

Reinventing Nationalism: Mexico in the Works of José Revueltas

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DURING THE FIRST SIX DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, most Hispanic American intellectuals wrote and thought about nationalism. The majority of them tried to accommodate a European national model to the specific characteristics of their own nation and the whole Hispanic America. Their efforts to reach the ideal picture of modernity were, for the most part, unsuccessful. Today, modernity ideals are still out of reach. Economic globalization and the rise of multi-national corporations have made us aware of the current impossibility for the nation-state to attain its stated goals. The inhabitants of Third World countries have heard these goals many times in the form of political promises about freedom, equality, development of national industry, land distribution, elimination of poverty and creation of jobs.

A modern and progressive state has been always supposed to accomplish the goal of a stable internal economic development that could produce material welfare for its inhabitants. Its first priority was to attain domestic economic growth and then, later, political power. Of course I am not trying to suggest here that nations and nationalism are a simple product of elite Western economic ideas and ideologies. I am aware that the national creation is affected by the struggle among different ideologies, class and ethnic conflicts, and other factors like the incorporation of local traditions, particular interpretations of modernity, specific historic circumstances and so on. I am also aware that nations were created under very different historical circumstances, in places with radically different historical processes. In fact, maybe the only possible constants in the many different conceptual nations crafted all over the globe are a belief in "progress" through a state bureaucracy, a state-controlled primary education, an official rewriting of history, a flag, an anthem and more recently a national soccer team.

Nevertheless, I want to start by restating the undeniable economic character that was always implied behind the crafting of modern nations. I believe this decision will prove fruitful in a time when the unmasking of the many philosophical absurdities hidden behind the word nation, (national spirit, ethnic integration, language imposing, foundational myths, etc.) have not been accompanied with an evaluation of the material changes that the global economy has brought to the ideological use of nations, as well as to the goals a Third World nation is supposed to attain and to the very definition of each nation.

In Mexico, the party that had ruled the country for seven decades is finally out of the office and with it, a whole ideological construction of what Mexico is. The idea of Mexico, crafted during and after the Mexican Revolution, had been in crisis since the 1960's and with the triumph of Vicente Fox in the 2000 presidential election, the PRI's national project is almost dead, after a long and painful illness. To better understand this dramatic change, it is imperative to understand what the PRI's national project was and the very particular ways it defined and abused the national idea. José Revueltas, a solitary Mexican Marxist novelist and social theorist, was the first to analyze the re-creation of Mexico after the Revolution; he was also the first to notice its bankruptcy and to suggest a new ideological use of the nation's myths.

In this work, I use Revueltas's analysis of Mexico's ideological creation as a valuable aid for a better understanding of the Mexico that is emerging after the defeat of the PRI in the last presidential elections. The new government attempts to define itself in partial opposition to the revolutionary project crafted by the PRI. My wish is to provide a historical analysis that throws light into the current national ideological debate. The re-evaluation of José Revueltas's critique of post-revolution Mexico is, I think, a necessary step in any future attempt to use the ideas that support Mexico's national identity in a politically progressive way.

Before turning to José Revueltas's critique of Mexico's national creation after the Revolution, it should be useful to sketch the historical development of Mexico and the Mexican identity.

It is arguable that modern Mexican national identity was created during the Díaz regime, when the quickening tempo of the European Industrial Revolution, accompanied by an increasing trade with world markets, made it necessary for Europe to incorporate peripheral countries like Mexico into an international economic system. Peace and stability were the necessary conditions for achieving progress, which at the time was identified with social scientific ideas like Taine's social determinism and Comte's positivism¹. Freedom, order and progress were the three guiding ideas of the positivist creed. Trying to be accepted as a nation of the cosmopolitan world, the "scientific" intelligentsia of the Díaz government crafted a sellable idea of Mexico, a cosmopolitan, modern and at the same time exotic nation that combined for the first time two mythical pasts: one Indian and other Spanish².

Then, in 1910, came the Revolution, an explosive movement that combined Indian exasperation, northern peasants and workers' radical demands of material improvements, and a poorly articulated claim to power by a relegated bourgeoisie. In the end, it was this emerging bourgeoisie who ultimately reached power. It found a way to reconcile the radically different interests involved in the Revolution under a new definition of what Mexico was and what Mexico was meant to be. According to Roger Bartra, the greatest myth of the Revolution was its transposition of social antagonism to spaces and discourses where the class struggle was domesticated (227, 228). After the end of the struggle, peasants and workers gained little material improvements but ideologically they started to be the abstract base of a new national consciousness. The complex conciliation of interests under the new nationalist discourse was intrinsically ambiguous. As Octavio Paz claims, the new era was characterized by a search for lost pre-modern origins and a return to them, but at the same time, the new national discourse worked as an ambitious attempt to craft a modern nation (134).

The process of using national unity to give meaning to the Revolution, probably started as a result of the growing fear of the middle classes, faced with what seemed to be uncontrollable destruction. This provoked a desire for national unity, and a new concept of nation started to appear as a result of the struggles for power. Zapata and Villa's popular movements, despite having the most powerful armies in the first years of the Revolution, lacked the ideological resources to merge their movements with a viable national program that could assure them support from middle class sectors. They were defeated in the end by the armies of Carranza, himself a member of the oligarchy and whose army had the support of the powerful upper and middle classes. Carranza also succeeded in confronting the workers and

¹ As early as 1943, Leopoldo Zea wrote about the ideological uses of positivist ideas in Mexico in his book *El positivismo en México*. Charles Hale also published in 1989 an explanation of the transformation of the nineteenth century Mexican liberalism into positivism in his book: *The transformation of liberalism in late nineteenth century Mexico*.

² This idea is examined in Mauricio Tenorio's *Mexico at the World's Fairs: crafting a modern nation*.

the peasants, using the first ones to fight Zapata's peasants in the south. After a decisive victory over Villa in 1915, he was in partial control of the country by 1917.

The governments that followed Carranza —assassinated in 1920 while trying to escape from a revolt led by Obregón, the most powerful of his generals— transformed the Revolution into an indivisible entity, erasing the radical differences of all the different factions. Obregón's secretary of state, José Vasconcelos, perpetuated this idea through an ambitious educational program where all Mexicans were to learn the same mythical national history. In Vasconcelos's educational program, the sources of the Mexican problems were not to be found in the unjust distribution of land and wealth, but in the lack of an educational, redeeming program.³

The contradictions of the new nationalist discourse have their most powerful example in the opposition between the two most important artistic projects that arose as a result of the Revolution: The muralism⁴ and the novel of the Revolution⁵.

During the 1920's, the government-sponsored Muralism glorified the Indian past and the workers struggles in a self-proclaimed socialist fashion. It is easy to detect an important contradiction in a radical socialist art promoted and financed by a capitalist State. The murals in the government buildings exemplify the rhetorical social commitment of a State that proclaims itself the heir of a socialist revolution. The Mexican Indians triumph in the government buildings' walls despite their defeat in most of their struggles for land and social justice. It is a proud vision of the vanquished. Muralism, writes Carlos Monsiváis, is also a disguised return to the positivist cult of progress. It uses a stylized barbarism as the raw material of a heroic civilization that claims its place between the modern nations of the Western world (1425-1426).

On the other hand, the novel of the Revolution is characterized by its pessimism. It shows a moral obsession with the liquidation of the revolutionary stimulus. The novel of the Revolution documents the official betrayal of the revolutionary ideals. Its critique does not go as far as questioning the dominant social moral values. Ultimately, it also supports the positivist idea that Mexico has no remedy, also writes Monsiváis (1448).

It would be unfair not to mention that both artistic movements showed a very critical view of the devastated civilization ideals of Europe; they attempted the construction of a new nation in opposition to the colonizing discourse of Europe and the growing imperialism of the United States. What I emphasize here is the rhetorical use that turned them into the basis of a new national project. The Indians, reaffirmed as the essence of the nation, were turned into ancestral, enigmatic and remote beings, with a silence of centuries. This abstract character made them almost invisible.

The process of national redefinition reached its intellectual peak during the thirties and forties, when Mexican intellectuals started an exploration of the Mexican psyche. They were trying to explain the perennial defeat of modern ideas in Mexico while at the same time using this failure as evidence for a new critique of a decaying Western civilization.

³ A very lucid analysis and critique of Vasconcelos's contradictory educational program and of some of its consequences can be found in the following essays by Jorge Cuesta, written in the 1930's: *Una nueva política clerical y La enseñanza obligatoria*. Both of them can be found in *Jorge Cuesta*, an anthology edited by Carlos Monsiváis.

⁴ Its main exponents are Orozco, Siqueiros, Rivera and later O'Gorman.

⁵ Azuela's *Los de Abajo* and Guzman's *La Sombra del Caudillo* are probably the best examples. Later examples are also Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Fuentes's *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz*. One of Revueltas's novels: *El luto humano*, is considered by some critics as a late example of the Novel of the Revolution.

Samuel Ramos, for example, used a particular psychoanalytical theory to reach what would be a recurrent diagnostic: inferiority complex (111-116). Octavio Paz tried to make Mexican society understandable through the analysis of its most significant myths and words. Some of his most famous conclusions identify what he calls the primordial solitude of Mexicans: the product of a sexual violation perpetuated in the Indian women that marked them and started a society based on the use and abuse of power (77-80).

José Revueltas participated in the search for Mexican identity during his early works in the 1940's, particularly in journalist essays and chronicles. He went from sharing the optimism towards Mexico's future during the Cárdenas years to an extremely critical position regarding the post-Revolutionary government ideologies and policies. His *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza* (1961) (Essay About a Headless Proletariat) is probably the first political work in Mexico that attempts to analyze the mechanisms through which the Mexican State legitimizes itself based on an appropriation of all the symbols, myths and ideas generated from the Revolution.

José Revueltas wrote his best political essay, the *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza*, in 1961, when the political system that emerged after the final triumph of Obregón was starting to show signs of decline. From those years on, governments in Mexico have accepted the reality of a global economy in which national economic development has little meaning. This process has finally been completed with the PRI's defeat in the year 2000 elections. The "revolutionary family" is finally out of the office and with it, most of the ideas and political programs that helped to define modern Mexico and to control its political destiny. While it is not easy to lament the ending of the predatory and corrupt regime of the PRI, it is ironic that the supposed triumph of democracy in Mexico means in reality the conscious acceptance by its new government of the country's main role in the global economy as a cheap labor provider. The PRI's defeat put an effective end to any discourse of national industry development and political independence. It means, I think, the end of a particular national discourse. In this context, Revueltas's pioneering attempt of unveiling the contradictions inherent to the Revolutionary national project from its very beginning helps to explain both the Revolution's historical failure and some of the keys of today's national politics, when Mexico is being reinvented once again.

In Revueltas's early essays, many of them written during or right after the Cárdenas presidency, there is an exaggerated optimism about the possible solution of the national problems with concrete economic actions. For example, during one of Revueltas's travels to the north of Mexico in 1943, he witnessed the first grape harvest in a communal vineyard in Mexicali. He wrote that private property would be a transitory step towards the total industrialization of agriculture (Revueltas, *Viaje al*, 73). In the same trip he also visited a newly built dam in Tijuana and wrote that, some day, the Indian sadness will transform itself into smiles and muscle (73).

This early optimism has its reverse side in a novel also written during the early 1940's: *El luto humano*. In this novel, all the actions and hopes of the characters end in failure and death. In the novel, a group of peasants and a priest try to escape a flooding that starts to cover the wasteland in which they live. As Ruiz Abreu notices, "Almost everything in the novel warns of destruction and chaos" (162). Everybody in the novel is a victim of an historic offense. The Conquest condemned the characters of the novel, almost all of them peasants, and the redeeming possibility of the Revolution failed. The fiasco of the land distribution, ruined by fraud, corruption and government lack of help, is central in the conception of the novel. Roger Bartra uses this novel as an example of a literature that perpetuates the stereotype of the Mexican Indians as mythical beings that carry with them a centuries-old deep sadness (47-48). It is true that Revueltas uses stereotypes in the novel, but he is also stereotyped when Bartra chooses not to refer to the specific historic dimension that Revueltas

gives to the existential pessimism of his work. Nothing is more distant from Revueltas's literature than the attempt to petrify any fixed vision of reality. Revueltas himself tried several times to clarify his attempt to portray in his novels the many contradictions of reality and how these contradictions can reach unbearable extremes. Evodio Escalante makes this point clear in his book about Revueltas, where he explains that Revueltas's work is the only attempt at creating dialectical literature in Latin America (19). For him, Revueltas attempts to understand the forces behind the movement of reality and how contradictory elements interpenetrate each other and, taken to an extreme, degenerate in total corruption. Monsiváis also notices that the key in Revueltas's thought is the freedom of fatality. Everything is carried out to the limit: his baroque style, his radical passion, and his atmospheres where delirium is the only possibility of lucidity (1477).

This program, as any other, is in itself questionable of course. What I want to clarify is that the apparent extreme and almost closed pessimism of the novel is not just an attempt to show any inherent sadness or predestination of Mexicans. Pessimism, in *El luto humano*, is an effort to take to an extreme a particular historical situation, hoping for its renewal.

Any optimism is left behind by Revueltas in his *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza*, his major political text. In no other place does he make more explicit the notorious ideological character of Mexico's national formation and institutionalization. Revueltas's essay is a strong critique of the Mexican Communist Party from a communist perspective. He denounces its inability to provide the working classes with a political platform that could serve their real interests. Political parties, claimed Revueltas, are the organized political and ideological consciousness of social groups. It is imperative then to have a politically organized and theoretically coherent representation for the workers and peasants' true interests. Revueltas's essay goes beyond a legitimate desire for the establishment of a coherent and honest Communist Party. His analysis about the process of national formation after the Revolution also provides a solid starting point for an understanding of the powerful ideological mechanism behind the ruling political group that emerged after the Revolution. It also gives a key to a partial understanding of the gradual ideological collapse of this group and of the current need for a redefinition of a coherent political discourse for Mexico's dispossessed majority.

Revueltas states in his essay that Mexico entered too late into the world of nations. It only had an incipient manufacturing bourgeoisie where it should have been a base of advanced capitalist relations. Mexico was seen by the world powers as a simple object of prey. For Revueltas, the only winner of the Revolution was an emergent bourgeoisie that, just as peasants and workers, entered the struggle without a clear political and ideological program. This deficiency was used to its advantage: the revolutionary bourgeoisie was the only social class capable of making a rational critique of the struggle's development. During the Revolution, it extended its consciousness, managing to incorporate into its incipient ideological arsenal the radical social demands of peasants and workers (166-175). By doing this, it was able to give a global coherence to the whole movement and got approval for its government from the poorest sectors of the population. The new national ideas that came out of the Revolution were the keys that gained for the new government the simultaneous support of workers, peasants, and even part of the old oligarchy. The Revolution did not eliminate social classes, but it did reorganize in an effective way national and class-consciousness all over Mexico.

According to Revueltas, this subtle maneuvering on the part of an emerging bourgeoisie is explained in part by the delay of the Mexican bourgeoisie in its arrival to power. This bourgeoisie participated in the struggle without an organized set of ideas that could accurately define its class interests. Its main concern when entering into the struggle was simply to end with a political monopoly that kept its members out of the power positions.

This political monopoly, writes Revueltas, was seen as the one and only evil to defeat. It was similar, he thinks, to the naïve way the liberal oligarchy of the nineteenth century imagined the catholic clergy, supposedly the one and only impediment to carry on the liberal program (144). Thanks to this lack of a theoretically organized political consciousness, at the end of the Revolution it was easy for the bourgeoisie to incorporate into the 1917 Constitution the most radical demands of peasants and workers. Carranza included all the reforms under the condition that they were to be implemented by an almighty government. The document is socially advanced, but it is far from reflecting the actual practices of the new rulers. Every revolutionary government crushed in reality any independent working class movement. The only socialist consciousness allowed in Mexico was that of its government. Thanks to this fact, peasants, workers and even bureaucrats could identify themselves with the Revolution while the Mexican bourgeoisie dominated the historical national development. The result, despite the partial social success of the Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho governments, was an interesting version of capitalism in an almost totalitarian regime.

The supposed national ideology—the inferiority complex, its sadness, its machismo, the harrowing violence and so on—resulted very useful for the new class in power to make less noticeable under this homogeneity the abysmal economic differences between the different sectors of the national population. Deep inside, all Mexicans suffer and are lonely. Revueltas also writes that the incipient worker's ideology⁶ and the peasant organizations were not only assimilated by the government but also turned into carefully separated official organisms, funded and controlled directly by the government (222-223). The new ruling group got support from both groups while breaking at the same time all possible association between them. The historical frustrations of the bourgeoisie in Mexico, its relatively small presence in a semi feudal, socially and ethnically divided country, also helped to diminish the class character of the new government. Thanks to this circumstance, explains Revueltas, the "revolutionary family" proclaimed itself agrarian, nationalist and indigenist. This "revolutionary family" also wrote social radical reforms in a constitution that never quite followed and could hide itself gracefully behind the government sponsored radical socialist art of the Mexican muralists in the government buildings walls.

It is not surprising, continues Revueltas, that this post-Revolution bourgeoisie failed in its attempt to establish capitalist relations of production, steady economic development and world political influence. Its biggest failure was that of the agrarian reform, which was at the center of the Revolutionary movement. It was the indispensable step to free the country from its colonial defects and to start any attempt to modernize the social, economic and political relations. Even for the first revolutionary governments, it was the crucial factor in the constitution of the nationality (135-139).

Based on this failure, Revueltas harshly criticizes the Mexican left support for the government's social programs and politics. How was it possible that the supposedly most advanced form of political analysis, the Communist party, had not noticed for years the ideological disappearing of a bourgeois government behind a socialist rhetoric? Or the rhetorical discourse of a government that continually attributed its social failures to the power and influence of a reactionary bourgeoisie located outside the government? The left, continued Revueltas, traditionally supported the government in its promise of agrarian reform, of national industrialization, of defense against imperialism, but it was incapable of seeing

⁶ Revueltas notices that the post-revolutionary governments did not incorporate into their official discourse the only theoretically advanced workers ideas of the time: those of the "union-anarchism" of the Flores Magón brothers. Ricardo Flores Magón had predicted since 1910 that if the workers' movement did not take the leadership of the struggle they would be in the end at the mercy of the ascending Mexican bourgeoisie.

that the failure of each one of those programs was in direct relation to the interest defended by the government members (186-198).

A complementary critique of the Mexican left is found in two novels of Revueltas: *Los días terrenales* and *Los errores*. In both of them he questioned the strategies of a left that dogmatically followed the instructions of a party unaware of the social and political realities of Mexico. Revueltas explored the contradictions between the individual communists and a party that was alien to the country's reality. In the end, every communist started to become as unreal as its party. As Monsiváis noticed, the communists are lost in a world where a quasi-religious dogmatism and its autocracy became their only shield to the capitalist persecution (1477). In *Los errores*, this demonized radical left also starts taking on the characteristics of a marginal society. At the margins of the social life, communist militants interact, and become strangely similar, to alcoholics, prostitutes and beggars. Social resentment, writes Monsiváis, becomes circular and results in destruction (1478).

Nations are not going to disappear soon. Their vanishing was predicted by socialist thinkers more than one hundred years ago and they are still here, probably for quite a long time since cheap labor is the crucial factor of the global economy. Nations are an ever-present reality, despite the proved fact that most national projects have failed and some of them are a historical and ideological absurd.

Historian Mauricio Tenorio proposes some interesting steps regarding the contemporary study of national creation. The first step, he argues, would be "a rethinking of national images, nationalism, and identities in a disenchanting, non-nationalist, pragmatic, and yet wishful fashion" (12). It would be useful not only to keep exposing and documenting the many absurdities of nations and nationalism, but also to develop useful critiques for the reconstruction of nations in the best possible harmony with traditional humanist ideals. National analysis can be used and combined with the addressing of specific problems.

Part of Tenorio's agenda is to consider the ethical issues involved when talking about nationalism. Nationalist processes know no end, he writes, and they are not a simple historiographical category, but also a profound ethical issue. While studying national ideas one must be aware that disbelief quite often leads to political conservatism, or at least to political inaction. It is necessary then to take seriously our somehow naive acceptance of hope. There is a necessary taking of political position in any disenchanting historical analysis of the nation and its problems. When taking this political position, one should also be aware of the risk of being wrong and conscious of the temporariness of his or her conclusions. We can only hope to be as close as possible to the always theoretical and always changing ideal human conditions of coexistence.

New historiographical works regarding nationalism also require a careful reconsideration of those figures that did not attain official recognition. There is indeed a very specific need for rescuing some theoretical work that has been traditionally relegated as out of fashion or anachronistic. The non-narrative work of José Revueltas is an obvious example of the latter in Mexico. Despite unquestionably being one of the most important Mexican writers and social theorists of the twentieth century, his essays and his journalistic work have been largely ignored. The relegation of some of his work could be partially explained by the fact that Revueltas harshly criticized both the right and the left, acquiring enemies on both sides of the intellectual world in a country where the writers' village is still one of accomplices and hierarchies. Another obvious reason for this exile is that the Marxist utopia to which Revueltas devoted most of his life, has lost many of its supporters and appeal. For example, Revueltas's *Historia de un proletariado sin cabeza* was written using Lenin's national ideas to justify the validity of his own analytical position. That fact certainly makes part of his work difficult to contextualize (in a similar way to Lenin's) and has historically posed an obstacle for a serious academic reevaluation of his non-narrative texts.

Nevertheless, we would have to agree that nowadays the search for a new critical discourse that can counteract the immense ideological and political power of late global capitalism is still an urgent intellectual and political task. Marxism is one of the many dimensions this possible new critical discourse should contemplate today along with many others. We still share Marx and Revueltas's idea that human society, the way it is defined now, walks towards its own destruction.

Revueltas's literature tried to overcome a negative reality by taking it to its extreme, exposing its contradictions and dogmatic assumptions. In a similar way, any new Mexican national discourse would also have to keep pushing for an awareness of the ideological power of previous national inventions by starting to develop a nationalism that is aware of both its absurdities and its strategic value.

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