

## 20th Century Mexican Philosophy: Features, Themes, Tasks

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### English Abstract

In what follows, I want to think about some of the ways in which Mexican philosophy, understood here in a historically limited way, avails itself for philosophy's futures, its inter-cultural dialogues, and, especially, those inevitable Inter-American exchanges we are sure to have in those futures. To this end, it is worth considering the Mexican appropriation of philosophy itself, of how it is limited in grounding and reach. Thus the first section of what follows treats a meta-philosophical point that may hold value for any future philosophy concerned with authentic dialogue. In the second section, we will reflect on two issues with which 20th century Mexican philosophy concerns itself at the expense of others: the first, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which according to Fernando Salmeron was the "most relevant event in the contemporary life of Mexico" in the 20th century (1963, 289); and the second, but related in an essential way to the first, the problematic filosofía de lo mexicano, or the philosophy of Mexicanidad. For the sake of brevity, I will focus my remarks on the way in which these themes, namely, the revolution and lo mexicano, appear in the works of Octavio Paz, Leopoldo Zea and Emilio Uranga. All three thinkers appear dissatisfied with the way in which the legacy of the revolution was distorted by post-revolutionary re-thinkings and are troubled by the ideological substratum of lo mexicano. It is Uranga, however, who in his struggles with the legacy of the Mexican revolution achieves a deconstruction of Mexican historical identity that promises to transcend its confessed Mexicanidad in its characterization of subjects framed by events and the necessity to deconstruct those frames. So Uranga has a central role in what follows. In the third section, we consider the tasks of Mexican philosophy. In the final section, I consider the legacy of Mexican philosophy in the 21st century in figures such as Guillermo Hurtado and Mario Teodoro Ramírez.

### Resumen en español

En lo siguiente, quiero contemplar algunas de las formas en las que la filosofía mexicana, considerada aquí de una manera históricamente limitada, se dispone para los futuros de la filosofía, sus diálogos interculturales, y, en especial, aquellos inevitables intercambios Interamericanos que tendremos en esos futuros. Con este fin, vale la pena considerar la apropiación mexicana de la filosofía misma, de la forma en que está limitada en fundación y alcance. Así, la primera sección se ocupa de un punto meta-filosófico. En la segunda sección, reflexionamos sobre dos cuestiones con las que la filosofía mexicana del siglo XX se ha ocupado: la primera, la cuestión de la revolución mexicana de 1910, que según Fernando Salmerón fue el "acontecimiento más relevante en la vida contemporánea de México" del siglo XX; y la segunda, y relacionada de una manera esencial con la primera, la problemática filosofía de lo mexicano. Centraré mis observaciones sobre la forma en que estos temas, a saber, la

revolución y lo mexicano, aparecen en la obra de Octavio Paz, Leopoldo Zea y Emilio Uranga. Los tres pensadores parecen descontentos con la forma en que el evento de la revolución fue distorsionado por concepciones post-revolucionarias y también se preocupan por el sustrato ideológico de lo mexicano. Es Uranga, sin embargo, que en su lucha con el legado de la revolución logra una deconstrucción de la identidad histórica mexicana que promete trascender su confesada mexicanidad en su caracterización de los sujetos enmarcados por acontecimientos y la necesidad de deconstruir esos marcos. Así Uranga tiene un papel central en lo que sigue. En la tercera sección, consideramos las tareas de la filosofía mexicana. En la sección final, comento sobre la herencia de la filosofía mexicana en el siglo 21, particularmente como esta herencia se encuentra en figuras como Guillermo Hurtado y Mario Teodoro Ramírez.

### **Resumo em português**

No que segue, quero contemplar algumas formas pelas quais a filosofia mexicana, considerada aqui como historicamente limitada, dispõe-se aos futuros da filosofia, seus diálogos interculturais, e, particularmente, aos inevitáveis intercâmbios interamericanos que certamente teremos nesses futuros. Com essa finalidade, vale a pena considerar a apropriação mexicana da filosofia, da forma como está limitada em fundamentos e alcance. Assim, a primeira parte trata de um ponto metafilosófico. Na segunda parte, refletimos sobre duas questões que interessaram à filosofia mexicana desde o século XX: a primeira, a questão da revolução mexicana de 1910, a qual, segundo Fernando Salmerón, foi o “acontecimento mais importante da vida contemporânea no México” do século XX; e a segunda, relacionada de maneira essencial com a primeira, é a problemática da filosofia do mexicano. Centrarei minhas observações sobre a forma como esses temas, a saber, a revolução e o mexicano, aparecem na obra de Octavio Paz, Leopoldo Zea e Emilio Uranga. Os três pensadores parecem descontentes com a forma como o evento da revolução foi distorcido por concepções pós-revolucionárias e também se preocupam com o substrato ideológico d’o mexicano. É Uranga, não obstante, quem, na sua luta com o legado da revolução, consegue operar uma desconstrução da identidade histórica mexicana que promete transcender sua confessada mexicanidade na sua caracterização dos sujeitos marcados por acontecimentos e a necessidade de des-construir esses marcos. Dessa maneira, Uranga tem um papel central no que segue. Na seção final, comento sobre a herança da filosofia mexicana no século XXI, particularmente como tal herança se encontra em figuras como Guillermo Hurtado e Mario Teodoro Ramírez.

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We understand 20th century Mexican philosophy as a project of self-discovery and affirmation begun in Mexico at or around the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and lasting until the end of the century, with various interruptions, refusals,

denials, and erasures along the way.[1] This period in Mexican history witnesses the emergence of a philosophical consciousness preoccupied with cultural and historical identity, authenticity, and anti-positivistic, anti-imperialist criticism that simultaneously challenges the nature and limits of Western philosophy itself. Insofar as Mexico—which out of the chaos of the revolution “has [now] been discovered” (Ramos 1943, 149)[2]—constitutes a common denominator in these reflections, it appears as an all-encompassing reality (an ideological, historical, super-structure) that grounds and bestows identity. Philosophers thus ask into the *Mexicanness* of Mexican identity, culture, and history. This period introduces *la filosofía de lo mexicano*, or the “philosophy of Mexicanness,” that defines the most contentious period in Mexican philosophy, namely, the period represented by the famed *Ateneo de la Juventud* established in the years before the Revolution and lasting until 1925, *los Contemporáneos* which see their influence wane in the early 1940s, and ending with the philosophical failures of *el grupo Hiperion* in the late 1950s.[3] Despite obvious limitations that in hindsight seem unforgivable (e.g., a blind disregard for Mexico’s complex racial, gender, and economic divides), this period is also marked with an originality that merits consideration, revision, and preservation, as we think about the many futures of philosophy in the 21st century.

In what follows, I want to think about some of the ways in which Mexican philosophy, again, understood here in a historically limited way, avails itself for philosophy’s futures, its inter-cultural dialogues, and, especially, those inevitable Inter-American exchanges we are sure to have in those futures. To this end, it is worth considering the Mexican appropriation of philosophy itself, of how it is limited in grounding and reach. Thus the first section of what follows treats a meta-philosophical point that may hold value for any future philosophy concerned with authentic dialogue. In the second section, we will reflect on two issues with which 20th century Mexican philosophy concerns itself at the expense of others: the first, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which according to Fernando Salmeron was the “most relevant event in the contemporary life of Mexico” in the 20th century (1963, 289); and the second, but related in an essential way to the first, the problematic *filosofía de lo mexicano*, or the philosophy of Mexicanness (cf. Villegas 1979). For the sake of brevity, I will focus my remarks on the way in which these themes, namely, the revolution and *lo mexicano*, appear in the works of Octavio Paz, Leopoldo Zea and Emilio Uranga. All three thinkers appear dissatisfied with the way in which the legacy of the revolution was distorted by post-revolutionary re-thinkings and are troubled by the ideological substratum of *lo mexicano*. It is Uranga, however, who in his struggles with the legacy of the Mexican revolution achieves a *deconstruction*[4] of Mexican historical identity that promises to transcend its confessed Mexicanness in its characterization of subjects framed by events and the necessity to deconstruct those frames. So Uranga has a central role in what follows. In the third section, we consider the tasks of Mexican philosophy. In the final section, I consider the legacy of Mexican philosophy in the 21st century in figures such as Guillermo Hurtado and Mario Teodoro Ramírez.

## I. Familiar Features of Mexican Philosophy

At the risk of falling into an undesirable exclusionary essentialism, in my readings of the Mexican philosophers of the 20th century I am often confronted with two recurring and *familiar features*. Mexican philosophy is (1) *circumstantialist* and (2) analytically *introspective* (what, following Uranga, I call auscultatory).[5] It is circumstantialist because, following Ortega y Gasset, it takes seriously the Spaniard's claim that "One reaches one's full capacity when one acquires complete consciousness of one's circumstances. Through them," says Ortega, "one communicates with the universe" (2000, 41). As such, Mexican philosophers attempt complete consciousness of the legacy of conquest and colonialism, the failures of modernism, or the trauma of revolution, and on that basis communicate philosophically with the universe. The second feature is that Mexican philosophy is analytically introspective/auscultatory. What I mean by this is that it digs into Mexican history, into Mexico's historically constituted sense of itself, for the truth of its own being. In this sense, it is self-critical; the aim of auscultation is ultimately to detect and deconstruct the meta-narratives, ideologies, or pretensions that frame modern Mexican subjectivity, such as the narrative of national exceptionalism that grows out of the revolution. An introspective analysis of its own circumstance is thus the foundation from which communication with the universe will take place.

### I.1. Feature 1: Circumstantialism

It does not escape Mexican philosophers that a thinking of totality, a thinking that transcends contingency and place, has been the hallmark of philosophy since its naming by the Greeks. But Mexican philosophers have come to understand that a thinking that thinks totality is ultimately alienated from the specificity of its emergence. In the process of grasping at the universal—what they are told philosophy *has to be*—they've discovered that their thoughts are incapable of letting go of their situated existence, an incapacity (call it loyalty) that forces a return of thinking to its place, to the *circumstance*.

This struggle between infinite and the finite, identity and difference, universality and circumstance, has a central place in the work of Emilio Uranga and Leopoldo Zea.[6] The starting point of Uranga's philosophizing, for instance, is a suspicion that essence and universality are historical constructs serving the interests of colonial power. Thus, he says in his *Análisis del ser del mexicano* (1951), "we are not certain of the existence of man in general...[or of] what passes itself off as man in general, namely, generalized European humanity" (Uranga 2013, 43). The movement away from this doubtful "man in general" requires a return to origins, that is, to one's *specific* origins, where the generalizations of European philosophy fit only loosely. The struggle appears, however, when despite the return to origins and the bracketing of "man in general," Uranga is forced—as if by the pull of Western philosophy's colonial presence—to seek what he calls those "*rasgos esenciales*" or "essential aspects" that define the being of the Mexican.

Just to be clear, the circumstantialism of Mexican philosophy does not preclude it from reflecting about the same issues with which other philosophers from other times and other places have busied themselves; Mexican philosophy adamantly affirms itself, as Leopoldo Zea was fond of saying, as *filosofía sin más*—philosophy, pure and simple (1969). But those local emergencies to which their attention was drawn—and to which it is still drawn— have demanded philosophical readings and articulations that do not conform to standard practice. However, for this reason what we are calling “Mexican philosophy” has remained outside philosophy’s grand narrative despite being a sustained commentary on identity, history, and culture of significant philosophical value and interest to an entire generation of thinkers.

But what is the Mexican circumstance? In a short review of Guillermo Hurtado’s (2011) *Mexico sin sentido*, Mario Teodoro Ramírez has recently written a most observant and telling description of the Mexican circumstance relative to the life of philosophy in that country:

If a pre-Socratic philosopher lived in today’s Mexico...he would have to conclude that Being is violent, that is, that it is death, destruction, irrationality, nothingness, pure non-Being. Perhaps he would refuse to invent philosophy and he would have no choice but to remain in myth, in innocence and in the non-reflective. But we cannot refuse the necessity to think, nor the necessity to reinvent philosophy beginning from the extremely negative conditions in which we find ourselves....We cannot give ourselves the luxury to begin from the standpoint of those ideal conditions of a presumed universal philosophizing...[we begin from a thinking] that allows us to confront what there is, what touches us, and try from there to contribute toward the search for possible exits from our situation, the situation of a country imprisoned by violence but, and above all, and what’s most worrying, imprisoned by defeatism, bewilderment, by nihilism (2014, 159).

Although written more than half a century after Uranga’s *Análisis*, the circumstances to which Ramírez refers and onto which philosophy anchors itself have not radically changed. Hurtado shares a similar conception of 21st century Mexico: “Mexican society is disenchanting, discouraged, and disintegrated; but worst of all is the fact that it is *disoriented*. There is an emptiness of ideas, values, and projects” (2011, 23).

The disenchantment that Hurtado mentions is a cultural and historical remainder that could be traced back to a variety of sources. In the post-Revolutionary period the disenchantment or alienation could be easily traced to the event of the Revolution itself. The Revolution was the formative event of the Mexican circumstance—it was that through which communication with the universe would have to be established.

### *1.2. Familiar Feature 2: Auscultatory Analysis*

For better or worse, the Revolution awakened a national consciousness. Or, as Uranga observes: “the being of the Mexican is a being that has *emerged* from a

revolution” (2013, 92). The suggestion here is that what emerges is also a new beginning, new opportunities to build new worlds out of chaos, death and destruction. However, the *being* that emerges from the revolution is immediately arrested by discourses that seek political, ontological, and metaphysical security and permanence; these discourses form a nationalist ideology that mediate and reshape the event of revolution itself, and, as a consequence, Mexican identity itself, in accordance with the interests of power. The being of the Mexican is thus a being that emerges from a revolution only to be submerged in its aftermath, as the revolution is reimagined and re-conceptualized so as to function as a founding narrative, or as an origin myth.

Philosophers, coming of age in the atmosphere of this mythology, are quick to recognize its limiting and constricting effects. They come to see that the so-called revolutionary ideology conceals a deeper reality, one that holds the promise of authenticity and genuine overcoming. Thus philosophy itself takes on the character of an attending to the circumstance—of a *listening-in* to culture. Uranga writes: “Our character, that structure of our being that history has authorized for us to express (*plasmar*), has been ‘executed’ (*ejecutado*) from a depth of ontological auscultation (*auscultación*) that we should not disparage” (2013, 36). The reference to “auscultation,” or to the act of listening to the sounds of the human body during a medical examination, suggests both that the “true” being of the Mexican will be detected deep *beneath* the superficial structures that hide it *and* that the project of unconcealment will demand the attentive “ear” of Mexicans themselves, as they learn to listen to the sounds of their own ontological constitution. In Uranga’s introspective, auscultatory analysis, the confrontation with this deeper reality reveals an essential indeterminateness in the Mexican being-in-the-world that he characterizes as *nepantla*, *zozobra*, and accidentality.

Ultimately, together with the new mode of being that emerges with the revolution there is also the awakening of a *philosophical consciousness* that seeks to *listen-in* and articulate the reasons for the social and cultural failings of post-Revolutionary Mexico. This philosophical consciousness becomes the revelatory apparatus through which the Mexican discovers the manner of its framing by post-Revolutionary narratives, or as Uranga says, by the *ideology of the catastrophic*. These narratives or ideologies conceal within themselves the fragmentation, contingency, and disunity that accompanies modern Mexican culture and constitutes the Mexican present as described by Ramírez and Hurtado above.

## II. Themes in Mexican Philosophy

### II.1. Theme 1: The Mexican Revolution

Thus we have the meta-philosophical point that 20th century Mexican philosophy is a circumstantialist and analytically introspective/auscultatory philosophy. Now let us consider those recurring themes with which it finds itself occupied, namely, the revolution and *lo mexicano*. First, the revolution.

As a historical event, the Mexican Revolution was both politically and culturally complex. It was fought in the name of freedom, in the name of rights, for the sake of peasants, and for the sake of the *criollo* elites; it called for an end to presidential re-elections, and it called for centralized government; its leaders represented every interest and every temperament, they came from the south, the north, the mountains and the cities; Villa, Madero, Carranza, Zapata, Orozco, Huerta, and Obregon fought alongside one another and against one another, they killed and were (eventually) killed.[7] In short, it was, as Octavio Paz refers to it, a “fiesta of bullets” (1985, 148).

The hostilities of the Revolution officially ended in 1920 by means of various forms of political reconciliations and assassinations, compromises and forfeitures. However, the *idea* of the Revolution persisted, kept alive in a process that institutionalized it into the national consciousness as a demand for loyalty and sacrifice. This process was an ideological process that re-imagined Mexican reality in terms of those principles that fueled revolutionary fervor, forgetting for its own sake that some of those principles (such as agrarian reform) stood in direct contradiction with the political realities of modernism promoted by the nationalist regime.[8] Nonetheless, the ideology of the post-revolutionary era was infused with the power to calibrate the direction of the nation in accordance with those principles that made better use of the Revolutionary consciousness, amongst these, a fervent nationalism, agrarian reform, and *Indigenismo* (i.e., a renewed concern for the rights of Mexico’s indigenous population coupled with a patronizing interest into the indigenous population’s cultural “value”). Because it professed to retain those revolutionary ideals, even if, in fact, it ignored them in *practice*, the ideology of the Revolution became the source of national, political, and cultural identity for post-Revolutionary Mexicans. This is why Ramírez notes that: “In reality or in the imagination, in action or in pure ideology, the Revolution was something that ‘existed’; above all, it is something that *defined the being and the destiny of the nation*, that came to signify the *blueprint* for a redefinition and reinterpretation of the national historical process in its totality” (2006, 153).

The institutionalization of the revolution in the social and cultural imaginary constitutes a significant aspect of a circumstance with which mid-century Mexicans had to reckon. This reckoning is well documented in the literature of the post-Revolutionary period. Literary giants such as Mariano Azuela, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes, for instance, lend voice to the paradoxes of a revolutionary ideology that professes the righteousness of a selfless sacrifice for the *patria* while allowing wealth and power to corrupt its principles. Rulfo, for instance, depicts those who having dutifully pledged their lives for the nation are afterwards marginalized and ignored by the political process and are, in fact, worse off than they were before they sacrificed life and limb for its consummation. His *El llano en llamas* (1953) is arguably the most vivid in its depictions of this dismay, provoking the fundamental question as to the meaning of the Revolution itself. Similarly, Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) illustrates the manner in which the Revolution lives on as a demand for sacrifice, and how, once institutionalized

in the popular imagination, this demand is deployed for the benefit of the political and economic elite.

### *II.1.1. The Revolution in Octavio Paz*

While artistic forms like painting, poetry or the novel admirably reveal the paradoxes of post-revolutionary Mexico, only philosophy is thought equipped to handle the question into the ontological and epistemological conditions of Mexican culture in the wake of the *revolution-as-event*. Seen through the lens of philosophy, the revolution appears as a radical schematic shift in the conceptual register of Mexican consciousness; a shift, or transferal, of epistemological and ontological categories to a new source, a new consciousness, that emerges and is contiguous with the spectacle of self-inflicting violence. This new consciousness represents an *authentic* Mexican being, i.e., a free and autonomous manner of being, capable of its own manner of chaos and suicide.

In his *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Octavio Paz describes the revolution as involving “an excess and a squandering, a going to extremes, an explosion of joy and hopelessness” (1984, 148). We can say that together with the emergence of a new, post-colonial, ultra-nationalist consciousness, which is that explosion of joy to which Paz refers, the revolution represents an excess of death and suffering, a squandering of youth, of the past, of human life, but also a real cry against a hopeless condition. But Paz, like Zea and Uranga, see these explosions and excesses at play in the inner being of the Mexican individual, so that the *fiesta of bullets* is in macrocosm the complex ontological universe of the Mexican himself. The event of the revolution is then a return to inwardness, or, as Paz says, to origins, and thus, to a genuine and authentic Mexican identity. Ultimately, once the *fiesta of bullets* comes to an end, so does the moment of authenticity and genuine self-expression. What comes after is an attempt to capture the spirit of the revolution and exploit it for political expediency.

The meta-discourse that sanctions the revolution as constitutive of modern Mexican identity aims to reproduce an ontological version of revolutionary joy and hopelessness—joy becomes an aspirational ideal and hopelessness that from which one can aspire. But in so doing, personal and social visions of the good life are limited to a horizon of post-Revolutionary politics where hopelessness is reproduced to perpetuate the need for social and political restrictions and framings. This ideology of hopelessness and (an ideal) joy ends up interpellating the Mexican individual in a process by which identity—what it means to be Mexican—is essentialized and limited as a national identity.

Against this meta-discourse, Paz is forced to conclude: “It is scarcely very strange that a good portion of our political ideas are still nothing but words intended to hide and restrict our true selves” (1984, 146). The Revolution was itself a revolt against those ideologies that restricted the Mexican’s true self, that “[replaced him] with an inanimate abstraction” (167) and as such, it was more than a political and cultural



upheaval, but the very “vengeance of reality” (148). The revolution was Mexican reality unveiling itself, and so it “was not the face of courtesy, of dissimulation, of form imposed by means of lies and mutilations; it was the brutal, resplendent face of death and fiestas” (148) where the Mexican individual, “drunk with his own self, is aware at last, in a mortal embrace, of his fellow Mexican” (149).

But, if the Revolution is a spontaneous and brutal moment of authenticity, then the process of its institutionalization into the cultural imaginary mediates that spontaneity and brutality and robs it of its authenticity. Paz describes the institutionalization process thus: “The Revolution began as a discovery of our own selves and a return to our origins; later it became a search and an abortive attempt at a synthesis; finally, since it was unable to assimilate our tradition and to offer us a new and workable plan, it became a compromise” (1984, 168). Saying that the revolution is a compromise, a social consensus, is to say that the revolution, as a historical event, is now myth, a constructed story of how Mexican’s revealed their Mexicanness through brutal expressions of humanity. This story is the basis of a new framework of national and cultural identity—a framework for what became known as *lo mexicano*.

### *II.1.2. The Revolution in Leopoldo Zea*

Armed with a nationalist ideology, post-revolutionary Mexico staunchly protected what remained of itself after the violence, namely, that sense of uniqueness that lent the revolution its particular character. Through its master narratives and ideologies, it sought to affirm sameness rather than difference, the State rather than the individual, and a national essence rather than individual existence. This essentialism forces Octavio Paz to the critical conclusion that “*Mexicanidad* is a way of not being ourselves, a way of life that is now our own” (1984, 169). “This,” he says referring to the “not being ourselves” of the Mexican “helps define the problem of Mexican philosophy” (168). That is, the problem for Mexican philosophy is the problem of inauthenticity and the ideological interpellations that maintain it.

The concept of *mexicanidad* can be traced to the colonial period, when mestizos recognized the strategic power of the idea and deployed it as a form of resistance against the image of humanity promoted by their former colonizers (Zea 1952, 202). Claiming an essence, i.e., Mexicanness, was a means of demanding membership in the universal human community, where essences had currency and rational legitimacy. At this time, writes Leopoldo Zea, “far from indicating a reduction of humanity, [*mexicanidad*] becomes its most concrete expression” (1952, 202). In the period of Independence (the 19th century), intellectuals promote the idea in an effort to show their European and North American counterparts that Mexican identity, like “American” or French identity, is not merely a social construct or an accident of history, but a universal; on this view, *mexicanidad* is a *form* of humanity that modernity is helping to unveil. The instantiation of this form of humanity, however, is interrupted by Revolution at the start of the 20th century, an event in which *mexicanidad*, as the name for the Mexican essence, as the name for unity and sameness, is rejected in spontaneous acts of chaos

and violence by beings that only recognize their differences. Zea put it in the following way:

The Mexican Revolution revealed to the Mexican aspects of himself that dominant groups had previously endeavored to hide. An almost ancestral world bursts forth as if by magic [*como por encanto*] obliterating that ridiculous and simple world that the Porfirio Díaz regime [*el Porfiriato*] had elevated. With this Revolution an authentic return of man into himself is initiated. First the painters and the poets, now the philosophers continue the project of revealing authentic humanity [*el hombre sin más*]; a concrete human being, but a human nonetheless, as human as those humans from other cultures and other continents (1952, 213).

Amidst the Revolutionary fervor, Mexicans affirmed their differences, or their concreteness, displacing previous regulative notions of humanity as such. Against a demanding Eurocentric humanism, Mexicans proclaimed themselves as creators of their own world and masters of their destiny. But these affirmations emerging from the brutality of revolution also revealed unbridgeable schisms in world-views, irreconcilable perspectives regarding that destiny.

*Mexicanidad* once again promises to transcend the divisions, to bridge schisms and unify a divided people. In post-revolutionary rhetoric it represents that marker of identity that survives revolution and chaos and, as such, can serve as the basis for an authentic national identity; the idea of Mexicanidad, or *lo mexicano*, is thus especially attractive for nationalist ideologues bent on exploiting the principles of the revolutionary ethos for political ends. The ideological insistence or repetition that there is something uniquely Mexican about the revolution, that *lo mexicano* survives a metaphorical suicide of the Mexican people, lends to *lo mexicano* the appearance of transcendence. Of course, for us, this transcendence shows itself to be an illusion, propaganda at its best.

For Zea, the nationalism driving this post-revolutionary rhetoric is not innocent. He writes: "Nationalism as such is a great danger...We do not want to create one more mask of the Mexican or of *lo mexicano* that serves once again to conceal that human reality that was revealed with such difficulties" (1952, 214). In other words, the schisms, divisions, uncertainties revealed by the revolutionary upheaval must remain exposed so that they may be confronted for the sake of dialectical overcoming; however, what nationalist discourses and ideologies accomplish is that they hide, or mask, the revelations. A nationalist appropriation of *lo mexicano* is one such mask, concealing a hard-won human reality.

Aside from reflecting structural and historical divisions, social and political failures, and intra-individual tensions, these realities also reflected the intimate spirit of a people, one in conflict with itself, with its history, and with its circumstance. As Zea sees it, the historical event of the revolution can be traced back to that intimate struggle. "This movement [the Revolution]," he says, "had its roots in the inwardness of the Mexican himself" (1952, 212). Zea's return to the individual as the source of Mexico's defining

historical event means that *lo mexicano* (the inwardness) and the revolution are reflections of themselves.

That is, according to Zea's reading, the revolution and *lo mexicano* go hand in hand, they are both expressions of a will to power that seeks to assert itself before history and external influences, viz., whatever is the outside the Mexican individual, namely, North Americans, the European colonizers, cultural imperialism, etc. Danger appears, however, when this will to power is subsumed under rhetoric that masks its concreteness, its uniqueness, and its reality. When this happens the revolution becomes myth and *lo mexicano* an essential determination with hegemonic pretensions. In short, the revolution loses its violence while *lo mexicano* loses its Mexicanness.

### II.1.3. *The Revolution in Emilio Uranga*

The philosophical critique of the Revolution as ideology, narrative, and myth is carried out in a most philosophically interesting way in Emilio Uranga's *Análisis del ser del mexicano*, a foundational text of 20th century Mexican philosophy published in 1952. In that work, Uranga proposes to do more than what the title indicates, namely, more than a hermeneutic of Mexican existence; it also aims to be a critical deconstruction of modes of intelligibility that seek to define the Mexicans rigidly as this or that kind of being. Uranga's critical philosophy thus aims to be a deconstruction of those interpretations that bestow totalizing descriptions of self and culture, such as those descriptions that define certain people and entire societies as rational or civilized, ultimately legitimated by God, law, or philosophy. Thus he says that "every interpretation of man as a substantial creature seems to us inhuman" (2013, 45). The colonizer's interpretation of himself as complete in his humanity, legitimated by God, and authorized by Kings is one such *inhuman* interpretation; mestizo interpretations of themselves as civilized before indigenous peoples is another *inhuman* interpretation; the interpretation of women as inferior in strength and aptitude is another; but *inhuman* is also the consumerist interpretation of indigenous identity in essentialist terms as primitive, pure, uncorrupted, innocent, etc. Similarly to these colonial, racially-motivated, phallic-centric, and consumerist interpretations that promote identity in a totalizing fashion, an essentialist interpretation of Mexican culture and subjectivity would likewise have to be *inhuman*. This particular interpretation emerges from the event of the Mexican revolution, whose post-revolutionary ideology (its mythology, its meta-narrative) aims to define Mexicanness rigidly and for the sake of political hegemony.

Mexican philosophers are well aware that a lack of analytical introspection is concomitant with the hegemonic pretensions of a corrosive ideology. The revolution-as-myth poses a special problem since questioning it requires betraying certain loyalties that the myth itself demands of its subjects—it would be akin to a counter-revolutionary act. Thus unquestioned, the revolution becomes circumstance, it is the world into which one is thrown. Uranga frames the problem in the following way: "The problem of the revolution is precisely that of the reality that it has produced, of the sense that it has given us and in which we invest ourselves without clarifying it or making it

precise” (2013, 91). For the post-revolutionary Mexican, the revolution is the source of sense, the source of identity, and source of justification. The Mexican becomes a subject of the revolution without being temporally coincident with the event itself; it is a subject of an event after the event, or in the wake of the event; or, we could say, the Mexican subject is a post-event subject. Uranga continues: “We live immersed in that sense, but immersed in it does not mean that we have appropriated that sense by any means, but rather only that without realizing it we live at its expense” (91). Translating this statement into a more critical vocabulary, we can say that the post-event subject is interpellated by the revolution.

These critical observations regarding post-event subjects, interpellation, and the necessity for analytical introspection/auscultation can, I take it, be appropriated in our own, post-9/11, world. In fact, this is a lesson that Uranga wants his text to convey: “The image of man that will emerge from [our study] will not be original, but it will be originary, which means that in it one will recognize all of those who through a thousand accidents of history, of culture or society, have found themselves cornered and *framed by the catastrophic*” (2013, 108; my emphasis). Here, then, the task is to think about what it means to be “framed by the catastrophic.” In my reading being so framed means that one’s possibilities for self-understanding and self-fulfillment are limited by interpretive schemes that emerge from catastrophic events, such as the Mexican Revolution, *Tlateloco*, 9/11, or the implementation of NAFTA.

Deconstructing the frames of the catastrophic, or the ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico, requires philosophy. Uranga calls his method phenomenology, but quickly distances himself from the orthodoxy of the tradition:

Phenomenology has unjustly been reduced to an inquiry into essences and it has been forgotten that it is something radically different, something that can be described as an advance toward the nutritive or originary roots of the human character and not toward a fixing of a particular and closed structure (2013, 109).

His advance toward the nutritive roots of the Mexican character takes Uranga, as it does contemporaries like Zea and Paz, to reconsider the “meaning” and “significance” of the Mexican Revolution, the ontological complexities of Mexican being, and the existential-ontological relationship between these two.

Consequently, Uranga recognizes the ineffectiveness of the revolutionary narrative in the everyday lives of post-Revolutionary Mexicans. The spatial, conceptual, and temporal distance between the *event* and its rhetorical manifestation drains it of its power. “In its dimension of interiority,” Uranga writes, referring to the internalization and institutionalization of the Revolution, “the Revolution no longer nourishes us” (2013, 90). The event-turned-myth of the Revolution, in fact, limits the possibilities of human flourishing in the process of its codification into the cultural life of Mexicans. But, more than limit human possibilities, it “covers them over” (90). It does this when it is mythologized, converted into a narrative of struggle and resistance by those against

whom struggle and resistance is prohibited (i.e., the State). The Revolution is no longer nourishing when it ceases to be an existential strategy and becomes spectacle. More importantly, Uranga suggest that when the Revolution takes on this rhetorical structure, it fails to be what it was at the time of its occurrence, namely, a revelation of authentic being. He says: “Floating upon the surface of appearances [the Revolution as ideology] has allowed what is essential to escape” (91).

A critical confrontation with the Revolution-as-narrative is thus necessary if what has escaped is to be captured. This is a task for philosophers, who following the lead of the poets, must unhinge the reality of the Revolution from the frames of the institution. The task is, he writes: “To turn that novelty of our nation into an everyday affair, to repeat its possibilities without fear...The task is, then, to be vigilant and make sure that the essence of what the Revolution has produced become for us an everyday lived reality practiced in everyday situations” (Uranga 2013, 90). The “novelty,” of course, being the revolution as a uniquely Mexican event, and that possibility that must be repeated “without fear” being that consciousness of finitude that empowers rebellion and constitutes courage in the face of death.

## *II.2. Theme 2: la filosofía de lo mexicano*

As a living event, as an always immediate catastrophe that Mexicans are forced to re-live via its ideological productions and reproductions, the revolution has the power to frame, or shape Mexican identity. The revolution, says Uranga, “revives or destroys its own possibilities in each individual Mexican while conferring upon him his individuality” (2013, 90). Of course, it is not the actual revolution-as-event that is conferring individuality, but the ideological bi-product of that event, which beckons Mexicans—or those in the name of whom the revolution was fought—to own up to its vision and take a stand on its principles.

Naturally, Mexican critical consciousness, already distrustful of its own colonial heritage, will be suspicious of anything that *confers individuality*. Uranga, whose existentialism he owes his teacher José Gaos (and by extension, to José Ortega y Gasset), is critical of any totalization of the revolutionary upheaval into political or cultural ideologies that seemingly forget the event’s origins in existential suffering. Thus, in Uranga’s *Análisis* the narrative structure of the revolution is exposed as a set of institutionalized principles that oppressively frame the everyday lives of Mexicans after the 1920s. The notion of “lo mexicano”—a phrase referring to *what it means to be Mexican*—is dislodged from a post-revolutionary philosophical humanism aimed at defining Mexican identity as “[non]static...modifiable reality...filled with possibilities” (Salmeron 1963, 290)[9] and is appropriated by those framing/interpellating ideologies that posit “lo mexicano” as an index of identity, as a measure for what is and what is not “Mexican”—as stereotypically macho, melancholy, suffering inferior complexes, delusions of grandeur, careless, death-obsessed, violent, a *pelado*. [10] Against this essentialist and totalizing understanding of *lo mexicano* and Mexican identity, Uranga posits the ontological dimension of Mexican subjectivity, one that

cannot be captured by narratives or institutionalizations and that escapes the kind of conceptualization that can feed a nationalist ideology (more on that below).

The ideology that formally subsumes the concept of “lo mexicano” into its conceptual register necessarily articulates the event of the revolution as a uniquely *Mexican* event. It says that the revolution could not have happened anywhere else and at any other time or in any other way; its heterogeneity, its complexity, its misery, and its contradictions all reflected an unmistakable *Mexicanness*. It was not imitative or repetitive of other histories or rebellions, it was singular in its happening. As such, it was colored through and through by a specifically Mexican way of being and doing things, i.e., by *lo mexicano*. Post-revolutionary ideologues promote this distinctive coloring, i.e., “*lo mexicano*,” as an anti-colonial, but especially an anti-imperialist, strategy deployed by Mexican culture, and, moreover, as representing an essential difference, one that defines Mexican individuality both historically and existentially.[11]

Of course, the essentialism of *lo mexicano* is not hard to miss. While seemingly promoting this essential difference as a mark of Mexican identity, Octavio Paz, in his *Labyrinth of Solitude*, stresses that identification with “lo mexicano” is one of the ways into bad faith; appealing to the normative demands of “lo mexicano,” that is, allows Mexicans the opportunity to refuse to take responsibility for their own authenticity and their own lives. For his part, Uranga challenges the ideological substratum, and thus the essentialism, of “lo mexicano,” by arguing that whatever makes Mexican’s uniquely Mexican is something that also makes them uniquely human. That is, if it refers at all, “lo mexicano” refers to a constant *becoming*, to a moving ground, to *zozobra*, to an existing that is a perpetual fleeing from its uncertainty, or accidentality, and to its opposite; *lo mexicano* is perpetual ontological migration, immigration, emigration. This is the human condition revealed in the Mexican (as that which is most proximally given to auscultatory analysis) and, while it announces an ontological uniqueness, it is not the kind of uniqueness that serves ideological purposes.

Uranga’s understanding of the notion of “lo mexicano” is very intentionally philosophical and, for this reason, great care has been taken to criticize it (see Villegas 1979). Those criticisms, however, which make little effort to distinguish between the *ideology* and the *philosophy* of “lo mexicano,” ultimately mischaracterize Uranga’s efforts.[12] Uranga’s philosophy is rooted in a truly unique ontology. In accordance with the 16th century Dominican friar Diego Durán’s observation that the Mexican character is a product of “two laws,” viz., the indigenous and the Christian, Uranga refers to the being of the Mexican as perpetually “oscillating and pendular” (2013, 93). Reaching further back to the conceptual arsenal of pre-Hispanic culture, Uranga captures the oscillating and pendular movement of Mexican being with the náhuatl concept of “*nepantla*.” *Nepantla* refers to being “in between, in the middle, in the center,” as opposed to being “installed” determinately in any one state or ontological position (93). That is, the in-betweenness of *nepantla* is not the in-betweenness of a middle-ground or center that dictates its own extremes; it is not the in-betweenness of a valley surrounded by mountains. The in-betweenness of *nepantla* is the in-betweenness of

transition, the neither here nor there of being in-between places; it is the in-betweenness of fog in a meadow, of moving sand in the ocean current. In this sense, the Mexican ontological condition is conceived as dynamic rather than static, in a state of constant migration from extremes to center, from center to peripheries, and from peripheries to peripheries, never settled in “one at the expense of the other” (93).

The ideological conception of “lo mexicano” fails to capture those characteristics, such as *nepantla* and its obvious temporality, that would lend the concept existential legitimacy. This failure has to do with the fact that *nepantla* is a human, not only a Mexican, ontological condition. Staying true to the phenomenological dictum that demands one attend only to what is proximally one’s own, *nepantla* reveals itself to Uranga’s auscultatory analysis as constitutive of Mexican being (of course! he admits to know nothing of “man in general”!). Adoption of this revelation by a nationalist ideology would be self-defeating.

Thus, Uranga searches, *listens-in*, for a human reality beneath the many skins of the Mexican. He finds it as a perpetual unsettledness, a constant noise. *Nepantla*, then, does not give itself directly, as other states like melancholy or *desmadre*, but rather gives itself indirectly as a pretheoretical anxiety or an un-groundedness, prompting Uranga to say that *nepantla* represents “the cardinal category of our ontology” (93). From this ontological understanding, others like Octavio Paz will say that the Mexican is a being in perpetual disquiet and fleeing, always oscillating between communion and solitude.

But if *nepantla* is a fundamental ontological category in the philosophy of “lo mexicano,” then *zozobra* designates its primary existential correlate. As the name for a modality of a being rooted in rootlessness, whose *urgrund* in the no-where between this and that history, this and that culture, or this and that identity, *nepantla* does not capture the *sense*, or *feeling*, of this rootlessness or loss of belonging. Appealing to the poet Ramon López Velarde, Uranga calls this sense of loss “*zozobra*.” *Zozobra* names the anxiety of not knowing where one stands at any one time: “a not knowing on which [extreme] to depend on, or what is the same, a dependence on the two extremes [of our identity]...a grasping at both ends of the chain” (2013, 94). *Zozobra* is thus an anxious hesitation and indecision before the demands of precarious, pendular, existence.

As the existential correlate to *nepantla*, *zozobra* ultimately provokes a rational decision, namely, the decision to bridge the in-betweenness with a stable, essentialized or essentializable, identity, history, or culture. The anxiety of breakdown, which is *zozobra*, motivates a desire for the security of universality and permanence. Thus, the attraction of European or Indigenous identities, both of which represent the two options, or laws, for the Mexican, is that these are static, defined, and unambiguous, giving one the illusion of permanence, of ground and stability. From this desire for essences, or permanence and origin, emerge those ideologies that aim to essentialize identity, painting a caricature of the Mexican, or of *what it means to be Mexican (lo mexicano)*, as homogenous in *his* identity and resolute in his resolve. But this homogenous image

hides a “mode of being that incessantly oscillates between two possibilities, between two affects, without knowing on which of these to depend, on which of these to cling to for justification” (Uranga 2013, 105). This is *zozobra*, and Uranga points to it as the ungrounded *urgrund* that defines Mexican identity. That is, *zozobra is not* “a fixed and solid ground” [*punto fijo y roqueño*], but is rather like “moving sand on which nothing firm can stand” (105).[13]

The notion that the Mexican person is a being in constant internal struggle, that suffers what I call elsewhere a “passion dialectic” (Sánchez 2016, ch. 4), doesn’t seem to hold much promise for cultural and social progress. Uranga recognizes that some will see the stipulation of *zozobra* (or *nepantla* or accidentality) as constitutive of Mexican identity as a “useless truth” that only “negatively contributes to the project of bettering ourselves” (Uranga 2013, 105). Indeed, this will be Roger Bartra’s critique in his famed *La jaula de melancholia* and before him Abelardo Villegas’ in *La filosofía de lo mexicano*. After all, how does knowing ourselves as pendular, anxious, or lacking in essence not reaffirm a sense of oneself and one’s culture as powerless or marginal? What use is a truth that doesn’t open up new possibilities for being? The answer seems to be, simply, that the usefulness of these revealed truths lies in the power bestowed with knowing precisely where we stand, who we are, and *what we are not*, namely, internally coherent, or possessing universal qualities that transcends one’s material insecurities. Moreover, such criticism is based on the fallacious reasoning that there is an ideal state of being that is better than the rest. Uranga suggests that the revelation of *zozobra* as the ungrounded ground of Mexican existence interrupts and disrupts ideologies and meta-narratives that have not contributed to the project of *simply knowing where we stand and who we are*.

The deconstructive project of Uranga, as well as that of Zea’s, Luis Villoro’s, Samuel Ramos’, and Antonio Caso’s, can thus be read as liberatory projects. It is liberation from a world produced without consent. Uranga implies this much when he states that Mexicans are “held hostage by a previous order in which we find ourselves, we feel ‘cheated’” (2013, 105). What is sought is freedom from the bondage of that order and the opportunity to create a new order, an opportunity to have a say about the world in which they live. A critical philosophical confrontation with the previous order is required for liberation. This confrontation reveals that the being of the Mexican should be understood not in terms of particular national characteristics belonging only to Mexicans but rather in terms of a complex, multi-faceted, and ultimately ungraspable givenness. The revelation of *zozobra*, *nepantla*, and accidentality as ontological features of Mexican being undermine the old order, the official narrative, the post-Revolutionary nationalist epistemology and thereby, Uranga says, “beautifully mock the deceptions and roughly places on us the obligation to assume [this new being] without excuses” (2013, 105). Freedom, then, lies with the acceptance of one’s ontology.



### III. The Task of Mexican Philosophy

For philosophers, like Uranga and Zea, the Mexican Revolution signals the material fracture of Mexican history and the final anti-thesis of a western Notion that positioned itself as the absolute interpretive framework for a situated human existence. The Revolution broke through the humanistic abstractions to reveal the concrete death of the other, who was not other, but the same; a brother, a sister, a friend, another Mexican. In the flurry of its chaos, it reflected the internal contradictions of the Mexican individual. The nationalist ideology of post-Revolutionary Mexico meant to dissolve those contradictions through a rational reconstruction of the Revolution-event as a collective moment of catastrophe—it meant to treat the trauma by unifying the differences in the Mexican character under one banner, “lo mexicano,” a limiting concept itself representing a momentary narcissism, that of power in love with itself. Uranga’s existentialist critique of *lo mexicano* is thus a critique of power—of power as ideology and power as nationalism. Breaking through the institutionalized narratives of power requires a return to the self and an encounter with its chaos and accidentality; there, *zozobra*, as the anxiety of possible destruction, serves as the ungrounded ground, as the ungraspable “crisis” at the heart of *all* humanity, and at the heart of the Mexican event par excellence, the revolution.

As has been pointed out, in the story of Mexican philosophy the Revolution represents a moment of genuine self-awareness; it is a spiritual, historical, and philosophical awakening. Growing out of the recognition of political and economic marginalization at the hands of a decades’ old autocratic bureaucracy that hastened the fracturing of community, solidarity, and optimism, Revolutionary sentiments quickly escalated into a violent confrontation of ideologies and personalities. In the death struggle, a consciousness of crisis emerged that had been previously lacking; a consciousness that questioned itself and doubted its humanity. After the moment subsided, ideological *mediation* framed that consciousness and lent it a certainty that it did not deserve and that it never had. Mexican philosophical consciousness is a response to this mediation and this institutionalization.

It is on the basis of the revolution-as-circumstance that Mexican philosophers deploy philosophical criticism so as to reveal what mediations or institutionalizations have obscured. Uranga makes clear philosophy’s task: “The task of philosophy consists in making us enter into conscious possession with what we already have, of that previous having in the bosom of which we exhaust ourselves and in the light of which we understand everything that happens to us on an everyday basis” (2013, 91). That is, the task of philosophy is the revelation, both through auscultatory or inward looking and through the recognition of what stands before us, of *how* we are—how we *exhaust ourselves* and how we understand; this is a revelation of the *how* of our *being* and not a revelation of our essence, of *what* we are. It is this *how of our being* that is constituted as (existential) *zozobra* and (ontological) *nepantla*.

As Zea suggests, the revolution was a reflection of the oscillations, the hesitations and uncertainty of the Mexican individual in his inwardness; the revolution materialized this inwardness in violent struggles. However, the institutionalization of the revolution erased its hesitations, uncertainties, and promises, replacing them with ideological representations meant to frame Mexicans and their destiny, creating a subject of the revolution, a post-revolutionary subject, or a post-event subject. Thus, to reclaim the uncertainty, oscillation, and hesitation is to reclaim an authentic being-in-the-world unhinged from the event; it is to reclaim a healthy suspicion of proposed certainties and an awareness of our own limitations as subjects of many events and many histories. Uranga puts the matter rather poetically when he writes:

The call to forge our character as *zozobra* is a call to the unexpected [*al azar*], it is an invocation or a provocation...Hearts in sadness or *zozobra* lie in cavernous darkness, but from there they are vigilant. Heal yourself with a combination of darkness and light. To submerge oneself in the originary *zozobra* seems like a movement that takes us toward darkness, toward the annulment of consciousness; however, at the extreme point of surrender to the darkness there shines our vigilance, and our fragile antennae lends itself to receiving the message (Uranga 2013, 98).

The invocation to face our own originary being, our *zozobra* and our unsettledness, is the provocation. This provocation interrupts the consciousness of catastrophe that frames our everyday, waking us to uncertainty and fear. And so Uranga tells us that that this awakening is a healing, a healing by “darkness and light” of those wounds left unattended by an inability to hear, to see, to be vigilant. Framing ideologies are our sickness. Uranga recognizes that the codification and textualization of the Revolutionary moment into a framing narrative made healing impossible; Mexicans were blinded to their true selves by an ideological fog that tricked them into thinking they were inferior, melancholic, brave in the face of death, or brutally nationalistic. And so they remained trapped in myth and self-deceit. Hence philosophy’s purpose:

The task is not to fix ourselves so as to make a beautiful image, it is not to learn a role that does not embarrass us when in the presence of others, but rather it is to assume what we are without apology...the revolution does not demand that we feel shame for who we are, rather it demands that we recognize ourselves in our misery and identify with that so as to build on that as a foundation (Uranga 2013, 106).

We find here the familiar motifs of a Mexican philosophy: it is circumstantialist because the revolution is an ever present reality, and it is auscultatory, or analytically introspective, because it searches the depths of the situated human being so as to awaken a consciousness of existential struggle (“misery”) and uncertainty, of “lo mexicano” in its ontological/philosophical dimensions, even if by doing so philosophers are forced to violate the mandates of philosophy itself, or the ontological sanctity of “man in general.”

More generally, this is Mexican philosophy because it is borne from an impulse to understand a circumstance that history, politics, and geography has determined as Mexican; it is philosophy because it is an attempt (ultimately heterogeneous) to articulate that understanding in accordance with the rules of the Western philosophical tradition. Its failure to behave in accordance with those rules, moreover, lends those articulations their difference and, simultaneously, their significance. I've focused here on two obvious violations, namely, one, the refusal to ground philosophy a-historically but rather in specific events like the Mexican revolution and, two, the turn inward toward "lo mexicano" and the ontological constitution of such a being. But in spite of these foci, we are gifted with lessons of universal value. Uranga's project tells us to challenge our institutionalized discourses. His philosophy is meant to rid reality of false and mystifying masks, those created by desperation, trauma, or nationalist fervors, and to place us before the exposed face of a concrete reality upon which we must act with the full force of our insecurities and our deficiencies. Only then can we formulate social and existential strategies that push us forward, that depart not from a false sense of exceptionalism but from a desire to cooperate with others, where *lo mexicano* can mean different things to different people, where it can mean community and dignity and respect for life. And so Uranga says by way of conclusion: "What we desperately need is a concrete solution, one that will give meaning to our presence on earth" (2013, 168-169) one that will allow us to face our limits and our challenges, or crudely put, "the terror of knowing ourselves" (106).

#### IV. Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century

In very general terms, we could say that Mexican philosophy in the 20th century endeavored to contribute a current, a strand, or a perspective, to the historical tapestry understood, pure and simply, as *philosophy*. That this effort was rejected by philosophy's gatekeepers is evidenced by the absolute absence of that Mexican strand or perspective in the global story of philosophy as it is told today. A thinking that sought to ground itself in the Mexican circumstances, while still calling itself philosophy, was thus hidden away, lumped together with the "Hispanic essay" or Latin American literature, almost completely marginalized from the official philosophical record, one that dreamt only with remaining pure and self-legitimated. But this marginalization has always depended on the silence of the marginalized, and Mexican philosophers refused to remain silent. The fact is that Mexican philosophers of the 20th century considered themselves *filosofos* and what they were doing *filosofía*, and more significant still, *filosofía Mexicana*, even if they understood that history had relegated them to the fringes of power and that recognition would be hard won, if it came at all. Thus, in spite of their perceived marginalization, and the marginalization of their thinking, Mexican philosophers offered their voice to the philosophical conversation. False starts, failed projects, and internal dissent notwithstanding, 20th century Mexican philosophy survives as the reactionary event that it was, as an existentially motivated search for a direction, for an orientation; for what Guillermo Hurtado (2011) calls, "*un sentido*."

The legacy of 20th century philosophy as here understood lives on. Worth mentioning is the work of Guillermo Hurtado and Mario Teodoro Ramírez, who, in slightly different ways, continue the project begun by the philosophers of *lo mexicano*, but, unlike their predecessors, add a pragmatic and cosmopolitan dimension to their reflections. In various important works, both thinkers have established themselves as the 21st century curators of Mexico's 20th century philosophical heritage. But more than curating it, their work is a virtuous caring for that inheritance, one that involves the deployment of its lessons—but strengthened with the weight of historical experience—for the sake of contemporary Mexican life. For his part, Hurtado sees his role as one of “transcribing and synthesizing” those ideas that will re-orient Mexico and Mexicans toward a better future because, he writes, “We Mexicans, every single one of us, must *take on the responsibility* [*responsabilizarnos*] for our own situation” (2011, 24).

Hurtado's efforts have helped preserve and rescue, especially in Mexico, the work of *el grupo Hiperion*, which he has anthologized in his *El hiperión*, a valuable text that comes with an authoritative introduction that, when properly translated, should contribute greatly to this expanding field within academic philosophy in the US. In his commentary, Hurtado both defends and criticizes the philosophers of *lo mexicano*—he defends their intentions but criticizes their lack of rigor. In the process of that critique, however, Hurtado clarifies the established horizons of philosophy and urges a re-anchoring of those horizons to the sites of its emergence. He applauds the tendency in Mexican philosophers to focus on local problems but chastises their blindness to the global situation. Thus he seeks a universalism in philosophy that nonetheless can find its point of origin in *an original* ground.

In various places, Ramírez analyzes the value of the philosophy of culture embraced by his predecessors (cf., Ramírez 1997). Within that analysis, he defends the philosophers of *lo mexicano* against criticisms that these were simply blind to the universal tendencies of philosophy. “They were all,” he explains, “experimenting in a kind of philosophical voyage that took them from the deepest and most labyrinthine depths of Mexican reality to the recognition that Mexicans belonged to a universal human reality” (2010, 17). Ramírez, like Hurtado, continues that philosophical voyage with philosophers like Zea, Uranga, and especially Luis Villoro, in whom he finds a blueprint for the future of Mexican philosophy. This blueprint, roughly sketched in the various perspectives of the cultural philosophers emerging in the wake of the revolution, culminates in a philosophical program that retains a certain circumstantialism and desire for self-knowledge but to which is added a dimension gathered from the historical experience of philosophy *in Mexico*. Ramírez writes:

we observe that there is no necessary opposition between nationalism [lo mexicano] and universalism, and that both can converge and support each other if they take on a political function. What really opposes these is a pluralistic perspective, that is, a perspective that recognizes the complexity and heterogeneity of the national culture, the irreducibility of cultural life to one model—the universal or the national—and the necessity to progress toward forms of thought and culture that are more dialectical, critical, and concrete (2010, 21).

This pluralistic bent is a legacy of the philosophers of *lo mexicano*, who, lost in the dialectic of the universal-particular, of the everywhere-here, unknowingly left it as the best option for the 21st century.

Likewise, Hurtado's work represents the fulfillment of the promise inherent in Mexico's philosophical project of the early 20th century—of the vision of those who sought a *new humanism* on the heels of the revolution and who found instead the ungraspability of Mexican being, one constituted by *zozobra*, *nepantla*, and solitude. And it represents, also, the manner in which Mexican philosophy enters into conversation with other traditions, other cultures, and other thinkers who confronted similar difficulties; that is, with an inter-American philosophical vision in the 21st century. Hurtado, along with a handful of other *transcribers* and *synthesizers*, such as Ramírez, Antonio Zirion Quijano, and Aurelia Valero Pié, have resurrected the project, not out of an intellectual/professional curiosity, but from a sense of duty to *their* Mexicanness. This was the impetus for the *Ateneo de la Juventud*, *los Contemporaneos*, and *el grupo Hiperión*, but today contextualized in a modern world that offers different challenges and demands different solutions; thus the philosophical work is richer, more ambitious and with practical goals, it produces ideas that are born from the Mexican circumstance and that have the power to insert themselves in it and change it. Because, as Hurtado proclaims in his *Mexico sin sentido*: “the new sense [for Mexico] will not come in a formula which is transcendent to our social practices, but one that is immanent to them” (2011, 25).

Similarly to Ramírez, Hurtado stresses the need for pluralism in philosophy and creation of philosophical communities and philosophical dialogues that are critical and grounded on real, practical problems. This new dialogical, pluralistic, and practical approach to Latin American, and Mexican, philosophy he calls a “Pan-American dialogue” and it must necessarily appropriate those efforts that have come before. “Our past,” he writes, “should be taken as something that allows us to better understand our present but also as something that allows us to understand the new, regardless of *whether it comes from within or abroad*” (Hurtado 2007, 43; my emphasis).

On this account, Mexican philosophy is a circumstantial philosophy, rooted in the local but open to the universal, open to the worries of all human beings, American or not. As Hurtado notes: “Mexican philosophy, so that it may truly be that, must begin as a reflection of its own reality, or it must originate in it. This reality, many times and in many dimensions, is the same as that of other human beings” (2007, 42). Moreover, in order “to reach the sought after universality we must begin with a deep and genuine reflection that takes as its point of departure the cultural and historical circumstance, and that moreover contributes to the philosophical discussion that already exists in an original and solid manner” (2007, 45).

Ultimately, Mexican philosophy teaches us, either by failure or emphasis, to be circumstantialists without resorting to shortsighted provincialisms or harmful

nationalism; it teaches us to anchor our thinking on the ground beneath our feet; and it teaches us to be mindful of appearances, spectacle, and those meta-narratives that obscure clarity and truth. Shunning purity, Mexican philosophy is neither pragmatism nor existentialism, although it owes its perspectives and methodology to these and other traditions. The Ortegean tendency to think from the circumstance in order to save them—so influential in 20th century Mexican philosophy—is re-united with another often ignored Ortegean insistence to have our circumstantial thoughts retain a universal intent.

Thus, the lessons of Mexican philosophy are meant not only for Mexicans (or their descendants) for whom the Revolution or the search for *lo mexicano* has some meaning, but rather they are meant for whomever finds him/herself framed by the catastrophic and searching for that existential truth that in its ungraspability nonetheless reassures, as the recognition of *zozobra*, *nepantla*, or accidentality reassures. These lessons transcend borders and time, language, catastrophes, and generations. This type of universalism is the only one we can hope for, and the only one we can afford to live with.

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## Notes

[1] While this starting point might seem arbitrary, we take our cue from previous historiographical treatments, such as Samuel Ramos' (1943, 127ff) and Antonio Ibarguengoitia (1967, 177ff). Of note is also José Vasconcelos' claim that an authentic philosophy had been absent in Mexico before 1930. See Salazar Bondy (1968).

[2] The line reads: "A spiritual change had begun to take place due to the revolution, beginning in 1915...that could be defined in these terms: Mexico had been discovered."

[3] For short historical account of these movements see Salmeron (1963), Sánchez (2012), Sánchez (2016).

[4] My use of "deconstruction" here refers merely to an active and critical pulling-apart of previously held beliefs, knowledges, or ideas so as to reveal an inner truth or truths and not to "deconstruction" in the sense associated with figures like Paul de Man or Jacques Derrida, in which paradoxes of thought and language are the target and which "is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be," in (Norris 1982, xii).

[5] We can also say that its aim is “autognosis,” following a term used by Uranga (2013), and Villegas (1985). I prefer “auscultatory,” however, because it implies a *careful attending to*, which need not be implicated in the *über*-rationality of autognosis, or a “knowledge of self.” But this distinction I leave for another time.

[6] This dialectic also constitutes what Mario Teodoro Ramírez calls the defining “problem” of Mexican philosophy, a problem which, he says, is “*propium* to Mexican philosophy” (2010, 10).

[7] A complete picture can be found in Alan Ridding (1989, 59-86).

[8] “Ideology” is here understood in the sense described by Luis Villoro: “What characterizes ideology is not its relationship with reason, either theoretical or practical, but its role in the management of behavior...[Moreover,] its social function.” It is “any set of enunciations, justified or not, that form a systematized set, prescriptive to a certain form of conduct and held together by a strong emotive glue.” In Luis Villoro (2001, 184).

[9] What I’m calling here a post-revolutionary humanism refers to Samuel Ramos’ “new humanism” which “presented itself as an adequate reflection of the aspirations of the Mexican Revolution. [It was] the study of the Mexican individual and the educational efforts that aimed to correct his vices of character...[while] defining a type of man that was more human and more dignified than what was realized during *porfirismo*. But above all, a type of man that is not a fixed entity but a modifiable reality filled with possibilities to constitute a common responsibility” (Salmerón 1963, 290).

[10] According to critics such as Roger Bartra (2002), these stereotypes defined an oppressive picture of the Mexican that, Bartra claims, philosophy helped to foster (33-40).

[11] In this sense, as Ramírez (2006) observes, Mexican nationalist ideology is “defensive rather than offensive,” i.e., it is a “response—correctly or incorrectly posited—to the problem of our cultural and spiritual ambivalence” (154).

[12] Both Bartra (“Does it mean anything to be Mexican?”) and Villegas (*La filosofía de lo mexicano*) fail to mark a clear difference between *filosofía* and *ideología* and for this reason group all discussions (political and ontological) as part of the same ideological effort. Thus, in *La jaula de melancholia* (1972), Bartra writes of the notion of “lo mexicano” as originating from a “nationalist will to power linked to the unification and institutionalization of the modern capitalist State” (1987, 3), a description that applies more to ideology than to philosophy, as I’m understanding these here.

[13] The 1888 edition of the *Primer Diccionario General Etimológico*, defines “zozobra” as “the opposition and contrast of winds that impede navigation and place the vessel in danger of being submerged” (688). This is the sense in which it is used by Lopez Velarde and Uranga when they describe Mexican being as characterized by a fundamental anxiety of breakdown and loss. Etymologically, the word originates in *Catalán*, from the word “sotsobre” and its verb “sotsobrar,” which means “to overturn” [volcar], or to put upside down. *Sotsobrar* has Latin roots: *sots* from the Latin *subtus*, meaning below or under, and *sobre* from the Latin *super*, above or on top. So, yes, the interplay between *nepantla* and *zozobra* is an interesting one, especially when used to define a particular, and situated, human being. This being is one that is in constant movement and perpetual uncertainty, always “in danger of being submerged,”

unable to stand still in the certainty of its own existence, overturned by fortune, history, and its accidents, or to get fancy, a being-in-vertigo.

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