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On the Question of Latin American Philosophy

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chapter III). This distinction underscores the lack of legitimate civil and political (in the broad sense) order in the former world, where “society has completely disappeared” (17; Part I, chapter I). Here, Sarmiento focuses on the anarchic and, in his words, “feudal” aspects of the only “society” there is, the family, whose structure is analogously tyrannical.

13. See, for example, *Facundo*, 17-18, Part I, chapter I, where Sarmiento characterizes the socioeconomic organization of “barbarism” as “similar to the feudalism of the Middle Ages” but without barons and castles.
14. Facundo Quiroga is, for Sarmiento, the incarnation of the primitive barbarian type (see, for example, *Facundo*, 51; Part II, chapter I). He is “the natural man who has not yet learned to control or disguise his passions; who displays them in all their energy, giving himself to its impetuosity.” He is lawless and hateful of authority, hard-hearted and “dominated by rage.” Later on in *Facundo*, however, Sarmiento tempers his judgment: he claims that Quiroga was not cruel or bloodthirsty but rather simply “the barbarian” (*el barbaro*) who knows not how to restrain his passions and who, upon having his passions aroused, knows not how to measure his responses to them. But he proceeds to call him a “terrorist” (*el terrorista*), who, upon entering a city, executes (*fusila*) some and assaults (*azota*) the other, brutalizing women and humiliating citizens. Here is an example of why Sarmiento has been called “the essence of contradiction”! Perhaps, in this context, it is better to think of his judgment as reflecting his *ambiguity* toward the figure of the *gaucho* and even of the *gaucho* turned *caudillo*. He does seem to have *some* respect for this character, to the extent that he is self-assured, brave, vital, and *free*. The problem is that these traits *in barbarians* are feral and uncontrolled.
15. I would argue that Sarmiento is an environmentalist but not a determinist. First, his language when referring to the relationship between environment and character supports a weak determinism at best (see, for example, *Facundo*, 16, Part I, chapter I, where he says that the way of life of the countryside is what “influences” [*influye*] the formation of the “barbarian” character and spirit). In the same chapter, Sarmiento examines *other* factors that contribute to the formation of the “barbarian” spirit, notably the social (or, rather, asocial) organization of life and the feudal economic organization (see also the Introduction, where Sarmiento contends that both “colonialism” and the peculiarities of the geographical environment are responsible for shaping the “barbarian” character). So, I would argue that geographical environment, for Sarmiento, is a *contributing* cause but does not overdetermine the formation of character. Second, Sarmiento’s whole project of “civilizing” the “barbarian” world would be self-defeating in the extreme if he believed that environment alone determines one’s character. The *geography* will not ever change, but the ways of organizing life, *given* geography, can be changed so that the unity of the nation through civilization can become a reality. Similarly, Sarmiento’s almost obsessive concern with education would be pointless if he were a strong determinist because if character is wholly formed by nature, then there is nothing that education can do to change and improve it. I am aware that this issue is larger and more complex than these brief arguments

can address, but, again, space constrains what I can do in this paper. For an argument that Sarmiento is a strong determinist, see Susana Nuccetelli. *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 166-73.

16. At times, Sarmiento portrays the “barbarian” (*gaucho* or *caudillo*) as inflamed by a sense of “superiority.” But this superiority is spurious and, he suggests, simply a very human response to the need not to feel completely helpless in the face of the stringent demands of the environment. Interestingly, the “symbols” of this “superiority” are themselves “barbarian” and what render this character an object of *fear* rather than admiration: the knife, the *bolas*, and the physical prowess and endurance demonstrated through command of the horse. These symbols represent the potential *violence* of “barbarism” as the rule of brute force.
17. Sarmiento has faith in the possibility of progress, but not the unlimited faith of nineteenth-century positivists who viewed progress as inevitable. In fact, for Sarmiento, General Rosas and his “barbarian” rule is *proof* that regression is a very real possibility in the life of Hispanoamerican nations. In this sense, *Facundo* is a *warning*: tyranny will become a permanent reality in the life of the new nations unless combated actively with the “instruments” of progress, notably the constitutional rule of law and policies aimed at mental and material development (viz., education, immigration, the development of technological structure and industry/commerce, and so on).
18. For illuminating discussions of various aspects of Sarmiento’s “program” of social reform, see the excellent collection of articles in *Sarmiento: Author of A Nation*, edited by T. Halperin Donghi, I. Jaksic, G. Kirkpatrick, and F. Masiello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
19. See, for example, “Our America.” In *Jose Marti: Selected Writings*, edited by E. Allen, with Introduction by R. Gonzalez Echevarria (New York: Penguin, 2002).
20. For a discussion of Sarmiento’s views on this issue, see, for example, William Katra, “Rereading *Viajes*: Race, Identity, and National Destiny,” and Natalio Botana, “Sarmiento and Political Order: Liberty, Power, and Virtue,” both in *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*, 73-100 and 101-13, respectively.

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On the Question of Latin American Philosophy

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The intellectual history of Latin America is replete with attempts to address the question of whether there is, or can be, Latin American philosophy. While there have been numerous and varied answers to the question from a wide range of gifted thinkers, there has been relatively little engagement with the question *as such*. José Mariátegui,

Leopoldo Zea, and Risieri Frondizi, just to name a few, have provided their respective answers to the question, but they have not questioned the question itself.¹ What are the reasons behind it? Why is it important? What are the conditions under which we understand it to be a legitimate question in the first place? In short, what motivates the question and gives it force?

On its face, the question “Is there Latin American philosophy” can be understood in two distinct, though interrelated, ways. The first is a relatively empirical question, concerned with the presence (or lack thereof) of philosophical production in Latin America and/or by Latin Americans. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to have some clear concept of the geographical borders of Latin America, and/or the constitution of the *group* of Latin Americans. To be sure, neither of these concepts have been settled definitively, and, what is more, one would need some working definition of philosophy, which can itself be quite a chore. Nevertheless, once one has settled on some use for the terms “Latin American” and “philosophy,” the first interpretation of the question “Is there Latin American philosophy” becomes strictly empirical.

This will be true whether one is a universalist about philosophy or not. If one holds the universalist position that all philosophical endeavor is the same in some foundational sense, then one need only ask whether the intellectual product in question *really* is philosophy, and, if so, whether it was produced by a Latin American (understood either in the strictly geographical sense of being a person in or from Latin America, or, perhaps, understood in an *ethnic* sense). If the answer to both these questions is “yes,” then there is Latin American philosophy, at least in this particular case. At the same time, if one rejects the universalist position and holds that philosophy is, in some deep sense, historical, or culturally relevant, or some other variation on this theme, then the basic method remains the same. The only real difference will be that the nonuniversalist will hold that Latin American philosophy might not look exactly the same as British, French, or North American philosophy.

The nonuniversalist position leads into the second interpretation of the question of Latin American philosophy. Instead of asking the empirical question of the *production* of philosophy in Latin America and/or by Latin Americans, the question can be interpreted to ask whether there is or can be philosophy that is *peculiarly* Latin American. This is clearly a more compelling question for nonuniversalists, who would allow for the existence of a culturally specific philosophy. If one is a strict universalist, the answer to the question becomes obvious, as there can only be philosophy *simpliciter*—it is meaningless to ask whether there is a specifically Latin American philosophy if one is a strict universalist. Nevertheless, there could be a variety of universalist for whom this could remain a viable question. One might be a “weak universalist” and hold that, while the fundamental concepts and questions (and probably methodology) of philosophy are universal, there are culturally specific differences of style and content. All philosophy, from this perspective, is the same at its root, but there are important culturally relative flourishes and more “superficial” distinctions that allow for a kind of culturally specific philosophy even within a more broadly “universalist” framework.

In either case, part of the question, on this interpretation, is whether there is anything *distinctive* about the philosophy generated in Latin America (or by Latin Americans) *vis-à-vis* Europe and North America. Indeed, much of the concern in the historical literature on the question has to do with the extent to which philosophy in Latin America is or is not derivative of European philosophy. Any affirmative answer to

the question of Latin American philosophy, in this latter sense of cultural specificity, must, therefore, be understood to entail some relevant differences between Latin American philosophy on the one hand and European/North American philosophy on the other.

Furthermore, there is a counterfactual concern for both interpretations of the basic question. That is, even if the immediate answer is that there is no Latin American philosophy at present (perhaps because it is derivative of European philosophy, or because intellectual production in Latin America is not yet properly philosophical, etc.), there remains the question of whether there *could be* Latin American philosophy in the future. Here, the issue of distinctiveness *from* Europe remains critical even if there is no such distinctiveness at present.

What interests me most, however, is what lurks *behind* the question of Latin American philosophy. One way to approach this is by asking why there *wasn't* a corresponding concern in nineteenth-century North America. That is, why weren't there massive amounts of journalistic and philosophical essays, congresses, conferences, and so on, dedicated to putting to rest once and for all “the question of North American philosophy?” The immediate response to this latter question is to point out that there was no *question* of North American philosophy in the same way that Latin American philosophy has been presented as a question. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Sanders Pierce, and William James were all convinced that they were doing something distinctive and unorthodox. They also understood themselves to be citizens of the United States, which, in turn, made their distinctive philosophy “American.” Thus, there was some sense in which they understood their philosophy to be American, but this was not understood by them, or by the intellectual community at large, to be an earth-shattering revelation. It did not reveal the full promise of North American peoples nor did it establish the legitimacy of intellectual endeavor in the United States. It was a curiosity—a new and novel approach to philosophy that took root in the United States, nothing more or less.

From this history, a new question emerges. Why is Latin American philosophy understood to be a *question* in the first place? I have two interrelated approaches to this problem, both of which are offered more as invitations to further discussion than as definitive answers.² First, in Latin America, for numerous reasons, there was a concerted effort (though, certainly, this effort was stronger and more successful at different times and in different places) to expunge Spanish and/or European intellectual, cultural, and political influence. In the United States, on the other hand, the concern was to avoid the political influence and control of Britain, but North Americans were perfectly happy to preserve much of British culture, including its philosophical tradition. Thus, raising the “question” of Latin American philosophy might be part of an effort to establish a radical break with Spain (and by extension, Europe) by creating a distinct and original intellectual tradition over and against Spain/Europe. “To the extent that our philosophy remains European, we remain intellectually colonized,” the argument might go. “And if our philosophy is distinctively Latin American, that signals the breaking of those mental fetters.”

Another possible motive behind the question of Latin American philosophy has to do with *mestizaje* and the politics of race. In North America, there was not the same *degree* of *mestizaje*. The indigenous peoples were either exterminated or confined to reservations, and the African population likewise remained (relatively) distinct. As a consequence, it was much easier for North Americans to see themselves, and be seen by

Europe, as culturally, intellectually, and racially European. For Europeans, North America might have been a distant backwater, and its inhabitants might have been poor relations, but they were still relations. Because of the extent of *mestizaje*, the same could not be said for Latin America. The inhabitants of Latin America, even the *Criollo* elite, were understood (by Europeans, and, perhaps equally importantly, by North Americans) to be culturally and racially distinct from Europe/Spain. Within this racialized framework, the intellectual capacity—the *rationality*—of the non-European is understood to be always already in question. In this situation, one way to establish one's legitimacy as a rational agent is to produce what is incontrovertibly philosophy. This can be done either in the same tradition as Europe (thereby showing that the racial classification as nonrational is mistaken), or as something completely new (thereby establishing racial equivalence, or even superiority, á la José Vasconcelos). Either way, it becomes crucial that the intellectual prowess of those whose capacity is in doubt (within a racialized framework) be proven on the philosophical field of battle.

What all of this points toward is the extent to which the *purpose* behind the question of Latin American philosophy is so crucial to positing any answer to that question. "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a way of asking whether there is anything *distinctive* about Latin America. It is a way of asking whether there is any coherence to the notion of Latin America itself, and it is a way of asking about the *identity* of Latin American peoples. If we think of British philosophy, for example, we can see all of these functions at play. British philosophy, provided one understands it to be in any way culturally specific (either as a "weak" universalist, or as an historicist), has to be more than simply the philosophy produced by citizens of the British Isles. Describing a particular philosopher (John Locke) or a particular philosophy (Utilitarianism) as "British" is a way of establishing something distinctively British about that philosopher or philosophy. Pointing out their shared British-ness, likewise, is a way of pointing out the coherence of Britain itself. And British philosophers and philosophy both inform British identity and are, in turn, informed by it.

The same exercise can be performed in relation to European philosophy generally. What becomes particularly clear in this context, however, is the extent to which much of the unity and coherence of European philosophy arises not exclusively out of any similarities as such but as much, if not more, out of a distinction *from* the non-European. Just as the notion of Europe itself resulted from the encounter with Africa and the "New World" (the radically non-European), we can see how particular varieties of European philosophy (German, British, French) are understood *as such* in part as an effort to establish *difference from* some other variety(ies). In other words, what makes European philosophy coherently European is in large part its *difference from* Asian philosophy, African philosophy, and so on.

In the Latin American context, much of the reason the question of Latin American philosophy took on such importance was because it was a way not only to establish Latin American *rationality* but also Latin American *identity*. "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a way of drawing a distinction between what is Latin American and what is *not*. It is an attempt to draw some coherent whole *in relation to* some relevant *other* (Spain, Europe, North America, etc.). Thus, it may very well be that if we are even asking the question of Latin American philosophy, we already have some notion of what it *isn't*, and we are really just negotiating what we *want* it to be.

Thus, much of the shape of Latin American philosophy is determined by the way in which this question is *asked*. In raising the question itself, one is shaping philosophical endeavor in Latin America. Just as our understanding of British philosophy emerges out of the *practice* of philosophy in Britain, Latin American philosophy can only *emerge* in a similar way. The answer to the question is, in effect, dictated by the prior notions of philosophy, of Latin America itself, and of its distinctiveness (or lack thereof) from Europe and North America that we bring with us. Thus, it is only in investigating the motives behind the question that we can ever make progress on the question itself. And, what is more, in asking these deeper questions about motive, and the nature of philosophy, and the ontological status of Latin America and Latin Americans, we are most certainly asking philosophical questions. So it may very well be that the question provides its own answer in the course of being asked.

Endnotes

1. José Mariátegui. "Is There Such a Thing as Hispanic-American Thought?" In *The Heroic and Creative meaning of Socialism: Selected Essays of José Carlos Mariátegui*, edited by M. Peralman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996); Leopoldo Zea. "The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America." In *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity*, edited by Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 2004), 357-68; and Risieri Frondizi. "Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?" In *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, edited by Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004) 294-301.
2. What follows came about as a result of discussions with William Cooper and Maria Morales at the NEH Summer Institute on Latin American Philosophy in June of 2005. Any mistakes, misrepresentations, or other failings are solely my responsibility.

DISCUSSION

On the Advantage and Disadvantage of the History of Philosophy for Latin American Philosophers

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I.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin American philosophy is still by and large viewed with indifference by professional philosophers. Worse still, in the opinion of many who are well acquainted with the work of Latin American philosophers, the pervasive indifference toward Latin American philosophy is not unwarranted, for this tradition is characterized by thought that is, on the whole, derivative and unoriginal. As Jorge J. E. Gracia, a philosopher who has written extensively on Latin American philosophy, puts it,