SUMMARY

This essay focuses on the current malaise in Latin American studies. More generally, it discusses how dogmatic theoretical assumptions, specifically postmodern, impair productive critical diagnosis of rapidly changing reality, such as that of Latin America today. As a result, two very different images of present-day Latin America are put forth, one, by a diverse group of emerging new leading Latin American thinkers and scholars, critical of intellectual currents that coalesced in macondismo, and the other, by U.S. Latin Americanism, still anchored politically in the 1960s, entangled methodologically in a hodge-podge of postmodern, poststructuralist and postcolonial, theories, and enthralled by macondismo. This “Latin America” concocted by the hegemonic U.S. academy for its own consumption is then re-exported to Latin America which is, paradoxically, struggling to liberate itself from macondismo. The essay argues for a retooling of theory and for a critical reexamination of postmodern epistemology and other tenets.

Key words:
U.S. Latin Americanism – Postmodernism – Macondismo – Cultural Studies – Theory – Science

RESUMEN

El ensayo se enfoca en el malestar existente en los estudios latinoamericanos. Más en general, hace ver cómo los supuestos teóricos dogmáticos, específicamente los posmodernos, impiden diagnosticar, en forma productiva y crítica, la realidad que se encuentra en flujo rápido, como la de América Latina hoy. Como resultados, son propuestas dos imágenes de América Latina actual muy diferentes: una, por un diverso grupo emergente de pensadores e investigadores latinoamericanos de primera línea, críticos de las corrientes intelectuales que han culminado en el llamado macondismo, y otra, por el latinoamericanismo norteamericano, anclado todavía políticamente en los años sesenta, enredado metodológicamente en una mescolanza de teorías posmodernas, posestructuralistas y poscoloniales, y abrazado del macondismo. La “América Latina” conjurada por la hegémónica academia norteamericana para su propio consumo es luego reexportada a América Latina, que, paradójicamente, lucha por liberarse del macondismo. El ensayo aboga por un replanteamiento de la teoría y por un examen crítico de la epistemología y los otros supuestos posmodernos.

Palabras clave:
Latinoamericanismo norteamericano – Posmodernismo – Macondismo – Estudios Culturales – Teoría – Ciencia
BEYOND LATIN AMERICANISM AND OTHER ACCIDENTAL/OCIDENTAL TOURISM: GUATEMALA(NS) IN SEARCH OF CULTURAL THEORY, AND MORE

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Only thoughts reached by walking have value.
Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols

Mario Roberto Morales’ The Articulation of Difference (1998) is a path-breaking study of the cultural and social self-discovery of a multiethnic Central American country reeling after decades of civil strife. It is also an important challenge to the complacencies of Latin American studies in the United States.* Guatemala’s return to democracy after the signing of peace accords in 1996 has been tentative at best. The legacy of decades of unrest was compounded by the brutal counterinsurgency war of “scorched earth” waged by the army in the early 1980s. The apparently “local war” was then just a part of the last round of the global “cold war” encounters (the war was indeed “glocal” throughout Central America). In Guatemala, the indigenous population of the highlands paid the heaviest price for the revolutionary folly. For many, there no longer was a home to return to. Hundreds of thousands of refugees from the war zones have flooded the cities, especially the capital, Guatemala City, to the point of making it unmanageable and plagued by an uncontrollable crime wave,

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spilling over to the countryside. Add population explosion, ever increasing drug traffic—actually, trafficking with everything at hand—, endemic corruption on all levels, and the idea of peace vanishes into thin air. The winds of globalization in the 1990s raised new challenges to economy, culture, national identity, and democracy. This new context has also opened a floodgate of surprising transformations. To say that “Latin American reality is not what it used to be,” is an understatement (see more on this account in our Latin America Writes Back).

THE RACE OF THEORY AND REALITY

Theory and reality are locked in a perpetual race. The former—taken at its bottom line—is just a “toolbox” of hypothetical assumptions regarding the latter. It is tough for any research to keep abreast of all new developments. In times of rapid changes, reality quickly embarrasses any cherished theory, especially the narcissistic kind with a capital T.

Theory can lose pace with reality for a variety of reasons. Reality in flux—beyond the normal processes of becoming and change—is only one of them. Popular beliefs, cultural biases, unquestioned assumptions, feelings prevailing over rationality and critical argument, partisan and solidarity commitments, all this and more can turn any theory into a bastion of dogmatic labels and idols that protect themselves against scrutiny rather than encouraging it. While the “closed horizon” of values has characterized especially the religious-ritualistic settings, the same tendencies have been lurking in the scientific contexts as well. The dominant episteme as the laid out “horizon of expectations” creates a meshwork of verisimilitude through and against which assumptions and facts are sifted, classified and evaluated.

Once a set of dogmatic assumptions sways a certain interpretive community, research and interpretation begin to move in a closed circle: certain results are expected and therefore preordained. The “ideologically correct” marketplace established along these lines validates the outcomes and draws legitimacy from them. Inconvenient facts are devalued or conjured away. The divide between the scientific and the religious-ritualistic becomes blurred. (Postmodernism just elevates murky practice to the status of theory.)

In both cases, the slightest cracks in the edifice of the hegemonic episteme threaten to topple it. While this is not unusual in science, it works differently in the religious-ritualistic attitudes. Since pointing out fissures comes to be viewed as heretic or—in the secular version—as “politically incorrect,” policing of these rifts is not done with the aim to correct the flawed theory turned dogma but to discipline the offender or even eject him from the corresponding game. The case of the physicist Alan Sokal, who gave a memorable lesson to the spurious postmodernist establishment in the social sciences, was a preview of things to come; fortunately for him, at least, his bred-winning academic career was out of the reach of the
“new Caesars” who had to limit themselves to verbal abuse and practice of abjection they so deplore in theory.

What is worrisome nowadays is the growing radicalization of the academy in the U.S., which appears to clone, in secular conditions, age-old religious-ritualistic attitudes and their biases.

**THE CASE OF TESTIMONIO**

The hoopla in U.S. language departments over Latin American *Testimonio* literature is another case in point. Over time and step by step, a huge imaginary edifice was constructed around this not so literary and not so ideologically pure genre. In the strictly select canon of *Testimonio*, a pristine “subaltern” was endowed with special agency of authority and truth, expressing his/her “people’s” undiluted will and creating, by the way, a new thrilling model of “non-literary literature” and challenging the tired elite Modernist high culture of the past. This pious model overlooked many disturbing “details” of mediation, authorship, and ideological marketing, not to speak of the narrow “modernist” concept of aesthetics and the arts underlying the theory of some such new “non-literary literary” model. It also left out the strictures of the narrative emplotment –another name for the Aristotelian *mythos*— imposed on testimonial stories, which endows them with considerable powers and prowess of mythmaking. Recently, pressed hard by new historical findings, the guru of *Testimonio* Miguel Barnet had to recognize that his celebrated *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) “follows a mythical and not a chronological structure” (see our “Entramados” 54-55).

Over a decade ago, while doing his doctoral research in Guatemala on another topic, though related to the war, David Stoll wandered through the country, worked in basic archives, and talked to unpretentious people in faraway villages, doing just what an anthropologist is supposed to do. Almost inadvertently first, tiny cracks began to form in the forceful eyewitness story told in the 1980s by Guatemala’s Nobel peace laureate of 1992, a survivor of counterinsurgency repression. Puzzling over the discrepancies and digging deeper, he found important parts of her testimony that began to disintegrate precisely as the eyewitness account –and therefore unquestionably true— version of her life story.

Stoll was torn between his, and everybody’s, fascination with Rigoberta Menchú, on the one hand, and the emerging inconvenient facts, on the other. As a sophisticated practitioner of his craft, he struggled to understand the sense of these cracks in her story. Not all of them could be explained away on the account of her traumatic experiences. Beneath the surface of a representative of the indigenous people were lurking layers of Western ideologies, including liberation theology, feminism, and the Marxism of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor which sent her on a propaganda tour to Europe. Something more complex was surfacing in place of a simple peasant Indian woman just speaking for “her people”.

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Menchú herself came to recognize later, in *La nieta de los mayas*, that “At that time, I could not move a finger without the leaders’ consent” (Menchú et al. 261). But while she had been “like a sponge” (242), assimilating all kinds of impulses in those momentous times of the late 1970s and early 1980s, her comrades “never understood the importance of learning new things” (249), among other interesting confessional tidbits. Only the “sponge” made it into the abridged, “cut and paste,” English translation of *Crossing Borders* perpetrated by Ann Wright (105). In her version of things, Menchú’s niece’s son Pablito, “kidnapped” for ransom by his own father, is continually referred to as “Kalito,” and lapses in accuracy are commonplace: for example, when Menchú –referring to her first press conference in Nicaragua— says “se me olvidó totalmente lo que tenía que decir” (“I completely forgot what I was supposed to say,” 246), in English it comes out as “I completely forgot what I was going to say” (109). The same translator also produced the first testimonio, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. It is not surprising that numerous controversies around Menchú’s testimonies have sprung up from these mistranslations.

Following his line of questioning, Stoll was led from Menchú to the web of political commitments and expectations exacted by her revolutionary sponsors and by her target audience in the human rights community. The new information provided in his *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (published in 1999 after long delays) did not diminish the stature of the Guatemalan Indian peasant girl who became a Nobel laureate; only her romantic image changed: pristine subaltern took backstage and, instead, a complex human figure –*zoon politikon*— emerged in a tangled interplay with different political, solidarity and academic contexts. The alleged “subaltern,” radical emblem of the irreducible Other, became pretty much like “*us*” (see “Purloined subaltern,” in our “Entramados” 67-68). An idol became human—all too human, perhaps—and the academy could see itself in a mirror of its narrow agendas and extracurricular commitments. The house of cards of the academic imagination collapsed. (Independently of Stoll, Morales has confirmed in his own analyses the striking political savvy both of Menchú and of many other indigenous representatives, quite the contrary to the straightforward “postcolonial” theories, where they figure as poor hapless objects of History, who cannot speak for themselves and need the comfort of self-anointed academic “interpreters.”)

The academic left-wing “interpretive community” did not take this affront by reality put forth in Stoll’s book lightly and its author was close to crucified (the fury and perplexity of this diverse group is reflected in Arturo Arias’ collection); the attempt to move the discussion beyond insults to a higher ground has not found its way yet to the U.S. academic market (see the volume edited by Mario Roberto Morales, *Stoll-Menchú: La invención de la memoria*, 2001). Instead of reexamining their perhaps well-meaning yet failed constructs, these academics declared that they would continue teaching Menchú as they saw fit and, in a surprising about-face, asked, without blushing, Who expected truth in Latin American *Testimonio*, after all? Others pontificated
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that truth did not matter; and, actually, What was the truth in the postmodern world anyway? Wasn’t it our construct only? Even simple well-established facts were discarded as malicious interpretations. All the postmodern paraphernalia were called to the rescue (see our “Entramados”). In this peculiar postmodern discourse-card game, any joker trumps reality—or so it appears.

If Rigoberta Menchú herself has been willing to come out and confirm—directly or indirectly—the tenor of many of Stoll’s and of Morales’ analyses, among others, why could the academy not muster the courage to at least accept the same? Instead, the anxiety over the unspoiled subaltern paradigm has prevailed to the point that the defense of the Nobel Prize laureate against herself by the academy has become absurd.

POSTMODERNISM TO THE RESCUE

In the postmodern turn, protecting dogmatic assumptions from inconvenient facts on the ground, the Nietzschean equivocal dictum “there are no facts, only interpretations” was being stretched to its limits. Yet what if Nietzsche’s provocative aphorism, extrapolated so joyfully from *The Will to Power* (267), was itself only an interpretation, and not necessarily the most lucid one? Besides, Nietzsche himself is much more complex on this issue. His polemic is directed against positivism and its concept of ‘fact-in-itself’. In his own philosophy, he rightfully disparages everything “in-itself” as absurd. “Coming to know,” he writes, “is always placing oneself in conditional relation to something” (301). And yet in another note: “There are no ‘facts-in-themselves,’ for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be ‘facts’.” Without this balancing act, we could not understand what he has to say in his own later work both on interpretation and on the *sense for facts*. His characterization of interpretation in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) is unflattering: “those violations, adjustments, abridgments, omissions, substitutions, which among them constitute the business of interpretation” (287). And in one of his last writings, *The Antichrist* (1888), he extols Greek and Roman culture, where “All the presuppositions for a scholarly culture… were already there.” Among them, “the *sense for facts*, the last and most valuable of all the senses… the free eye before reality, the cautious hand, patience and seriousness in the smallest matters, the whole *integrity* in knowledge” (*The Portable Nietzsche*, 650-51). In his last return to Zarathustra themes, in the last pages of one of his last conscious works, *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche writes that “superman” —the fancy metaphor for the type of man his Zarathustra announces— is simply a man sufficiently strong to take up reality as it is. Nothing more, nothing less.

The probing notes, scribbles, and improvisations from the 1880s, pieced together by his sister and other editors and published posthumously under the title of his abandoned project of a “book for thinking” (*Portable* 442), cannot be taken as Nietzsche’s final word. The apocryphal *The Will to Power* and the other papers left by him constitute arresting reading, but they are *only food for thought*. 

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The 20th Century episteme slid into taking Nietzsche’s partial *boutade* from *The Will to Power* for its equivocal face value and accepting it as an unquestionable axiom through the concept of *Gestalt*, according to which the totality of the *figure*—its *configuration*—is more than the sum of its parts. Elements became meaningful through the whole only and were subordinated to it. Step by step, they were less and less important per se and were moved around at will. Lately, truth itself has turned into a mere “shifter” function for the “neo-pragmatists,” for whom *solidarity* has become more important than any attempt at *objectivity*: for the celebrated postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty, the truth resides in the mouth of the speaker, shifting freely from one speaker to another (Rorty 23), and thus stretching ad absurdum the current “performance turn.” As a result, postmodernist worldview was born, opening the space of “free-for-all,” where “everything goes” and nothing matters (except tenure and academic “micropower”).

In the 19th Century positivism, facts allegedly “spoke for themselves.” How naïve! Postmodern episteme (*despisteme?*) has gone to the other extreme and has had to struggle with its absurdities: accepting only convenient facts, making without any or conjuring them up freely through “interpretations,” or turning facts into hapless subalterns, always in need of politically correct interpretations—praying that nobody points the finger to this sorry state of epistemic affairs.

**U.S. LATIN AMERICANISM VS. LATIN AMERICA**

The present-day U.S. Latin Americanism (a term coined by Enrico M. Santí) has experienced growing difficulty in coping with the local complexities of Latin American realities and with the rapid changes prompted by conflicting local and global trends. It also has ignored the best new developments in the Latin American academy (on this score, see our *Latin America Writes Back*). There seems to be a widening gap as well as asynchrony between the two academies, their research agendas, politics and indeed ethics.

By the 1960s, Latin American intellectuals left behind theory understood as a simple “toolbox” of methodologies for specific domains of inquiry and embarked on the adventure with the Grand Theory, which was promising not only to explain the world, but also to change it. The promise was too good to resist. It was also too good to be true. The world poorly understood was poorly changed at best and was devastated at worst. Thirty years of heroic struggle for utopia, from the 1960s to the 1980s, coinciding with the secular societal crisis triggered by the botched race for modernization, added to the region’s burden and pushed it further into the blind alley.

In Latin America, the modern socialist utopia hooked up with the anti-modern “turn”—further complicated by the “anti-Yankee” stance—that Latin American thinking took in the late 19th Century. That memorable twist involved figures as opposing on the political spectrum as the Cuban José Martí and the Uruguayan José...
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Enrique Rodó. In that baffling about-face, the 19th Century Liberals and Conservatives switched their agendas (see the lucid account by Edmundo O’Gorman) and the hodgepodge of contradictory attitudes —strikingly “postmodern” avant la letter— created the breeding ground for the one hundred-year plague of macondismo.

Gabriel García Márquez’s novel One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) has the merit of putting the finishing touches on Latin America as Macondo. Latin American and foreign intelligentsia then turned macondismo into an expedient tool for the interpretation of Latin America through the literature of “magic realism.” Reality and analysis were replaced by fantasy and wishful thinking. Secular failures of the region were celebrated as achievement, idiosyncrasy, authenticity, inscrutable mystery, and spiritual superiority. Why bother about the struggle for modernity and modernization if the “hybrid” macondista reality was supposedly already “postmodern” avant la letter? Macondismo thus emerged as the “bright” side, embellished by literature, of the continent’s limited, frustrated or failed reach for modernity. However, macondismo was not simply a modern reaction to failure: old myths about the New World’s exceptionalism and magic allure were lurking under this new veneer. José Joaquín Brunner sums up his devastating critique of macondismo in his magisterial “Traditionalism and Modernity in Latin American Culture”: “Macondo is the final aristocratic gesture of a semideveloped continent that finally is obliged to recognize itself in Modernity” (17).

In Latin America, the search for modernity has been substituted by the pursuit of the mirage of “identity” (see Jorge Larraín’s Identity and Modernity in Latin America, 2000). The chronic crisis of the continent in the 20th Century to which macondismo contributed —and continues to contribute— produced a string of fascist and socialist dictatorships and culminated in the savage Central American wars in the 1980s. And Latin America is not out of the woods yet: the fateful 20th Century seems to continue there without end in sight.

Sensing the failure of the Grand Theory, dramatically highlighted by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a diverse group of leading Latin American intellectuals turned from macondismo and/or utopia to the reality which was undergoing spectacular changes right before their eyes. In the late 1980s, José Joaquín Brunner, Néstor García Canclini, Jorge Larraín, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Beatriz Sarlo, to name a few, although each of them adopting strikingly different stance, all began to look beyond Macondo in order to study the shape of the new Latin America emerging from the momentous modernizing processes going on since the 1950s under the nose of, yet “under the radar” of, other “enlightened” “progressive” intellectuals still under the spell of their macondismo fever. During the 1990s, a number of young Latin American writers challenged macondismo in literature (see Mempo Giardinelli, in Latin America Writes Back, or the volume McOndo, edited by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, parodying Macondo in the very title of this collection of short stories).

In the meantime, by the early 1980s, it was the turn for U.S. academy to fall for the Grand Theory in the “post-isms” mode. The whole cycle of experience was repeated on a new soil, though in a somewhat different key. The same discussions
and “discoveries” were rehashed in the U.S. in complete ignorance of Latin American debates of the 1960s (as Sarlo points out) and were then re-exported to Latin America, where continuity had been interrupted in the 1960s (Cuba) and 1970s (fascist dictatorships in the Southern Cone). Fortunately for the U.S., only “cultural wars” erupted there, yet the toll on the academy’s sanity was heavy. One by one, the disciplines in the humanities and in the social sciences declared themselves in crisis or in bankruptcy. The crisis was indeed epistemological; but it was only a part of a wider crisis of social values produced by the counterculture, the “hippie” revolution, Vietnam war and cultural transformations driven by technology, media and by the popular culture created, in turn, by mass media, to come to affect professional values at large (see the reactions to Sokal and to Stoll which would be incomprehensible in other settings).

Postmodernism added yet another touch: the ideologism of Grand Theories linked with postmodern gamesmanship and image packaging. The need to create some distinctive image on the stage of the mass reproducibility of culture intensified the modern tendency towards “artistry” (Nietzsche ponders modern man’s irresistible transformation into Schauspieler/actor in The Gay Science 302-03). Research turned into slick yet vacuous ritual gaming (careers, grants, publications) and the “star” professor was born. Publishing faster than one can think became an ideal.

Cultural studies—this “jack of all trades” which came to the rescue like deus ex machina—were ill equipped to deal with this multi-layered crisis, and, actually, contributed to it. In comparison with the earlier British version, which had been heavy on Marxism, the U.S. mutation flouted its “unbearable lightness of being,” flirted with everything and ended up being master of nothing. “Cultural studies,” in spite of the name, were not meant as a study of culture at large, but focused mainly on the media revolution, on the one hand, and on certain group interests, such as gender and sexualities, on the other. The “neuralgic” point of cultural studies was precisely the intersection of both lines. In addition to this narrow focus, ‘studies’ has been substituted in many cases by ‘agenda advocacy’. The list of preferred topics (see Reynoso 24) boils down to a few interrelated themes: gender, race, representation, globalization, and media culture. In his thorough critique of cultural studies, Carlos Reynoso points out, among other things, lack of basic epistemological and critical reflection on the new field, haphazard and uncritical use of frameworks and methods imported from other disciplines, presenting of truisms as new discoveries, and marked Anglo centrism (302-05). Cultural studies and cultural wars are the twin epiphenomena of the same failed movement that peaked in the humanities and in social sciences in the last two decades.

One index of the unreality of these attitudes was the assumption that some hastily concocted junk, expressed through as unintelligible discourse as possible, would somehow by itself immediately change society. Reality did not cooperate and elite universities became hospices for bruised egos. Finally, in April of 2003, Grand Theory in the U.S. was ritually buried by a group of its exhausted practitioners (see the
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“Postist” Grand Theory appears to be mortally wounded or dead in the larger academic world, but alive and well in U.S. Latin Americanism, the true heir of macondismo. Latin Americanism’s version of the U.S. imperial academy, extending its hegemony all over the world, enriches Latin American macondismo with local U.S. touches. Many U.S. professors are now more “radical” and more “revolutionary” than Latin American revolutionaries who have been chastised by history. Latin Americanism distorts by selection and by omission both the new Latin American reality and the emerging thinkers of the Latin American academy. Yet the writing is on the wall for the latest –and hopefully last— metamorphosis of macondismo.

The recent special issue of Revista iberoamericana (Nr. 203, April-June 2003), dedicated to “Latin American cultural studies on the threshold of the 21st Century,” is a case in point: besides some carefully selected Latin Americans (Monsiváis is always a breath of fresh air), the same endogamous U.S. academics once again chew over the fatal flaws of their pet theories. Among other things, they are vindicating post mortem vitality for the concept of ‘subaltern’, requesting “new imaginaries,” clamoring for “breaking the limits of thinking and other old-fashioned habits,” starting a “non calculative but commemorative work,” whatever all that gibberish means. (Will the dead subaltern rise at midnight to feed on its inventors? It would be poetic justice.) Some discover that September 11 changed the world. Others present a string of anecdotes nostalgic of the good old days. The devastating critique of cultural studies by Carlos Reynoso is gingerly dismissed as a crisis of the messenger’s discipline, anthropology. Indeed, the politics and the ethics of research seem to be different in U.S. Latin Americanism and in the best contemporary Latin American thinking. This con-memorable issue reminds us of what we are left with when “old-fashioned” habits such as critical thinking are abandoned for the pastures of spurious “new imaginaries.”

THEORY RETOOLED

Yet theory is not just a “toolbox” of methodologies nor Grand Theory. It does not have to sink into vacuous gamesmanship or ritual. In his Vienna lecture, “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity” (1935), which became the nucleus of his unfinished monumental Crisis of European Sciences, Edmund Husserl brings “theoretical attitude” back to thaumazein, to the attitude of ‘curiosity’ and ‘wonderment’ about the world, and of ‘thirst’ for knowing, without addressing exclusively practical concerns. He wonders, rightfully so, how this attitude “could arise and become habitual, at first in individuals, out of the manner and the life-horizon of Greek humanity in the seventh century” B.C. (Crisis 285) and how “a few Greek eccentrics” initiated “a transformation of human existence and its whole cultural life” (289),
turning wonderment gradually “from original theòria, the fully disinterested seeing of the world … to the theòria of genuine science” (285). He points out that, unlike other cultural works, theoretical attitude—although originating in Greece—was not bound to the soil or national tradition, but created a peculiar universality of man’s critical stance (286). In this new attitude towards the world, the ideal truth has become an absolute value and “brings with it a universally transformed praxis” of human existence and the whole of cultural life (287). In “The Origin of Geometry” (1936), Husserl defines the “community of scientists” as “a community of knowledge living in the unity of a common responsibility” (362). This has, obviously, nothing to do with the “interpretive communities” policing their “correct” interpretations.

Only misguided structuralism (Claude Lévi-Strauss) and poststructuralism (Jacques Derrida and others) proposed to erase the divide between the theoretical-scientific and the religious-mythical attitudes, reducing both to bland bricolage. Scientific thinking strives to create universal languages and systems as rigorously established metalanguages and metasystems, proposed as universally valid and therefore subject to validation. The “horizon of expectations” in science is by definition open-ended and always subject to questioning. In this sense, science cannot be put on the same level with the symbolic systems—as rich as they can be—created by “primitive” mind or dogmatic assumptions and is indeed incommensurable with them. This is why scientific metalanguage can “read” and incorporate these local or limited systems, but not vice versa. Only the historical and pragmatic dimension of science and theory and the fact that they are not, and cannot be, absolute, creates the impression that they resemble bricolage. (Murky practice does not create good theory.)

Husserl is aiming his critique at the Nazi pseudo-romantic mystique of the Blut und Boden (blood and soil), which twisted German science and trapped even Martin Heidegger in its web, but it is equally valid for present-day poststructuralists or Euro-bashing multiculturalists. Writing German in French or in English is actually one of the striking “how to” features for creating the desired opacity of the postmodern discourse: muddied discourse parades as simulacrum of depth (Portable Nietzsche 240). In spite of the differences between the two epochs (rainbow colors now vs. brown then), the umbilical cord connecting postmodern deconstruction to the romantic “roots” in the German tradition is disconcerting, though it may help to explain the visceral revolt against Enlightenment in both. The similarities go beyond the twisted discourse and denunciation of Heidegger for his shortsighted and short-lived slippages in Nazi politics.

The current crisis of science is thus only the latest in the string of historic crises of the theoretical attitude. Stripped of its panic values, which increases revenues on the postmodern “EVERYTHING ON SALE” market, ‘crisis’ comes from criseô, ‘going to the edge’, ‘reaching a turning point’. Every now and then we get to the edge and need to deconstruct the way that has led us to the brink of the abyss; those who don’t jump over in despair, reconstruct the way to lead us in a different direction, up to the
next crisis. Reconstruction makes us return to fundamental questions but does not require us to go back to old solutions. Albert Camus’ Sisyphus looks forward to each new challenge; only in our case, it is always a different stone and a different mountain. This Heraclitean version of the myth helps us to keep our composure in the face of the cyclical reversals.

If we measure the effectiveness of a theory by its consequences, how far do we go? How long do we wait? Nietzsche would laugh at our impatience and ignorance (The Will 164). To the surprise of the postmodern petits philosophes disenchanted with theory, theory properly understood has plenty of direct social impact, even beyond the huge global effect of the universally transformed praxis of human existence. Take the oft-maligned Enlightenment. It did not produce modernity by itself but it created modern values, controversial as they may be. Yes, it took a hundred years or more to liberate slaves in the West. It took another hundred years to establish equal or even preferential status for their descendants. Postmodernism came to bury Enlightenment, but it appears that it has buried itself under its own pettiness and excesses. Its little Grand Theory, following Karl Marx’s quip, has just recast the Enlightenment in the farcical mode. Longue durée is incomprehensible for the postmoderns.

**WRITING AS WITNESSING**

How does The Articulation of Difference fit this context? The trajectory of Mario Roberto Morales is typical of his times in Latin America. He became involved in revolutionary activities as a student in the mid-1960s. After the failure of the first, “romantic” guerilla insurgency in Guatemala, he helped prepare the ground for the next round, starting in 1975; the war then exploded, inspired and aided by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. In 1982, his insurgent organization sent him to Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua to establish links with international solidarity networks, the lifelines of Latin American insurgencies. This actually saved his life, although he was briefly arrested in Mexico and later, for a longer and more ominous period, in Sandinista Nicaragua, because he had criticized the failed military strategy of the Guatemalan insurgents and exposed atrocities committed against his organization by another insurgent group. Reeling from that encounter with destiny, he realized that the Revolution was not what it was supposed to be: for some it was a game, others paid with their lives. Years later, he wrote a moving memoir of his experience with revolutionary reálpolitik, Los que se fueron por la libre (The ones who went off on their own, 1998).

After graduate studies in Costa Rica, he went to Pittsburgh to do doctoral work in cultural studies. However, his life experience did not square well with the intellectual culture at the Pitt Spanish Department, one of the bastions of macondismo in U.S. Latin American studies, and the theories he learned there did not square any better with the realities of his own country as he knew them firsthand. When he returned to Guatemala to complete the research for his dissertation, the new facts –unpredicted
and unpredictable—rushed in, overwhelming theories conjured up in European and North American classrooms. *The Articulation of Difference* emerged from these diverse encounters. It is a product of wondering and of wandering. Morales literally goes around on foot, looks, wonders, speaks with real people (not with the emaciated constructs of “subalterns”). This enables him to re-map his country following the momentous 1996 peace accords. On his journey of discovery, he does not find the predicted “postcolonial” reality nor some postulated “profound America” just a heartbeat away, beneath the slick veneer of modernity (the *topos* so celebrated by *macondismo*). He sees change and more change caused by the surprising flows of globalization. These include Korean-owned *maquiladoras*, cable TV and Mexican *telemovelas* and *rancheras* music in remote indigenous villages, handicrafts redesigned for international markets, old customs bankrupted by new mores but re-floated by tourism, “secret Indian rituals” arranged for a price for unsuspecting visitors from all-over the world only, or the remarkable spread of evangelical Protestant churches among indigenous populations which liberation theology delivered into revolutionary folly and counterinsurgency massacres. He finds that the “subaltern,” so hapless in theory, is adroitly and shrewdly navigating the new currents of politics and world economy, posturing successfully for the international aid organizations who are always on a lookout for the next anointed noble savage. Even Mayan priests have organized their Non-Governmental Organization and have invented for the occasion fanciful native dresses, adorned with plumage and everything imaginable; the funny thing is that the bellboys of a nearby hotel in the ever more touristy Chichicastenango actually wear a genuine colonial ceremonial dress coming from local saints’ brotherhoods—*cofradías*—, therefore casting doubts on who is more authentic out there in these postmodern times. The list could continue *ad infinitum*.

So far, *The Articulation of Difference* might seem like a Guatemalan version of García Canclini’s transitional *Hybrid Cultures*, which appeared a decade earlier. However, Morales goes far beyond hybridization and the glittering surface of globalization: he adds depth of local historical and cultural knowledge, critical political poignancy, and a different vision for the future of his country. *The Articulation of Difference* is a biting, demystifying reality adventure.

While *Hybrid Cultures* has been largely misread by U.S. *macondismo* and absorbed as one of its supporting pillars, *The Articulation of Difference* has resisted assimilation: it not only falsifies idolized Grand Theories and pious orthodoxies espoused by Latin American studies in the U.S., but romps through a range of politically explosive subjects in the multiethnic Guatemalan nation. Morales analyzes Miguel Angel Asturias’ convoluted road to cultural *mestizaje*; independently of Stoll, questions Rigoberta Menchú’s political role-playing, as well as that of other would-be representatives of the indigenous population, including U.S.-educated essentialist “Mayista” intellectuals; criticizes the arrogance of the dogmatic Left and how it contributed to the useless cycles of bloodletting in the region; shows how well-
meaning practitioners of anthropology contributed with their invention of traditions and ethnic markers (and now “help” with calls for ethnic warfare); and unveils the dance of indigenous representatives’ discourses vying for international aid through NGOs.

Based on his analysis of Guatemala’s realities, Morales looks to the future and argues for a democratic negotiation of interethnic differences in his country. This may be a utopian wager of his project, but recent history of the region has shown that there are no good alternatives to it.

The Articulation of Difference belongs to the new Latin American canon, produced by some first-rate intellectuals, brought up originally on mainly European theoretical models, yet now engaging their unavoidable home realities and rethinking failed cultural values embodied in macondismo. A long century of Latin American debacle(s) does not call for less.

If Morales’ book is uncomfortable for some North American readers, including some of his Pittsburgh teachers, then tough luck. It would be too easy to dismiss it as a minor follow-up of another book, or as a sign of “personal crisis,” or as the result of alleged “class” interests or “phallocentrism” (whatever this may mean).

Last but not least, The Articulation of Difference is a deeply Guatemalan book. It goes beyond current Western theories and the usual surface reports of accidental tourists, academic or otherwise. It has none of the superficial autobiographism of the postmoderns, yet it is sustained by life experience and by the unyielding hope of its author and of his people. Anybody who refuses to listen does so at his/her own peril.

REFERENCES


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Beyond latin americanism and other accidental/occidental tourism:
Guatemala(ns) in search of cultural theory, and more


