill, or a utopia fashioned on an island, without material ties or connections to any specific others. There is no history of exploitation to take into account, no reparations required, no prior obligations incurred by ties of war or conquest or the annexations of lands. The normative aims of ideal theory are thus fashioned as aspirations in a vacuum, necessarily vague, perpetually directed toward the present without concern for past or future. Utopia is thus lifted out of any living context.

In contrast, the non-ideal approach begins with thick descriptions of the present to then develop norms based on realistic possibilities and critical priorities given these current realities. The call for the new republics to be rooted in the specificity of their contexts is an approach to normative politics based on the non-ideal, or the real, rather than the imagined ideal. Aims are then defined as ameliorative, relational, and incremental.

Defenders of the ideal approach argue we cannot even identify the non-ideal without, first, having a clear conceptualization of the ideal. Yet, non-ideal conditions experienced in the first person do not necessarily require universally transcendent conceptual norms to identify the difficulties they impose on everyday life. I can shout in pain without recourse to a normative argument justifying the preference for painlessness.

9 → See Charles Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology”, *Hypatia* 20, no.3 (2005), 165-184.

Latin American philosophy of education would inculcate a consciousness of the non-ideal real, that is, the everyday lived experience of the context within which we find ourselves. There is no need to justify either our aspirations or our theory from this derided context, but simply to mine it for insight.

The intellectual basis for the demand to decolonize education has been eroded by skeptical philosophies that have called into question the founding terms of decolonization such as humanism, identity, progress, truth, and liberation. This has been produced in part by an arbitrary foreshortening of the discursive interlocutors, staying close within the five countries dominant in the past. The traditions of Latin American philosophy provide a different starting point and thus a different end-point for education. If knowledge requires self-knowledge then it requires social knowledge and contextual awareness. One needs a reflexive check, and an aware assessment of the constitutive conditions in which one's knowledge occurs, before one can be justified in belief. This requires an understanding of the specific and current formations of social identities, the influence of context, the historical legacy of one's location, and not a quick move to transcend or eliminate or escape. Decolonizing education requires first and foremost a thorough and comprehensive critical analysis of colonialism itself, in all its subtle guises. It then requires an affirmation of the ability to think from, and with, and most importantly, *for*. ■

