THE PROBLEMATIC OF MARGINALITY IN MEXICAN PHILOSOPHY

When José Gaos, a student of José Ortega y Gasset and a noted philosopher in his own right, encountered Mexican philosophy as a refugee from Franco's Spain he was surprised to learn that it addressed the central problems of human existence competently and profoundly. Gaos found that the two great initiators of speculative thought in twentieth century Mexico, Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos, had penetrated in their reflections to the core of existential philosophy before the European movement of existentialism had become self-conscious. According to Gaos, Caso antedated Gabriel Marcel in highlighting "the contingency of the performance of good action, the 'scientific' uncertainty of hope and of faith," and Vasconcelos, independently of European realists, developed and elaborated the thesis that all purely eidetic knowledge fails to capture reality, which is composed of singular and individual entities.[1] Gaos, however, is one of the few philosophers from outside of Mexico who acknowledges that Mexicans have made original contributions to speculative thought. Even Mexican thinkers themselves are reluctant to honor the achievements of their own tradition and often prefer to complain about the lack of philosophical excellence in their ambient. The proof that Mexican philosophers should be read not primarily for insight into Mexican culture but for their elucidation of important questions can be accomplished only by a serious encounter with their work such as Gaos undertook. Unfortunately, almost none of that work has been translated into English.

Ignorance of Mexican philosophy, particularly in the English-speaking world, is a result of several factors, the most important of which is cultural chauvinism. Although the United States shares a border with Mexico it is resistant to any contact with Mexican thought. The Mexicans import philosophy and social theory from the United States, but they are not encouraged to export their intellectual production. Philosophers from the United States and, surely, from Canada, too, would if they entered into the Mexican intellectual world be astonished at the density of its life and at its separation and distance from their own. Mexico, for the United States, is a source of raw materials, a place to set up factories which draw upon a pool of cheap labor, the origin of illegal immigrants, and the seat of a culture which produces Indian handicrafts and an exotic cuisine. Above all, for the middle class it is a place to vacation and perhaps to retire. Mexico is decidedly not, for the North American, a center to attract seekers after philosophical truth or wisdom. Putting aside a persistent racism directed against Mexicans, which is an important component of social attitudes in the United States, cultural

chauvinism is primarily expressed as an unexamined, because so deeply-rooted judgment that one can learn about the Mexicans but not from them. This judgment, which is scarcely ever made conscious because it is so pervasive, effectively forecloses contact by intellectuals in the United States with Mexican philosophy. The indifference toward Mexican thought of intellectuals in the United States indicates a far deeper chauvinism than either contempt or opposition would show. Contempt and opposition incorporate at least acknowledgment of the other. Indifference and ignorance dissolve a dimension of the other's being, that dimension which William James called the "social self."

Mexican philosophers are aware that they are ignored by North Americans and also by most Europeans. The indifference toward them of those in the centers of Western intellectual life is an aspect of what they call the "marginalization" of their country and its culture. As it became apparent in the second quarter of the twentieth century that, as the Mexican humanist Alfonso Reyes put it, Mexican intellectuals would not be invited to the banquet table of Western civilization, although they had many contributions to offer. Mexican philosophers increasingly made their marginality the basic theme of their speculative projects. The proclivity to turn inward, which generated both self-criticism and critique of imperialism, made their work even less accessible to outsiders than it was previously. The philosophy of "lo Mexicano" (that which is Mexican), which Francisco Vazquez analyzes and critiques in his essay "Philosophy in Mexico," is a result of the recognition of and response to marginalization. Raymond Rocco's study, "Ideology and Domination," shows how Leopoldo Zea, the leading contemporary Mexican philosopher, has made of marginality the starting point of a philosophy of history. Particularly in Zea's case a concern with the marginality of Mexico has led to a critique of cultural imperialism in Latin America as a whole and, finally, in the Third World. Vazquez remarks that Mexican philosophers today have little concern with their cultural tradition and have turned to Marxism or logical analysis for their inspiration. This tendency reflects the universalization of the Mexican problematic and the emergence of Mexico as a central actor in Third World politics. The new universalism, however, may be short lived if a new nationalism arises from the exploitation of Mexico's petroleum reserves.

The current preoccupation with "scientific" philosophy in Mexico is a throwback to the period prior to the Revolution of 1910 when the positivism of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer was the official doctrine of Mexico's educational system and the major legitimating ideology of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The Golden Age of Mexican philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century was rooted in a revolt against their positivistic education by a group of young intellectuals who had been selected to be the future elite of

the Porfirian system. Caso and Vasconcelos were among the prominent members of the Ateneo de Juventud, a remarkable study circle which fostered a return to the classics of Western humanism, exploration of indigenous traditions, and familiarity with the irrationalist movements dominating European thought at the time. The program of the Ateneo was nothing less than an effort at re-education and self-education by a group of brilliant young people who had been denied the opportunity to study metaphysics or any non-scientific discipline. They discredited the Porfirian system of education and the positivist ideology before the Revolution destroyed the positivistic polity. The thought of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson was blended by Caso and Vasconcelos with Platonism to create original philosophies closely resembling those of such figures as Max Scheler in Germany, Alfred North Whitehead in England, and George Santayana in the United States. The productive synthesis of classicism and vitalism was responsible for the anticipations of existentialism which Gaos found in the thought of Caso and Vasconcelos. This synthesis also prepared the way for the next generation's reception of Ortega y Gasset's historicism, which was grounded in "vital rationalism." For more than fifty years, then, Mexican philosophy was vitalistic and existential, another factor distancing it from the English-speaking world. During this period Mexican nationality was consolidated and Mexican philosophy expressed and reflected that historical process. Perhaps the new turn to "scientific" philosophy indicates that Mexican nationality has become secure, but it may also be a sign of more intensive economic and political exploitation.

The problematic of marginality, which was not a direct concern of Caso and Vasconcelos, was brought most sharply into focus by those thinkers, pre-eminently Zea and Emilio Uranga, who in the aftermath of World War II and the attendant decolonization explored the Mexican mind and its relation to the development of Western thought and civilization. Zea and Uranga believed that they found in the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre categories which would illuminate the "being of the Mexican." For Uranga marginalization meant being defined by the imperialist West as "accidental" in contrast to the oppressor's substantiality. He quotes Hegel as stating that America is an accident of Europe and maintains that "*this proposition must be taken to the dot of the I.*"[2] Uranga argues that historically what has passed for the description of the human essence has been an abstraction of the concrete European, who has defined himself as substantiality and self-sufficiency. He claims that from the beginnings of its history Mexico has suffered a "devaluation" because its people were not similar to Europeans and indeed were judged as insufficient by Europeans *a priori.* Uranga's response to cultural imperialism is to perform a "cynical gesture," which consists in "boasting about what the old morality considers

detestable."[3] In short, Uranga urges that Mexicans should affirm their accidentality as a universal character of human existence, turning the tables on the West by declaring substantiality to be a product of false consciousness rooted in chauvinism, domination, and false generalization. Ironically, Uranga appropriates the cynical gesture from Heidegger and Sartre. The philosophy of marginality, then, is a gift of the center to the periphery.

Consciousness of their marginality has made Mexican and more generally Latin American philosophers hypercritical with regard to the nature of their work and self-conscious and in doubt about their vocations. Although an observer such as Gaos could find much to praise in the Mexican and other Latin American traditions, Ibero-American thinkers themselves have critiqued their traditions, calling their philosophical heritage "inauthentic" while simultaneously having to defend that legacy because it is all that they can call their own. In the case of Mexico there has been ready acknowledgment of a persistent gap between the ideals projected by speculative thought and the social reality from which these ideals arose and to which they referred. The positivist program of substituting administration for politics masked a reality of political and economic exploitation. The ideal of charity projected by Antonio Caso and the norm of aesthetic completion formulated by José Vasconcelos compensated for the bureaucratization of the Mexican Revolution. The ideal community of persons projected by Leopoldo Zea helped legitimate the routinization of the Mexican regime. Vazquez relates the gap between the ideal and the real to the "political economy of discourse" which marginalizes intellectuals and makes their proposals irrelevant and, presumably, encourages irresponsibility. Both Vazquez and Rocco are concerned primarily with the unity of theory and practice and, thus, fall directly within the Mexican tradition. Neither of them accomplishes a unification, perhaps because none is possible. Mexican thinkers are disturbed that their philosophies have not contributed directly to the transformation of society. But is this not too much to ask of philosophy?

Perhaps the very will to make philosophy a transformative agent rather than to follow Ortega in declaring that it is a free activity of clarification which works its effects indirectly is the deepest symptom of marginalization. Sartre wrote in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that "one must be sure of one's rights and firmly rooted in the world, one must be free of the fears that each day assail the oppressed minorities or classes, before one dare raise questions about the place of man in the world and his ultimate destiny."[4] Mexican philosophers have persisted in raising questions about human meaning despite their marginalization, but they seem to have been assailed by guilt when they had to express the antinomies of existence. The Mexican philosopher's triumph has been to be a philosopher *malgré lui*, to let the gap between the ideal and the

actual open up despite all the pressures of conscience to cover the wound or to try to heal it.

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Notes

1. José Gaos, *En Torno a la Filosofía Mexicana*, México: Pórrua y Obregon, 1952, pp. 66-67.
2. Emilio Uranga, *Análisis del Ser del Mexicano*, México: Pórrua y Obregon, 1952, p. 70.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, New York: Grove Press, 1948, p. 133.