

MARGINALITY AND THE RECOVERY OF HISTORY: ON LEOPOLDO ZEA

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Leopoldo Zea is one of Mexico's most prolific and influential social philosophers.¹ While almost unknown in North American intellectual circles, Zea's philosophical work includes more than thirty books, consisting, in part, of a two-volume analysis of representative thinkers in Western philosophy and two classic treatises on positivism in Mexico — *The Rise and Fall of Positivism in Mexico* and *Positivism in Mexico*.²

Over a long and distinguished intellectual career, Zea's thought has been motivated by the belief that the most appropriate task of Mexican philosophy is to provide a new, and more evocative, interpretation of the human condition in Latin America. Put specifically but eloquently, Zea's work represents a continuing and sustained response to the question: "What is the relationship among philosophy, history and America"? Zea's reflections on the dynamic tensions which characterize the relationship of philosophy to its historical circumstance represent a reconciliation of two traditions of thought. On the one hand, Zea's ontology and epistemology reflect an important European influence — from Ortega's historicism is derived an appreciation of philosophy in its historical circumstance; from Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is adopted a dialectic of ideas and concrete interests; and from Sartre, there is taken a preoccupation with the values of responsibility and freedom.³ On the other hand, Zea has been most influenced by that tradition of Latin American thinkers who break with Europe in order to develop an authentic Latin American image of history — José Martí, José Enrique Rodo, José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, Manuel Ugarte, Manuel Prada, Samuel Ramos and Antonio Caso. Together with the early influence of José Gaos, Caso's is a haunting presence in Zea's thought. It is from Caso that Zea adopts the basic axiological principle of *la persona*, the integrity and dignity of whom is to be the normative standard by which the historical circumstance may be judged. Over and again, Zea returns in his writing to the problem of establishing an active mediation between philosophy and history, a mediation which is aimed at the liberation of *la persona*, at the emancipation, that is, of Latin America from colonial domination.

Philosophy, History and America

For Zea, philosophy is an "instrument" to know a concrete, substantial reality.⁴ The "something" which philosophy confronts is human action and our consciousness of it, the primary components of history. All philosophy is

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of and in history; it is always written from a certain angle of vision, from a particular historical circumstance. But if all philosophy is unavoidably political, is all thought about history, about the human situation, philosophical? With Gramsci, Zea proposes that while all reflection about the human condition contains a philosophical element, it is not thereby philosophy. In Zea's thought, philosophy refers to that type of self-conscious inquiry which provides a systematic and general framework of concepts, a set of propositions, for interpreting the human reality. In the philosophical regime, concepts are to be interlinked in such a way that they provide the basis for interpreting the significance of previously isolated historical phenomena. Yet is this conception of philosophy not similar to the classical position which would have it that the philosophical utterance is *universally valid*. In opposition to this viewpoint, Zea denies the imminent universal validity of philosophy, holding, instead, that philosophy's task is to interrogate the concreteness of historical experience. While the local is the point-of-departure, and not the goal of philosophy which is, after all, simply to philosophize, it does provide the "angle of vision" from which philosophy is always developed. To say that philosophy "must" confront historical concreteness is to use "must" in the sense of "inevitable". Zea summarizes his attitude towards the birth of philosophy as follows: "What then is our *situation* from the point of view of what we are? What is our *being*? Here is the task for philosophy. From the response to this question will rise our search for [American] philosophy"⁵ For philosophy to be philosophy it must achieve self-consciousness; thought which does not recognize its own circumstances does not reach self-consciousness. Although philosophy may not always reflect on its circumstances, it must, nevertheless, reflect its historical experience. But if philosophical inquiry is perspectival rather than definitive, how is it to be evaluated? How, in other words, is Zea to overcome the dilemma of historicism: if all philosophy is true only in a relative sense, then one's own philosophical perspective must be valid only for a given circumstance? Zea would respond to the historicist dilemma by noting that all individuals, including the philosopher, are born into circumstances not of their own making. But to live is to act and through action we are committed. Our circumstances, by virtue of existence, oblige us to take a position. We are then presented with possible choices by the human situation. Death is the only exit from choice. But choice of a path makes us responsible for our actions, to others as well as to ourselves, for existence is inherently social. Commitment and responsibility are thus unavoidable. And, of course, it is only in a condition of freedom that authentic responsibility can be realized. The philosopher's task is, in providing an interpretation of the human condition, to assume responsibility for this interpretation, for its strategies and proposals, and for the consequences which follow from acting on it.⁶

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The concepts of commitment, responsibility and freedom have as their common reference the dignity, the integrity and welfare of "the person". The realization of the value of "la persona" is the normative possibility of all historical action. Zea argues that there is an ultimate value in history and that is history itself, or existence, for without existence [which means the existence of the person] there can be nothing else. But existence is inherently co-existence: there can be no history of "one", only of one among and within the many. This is the *condition* of existence. The principle of life, then, must be taken as a given of history for without it, all the rest is nonsense. All history *presumes* the principle of life, which, for Zea, means the life of each person. Thus philosophies *can* be evaluated in terms of whether and to what extent they have self-consciously assumed their commitment, have established responsibility for their vision, and promoted freedom. The reference for all these, the evaluative standards for each, is the extent to which they in turn have promoted the dignity, welfare, and integrity of the person. Who is to judge this? Zea answers: the community of which one is part. Philosophy must submit to the judgment of the community.⁷

Domination, Philosophy and the Latin American Situation

If philosophy is a response to the historical circumstance what then has been the situation in America, particularly in Latin America? Zea states that "the philosophical-historical interpretation of the relation that, from the cultural point of view, Latin America has had with Europe or the Occident is what will provide the origin of a philosophy which is American".⁸ But what has been the form of this interpretation? Zea argues that the different accountings of this relationship must be analyzed with regard to their historical development, and for this the history of philosophical ideas in Latin America must be placed in context. In Latin America, the history of ideas is opposed to that which has developed in the *European* experience. In the European idiom, the history of ideas is of the making of the European self, of the absorption and assimilation of philosophical tendencies around the creation of a distinct Euro-centered history. The history of European philosophy is an ongoing dialectic among the masters.

But in Latin America, the philosophical situation has been quite different. Until late in the nineteenth century, the history of ideas in Latin America was preoccupied with understanding the European influence — under the regimes of Platonism, Thomism, historicism — *in* Latin America; for none of these reflect the American reality. For Zea, this amounts to a history of thought and not of philosophy because philosophy is an original expression of the historical circumstance. While European philosophy might be envisioned as proceeding dialectically through stages of assimilation and absorption, the history of Latin American thought proceeds by the *juxtapositioning* of ideas. In

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Latin American thought, adaptation took place but little absorption.⁹ The result was an accumulation of problems, not solutions. In Zea's viewpoint, each stage of Latin American history was denied by succeeding generations of thinkers, rather than being accepted as *having been*, having existed as the context from which the present reality developed. In other words, Zea argues that Latin American thought tends to reflect its circumstance, but not *on* them. Latin American thinkers refused to accept their history, their circumstances. They attempted to ignore the "backwardness" of their societies as compared to Europe. For Zea, it is only with the development in the twentieth century of an awareness of dependency and marginality in Latin America that an authentic philosophy emerges. In a short book entitled *America Philosophy as Simply Philosophy*, Zea emphasizes that for a good deal of its history, there was no distinctive Latin American philosophy. The authenticity of Latin American philosophy develops when it begins to assess its circumstances from the perspective of the colonized, when it becomes self-conscious of the dependency relation. And with the emergence of an authentic Latin American philosophical voice comes an understanding that the reality of America is not European, that philosophy in Latin America must find its own way. For Zea, to write a history of the dependency relationship is really to contribute to a global philosophical project.¹⁰ The philosophy of the history of the dependency relation is the opposite vision of a philosophy of history of domination; the reality is the same but the angle of vision, what it means for the dependent and the dominant, is quite different.

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Notes

1. Leopoldo Aguilar Zea, like his working-class parents before him, was born in Mexico City on June 30th, 1912, two years after the Mexican Revolution began. He received all of his formal education in the Capitol, finally attending the *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico* (UNAM) and receiving a bachelor's degree in 1936. He subsequently divided his time between the study of law and philosophy. With the assistance of José Guasi, Zea worked for his master's degree from 1938 to 1942, and received a doctorate in philosophy and letters in 1943. Both his master's thesis, *Positivism in Mexico*, and his doctoral dissertation, *The Rise and Fall of Positivism in Mexico*, were subsequently published and have become standard works in the study of Mexican philosophy, history and the social sciences. After holding temporary positions in several Mexican universities, in 1944 Zea was appointed to replace one of Mexico's leading intellectual figures, Antonio Caso, upon his retirement. Zea was appointed Professor of Philosophy of History on the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at UNAM, a position Zea has now held for thirty-seven years. He has also served as the director of that department as well as of the Center of Latin-American Studies, focusing its energies on the History of Ideas in Latin America. In 1947, Zea was appointed to direct the work of the Committee on the History of Ideas in America whose principal task it has been to prepare and publish a History of Ideas of each nation in America. The first books appeared in 1956 and new works continue to be published periodically. The original task is now nearly completed but the committee's work is now focused on updating its earlier publications. The list of

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honors and awards bestowed on Zea in recognition of his efforts and accomplishments are considerable to say the least, and certainly too long to include here. However, some of the more significant include his being granted the highest awards of the governments of Italy, Yugoslavia, Peru, Mexico, including membership in the French Legion of Honor. He has also served as a cultural envoy of the Mexican government, and has been the founder and director in universities in many countries. He was invited, for example, at the urging of Arnold Toynbee, to lecture at Oxford, France (Sorbonne), Germany, Italy, various African states, several in the United States, and, of course, many in Latin America have invited Zea to speak to their faculties. Zea's work is very broad in its scope and includes a two-volume analysis of the major figures in western philosophy, a two-volume presentation and critique of Latin-American philosophy, and his two books on positivism in Mexico are considered classics in the area of the sociology of knowledge. He has published thirty-one books (and another in press), thirty-three articles in Mexico and an additional thirty prepared for English, French, or Italian scholarly publications. However, there is a basic continuity in Zea's work based on the use of the same themes and concepts in his analysis of different issues and concerns. This analysis is motivated by his belief that a new interpretation of the form and substance of the human condition in America is the appropriate task of American philosophy. And Zea's analysis is not isolated for it is part of the broader effort of a relatively small number of philosophers in different countries and of different orientations, who have concluded that the traditional philosophic frameworks cannot provide the understanding they seek. Thus, it is important to understand that while not part of the mainstream of contemporary thought, Zea's efforts are not simply idiosyncratic.

All of the information on Zea's background was obtained in several personal interviews with him during the month of February, 1978, in Mexico City. I wish to express my gratitude to Vice-Chancellor Wilson of UCLA for providing a grant to travel to Mexico for these interviews. A fellowship provided by the National Chicano Council on Higher Education has made this research possible by allowing me to devote the academic year 1977-78 to a broader study of Zea's work.

2. Zea's more important works are: *El Positivismo en México*, Tercera Edición, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968; *Ensayos sobre Filosofía en la Historia*, Mexico: Stylo, 1947; *Dos Etapas del Pensamiento en Hispanoamerica*, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1949; *La Filosofía como Compromiso*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1952; *América como Conciencia*, Mexico: Cuadernos Americanos, 1953; *América en la Historia*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957; *La Filosofía Americana como Filosofía sin Más*, Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1969; *Dialéctica de la Conciencia Americana*, Mexico: Editorial Alianza, 1975. I was fortunate enough to obtain the manuscript of Zea's latest work which should be published soon, entitled *Filosofía de la Historia Americana*. In this work Zea has brought together his basic themes and attempted to synthesize them. Since the pages of the manuscript will not correspond to the pages of the book, my references to this work will list the chapter and section where the reference is to be found. Two excellent commentaries on Zea's work are to be found in Abelardo Villegas, *La Filosofía de lo Mexicano*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960, and Michael Weinstein, *The Polarity of Mexican Thought*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976.
3. Zea's references to Ortega and Mannheim can be found in *En Torno a Una Filosofía Americana*, México: El Colegio de México; for discussions of Sartre, see: *La Filosofía Como Compromiso* and *La Filosofía Americana como Filosofía sin Más*.
4. The clearest statement of Zea's conception of philosophy is contained in the first essay in *La Filosofía Como Compromiso*. See also *América Como Conciencia*, pp. 13-21, and *La Conciencia del Hombre en la Filosofía*, México: Imprenta Universitaria, 1953, pp. 11-32.
5. *La Filosofía Como Compromiso*, p. 37.
6. The three concepts are discussed in the first essay of *La Filosofía Como Compromiso*.
7. Some idea of Zea's notion of community can be gathered from his discussion in the first two chapters of *El Positivismo en México*, but it is not very clearly developed.
8. *Filosofía de la Historia Americana*, Introduction, Section 1. The following discussion refers to this entire chapter.

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9. Zea discussed the situation of America in many works. The most extensive analyses are found in *America como Conciencia*, *Esencia de lo Americano*, and *Dos Etapas Del Pensamiento en Hispanoamerica*, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1949. The relationship with Europe is dealt with in *América en la Conciencia de Europa*, Mexico: Los Presentes, 1955.
 10. For Zea's fullest account of dependency, see *Dependencia y liberación en la cultura Latino Americana*, Mexico: Cuadernos de Joaquin Mortiz, 1974.
An excellent discussion of Catholic ideology as applied to Latin America is contained in *America en la Historia*, ch. 9. For an analysis of the Occidental Colonizer, see *El Occidente y la Conciencia de Mexico*, México: Porrúa y Obregon, 1953.
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