TEACHING LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY ON ITS OWN TERMS

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> “[…] remind her that injustice on this land weighs heavier than elsewhere, this land, the ransom of injustice.”
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> Chris Marker, *Description D’un Combat*

On its face, the task of putting together a new syllabus might resemble the production of an instruction manual, for student and teacher alike. The syllabus tells us what to expect, what we are to do, how things shall proceed. Yet having for the first time participated in this crucial, albeit bothersome, task, I am rather reminded of the composition of a script or a score to be performed. Even when it is left open to modification and even though it cannot possibly account for the behaviors and actions of the students (or even the teacher) at any given point, we may nonetheless say that a successful course, if nothing else, is the successful instantiation or “playing out” of the syllabus. There is a dramatic element present here, for the standard syllabus announces both its objective and the trajectory through which we, as a class, shall accomplish it, whether such an objective might be to obtain a cursory knowledge of Algebra or to gain the skills necessary to speak in public. Though the relationship between the objective and the trajectory designed to reach it might at times appear obvious, little experience is needed, as a teacher or as a student, to testify to the variety of ways in which learning can take place. Not just this relationship, but the terms themselves, “objective” and “trajectory” (and these are by no means essential categories, for any number of different terms and relationships could be analyzed in their place) open themselves up to further analysis. To have as a major objective that students gain an appreciation for the subtleties of jazz music is

to point towards much more than the rote memorization of information or the mastery of a practical skill. Similarly, the trajectory—the means through which the objective is accomplished—refers to much more than the readings we assign or the exams we design, it in fact refers to a network of procedures and constraints in which we place our students. It refers to a space, not unlike the space of the theater, designed to evoke a specific experience—and, most likely, a corresponding set of skills and/or information gained through such an *experience*—in a student. A school course is a kind of fiction, ranging from the kind of participative fiction of an interactive theater to the kind of unilateral fiction produced by Kierkegaard through the use of pseudonymously-written works, which expressed different views and varying levels of faith in order to "deceive [readers] into the truth."

We may perhaps break down this fictional construct into four "levels"—which are also not essential categories, but mere heuristic devices—along which we could think about the network of procedures that make up a syllabus and its corresponding class/performance.

01 Textual. Quite simply, the texts we assign the students to read. These individual units ultimately make up the arc of the class and must be decided carefully. We must decide which authors to cover and which texts by those authors would best represent not just their ideas, but the general themes of the course.

02 Structural/Narrative. The arc composed through the juxtaposition of all the texts. It is here that a history is constructed (or deconstructed). Texts may follow one another chronologically or thematically or even tangentially, but inevitably, some meaning is produced, or rather, is interpretable, from any given sequence of texts. This is furthermore affected by the placement of assignments and exams within this arc, which often has the effect of separating this arc into temporal/thematic units, and which may ultimately cement or undermine the way in which these units are conceived and learned.

03 Administrative. The basic procedures dictating acceptable behavior and work within the confines of the class:

grade scales, seating arrangements, procedures for writing papers, etc. While these procedures and regulations would seem to be extraneous to the "content" of the course (and often are partially determined by the rules and policies of the department and university administration), they inevitably affect the way in which such content is conceived, produced, studied, and assessed, and thus may serve to support or undermine it.

04 Performative. The role of the teacher as it is made manifest in the class: through demeanor, body language, volume, the mode in which the class is conducted (lecture, discussion, etc.), and the very small yet very many elements which make-up student-teacher interactions. Like an actor-director, the teacher-architect need not collapse both roles into one, for "the teacher," undeniably a performer, may only indirectly and implicitly serve the goals and objectives established by the architect of the class (by asking the "right" questions, refusing to state their own position, taking the position of the text, etc.)

Through their various intersections, these levels affect and determine each other in a variety of ways, and ultimately serve to make up the network of relationships out of which a "class" is composed. Thus, at any given level, we must ask ourselves what it is that we hope to accomplish, to evoke, to reveal, and to share, in order to determine what kind of space we hope to create and to open to our students.

But if such relationships, and thus, such decisions and commitments are arguably present in any given syllabus and corresponding class, what, then, gives the title of this text—"Teaching Latin American Philosophy on its Own Terms"—its particular weight? I must concede here at the outset that even the most traditional of philosophers could ask himself (and I use the masculine pronoun here purposively) such a question and it would in fact remain a compelling one. As with all disciplines, philosophy's long history is rife with movements, cultural shifts, and re-definitions. In the most traditional terms, to ask oneself how to teach philosophy on its own terms is nothing less than to ask what, amongst the historical sediments that have accrued to

the term “philosophy,” is its real essence: what does wisdom tell us about the way in which we ought to groom its lovers?

Yet here we find the solace of the philosophers. Philosophy is not lacking in validation—even despite its increasing uselessness in the contemporary American education system—and to ask the question of its essence is to wade through the various histories, methodologies, and definitions offered to and by philosophy and to assent to those deemed most fitting to it—certainly not an easy process, but a viable one nonetheless. To ask of Latin American Philosophy what it would mean to teach it on its own terms, on the contrary, is to contend with its inherent resistance to such a question. The product of centuries of still-ongoing violence—physical, psychological, intellectual, economic violence—Latin American Philosophy, bastardized yet still dependent, cannot help but struggle with the question of its identity, which has both obsessed and eluded it throughout its history. To “do” Latin American Philosophy is, first and foremost and paradoxically, to question the possibility of its existence and to hear the truth that it speaks is always to forget, for an ecstatic instant, that it speaks in a language imposed upon it and with words never intended for such uses.

Here a quick clarification is in order. Though common perceptions and attitudes in the U.S. regarding the Latin American continent would likely (and, in my personal case, even despite growing up in South American, actually *did*) prevent us from imagining it, traditional European philosophy is in no way absent in Latin American schools and universities. (In Bogota, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and other cities, I was surprised—and furthermore surprised at my surprise—to find cheap editions of texts by Descartes, Diderot, and Foucault being sold by regular newspaper stands and even by street salespeople, something I’ve hardly even encountered in New York City). There is no shortage of Latin American philosophers studying and writing about logic, Aquinas, Kant, and many others. This, by the simplest and clearest definitions, ought to be rightfully regarded as Latin American Philosophy—and in an increasingly globalized academic environment, the fact of its being Latin American need not be seen as a definitive fact about its constitutive thinkers and their work. In other words, the use of the term “Latin American” is here used (as far as it can be done) transparently, which is to say that it denotes only what it appears to: Latin American Philosophy is philosophy taking place in Latin America.

Yet this is certainly not the troubled, self-alienated and self-alienating philosophy being described above. This philosophy, which has not yet taken its own validity and identity for granted, is one for which the denotation “Latin American” is the theme and object of study. It is a philosophy for which being “Latin American” is an issue, and one which is furthermore at odds with being “philosophy.” Each of the two terms cancels and repels and overtakes the other. It is this philosophy, which cannot truly be subsumed under any general heading of scholarship (Medieval Studies, Kant studies, etc.), that I have and will continue to refer to here as Latin American Philosophy.

How, then, must the pedagogical drama of Latin American Philosophy, in the sense just clarified, play out? What secret essence does the playing out of the syllabus evoke and reveal in this case? Here the vertigo of responsibility makes itself felt. Here, at this juncture, I found only the elements of fiction, the stories, the constructions, the masks, the performances, yet no clear essence to reveal through them. Certainly—though not very long ago, this was hardly a certainty—there are dominant figures, texts, and currents in Latin American Philosophy: Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz’s “Reply to Sor Filotea,” Bolivar’s Jamaica Letter, De Las Casas’ testimony, Rodo’s *Ariel*, and many more. Yet within the context of U.S. academic philosophy, these texts are hardly, if at all, recognized as what constitutes proper philosophy, let alone as foundational texts for any philosophical discipline. If responsibility strongly manifests itself here, it is precisely because the slowly-dissipating obscurity of Latin American Philosophy affords a great and perhaps overwhelming sense of freedom, with no buttressing to be found in a concrete canon or student expectations. In search of an Archimedean point, I found only a collection of contradictory, fragmentary pursuits of an identity and a purpose, which succeed, interrupt, and undermine each other.

This, ultimately, is our heritage, a mestizo philosophy for a mestizo people. We have inherited a non-history, a peripheral history, of violence, of injustice, of disunity. An illegitimate history that is yet to be entirely unearthed. At its core—or precisely because it lacks a core, a center, and an essence—Latin American Philosophy is problematic. Thus, it calls upon us to teach it *problematically*. Beyond our students, our departments, and our own sense of self, the responsibility that strikes us at this

moment is a responsibility towards this non-history and the multiplicity of views, of voices, and more importantly of voiceless victims, which irreconcilably make it up.

How can we conceive of this responsibility more practically? Like any art, teaching is an organic, complex, multi-faceted process and to presume to speak about *what* one ought to do would be to reduce it to a mere mechanistic method. Having delineated four general levels along which to think about teaching, I will conclude by sharing three major temptations that may arise—or, in my case, that *did* arise—as one approaches this task. They are decidedly the temptations of Philosophy in its most traditional form, which, following its own conatus, will absorb and resolve the tension present in the term "Latin American Philosophy," turning it into a transparent heading that merely denotes a geographical location.

01 First, one may feel—as I felt—the temptation to *utilize* Latin American Philosophy. By this, I mean the attempt to make Latin American Philosophy useful, for oneself and for students, within the context of philosophy as traditionally conceived in the academic landscape of the U.S. Thus, one may feel tempted to make visible the connections between Latin American texts and their various traditional European influences; one may in fact feel tempted to anchor a course in these connections, thus conceiving of Latin American Philosophy as an "offshoot" of European philosophy, culturally different but ultimately cut from the same cloth. The hoped-for result, of course, is to make Latin American Philosophy *relevant* to students who may otherwise see it as un-philosophical or as simply too distinct from their research interests to invest in it. Words like "utility" and "investment" make obvious the *economical* nature of this issue, which is present all the way from the incoming freshman to the tenured professor: everything, all uses of time, space, and effort, must be materially productive. Every class and text must contribute towards an internship or graduate school, must serve a potential AOC (an academic's

area of competence), must yield a few articles. Yet this economy must be resisted and criticized. To accommodate Latin American Philosophy within the larger history of European philosophy is to hide the many differences between the two, and furthermore to maintain the former's subordination to the latter in the guise of validation.

02 One may feel the temptation to *eschatologize* Latin American Philosophy. It is all too easy to see something like a history of Latin American Philosophy—causal, linear, and accessible—and furthermore to see this history as progressing towards a goal: liberation, individuality, independence, to name a few possibilities. To do so, however, would be precisely to validate the countless acts of violence and injustice of which Latin American Philosophy is a testimony; all eschatologies and all totalities, by their very logic, subordinate the particular, the individual, and the instant to the universal, the mass, and the (eternal) end. We must not be so blind as to deny that victories have been achieved and that obstacles have been surmounted, yet these are always accomplished piecemeal and are often seen only retrospectively, having arisen through a series of accidents, coincidences, and collisions rather than an active historical process moving towards a definitive goal.

03 Finally, we may feel the temptation to *canonize* within Latin American Philosophy. As stated above, there are certainly select texts which may be considered definitive for the study of Latin American history and Latin American Philosophy. These texts should certainly be translated, taught, and made easily accessible to students. The only harm, then, is in contributing to the slow formation and desiccation of something like a "definitive" and canonical history of Latin American Philosophy. In prioritizing specific texts and retroactively building a history around them, literary and academic canons serve to simplify both the texts and the discipline surrounding them. To accept the canonical version of the history of philosophy traditionally taught in an American university

> is to remove the challenge of having to read a variety of media and genres from a variety of points of views, places, and eras so as to *construct* an intelligible, practical, and fair system of reference for a discipline, and instead to mount the fiction as truth—one in which Latin America, for example, did not exist until 1492 and, much like Africa, has hardly contributed to the linear legacy of philosophy and human knowledge. Thus, we must continue to read, to translate, to make known and to make accessible the many texts that make up Latin American Philosophy. We must include tangents and peripheries and miscellanea, and we must preserve the freshness and the fecundity of even the most traditional texts in our syllabi.

But are these temptations not just as prevalent when we teach any other philosophy class, and are they not just as destructive there? Certainly. Yet the stakes inevitably appear to be higher for the teaching of Latin American Philosophy, both because to teach it as exclusively, as dominatingly, and uncreatively as philosophy is traditionally taught seems all the more unjust, and, more importantly, because it might not be too late to do justice to Latin American Philosophy. ■