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DISCUSSION

THE BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN THOUGHT

The characteristic mark of Mexican philosophy since 1910 is its quest for autonomy. The new philosophy in Mexico no longer cares to be hand-maiden to an extraneous master, be it church, state, or industry. Without escaping into the ivory tower (no fear of that because the Mexican mind would not feel comfortable there), contemporary thought in Mexico is in search of its own "genuine expression." What the new generation of Mexican intellectuals reacted against was essentially the dogmatic attitude of traditional positivism whose enthronement of Science had dethroned Philosophy. Their ideal was philosophic independence. They wanted "the restoration of philosophy, its freedom, and its rights." This request for the right to philosophize, irrespective of the results, is what radically differentiates the "spirit" of Mexican philosophy after 1910 from its previous manifestations. And in that "spirit" of intellectual independence lies precisely the most promising thing in the whole history of Mexican thought. Philosophy has at last come of age in Mexico.

Since history requires dates, we have selected 1910 as the beginning of the contemporary period of Mexican thought. In that year a new society of young intellectuals, the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (Athenaeum of Youth), organized "to celebrate the first centennial of Mexican independence, a series of lectures whose object was to study the personality and work of *Spanish-American thinkers and men-of-letters.*" (Note the accent on *Spanish-American* culture, which reflects the interest of the group to express themselves and not merely imitate European patterns.) Six public lectures were delivered by its charter members on different Spanish-American themes at the National School of Law in Mexico City during August and September of 1910.

Of the six lectures sponsored by the *Ateneo*, the last one given by José Vasconcelos on "Don Gabino Barreda and Contemporary Ideas" is the most pertinent to our story. Vasconcelos opens by giving Barreda, the leading disciple of Comte in Mexico, credit for having established a better system of thinking than scholasticism and admits that scientific fanaticism is more progressive and more in keeping with the times than "the fanaticism of religion." Positivism failed, nevertheless, to realize that "the poetic sense" belongs to the very nature of understanding, not just to a primitive stage of the human mind. Furthermore, Barreda was wrong even on his

own hallowed ground of science and his dogmatic attitude towards it did not permit him to accept what the best authorities knew in the field, namely, that scientific principles are "mere hypotheses." Vasconcelos uses Poincaré, Carnot, Clausius, Lord Kelvin, and Bergson to attack the scientism of the positivistic system. He closes with these telling words: "The positivism of Comte and Spencer could never contain our aspirations." This lecture expresses so well the spirit and program of the *Ateneo* and the new generation of intellectuals that it can be said to constitute the Mexican Declaration of Philosophical Independence.

The Big Four of the *Ateneo*, its co-founders, were the late Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alfonso Reyes, the late Antonio Caso, and José Vasconcelos. The first was a native of Santo Domingo and the remaining three, Mexicans. As was psychologically natural, these young men of the "Mexican *Sturm-und-Drang*" started off by attacking positivism, each in his own manner. The four friends would meet on their own and hold a sort of Platonic Symposium outside of the regular sessions of the *Ateneo*. They used one set of European masters against another to combat the old positivism and spread "the new humanism" throughout Mexico. Reyes several years ago reviewed what happened in "the immediate past" of Mexican culture and quotes Henríquez Ureña who observed: "We felt the intellectual oppression together with the political and economic oppression which a large part of the country was aware of already. We saw that the official philosophy was too systematic, too definitive not to be mistaken. Then we embarked on reading all the philosophers whom positivism used to condemn as useless, from Plato, who was our greatest teacher, up to Kant and Schopenhauer. We even took Nietzsche seriously (imagine that!). We discovered Bergson, Boutroux, James, and Croce." Henríquez Ureña omits here what Vasconcelos had close to his heart, that is, Hindu philosophy and "Oriental mysticism," an influence alien to the rest. Caso in his version of the same story narrates how it was Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* which awakened them from the "dogmatic slumber" of positivism and liberated them from "all empiricism" by opening up their eyes with respect to its "epistemological error." Now, however much of a Hume may have been Kant to them in their philosophical battle against Comte, Bain, Mill, Spencer, and their Mexican followers, we must not lose sight of the fact that Bergson has been, on the whole, the most influential single force against positivism in Mexico and, we can add with Risieri Frondizi of Venezuela (formerly of Argentina), in the other countries of Latin America.

At this junction it is natural to ask: What is the relation between the *Ateneo* and the Mexican Revolution of 1910? In other words: how is the intellectual secession from the Positivistic "Union" of the previous Era of

Reconstruction connected with that social movement historians label the Mexican Revolution? To answer this question adequately, we should have to solve the highly debatable problem as to what that Revolution is all about.

The Mexican Revolution has meant different things to different people and even to the same people at different times. To complicate matters, it is quite well known that the Revolution began in 1910 as a political uprising to get rid of Dictator Díaz, but was later transformed with Emiliano Zapata's battle-cry of "Land and Liberty" into an agrarian "communal" revolt (not "communistic," borrowing Frank Tannenbaum's distinction) to get rid of private property. Some argue that the Revolution was over long ago, others that it is all over but the shooting, while still others insist that the shooting has not really begun as yet. On one issue we can be reasonably sure: the Revolution not only has meant different things to Masons and Marxists, to Catholics and Capitalists, but it did not signify the same thing to its own políticos, from Madero to Cárdenas. Strictly speaking, there is no "Mexican Revolution" in the singular but rather many revolutions in the plural. Skeptics would infer from all this quandary that there is no use talking about the Mexican Revolution because we cannot discuss its "facts" without injecting our point of view, but if we were to accept the skeptical position, a particular point of view in itself, we could not discuss any "facts" at all and our story would have to end abruptly right now.

Since the story must go on, come what may, let us return to our original question, ever mindful of its complexity, and rush in where skeptics fear to tread. On a purely theoretical basis, cultural isolationists would tend to argue that there is no connection between intellectual and social events, and hence none between the anti-positivistic campaign of the *Ateneo* and the Revolution. Cultural interventionists, on the other hand, would tend to argue that intellectual forces are the direct agents of social changes, and hence the *Ateneo* was responsible for the Revolution. The truth of the matter, however, lies between these two extremes, as far at least as the Mexican situation is concerned. Pedro Henríquez Ureña made the right connection between the *Ateneo* and the Mexican Revolution when he remarked in 1927: "The *Ateneo* lived amidst battles and was, on the intellectual plane, the prelude to the gigantic transformation which was beginning in Mexico."

To understand how the anti-positivistic wave of ideas sweeping the country around 1910 could be "the prelude" to the revolutionary movement in the making, we must bear constantly in mind that positivism in Mexico was not just an academic affair involving professors but "the official philosophy" of the government. Henríquez Ureña and others of

the *Ateneo* knew then from direct experience that positivism was being "invoked as the ideological basis of the political tendencies in power," a thesis which Leopoldo Zea confirmed with copious details a short time ago. Given the general feeling of unrest over the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the anti-positivistic campaign of the *Ateneo* on theoretical grounds was bound to affect eventually the positivistic foundations of "*el Porfirismo*" (Porfirism), as his social system has been called, on practical grounds. Whether they were fully conscious of it or not, the young intellectuals in attacking positivism directly were indirectly criticizing Porfirism. And as the theoretical foundations to the presidential palace of Porfirism were being publicly destroyed, all that remained to be done was for men of action to finish the job. The men of action came soon and there has been plenty of action and reaction even since in Mexico. Positivism and Porfirism were like Siamese twins, and the fate of the one followed as the night the day the fate of the other.

From the foregoing it would be safe, in our opinion, to infer that the cultural leaders of the *Ateneo* were the intellectual forerunners of the Mexican Revolution rather than its political directors. Their work led in part to the Revolution, but they did not lead it. Vasconcelos bluntly states that there "was no atmosphere" at the time "for an intellectual flowering which might have given the *Ateneo* a role in our public life." In fact, a specific difference between the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 is that intellectuals did not participate in the former as they did in the latter, unless we were to stretch the Mexican Revolution beyond its military manifestation. By that token, of course, there is no fixing of dates. In short, Madero was no Lenin with a blueprint for revolution. All it seems he wanted for Mexico was a decent and workable government, and that is quite difficult to "plan" anywhere, no matter how many years you have to do it in. His murderers gave him less than two years, which is rather a short time to judge his success or failure as president. We can indeed speculate about what he might have done had he lived, but history is not so patient with wishful hoping, however eternal it may spring in the human breast. The "big shots" of the Mexican Revolution after Madero were far from belonging to "the intelligentsia." Many of them were ignorant and all were men of action who relegated men of ideas to secondary posts.

If the question is raised—where were the intellectuals of Mexico in 1910?—the answer is: the great majority of them, the old-timers, were "*Porfiristas*" and hence against the Revolution. As for the new intellectuals of the *Ateneo* and the generation of the Centennial, they could have easily been dismissed by the men of action on the ground that they were too young to cut any ice in public administration, but not on the

ground that as "intellectuals" they would have refused to do their part in the national crisis. No, the "*atenetistas*," on the whole, would not have sympathized with that kind of "intellectual" who buries his head in the sand when things are going tough. Vasconcelos in *Ulises Criollo*, the first of his autobiographical volumes, reports that during the Madero régime the *Ateneo* "was no longer the cenacle of lovers of culture, but the circle of friends with their eyes on political action. Antonio Caso was perhaps the only one who did not wish to get mixed up in the new situation. He proclaimed himself, more than ever, a Porfirist. Nevertheless, he collaborated in everything which signified cultural activity." (Caso apparently changed his political attitude after the planned assassination of President Madero in 1913.) The *Ateneo* was not an organization of intellectual snobs who believed in restricting the treasures of culture (not with a capital C) to their small clique and, to extend the radius of their program towards a moralized Mexican society, they founded the first *Universidad Popular* in Mexico on December 13, 1912, whose work in free adult education lasted ten years. The motto of the school came from the pen of Justo Sierra, the leader of the Mexican Spencerians: "Science protects our Country"—which, naturally, was not interpreted in traditional positivist fashion. After Madero's murder, the members of the *Ateneo* were dispersed by the ensuing fireworks and the meetings of this "glorious institution" (the phrase is Vicente Lombardo Toledano's) came to a sad end.

To recapitulate our remarks as to the connection between the *Ateneo* and the Revolution of 1910. Bearing in mind that the *Ateneo's* philosophical battle against positivism "initiated the rehabilitation of the thought of the race" (Vasconcelos), we can conclude that the anti-positivistic period of Mexican philosophy since 1910, which stems from that initial campaign, is the intellectual expression of the Mexican Revolution, in so far as "the Revolution in a certain sense is a discovery of Mexico by the Mexicans." (Lombardo Toledano) But only *in so far as* and *in a certain sense*. And *what* specifically that "certain sense" is, is precisely what the representative thinkers of contemporary Mexico, some with more awareness than others of their relation to the Revolution, have attempted to ascertain in their own positions.

Having sketched the Mexican Declaration of Philosophical Independence of the *Ateneo* in 1910, we turn now to the general effects of that call to intellectual freedom on the philosophical life of contemporary Mexico.

On September 18, 1910, a week after the last lecture of the *Ateneo* where, as we said, Vasconcelos was to all intents and purposes formulating the Mexican Declaration of Philosophical Independence, the Díaz government at the request of Justo Sierra, the then Secretary of Public Instruction

and Fine Arts who had publicly disavowed his positivist faith in 1908, reopened the doors of the University of Mexico. This act, the best piece of legislation ever sanctioned by the "honest tyrant" for the cultural life of his country during his iron rule of thirty years, really amounted to the establishment of a new institution, a secular university for the nation. It must be recalled in this connection that the predecessor of the National University, the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, which had been closed since those stormy days of the beginning of the Reform period in 1833 by Vice-President Gómez Farías, had been patterned after the renowned University of Salamanca and held the signal honor of being "the first active major university in the New World upon the inauguration of its courses in 1553," thus antedating Harvard by eighty-five years.

The reopening of the University of Mexico on secular foundations was not mere sequence but consequence of the new "*Geist*" of the times rising phoenix-like from its positivistic ashes. The new institution heralded perhaps the most momentous event for academic philosophy in Mexico, for as an integral part of it there was created the *Escuela Nacional de Altos Estudios* (National School of Advanced Studies) which later became the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National University. Philosophy thereby was reinstated in the university curriculum after having been in abeyance for more than seventy-five years in the official schools of Mexico. (The religious schools were the only places where philosophy was taught in Mexico during that period.) Lest this sound too surprising, it should be borne in mind that the National Preparatory School, opened by Gabino Barrera in 1868, taught logic and morals but not philosophy proper, because the Comtian scheme shoved the latter back into the so-called "metaphysical" stage of knowledge and thus there was no room for it in the "positive" stage. Philosophy in the era of Reconstruction had been dethroned by the "bookish formulas" of supposedly "scientific" sociology and, as the converted Sierra metaphorically put it in his inaugural address at the reopening of the University, the poor thing had been roving around academic halls "pleading" to be heard. "The voice of metaphysics" finally won its academic right to be heard once more at the University in 1910, and the next year that rejuvenated institution listened to Antonio Caso speak with all his irreplaceable eloquence in her behalf. Ever since then philosophy's voice has become louder and louder in Mexico, and, albeit she has had to face opposition here and there in the interim, it looks as if she will no longer have to go "pleading" again in that country.

With the reopening of the University in 1910, the anti-positivistic campaign passed from the private circle of the *Ateneo* to the public lecture hall of Antonio Caso, who dominated the intellectual scene of Mexico until the return of José Vasconcelos around 1920 from one of his political exiles.

Vasconcelos, more the man of action and less the teacher than Caso, reached the zenith of his cultural influence in the early nineteen twenties when, as Secretary of Public Education under President Alvaro Obregón, he devised a system of education for his country on "wide nationalist bases" in keeping with the ideological movement of the *Ateneo* and the Revolution. His chance for becoming the philosopher-king of the Mexican Revolution had arrived at last, but Vasconcelos was soon to learn the lesson which has embittered him ever since, to wit, that you cannot have your intellectual cake and eat it politically. It should be added that, although he did not develop his philosophic system called "esthetic monism" till after 1925, its first draft was published long before that date in his *Pitágoras* of 1916. José Vasconcelos and Antonio Caso are doubtless the two most shining stars ever beheld so far in Mexico's philosophical sky. I believe that Caso is the greater teacher of philosophy and Vasconcelos the greater philosopher of the two, but this is not the occasion to substantiate my opinion.

What is the central direction of philosophy in Mexico since the fifteen-year (1910-1925) hegemony of the two philosophers of the *Ateneo*? To quote from the recent account by Samuel Ramos: "An intellectual generation which began to act publicly between 1925 and 1930 felt dissatisfied with the philosophical romanticism of Caso and Vasconcelos. After a critical revision of their doctrines, they found anti-intellectualism baseless, but they did not wish to return to classical rationalism. In this perplexity, the books of José Ortega y Gasset began to arrive in Mexico, and in the first of them, *Meditaciones del Quijote*, they encountered the solution to the conflict in his doctrine of *vital reason*. In addition, as a result of the revolution, there had been operating a spiritual change, which, starting around 1915, was becoming clarified in the minds of people and could be defined in these terms: Mexico had been discovered. It was a nationalist movement which was extending itself little by little to Mexican culture: in poetry with Ramón López Velarde, in painting with Diego Rivera, in the novel with Mariano Azuela. Vasconcelos himself, from the Ministry of Education, had been talking of forming a national culture and was promoting all efforts moving in that direction. Meanwhile philosophy appeared not to fit within this ideal picture of nationalism because it has always pretended to place itself on the plane of universal man, rebellious to the concrete determinations of space and time, that is, to history. Ortega y Gasset came also to solve this problem by showing the historicity of philosophy in his *Tema de nuestro tiempo*. Assembling these ideas with some others he had expounded in *Meditaciones del Quijote*, that Mexican generation found the epistemological justification of a national philosophy."

The "Mexican generation" of which Ramos speaks is his own and is sometimes referred to as the generation of "*Contemporáneos*" (Contempo-

raries). This generation gets its name from a very small group of *literatos* imbued with a feeling of spiritual "restlessness" and a sense for the problematic. Its members organized a society dubbed *Contemporáneos* in 1928 and published a journal under the same title. The literary group consisted of seven friends who have been nicknamed "the seven wise men of Mexico." The official philosopher of *Contemporáneos* was Samuel Ramos himself and its "unofficial" one was José Romano Muñoz, both of whom had been Caso's students at the National University. Of the two men, Ramos was the intellectual rebel who dared in 1927 to change his mind about the value of Caso and launched a one-man campaign in the first three issues of *Ulises* (the predecessor of *Contemporáneos*) against his teacher's "anti-intellectualism" and its primary source, Bergson's intuitionism. (Ramos was too sympathetic with the nationalist program of education fostered by Vasconcelos to attack his "philosophical romanticism" at the time.) On the other hand, Romano Muñoz was more the peacemaker, as can be gathered from his October 1927 article in the fourth number of *Ulises* entitled, "Neither Irrationalism nor Rationalism, but Critical Philosophy." By "critical philosophy" Romano Muñoz does not mean Kant, but a compromise solution to the old conflict between reason and intuition. The "true philosophic method" is one which would submit the data of intuition to a "thoroughgoing critical examination." Romano Muñoz is honest enough to admit that Caso had anticipated the proper method for philosophy in his *Problemas Filosóficos* of 1915, although he agrees wholeheartedly with Ramos that Caso had "godfathered" intuition so successfully as to bring about an "enervating" effect on a "lazy and irresolute" people, like the Mexicans, who need "solid intellectual discipline" in its place. The article closes acknowledging that Bergson is now "out of fashion" and urging philosophic thought in Mexico "to rejuvenate" itself with the "extremely fertile" ideas of the new Germany and postwar Italy, "without forgetting the contribution of North and South America." In spite of this multiple appeal of the elder member of *Contemporáneos* to go beyond Bergson, Romano Muñoz himself and the generation after him remembered the "contribution" of the first-mentioned country but practically forgot that of Italy and the two Americas.

In order to account for the German influx of ideas in recent Mexican philosophy, let us distinguish the two major antinomies which the generation of *Contemporáneos* had inherited from the previous generation of the *Ateneo* and wanted to solve. The first had to do with the methodological issue as to whether reason or intuition is the criterion of knowledge. The second dealt with the epistemological problem as to whether philosophic truths are eternal or temporal. Ramos reports that his generation used Ortega's doctrine of "vital reason" to get out of the first impasse and the

latter's doctrine of "historical reason" to get out of the second. Since Ortega had already applied the "circumstantialist" point of view to Spain, so Ramos in particular argued for its application to his own country. Here was a typical son of the Mexican Revolution who was anxious to develop the ideological movement of the *Ateneo* to its logical end. Ramos credits Romano Muñoz for being the first to introduce Ortega's ideas into Mexico, and with them came after 1923 his quarterly, *La Revista de Occidente*, from Madrid, through which the Mexican intellectual world learned the German sources of those ideas of the Spanish generation of 1898 and thus became acquainted with such philosophers as Dilthey, Natorp, Husserl, Scheler, Lask, Hartmann, and Heidegger. In brief, recent German philosophy first arrived in Mexico indirectly via Spain, that is, through José Ortega y Gasset who, though originally trained under Hermann Cohen at Marburg, went so far beyond the neo-Kantian position of his teacher as to anticipate and approximate Heidegger's "existentialism" in his own Spanish way. Later Ramos himself, while studying in France and Italy from 1928 to 1929, heard Georges Gurvitch (of Russian origin) lecture on some of these men in his course on contemporary tendencies in German philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris.

The diffusion of recent German thought in Mexico grew to greater proportions before 1938 through the study trips to Germany of Adalberto García de Mendoza, Francisco Larroyo, and Eduardo García Máynez, and after that year, through the arrival of the following Spanish refugees: José Gaos, Eduardo Nicol, Juan Roura-Parella, Luis Recaséns Siches, José Medina Echavarría, the late Joaquín Xirau, and Juan David García Bacca, the most creative mind of the group. Of this talented number of Spanish intellectuals, the greatest influence on the younger generation of Mexico has come from the first, the Ortegúian Gaos who has been by far more effective as a philosophy teacher than as a writer.

Although Antonio Caso had lectured at the University, before the Spanish Republicans arrived, on some of the German philosophers mentioned above, Scheler and Husserl, to be exact, his own philosophy and that of Vasconcelos were originally inspired by contemporary French sources, especially Bergson. (This statement concerning original sources of inspiration should not be extended to intermediate and final sources. We simply cannot escape "stages," however difficult to define, in studying the development of a living mind. For example, Vasconcelos was so enthusiastic last year over our personalist movement that he gave lectures on Professor Brightman of Boston and other personalists at the *Colegio Nacional* in Mexico City.) In fact, we may distinguish broadly between the "new generation" of 1910 and the "newer generation" of 1930 by stating that the

first has been influenced primarily by contemporary *French* ideas and the second, by contemporary *German* ones. Such shift in intellectual geography is reflected in the greater interest of the "newer generation" in the problems of axiology and the applications of phenomenology to determinate regions of inquiry. As to Romano, Muñoz, and Ramos of *Contemporáneos*, they belong, strictly speaking, to neither generation, but constitute the bridge from the one to the other. And with this note of transition, we bring to a close our short story of twentieth-century thought in Mexico.

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