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Carlos Alberto Sánchez

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## The Demands of a Mexican Philosophy of History

**Keywords / Palabras clave**

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Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

## *The Demands of a Mexican Philosophy of History*

Carlos Alberto Sanchez / San Jose State University

### **Introduction**

By “the demands of a Mexican philosophy of history” I have in mind the demands that arise from philosophical analyses into the historicity of Mexican identity. My assumption is that such demands are prima facie evident with any penetrating study of our everyday forms of life. Such a study will reveal insights which will tell us what the structural particularities of any given problem are (whether completely or partially) and on to these insights we respond—or if we don’t respond, the problem at least demands a response. We are, in fact, held responsible by the results of our analyses. This assumption informs the claim of the present essay, namely, that the philosophical reflections into Mexican identity carried out by Mexican philosophers in the middle of the last century—sometime in the 1940’s and 1950’s, and particularly by Leopoldo Zea, resulted in the existential imperative commanding Mexicans to own up to their history and to their identity despite the conquest, the colonization, and 500 years of oppression and marginality.

My focus here is on Zea and, to a minimal extent, on Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla— Mexican philosophers that, with Zea, dedicated their efforts to analyzing the existential and historical underpinnings of the Mexican form of life as part of the “Hiperion Group,” a philosophical circle headed by Zea and active primarily in Mexico City from 1948 to 1952.

[1] I will proceed first by considering, in a general way, Zea’s philosophical reflections into the problems of Mexican historical identity. Next, I look into the “demands” that emerge from such a reflection and what Zea and others prescribe as a response to those demands. In this section I make a crucial, and unorthodox, claim regarding Zea’s philosophy in particular, namely, that in the texts considered he exhibits a peculiar Marxist tendency that has not been pointed out to date (what I call a “Neo-Marxist” tendency). [2] Finally, I attempt to bridge the temporal and spatial gap between Zea’s considerations more than fifty years ago and the ethical-existential problems related to Mexicans in the United States today.

### **Philosophy and Mexican History**

If anything, the Mexican revolution of 1910 made something exceedingly clear: Mexicans were divided (in spirit and deed) and as such seeking one another’s death. While Hegel’s philosophy had previously shown that the life and death struggle of separated beings would be resolved through the emergence of a master and a slave, the struggle of the Mexican would not be resolved by a mere class division. After more than a decade of fighting and killing one another in the name of justice, it became apparent that the real struggle was not between two separated beings who sought one another’s death; rather, the real life and death struggle was internal, taking place in the solitude of the Mexican mind. It was not hate of the

other that motivated the violence; it was self-hate or self-loathing. The source of this, philosophers will come to propose, is the historical circumstances of Mexico, which are unique to Mexicans and to world history.

Philosophers spent the years following the revolution attempting to make sense of these circumstances and of the corresponding sense of self to which these gave rise. The great Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos (1897-1959) was the first to articulate the problem in Perfil del hombre y cultura en Mexico, his landmark 1934 treatise. There, Ramos diagnosed the problem as essentially psychological. According to Ramos, Mexicans suffered from an inferiority complex that, he argued, was rooted in the conquest and colonization and the economic and cultural dependence that this involved. This sense of inferiority, Ramos concluded, was the source of the self-hate and self-loathing that neither independence nor revolution would eliminate. Despite the brilliance of his analysis, however, Ramos's work did not prove to be effective in rousing Mexicans from their apathetic, dogmatic slumbers.

It was Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004), beginning in the early 1940's, who moved beyond psychological description and attempted to provide a historico-philosophical account of the Mexican self. Zea writes in 1952:

We know we are heirs to two great cultures, those same cultures that we are willing to undervalue [menospreciar] for not being of use to us in our frustrating labors. We know ourselves heirs to two great empires: the Spanish and the Aztec. An inheritance that we feel more like a weight than as an asset [una herencia que sentimos más como lastre que como ayuda] (Filosofía como compromiso 186).

What Zea means is that the root of the problem (i.e., the self-loathing and accompanying irresponsibility in the face of the Mexican reality) rests in the incapacity of Mexicans to fully and resolutely appreciate their history—a remarkable, singular, and thus inimitable history belonging solely to them as Mexicans in particular and Latin Americans in general. [3] This lack of appreciation has nothing to do with a lack of understanding or exposure to the historical record but with the fact, partially diagnosed by Ramos, that Mexicans *feel* that Mexican and Latin American history is not their history. The past belongs to Spain, which is absent in the everyday lives of Mexicans; it belongs also to Technotitlan, Teotihuacan, and the glory of the Aztec empire, which is but a faint memory, more like a myth than a reality. In spite of this lack of appreciation, however, Mexicans are burdened with carrying around this history which is not their history. The burden is made heavier by the nostalgia contained in their language and in their faces, which reveal neither Aztecs nor Spaniards, but mestizos: Mexicans. Ultimately, the philosophical-historical question Zea asks has to do with the particular way of life belonging to this mestizo, which will both determine the essential nature of Mexicanos and prescribe a manner of living conducive to cultural and historical praxis given their circumstances. Zea asks: ¿qué es lo Mexicano?

Zea understands the challenges in asking about the form of life he and others call “lo Mexicano.” After all, philosophers are not supposed to ask these kinds of questions. Philosophers are supposed to ask about humanity in general, about our place in the universe, about the Good, about evil, and about death: questions that are general and of universal scope (some would say “abstract”). Asking about “lo Mexicano” is to do the opposite, it is to ask about a particular situation, a particular people. But, for Zea, if the questions he asks

grow out of philosophical curiosity, then what he is doing is philosophy. As he puts it, what we are doing is “putting guaraches on Aristotle” (*Filosofía* 183). And an Aristotle in guaraches has but one mission--to shed light on the particularities of the Mexican way of life so as to “unburden” Mexicans of their confusion, and more importantly, to give them a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, and a sense of history. [4]

Zea’s was indeed a philosophical task. Philosophy is, after all, a reflexive mental action; to philosophize is to reflect, to take a step away from ourselves, to abandon our immediate existence, to stop thinking about the traffic, our love lives, or our money troubles. In a moment of philosophical reflection, we distance ourselves from ourselves too as to look at ourselves, taking note of the way in which we exist, the way we are, what we are made of. Zea and his contemporaries did just this: they took a step back and critically analyzed that form of life which is called Mexican. The great Mexican poet/philosopher Octavio Paz had called for such a reflexive move in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, published in 1950: “It is natural that the Mexican should withdraw into himself and after the explosive phase of the Revolution, to spend a few moments in self-contemplation” (11). These “few moments” reveal, among other things, a deep rooted sadness about Mexico and its place in the universe; a sadness that emerges most noticeably in Mexican poetic expression. Likewise, in his *Anaylis del ser del mexicano*, published in 1952, Emilio Uranga notes that “Mexican life overflows [está impregnada] with a sentimental character” (28). It is not difficult to illustrate what he means: think of our popular music and the timelessness of José Alfredo Jiménez, Javier Solís, Pedro Infante, and Miguel Aceves Mejía. Did they ever express anything but sorrow and sentimentality? Or, think of Mexico’s most popular style of music, corridos, which are tragic lyrical poems in the oral tradition. For this reason, Uranga remarks, “the

Mexican always gives the impression of having already lived, of carrying in his soul a history, a world that already was, and that because of sentimentality, has been indelibly recorded.

There is the source of our melancholy and that gesture [*ademán*] of a man of bitter experience” (34). When we hear a song, read a poem by Ramón López Velarde or Octavio Paz, or experience El llano en llamas by Juan Rulfo, we indeed feel nostalgic, we get a sense that we have lived that experience, or that, inevitably, as Mexicans, we will.

So focusing their philosophical gaze, Mexican philosophers get a taste of what the Mexican form of life is like: it is sentimental but at the same time nostalgic, trapped under the weight of its own past. But why is it that Mexicans do not throw off the weight, or adjust it somehow, so as to be free from its ontological heaviness? Zea notes: “In our feeling of inferiority, insufficiency, resentment, and reduction, something hidden is made clear, a deeper feeling, something that we don’t want to display because it would embarrass [*avergonzaría*] given our current circumstances, and that is *pride* [*soberbia*]” (*Filosofía* 186). Pride. Mexicans are proud. They would rather continue carrying on a diseased sense of self then admit that this sense of self is diseased. Pride ties them to what they don’t understand; it ties them to what they don’t want to understand.

But while the Mexican seldom complains, this does not mean that he or she does not blame his or her condition on something other than him or herself. Ultimately, Mexicans blame their condition on their throwness, or on the fact that they are not something other than historical accidents, mestizos. Put differently, that they are thrown into the Mexican historical circumstance (that they are not other) signifies that they lack the civilization of the European; it means, moreover, that they lack the economic/capitalist intelligence of North



Americans, and it means, finally, that they lack any meaningful connection to indigenous empires which sink ever deeper into oblivion and forgetfulness with each passing day. All of this gives the impression that to *be* Mexican is to be mis-placed or displaced in world history. The attitude of displacement Zea calls “irresponsibility.” Zea writes, “In order to justify our irresponsibility we disparage ourselves, accusing fear, history, our blood and our race for our incapacity to realize our projects” (*Filosofía* 188). Moreover, Zea continues, “Instead of engaging the task of realizing a cultural and material world according to our possibilities, we prefer to lament our incapacity of not being as great as or better than Europe in the area of culture, or being as great as or better than the United States in the material arena... Instead of creating we prefer to imitate” (188). Thus sentimentality, pride, a sense of misplacement, and the need to imitate, characterize the nature of being Mexican and the nature of not being responsive to the Mexican circumstances.

Thus, Zea’s philosophical diagnosis is scathing: Mexicans suffer from a burdensome history, which justifies an unwarranted sentimentality and a self-defeating pride; this leads to irresponsibility in the face of that history and a sense of inferiority and weakness in the face of Europe and the industrialized “West,” namely, the US. Zea summarizes it thus:

Soon the Mexican found out that the past was a part of the Mexican self, but the shameful part, the part which had implanted in him countless defects. The defective part of the self had its roots in this past; there was the source of all his incapacities, the why of all of his failures, the reason why he couldn’t be at the heights of other societies [pueblos] that belonged to other races, to other religions, to other cultures. It was then that the

lamentations and the useless demands began, and with them, the justification for every irresponsible attitude. (Filosofía 181)

Indeed, the Mexican reproaches his or her past because of its defects and the defects it reveals in the Mexican character, namely, his or her weakness, his or her lack of will, during five hundred years of colonialism and domination. Now the Mexican blames that past for an inability to *be like* other, advanced peoples, in other advanced societies. But the activity of the will stops there, with the (willful) attribution of blame. Henceforth the Mexican adopts what Zea calls his or her “irresponsible attitude”.

### **Responding to the Demands: Mexican Philosophy and Neo-Marxism**

But is this the end of Zea’s philosophical account? In other words, does philosophy of history itself end in giving a philosophical account of history? The answer to both questions is negative, since Zea’s account is more of a philosophical critique than a philosophical description. And it is here that Mexican philosophy becomes universal in its scope and address; that is, it takes up universal scope when we consider Zea’s critique in a particular way, namely, as prescriptive, and as such, it is a critique applicable not only to Mexicans, but to Chicanos, to Salvadorians, to Eastern Europeans, to West Africans. The “critical” nature of Mexican philosophy is suggested by Paz in The Labyrinth of Solitude: “To become aware of our history is to become aware of our singularity. It is a moment of reflective repose before we devote ourselves to action again” (10). What does it mean to say that we (Mexicans) must “become aware of our singularity”? It means nothing less than awakening to one’s particular historical circumstance, to one’s material and spiritual conditions—to become aware of one’s destiny. According to Zea, for instance, this particular circumstance,

the Mexican circumstance, could be characterized by the idea of “marginality.” Mexicans exist in the margins of Western history and in the margins of contemporary culture. Mexicans take up the mode of marginality as an ontological condition. Thus, with the concept of “marginality” Zea describes “a person who ‘lives in two worlds but is not quite at home in either’” (The Role of the Americas in History xx). The two worlds that the Mexican “lives in” are, again, the Spanish and the Aztec, or the indigenous. (Notice that when the Mexican moves north, he is hyper-marginal, not only living in two cultures, those present in his history, but existing in three cultures, those of his/her past and his/her present. I’ll return to this below.) But this marginality is also part of the Mexican identity, so it demands a certain manner of being towards Mexican reality; this “demand” is what Zea’s philosophical critique is meant to make explicit.

We can trace Zea’s critical philosophy to Karl Marx. [5] In his early manuscripts, particularly the text “Introduction to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844), Marx had been concerned with the liberation of the German working class, the proletariat, from both psychological and material forces. The young Marx’s philosophy (what is now known as “dialectical idealism”) aimed to “awaken” a revolutionary spirit of praxis in the German people that would liberate them from their own negative, or oppressive, self-interpretations and from those conditions of enslavement that were imposed on them from elsewhere by either industrialization, religion, or the social mass. For Marx philosophy was “criticism” which had but one aim, “not to allow the Germans a moment of self-deceit or resignation” (66). As for Zea, philosophy for Marx was a living *process*, capable of changing the status quo. “We must make the actual oppression even more oppressing,” writes Marx, “by making them [the German Volk] conscious of it, and the insult even more insulting by publicizing

it... So as to give them courage, we must teach the people to be shocked by themselves” (66). And this is precisely what Zea’s historico-philosophical analysis attempts to do. So as to “teach the people to be shocked by themselves”, Zea describes the Mexican self as “incomplete,” “amputated, divided, crippled,” and the *being* of the Mexican (the ontological *es gibt* of the Mexican) as “oscillating, not between being this way or that way, but oscillating *within* two halves of the same being” (*Filosofia* 173). Zea’s point is to expose the existential condition that characterizes Mexican being, something akin to indecisiveness or vertigo, what Zea believes leads Mexicans to adopt a form of life that is “irresponsible.”

Zea, following Marx, aims to force Mexicans to think of their actual material and spiritual reality, the circumstances that define them as Mexicans and as humans; but more than this, he aims, through critique and “shock,” to motivate Mexicans to engage those circumstances and change them through some form of revolutionary action (*praxis*). This accords with Marx, who proclaimed in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, “The coincidence of the changing of the circumstances and of... self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice” (Thesis III). What does “revolution” mean here? It does not mean—as it means for the mature Marx—violent struggle against oppressive bourgeoisie or capitalists, but rather it means an action that changes both the circumstances in which people live and their innermost self. This can be thought as an internal revolution, where something happens to the inner life of the person who engages him or herself in revolutionary praxis. Jorge Portilla, a contemporary of Zea, put it thus: “In internalization we also find a subjective activity, a centrifugal movement analogous to the one involved in the realization of an act toward the exterior. A process definitely similar to this is the acquisition of a consciousness of class, in which the worker internalizes, that is, makes actively his, a

situation which before was merely suffered and external, and that in the process of its internalization brings with it a certain liberation” (56).

So here is the process: convince the people of the necessity for an honest and brutal inventory of their cultural and historical identity, or shock them, as Marx said, into responding to such an inventory (whether from shame or necessity), and simultaneously prescribe a manner of being appropriate for effective praxis and personal, social, and ideological liberation. The prescription outlines the logic of “sublation,” or what Marx called Aufhebung or aufgehoben, an untranslatable term which for Marx (in contrast to Hegel) meant “abolition, transcendence, and preservation” of one’s material condition, i.e., one’s (historical) circumstances (thus what makes it different from Hegel’s use of the term). Mexicans must face their history as a nation (this means confronting the conquest, the colonization, centuries of foreign ideological influence, their mestizaje, the evils of the revolution, and their current condition of dependence and marginality) together with their own personal narratives (which means confronting their own existential condition *as* Mexicans); upon this encounter, Mexicans must then take ownership of their own being by, in a moment of revolutionary praxis, forgetting (abolition) those aspects of their past that harm the collective consciousness, safeguard (preservation) those moments of Mexican history that give strength, and, finally, resolutely will what has not yet come (transcendence) not only for the sake of future Mexican generations, but for the sake of humanity in general.

### **Mexicans in the United States: An Attempt at Application**

Although philosophy's preoccupation with the existential-historical condition of lo Mexicano was abandoned before it made any real impact on either the Mexican intelligentsia or the Mexican people in general, it is fruitful (at least at a theoretical level) to consider this preoccupation fifty years later and from a vantage point radically different than that of Zea and the rest, namely, as it applies to Mexicans in the United States.

The question is: What does any of this have to do with Mexicans who find themselves in the US more than half a century after Zea's analysis? What Zea would say is that whatever the case may be, so long as these individuals continue to identify themselves somehow with the history of Latin America then they are, by default, responsible for that history. In fact, the situation of Mexicans and Latin Americans in the US is existentially more problematic than that of their Latin American contemporaries in Latin America, since the former must deal with the trauma of assimilation and acculturation in the great whale that is the United States... i.e., el norte. For Mexicans, the case is particularly severe because of their proximity to the US. Proximity is more of a problem for Mexicans because the US is, in fact, attractive, but attractive in the sense of physics. Thus, Mexico's close proximity to the US attracts more Mexicans who gravitate toward it sometimes against the counsel of practical reason—they know they are not welcome, they are aware that they might be immediately deported, they understand that they will be treated unjustly, etc., and they still come! From cities and pueblos throughout Mexico, the irrational desire is to dream the American dream. The problem is, as we know, that this dream is quickly frustrated as the Mexican finds it impossible to live up to the demands of that dream. The reason for this frustration has much to do with Anglo-America's negative perception of the Mexican as intruder, as illegal, as parasitic on their way of life, but it also has to do, as Zea argued, with the fact that the

Mexican has yet to respond to those demands made upon him or her by Mexican history itself. In other words, the marginality that goes hand in hand with being Mexican due to the lack of a genuine historical identity is never completely overcome, so in Anglo-America the Mexican's marginal existence compounds—the Mexican exists as hyper-marginal, marginal in relation to his/her historical identity plus marginal in relation to North American (US) culture and ethos.

Hyper-marginality, however, can ultimately force an individual and a culture into self-loathing or worse, imitation, into forgetting themselves completely and instead attempt to be like the other. In his Analysis Emilio Uranga put it best: “A culture of imitation is a culture of rest in the fundamental project of being saved by others. To imitate is to favor [propiciar], to gain a favorable look” (40). And this applies specifically to Mexicans in America. After all, here is a place (the US) worthy of being sought and here are a people worthy of being imitated: this place has an abundance of resources and its people an over-abundance of ambition, drive, determination, and know-how. However, the process of emulation, or imitation, proves difficult because both the place and its people resist integrating Mexicans into the pragmatic, secularized, and a-historical circumstance which defines Anglo-American existence. This leads to a deliberate or unconscious denial of the Mexican difference, of heterogeneity, and, ultimately, of rights. Zea put the matter in the following way: “While to the north we have witnessed the growth of a state without a great history, almost without traditions. A state inferior to ours...but a state that has beaten us, resting on values that we did not recognize as such. This is the state, ultimately, which has frustrated our dreams” (Filosofía 186). We can witness this frustration today. We can, for instance, sense the

resistance of difference and heterogeneity in irrational and inhumane immigration laws and practices.

How does the process of “sublation” apply here? Mexicans in the US must confront their marginal status, accept it, and transcend it. Most importantly, however, they must abolish and transcend, or go beyond, the irrational, yet hegemonic discourse wherein they are portrayed as unknowable, alien, absolutely different other. The transcendence of this discourse requires an inner movement of the will comparable to a revolutionary change of attitude (praxis). The material conditions, the circumstances, follow close behind.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My aim in this paper has been to focus on the existential and cultural implications, or demands, of a philosophical investigation into Mexico’s historical identity. With historical identity I am saying that to be Mexican is to share in a unique historical experience, one rooted in the conquest and colonization, one affirmed in wars of independence and revolution, a historical identity shared by poetic experiences of alienation, death, and existence, and one nourished by a common vision of the material conditions which give rise to a consciousness of immigration, exploitation, and marginality.

I am not saying that everyone who is Mexican identifies themselves in this way. On the contrary, the present paper assumes that not many people identify themselves in this way, but if they did, they would be responsible for certain demands made upon their identity by that identity itself.



So the story with “The Demands of a Mexican Philosophy of History” is that once you identify yourself as Mexican, or as Salvadorian, or as Anglo-American, or as Mexican-American, you are existentially obligated (morally speaking) to do certain things because of that identity—to fulfill certain demands. What are these philosophical demands? In short, you must assume your history, which means that you must take ownership of your history by preserving those aspects of it that empower you, you must get rid of those elements of your historical make-up that oppress you, and you must transcend, or overcome, superar, that history as you move resolutely toward your future.

The Mexican historian and philosopher Edmundo O’Gorman who, around the same time that Zea, took to analyzing the Mexican situation, proposed the thesis that America was not discovered but invented. America, and particularly Mexico, argued O’Gorman, had been idealizations in the European mind long before Columbus or Cortez set foot in its soil. America was created from a dream of what the ideal world would be like: no laws, vast amount of riches, and a place to begin anew—something like a “new” world, a paradise. The Spanish conquest and colonization made the dream a reality—or at least attempted to do so. Thus began, O’Gorman concludes, the invention of the Americas as the nesting grounds for European dreams and ambitions. So America was not “discovered” ready-made, it was invented before Columbus set his sights on the Caribbean, before Cortez destroyed the Aztecs, before the Mayflower anchored on Plymouth Rock. It was a dream long before it became a reality. And that is why there was so much destruction of lands, of peoples, of empires, because they were not part of the dream. And now the dream has changed, and the invention continues to get more complex, and as a result, there are people that must be dealt

with, left out, empires that must be forgotten, markets that must be created, and fences that must be built. Motivating the studies of Zea and his Mexican contemporaries is the question: why should Mexicans not be part of this continued re-invention of America?

Which gets us to a reiteration of Zea's call for revolutionary praxis. To be part of the permanent invention of the Americas, a psychic and a material change must take place, one demanded by philosophical analysis and historical fact. This change is demanded by the Mexican cultural and historical circumstance itself. As Zea puts it:

Nosotros tenemos que asumir, necesariamente, la responsabilidad de un pasado que no hemos hecho: pero al mismo tiempo, con nuestra actitud, cualquiera que esta sea, comprometemos y hacemos responsable de ella a un futuro que habrá de ser hecho por nosotros. En esta forma somos responsables de los otros y ante los otros. [We have to assume, necessarily, the responsibility for a past that we have not created. But at the same time, we compromise and hold responsible our attitude (or comportment), whatever that may be, for a future that will be created by us. In this way we are responsible for others and to others.] (Filosofía 13)

Nothing less than a revolutionary change is required, but one that gives way to generosity instead of violence, respect instead of oppression, and praxis instead of irresponsibility.

## Notes

[1] For a brief yet insightful history of "El Hiperion," see Guillermo Hurtado's editor's introduction to *El Hiperion* (2006).

[2]At least no one, to my knowledge, has made this claim. The usual line is that Zea was responding to Hegel and Hegel's absolutist philosophy of history (see for instance Saenz's Latin American Historicism and the Phenomenology of Leopoldo Zea).

[3]The singularity of the conquest of America is brilliantly illustrated in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America*. In its first pages, Todorov writes: "the discovery of America...is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the 'discovery' of other continents and of other peoples" (4).

[4]Of course it would have to be Aristotle that wears the *guaraches* and not, say, Plato. Aristotle's teacher was not, after all, concerned with the mundane particulars of this world, which he considered but a copy of the perfect world of Forms. It was Aristotle that cared enough about the minutiae to speculate about natural laws, poetry, and medicine.

[5]In order for this claim to be understood, one has to read Zea as a "materialist" in the sense he regarded the historical *circumstances* as having priority over any sort of ideas or value schemes. Moreover, I am not claiming that Zea's Marxist tendency is informed directly or indirectly by Marx's economic theory; what I'm proposing is that Zea's Marxist tendency is a result of both his personal distrust of Hegel's historical idealism and a natural affinity to Marx's humanist critique Hegel.

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