

Carlos Alberto Sánchez: *The Suspensions of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla*, with a translation of *Fenomenología del relajo*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. Pp. 227, hardcover \$70. ISBN: 978-1-4384-4467-3

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If part of the aim of Carlos Alberto Sánchez's *The Suspensions of Seriousness* is to introduce Mexican philosophy into the US academy, then the subject of Sánchez's new book might strike us as odd. As Sánchez acknowledges in his introductory chapter, Portilla was a marginal figure in 20th century Mexican philosophy, published very little during his lifetime, and never held an academic position. Moreover, his *Fenomenología del relajo*—which Sánchez translated into English for the first time and appended to his commentary—is an idiosyncratic investigation into a peculiarly Mexican phenomenon, namely *relajo*. So, prospective readers in the US, especially those who are interested in knowing more about Mexican philosophy, may wonder why Sánchez chose not to translate and comment on any of a number of Mexican philosophers whose work was more influential in Mexico and whose subject is likely to have a more widespread appeal.

Sánchez is aware of this reservation, for although he does not say explicitly that his aim is to introduce us to Mexican philosophy, he does claim with confidence that “In Jorge Portilla, Mexican philosophy affirms itself” and that “Portilla’s *Fenomenología* reveals Mexican philosophy in profile” (65).[1] According to Sánchez, Portilla was not just another philosopher who happened to be born in Mexico, but one whose philosophy was characteristically Mexican and whose text captures what “we may call ‘the worry’ belonging to ‘Mexican philosophy’” (66). Portilla was a member of *el Grupo Hiperión* (the Hyperion Group), which arguably represents the *philosophical* culmination of the intellectual and artistic efforts to define and rescue *lo mexicano* (literally, “the Mexican,” referring to Mexican-ness or what it means to be Mexican).[2] While Portilla’s method reflects the influence of European existentialism, phenomenology, and the philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset, he remains faithful to the demands of his own, Mexican circumstances. Moreover, while the Hyperion group in general sought to define *lo mexicano*, Portilla was the only member who examined the phenomenon of *relajo*, which he believed was an essential aspect of the essence of being Mexican (95).

However, it would be a mistake to suggest that *The Suspensions of Seriousness* would be of interest only to someone who wants to know more about Mexican philosophy. As Sánchez argues throughout his commentary, while the *Fenomenología* insists on beginning in local, personal experience, its aim is universal. It offers a description of a phenomenon that Portilla takes to “reveal essential characteristics of the human condition” [13] and a theory of values and human subjectivity that, in Sánchez’s hands, amounts to a critique of modernity and a prescription for how to cope with the challenges of being human in our “postmodern, postcolonial, and post-9/11 world” (112).

As mentioned, the theme of Portilla's essay is *relajo*, which, despite the connotations the word may have for Mexicans, Portilla defines as "the suspension of seriousness" [18]. *Relajo* refers to "the suspension of a determinate event through a repetitious interruption of the values which hold it together" (8). One achieves *relajo* by diverting attention away from the realization of values that constitute meaningful experience, as one does, for example, by telling a joke during a serious lecture, and encouraging others to forget that they are gathered to learn. *Relajo* is repetitious and collective, as its aim is to distract and generate indifference in a community. It is, in other words, to suspend the seriousness of an event, a practice, a duty, and ultimately a general sense of responsibility. By extension, a *relajiento*—someone who easily or regularly succumbs to or initiates *relajo*—is someone who "refuses to take anything seriously, to commit to anything ... [and who] assumes no responsibility for anything" [39]. For Portilla, then, *relajo* is not what his fellow Mexicans think it is: it is not just "letting loose" (the literal translation of the common phrase "*echar relajo*"), or an isolated occurrence, but a complex set of behaviors with moral and cultural significance.

Both Portilla's essay and Sánchez's commentary, then, should be of interest even to those who are not interested in Mexican philosophy (or who do not yet know they are). For students of phenomenology, Sánchez argues, Portilla's analysis of *relajo* is a unique contribution to the history of phenomenology. Considering that *relajo* had never been subjected to phenomenological analysis before, Portilla invented his own method, which Sánchez argues is a mixture of Husserl's "reductive method" and Heidegger's "destructive method." In other words, while Portilla pursues the essence of *relajo* by means of Husserl's eidetic (reductive) method, he is equally interested in uncovering the presuppositions that underlie the traditional (mis-)understanding of it, not in order to bracket them out, but in order to call them into question (destructive). For Portilla, a combination of methods is needed because the problem is not just that Mexicans do not know what *relajo* is essentially, but that they also do not know why they are prone to misunderstanding its nature and significance.

In addition to his descriptive philosophy, Portilla develops a theory of ethics in the second part of his essay, entitled "Moral Sense of *Relajo*," which shows not only the extent to which Portilla's phenomenology departs further from Husserl and Heidegger—and resembles more the work of Max Scheler and Jean Paul Sartre—but also the extent to which his analysis is practical. This section is a challenging section, but Sánchez defends a unique and well-supported interpretation. By comparing Portilla's moral theory to the work of Paulo Freire—an unexpected comparison, as Portilla would have had no contact with Freire—Sánchez argues that Portilla develops a version of what he calls "dialogical ethics," claiming "that the real moral significance of *relajo*, or the more tangible moral consequence that Portilla draws out, is that *relajo* destroys the possibility of dialogue" (78). However, just as important as the social dimension of Portilla's moral philosophy, according to Sánchez, is his theory of subjectivity and corresponding critique of modernity. All of these dimensions of Portilla's thought lead Sánchez to

conclude that “Portilla is the most prescient and realistic philosopher Mexico, and Latin America, has produced” (118).

For Portilla, there are two opposite ways of failing to be fully human, which he portrays via the figures of the *relajiento*, on the one hand, and the *apretado/a*, on the other. Concerning the *relajiento*, Sánchez summarizes Portilla’s view by saying, “To be a subject, then, means that one knows where one stands and is willing to take a stand when demanded to do so by the values one respects and is responsible for. Nonsubjectivity is a result of a loss of standing, of an unwillingness to answer to demands, to duty, of a falling into *relajo*” (99). The other “pole of subjectivity,” the *apretado/a*, is someone who takes herself “too seriously.” In Spanish, “*apretado/a*” refers to an uptight or pretentious person who believes that she is the very personification of certain values. The problem with the *apretado/a* is that although such a person embodies “the spirit of seriousness”—i.e. is willing to take a stand and answer to the demands of value—she fails to realize the possibility of her own error. Thus, what subjectivity requires, on Portilla’s view, is being *committed* to the truth and being willing to distinguish truth from the appearance and pretense of truth. And this is why, for Portilla, the Socratic ironist is the model subject: Socrates was absolutely committed to the truth (and was thus not a *relajiento*), he was willing to live in the uncomfortable uncertainty of his ignorance despite the temptation to present oneself as another “expert” (and was thus not an *apretado/a*).

Sánchez does an excellent job expounding the contours of Portilla’s moral philosophy, but his aim is more than exegetical and he is somewhat critical of Portilla. While Sánchez is at pains to help us to read through the *Fenomenología*, he argues that Portilla is relevant in the contemporary (philosophical) world for a reason Portilla could not have seen—namely that Portilla expresses the crisis of modernity, predicts its failure, and identifies the only appropriate way of coping with “the speed and availability of information, the persistent and irrational demands of technology, and the overabundance of values that all of this creates” (118). In other words, Sánchez argues that in Portilla’s criticism of the *relajiento*—and of Mexico more generally for being full of figures who fail to commit themselves to anything and who, as a result, are not authentic subjects—we can see what Portilla could not: a deep tension in the aspirations of the modern project. The *relajiento* is a failure by those standards—he is unproductive, inefficient, inactive—yet he is a real possibility. So, as Sánchez says, somewhat tentatively, “If modernity has given rise to the *relajiento*, then maybe there is something wrong with modernity” (117).

Conversely, if there is something wrong with modernity, then maybe being a *relajiento* is not necessarily a total failure, as Portilla seems to believe, and maybe Mexico’s salvation, as well as ours, does not consist in overcoming *relajo*. Sánchez argues that by holding Socrates as the model of subjectivity, Portilla uncritically assumes the Western notion that the goal of philosophy, and of being fully human, is to penetrate appearances in search of *the* truth. Portilla does not realize the possibility that there is no “*the* truth” to commit oneself to, and thus that being a *relajiento* may be “a

perfectly crafted expression of ‘postmodernity,’” understood as “‘an incredulity toward metanarratives’” (114; 102), just as irony was the perfectly crafted expression of Western “civilization” and modernity. Furthermore, Portilla does not realize the possibility that *relajo* may be the only resource left to one whose goal is to resist or reject, not this or that value within a certain value-scheme, but an entire value-scheme—especially one that marginalizes and oppresses anyone who tries to resist this or that value within it.[3] In other words, Portilla criticizes *relajo* because he could not see beyond the horizon of the Western framework into the postcolonial, postmodern world, in which *relajientos* might wield their “no’s to value” against imperialism or hegemony itself.

Sánchez succeeds in demonstrating the appeal of *relajo* in our chaotic, radically uncertain world. *Relajo* may help us to cope with constantly changing and competing values, the shifting demands of technology and social media, the destabilization of European hegemony, and the increasing role of fear in global politics and our everyday lives. But more has to be said to show that *relajo* is the key to our salvation. For instance, because Sánchez underemphasizes the undeniable influence of Kierkegaard on Portilla’s thought, he fails to see that his positive spin on *relajo* is strikingly close to Kierkegaard’s conception of Socratic irony and corresponding critique of modernity. As a result, I would argue, Sánchez overlooks the fact that even if *relajo* can play a positive role in our postmodern, postcolonial world, Portilla would still want to distinguish (as would I) the positive resistance to “metanarratives” and “overabundance of values,” on the one hand, and an empty, quasi-ironic existence that characterizes, for example, the hipster or chronically indecisive individual, on the other. Nevertheless, Sánchez’s *The Suspensions of Seriousness* is an original translation, reading, and interpretation of a text that will become essential reading for those already interested in Mexican philosophy and for those who might be.

Notes

[1] In this review, I cite the page numbers of Sánchez’s commentary in parentheses and the original page numbers of Portilla’s *Fenomenología* in brackets.

[2] Guillermo Hurtado offers such an argument in his essay “Paisaje del Hiperión” (“The Landscape of the Hiperión”): “Los hiperiones were well acquainted with the plethora of attempts to define “the Mexican”—scholarly, literary, pictorial, musical—that had appeared since the Revolution. They believed that their work belonged to that *cultural* movement, but they also thought that the movement had to be completed with the *philosophical* reflection about *lo mexicano*. That is why they cited Hegel’s phrase that the Owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk. Therefore, it was not only about achieving the final synthesis of everything that had been intuited about *el mexicano* in, for example, the novels of Martín Luis Guzmán, the paintings of José Clemente Orozco,

the music of Carlos Chávez, or the films of Emilio Fernández, but also about getting to the heart of the matter.” Guillermo Hurtado, “Paisaje del Hiperión,” in *El búho y la serpiente: Ensayos sobre la filosofía en México en el siglo xx* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 2007), 97. The translation and emphasis are both my own.

[3] It is not difficult, for instance, to indirectly confirm the Judeo-Christian worldview by rejecting or criticizing a certain Judeo-Christian belief, or even by trying to reject the entire worldview, but indirectly doing so in a Judeo-Christian “way” or Judeo-Christianly. Left, then, is the question concerning how to “suspend” those beliefs long enough to critically evaluate them without reinforcing them somewhere or somehow. This is the potential positive value Sánchez finds in *relajo*.