

Cultural Nationalism in Carlos Chávez's Generation*

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I was born in the late fifties. My family migrated from Chile to Mexico in 1968. I was 11 then. In Mexico, much of my generation passed from deep childhood fascination with Mexico's great nationalists of the first half of the 20th century to suspicion – with Diego Rivera leading a pack that had Carlos Chávez as his musical analogue. By the time I was a university student in the National School of Anthropology, in the early seventies, I felt that the precolumbian references in their works, and their overall grandiosity, tended to be demagogic – Aztec iconography in particular had become the face of the Mexican state. Like many others, I preferred artists who explored and spoke more intimately: I preferred Frida, who was not so nauseatingly famous then, over Diego, Silvestre Revueltas or Manuel M. Ponce over Chávez, etcetera.

When I think on this generational stand today, I realize that the meaning of nationalism on a cultural plane was not very clear to me back then, and that what I was seeing as a youth was a very particular moment in its history.

My remarks are geared to exploring the meaning of cultural nationalism in Carlos Chávez's generation. I begin with a brief conceptual discussion, and move from there to some of the specifics of the case.

Conceptually, three simple points need to be made:

The first is a reminder of something that should be obvious, but that we sometimes forget, and this is that nationalism is an international product. Although nationalists are obsessed with "roots" –and therefore with what is autochthonous, what is indigenous, and with local tradition– the obsession with the national is always in contrast with the foreign. Nationalism feeds on examples from other countries, as much as on contrasts between them. Indeed, it involves developing a collective identity in a social imaginary that is populated by national identities.

For this reason, the idea that nationalism is at odds with universalism or with cosmopolitanism is tricky: nationalists usually seek to present their ideas as springing from local customs and roots, but they are in fact always also in intellectual debt to foreigners making analogous moves. Mexico's great cultural nationalists of the 20th century are no

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exception: Diego Rivera trained in Paris as did the musician Manuel M. Ponce. Carlos Chávez's New York connections ran deep, as did those of painter Miguel Covarrubias. Even Mexicans who were proud of not ever having left the country were in constant dialogue with foreign artifacts, foreign ideas, and foreigners within. The national condition is also always an international condition.

So my first point is simply a reminder: nationalism is a collective moment in a world-historical trajectory. It is, for this reason, always suffused with the eeriness of the uncanny: always finding strange and unexpected coincidences between the local and the foreign.

My second point is maybe a little less obvious. At least it was not obvious to me in my student days, even though it follows logically from the first point. Nationalism implies constant translation. It requires moving ideas, artifacts and cultural practices from one place to the other, and transforming them all in the process. If a Mexican nationalist composer is inspired by a Hungarian nationalist composer –by Liszt, let's say– his or her work will involve moving elements of the Hungarian to Mexico by finding local analogues or cognates. This is what I mean by translation.

On the other hand, if the Mexican composer wishes to present his or her music in the United States, the music will need a further layer of translation –often articulated by critics, but sometimes by the composer him or herself– who works to help listeners contextualize the music, by offering local cognates and glosses, explanations and other hints that may aid reception and assimilation of the music. The result is an international movement. The dialogue between Carlos Chávez and Aaron Copland, for instance, was not only a way of presenting Copland in Mexico and Chávez in the United States. It was also a relationship that helped shape a musical current; one opposed to European music, in this case.

So, nationalism is an international product, which involves constant translation, both of foreign elements into national cognates, and of national elements into foreign cognates.

The third point follows from this.

Because nationalism relies so much on translation, it generates a peculiar distance, dramatic irony, and estrangement with regard to local culture. This is a subtle point, certainly, but it bears some consideration: nationalists are in constant awe of local culture. This awe is present because nationalists discover something in the people that is not obvious to the people themselves. This "something" is often thought to reveal a deep truth, it is seen as a key to the universe. Thus, early twentieth century Peruvian socialists discovered that the Incas were the world's first socialists. Mexican nationalists, for their part, made the ancient Maya into proto-astronomers and cosmonauts, and the Nahua into philosophers. Chinese nationalists, for their

part, still seem to believe that Confucius prefigured the economic thought of Adam Smith. These are such awesome operations of the result of translation –translating Karl Marx into the world of the Inca, Copernicus into that of the Maya, or Adam Smith to Ancient China– but they also all imply a very real distance from the people, a distance that allows you to see the parallels.

Indeed, nationalism involves a twin movement: toward the people (who are seen as the true source of all that is authentic), and away from them (because the people's everyday life does not offer a place from which to appreciate and exult in their own originality). For this reason, nationalists are forever foreigners in their own land. Their obsession with authenticity distances them from local sensibilities that are generally indifferent to the origin of this or that habit, or to the parallel between a local habit and an idea or expression that can be found in one iconic pinnacle of civilization or another.

This dialectic of estrangement and identification is what generates nationalism's peculiar magic, its thrill, and its excitement: getting closer to 'the low' –to popular culture– is the only local route to 'the high', to what is universal, to what is 'true'. This is especially the case in poorer countries, where it is difficult to be considered universal simply by subscribing to the latest international fashion, because those fashions generally arrive a little late. So that subscribing to the latest fashion, when you are, say, Peruvian, is always to be outmoded with regard to a New Yorker or a Parisian. But if you emphasize your connection to local popular culture, then you can at least hope to be recognized universally through another route.

Those, then, are my conceptual points: Nationalism is an international product that heavily involves translation. Due to its constant reliance on translation, nationalism also implies the fabrication of a distance between the sensitivities of the nationalist and the everyday world of 'the people'. Now on to Mexico.

I should say, to begin, that once I understood the centrality of translation for nationalism, and its key implication (distance from the people), I became more sympathetic to the accomplishments Mexico's great nationalists of the first half of the twentieth century.

They say that Rogers and Hammerstein had never set foot on Oklahoma when they composed their Broadway musical on the subject. And these two Jewish New Yorkers produced the most iconic work on Oklahoma that exists to this day. Diego Rivera's vision of pre-Columbian Mexico is much like Rogers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma: an outside and idyllic view that made the deepest marks. You have to recognize that merit at least, no matter how idealized Rivera's vision of pre-Columbian Mexico might have been.

But let's consider the nationalist elaboration of Mexican native roots more closely. What is the connection between Mexican modernism and the Aztecs? What, in particular, was Carlos Chávez's relationship to the Aztecs, really? In order to think about this, we have to move from generalities such as my points about translation and distance, to historical specifics. Indeed, specifics are important, because just as the contexts in which nationalism flourishes are varied, so too are its implications. The United States developed its romance with the West and with the frontier as a post-Civil War solution to the antinomy between the North and the South. It is useful to know that when you consider the Oklahoma twang. Goethe's interest in the development of German language and spirit was completely different in context and effect from Hitler's nationalism.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, Mexican intellectuals tended to think of the pre-Columbian civilizations as the local equivalent of Rome, an ancient pagan civilization that provided iconography for local claims to nobility. After Independence, such an operation might easily have been extended to ennoble the local populace as a whole; nevertheless, the failure of post-independence liberalism to even out the differences between the colonial caste system weakened the potential of such a strategy. Republican freedoms did not do enough to level the differences between European descendants and indigenous people or former slaves. As a result, by the end of the 19th century the cultural project was to civilize the Indians by way of aggressive infusion of European culture, and intellectuals tended to cultivate a gingerly distance with regard to the local folk culture as a result. Indeed, the idea of 'culture' as we understand it today did not exist in the early republican era. Instead of the world being composed of a variety of 'cultures', it was divided between civilization and barbarism. And so in Mexico, the point of the national government was to civilize the Indians, to wean them away from superstition and fanaticism.

And yet, by the early twentieth century, the two sources of inspiration that are mixed up to concoct Mexican modernism are pre-Columbian art and living popular culture. That was certainly Diego Rivera's strategy, and although Chávez tended more to the Aztec than to contemporary popular culture, other Mexican modernists, such as Revueltas, relied heavily on contemporary popular culture as well. What changed?

Several factors conditioned and made possible the new intellectual excitement with pre-Columbian and popular cultures.

Around 1900, around the time of the Spanish-American War, Latin America spawned a generation of intellectuals that had to confront the United States as the newly preponderant imperial force in the continent. This generation rejected American society and culture as

materialistic, and represented the United States as having turned its back on the ideals of democracy and civilization. Iconic figures such as Uruguay's Jose Enrique Rodó and Cuba's José Martí saw in Spanish American culture a true heir of the Hellenistic culture that the United States had turned its back on, in favor of material greed. Thus, one important strand in early twentieth century Latin American nationalism was claiming spiritual superiority over the United States, which had become the new hegemonic power in the hemisphere.

However, this current was soon complicated, due to World War I, an event that made idealizing Europe a lot harder than it had been during the *Belle Époque*. World War I signaled clearly that Latin American nationalists would have to develop their own personality, and could not continue to reside in the Parisian Parnassus. After World War I, Spanish Americans could not just aspire to be French.

In Mexico, this development coincided closely in time with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20, a movement that destroyed a number of key institutions of the old Mexican state, including the army, and so made room for a deeply reformed state apparatus. This presented Mexican politicians and intellectuals with the unusual opportunity of re-founding the state and its institutions, just at a time when there was a movement to reject both the United States and Europe as either decadent or imperialist powers. An opportunity benefitted culturally from the back-wind of the Mexican Revolution, which was seen as a moment of national authenticity, which had laid bare the country's deepest contradictions and possibilities.

This, indeed, is why so many of the major Mexican intellectuals of Chávez's generation are also great institution builders: Chávez created the National Orchestra, the National Conservatory, directed the National Institute of Beaux Arts; Rivera created the iconography that dressed up the new state institutions: the ministry of Education, the National Palace, the National School of Agriculture, and so on. It was in fact this connection to the state that raised the suspicions of my generation against the institutionally hyper-inflated, bloated 'giants' of Mexican post-revolutionary culture. Mine was, after all, a post-68 generation that tended to view the state as standing opposed to the people.

However, the view of my generation in this regard was somewhat skewed, I now think. It is true that Carlos Chávez was about as much of an Aztec as Rogers and Hammerstein were Okies. It is also true that the wedding between modernism and indigenous culture was a key feature of the revolutionary state. But the creative engagement of that generation remains deeply interesting, despite its institutional opportunism, and the constant confusion between artistic merit and political power that has characterized Mexico's cultural arena. The energy

of the movement between estrangement and rapprochement of this generation of nationalists and the creativity of their translation choices are really very exciting, even today.