Philosophy and the Problem of Cultural Identity: From Ramos to Salazar Bondy

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The Scope of the Discussion

- From 1930’s in Mexico with Samuel Ramos
- To late 1960’s through early 1970’s in Peru with Augusto Salazar Bondy
The Evolution of what is meant by the word “Identity?”

- National Identity
  - Limited to specific geo-political nations
  - May include more than one cultural group
  - Not necessarily focused on common socio-economic issues shared with other nations.

- Cultural Identity
  - Broader in scope
  - Includes Latin American and Caribbean Regions
  - Focuses on parts of the world still dealing with issues of Colonialism
So... What is the Problem?

- It is driven by a “concern for cultural integrity and authenticity.” (p.73)

- It is an “issue of how to make sense of the relation between Europe and Latin America....a culture that is neither fully European, since it was transmitted to America, nor fully American, since it was dominated by Europe.” (p.74)
1) the relation between cultural identity and self-knowledge
   • Focuses on subjective aspects on identity

2) the relation between cultural identity and nationalism
   • Focuses on historical & political aspects of identity

3) the relation between cultural identity and liberation from underdevelopment
   • Focuses principally on the practical, material and economic aspects of identity
The Philosophical & Cultural Precedent: The Formation of the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (Athenaeum of the Youth) 1908

- “Ramos likened these men to the soul of Mexico, although a soul without a body.” (p.75)

José Vasconcelos  Alfonso Reyes  Antonio Caso
The Mexican Revolution, “which began in 1910, ended dictatorship in Mexico and established a constitutional republic. A number of groups, led by revolutionaries including Francisco Madero, Pascual Orozco, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, participated in the long and costly conflict. Though a constitution drafted in 1917 formalized many of the reforms sought by rebel groups, periodic violence continued into the 1930s.”

(http://www.history.com/topics/mexican-revolution)
The **Spanish Civil War** (1936-1939) “broke out when the Spanish army in Morocco when a few of the most influential generals of the Spanish Army, led by General Francisco Franco, rose up against the democratically elected Republican government, presided over by Manuel Azaña. Essentially, the ranks of the Left (also known as Loyalist and Republican) comprised workers, peasants and trade unions, but also the Spanish government, Socialists, Communists and Anarchists. The Right (also known as Nationalist), was supported by rebellious factions of the army, industry, landowners, the middle classes and the Catholic Church. The Spanish Civil War would prove to be both fierce and bloody. General Franco's victory marked the beginning of a forty-year dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975).”

[http://www.donquijote.org/culture/spain/history/the-spanish-civil-war](http://www.donquijote.org/culture/spain/history/the-spanish-civil-war)

Pablo Picasso
“Guernica”
Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain
The Rise of Fascism in Europe (Franco following the Spanish Civil War, Mussolini in Italy and the rise of Hitler in Germany) led to the brutal oppression of liberal voices which then drove a number of Spanish intellectuals to Mexico in the 1930’s.
The Transterrados in Mexican Universities… “did not go to Mexico because they wanted to—most of them simply did not have a choice, the alternative being persecution or death…. That so many Spaniards were able to find refuge in Mexico was largely due to the personal efforts of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). When it was clear that the Republic was going to lose the war, Cárdenas announced that Mexico would accept all the refugees for whose transport and accommodation the Republican authorities would carry the cost.”

(http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/sfaber/Cernuda.pdf)
The Problem of Cultural Identity:

3 Concerns:

• “…to what extent do [the region’s cultural formations] represent a Latin American reality or an alien reality superimposed on the societies of the region?”

• “Is the cultural life of the country in touch with the very reality it tries to represent?”

• “…does the Mexican culture have a recognizable past and a recognizable future that it can call its own?”

(pp.75-76)
Influenced by Existentialism

Sartre:

• “One is what one is not, and one is not what one is.” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*)

• “It seems that we are our past and future selves, and this is our responsibility; yet we are not identical with our past and future selves. As temporal process, we are always becoming who we are.”

Influenced by Existentialism - Nietzsche:

• “How much truth can a spirit endure?” (p.78)

• “That one becomes what one is, presupposes that one does not have the faintest notion what one is.” (Ecce Homo, Chapter 9)

• “Direct self-observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves; we require history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing.” (Human, All Too Human, Chapter II)
Linked the problems of authenticity & cultural identity to the psychological problem of inferiority

Identified 3 aspects of inauthenticity:

- The problem of “the perceived inferiority of Mexico to Europe”
- “The problem of self-knowledge” leading to “living lives with deep splits between reality and illusion”
- “The lack of substantive moral values which leads them to think only in terms of survival.”

(p.76)
Psychological barriers to developing an authentic culture:
- A tendency towards escapism
- A fear of difficult truths
- The creation of a “false bravery”

2 Ways of Dealing with Insecurity
- One can simply reduce their expectations and adjust their aspirations to reality or, …
- One can inflate their feeling of self-image without regard to personal worth – this one “takes refuge in a fiction.” (p.78) which then results in worsening the problem and produces an immature, hostile, resentful and occasionally violent response.
- “The Mexican has devalued himself, committing an injustice against his own person.” (p.78)

- For Ramos, it is more a “feeling” of inferiority than an actual lack of capability.

- It is associated with “a weak self-image… when he compares himself unfavorably with his European counterpart.” (p.79)
The Solution: “un nuevo humanismo”
- Must be developed “from the bottom up” moving man from the “herd animal” to the authentic, fully-realized being
- Must include both a cultural and moral renewal
- Must produce true self-knowledge – one must “shed his resentment against what is foreign at the same time that he must acknowledge that the root of his problem lies in having lived outside his own being.” (p.81)
- Involves an abandonment of illusions.
Comte “came to appreciate the need for a basic and unifying social science that would both explain existing social organizations and guide social planning for a better future. This new science he called “sociology” for the first time.”

(http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/130750/Auguste-Comte/1446/Thought)
“Comte’s main contribution to positivist philosophy falls into five parts: his rigorous adoption of the scientific method; his law of the three states or stages of intellectual development; his classification of the sciences; his conception of the incomplete philosophy of each of these sciences anterior to sociology; and his synthesis of a positivist social philosophy in a unified form. He sought a system of philosophy that could form a basis for political organization appropriate to modern industrial society.”

(http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/130750/Auguste-Comte/1446/Thought)
“Comte revealed his conception of the ideal positivist society in his *System of Positive Polity*. He believed that the organization of the Roman Catholic church, divorced from Christian theology, could provide a structural and symbolic model for the new society, though Comte substituted a “religion of humanity” for the worship of God. A spiritual priesthood of secular sociologists would guide society and control education and public morality. The actual administration of the government and of the economy would be in the hands of businessmen and bankers, while the maintenance of private morality would be the province of women as wives and mothers.”

(http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/130750/Auguste-Comte/1446/Thought)
**Principle appeal towards elite Mexicans**

- Identified social and political order with progress
- Demanded direct control of the state by the bourgeoisie (affluent class)
- Cited the empirical sciences as means to determine truth and develop laws
- Emphasized education, particularly education for the affluent
- Denied the utility of theology or the preservation of cultural identity of the indigenous peoples.

“…they advocated the use of modern business methods to benefit both themselves and the nation, while stressing self-enrichment.”

(http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/117700/cientifico)
Positivism ignores the interests of all the people of Mexico – and instead defines the national interest as the interests of bourgeoisie.

Positivism fails to account for that which is at the heart of Mexican/Latin American identity - the humanism of the *conciencia de mestizaje*/mestizo consciousness “in honor of the alleged universality the Europeans had granted their own culture.”

Positivism models the concept of progress on European ideals instead of encouraging Latin America to develop solutions on its own (*por sí mismo*).
“...philosophy represents both the foundation and the highest expression of culture. In this role philosophy’s special task is to help human beings give an enduring meaning to the changing circumstances of their lives.” (p.91)
Zea’s Conception of Philosophy:

Philosophy when done right…

• must reflect and change with cultural values
• allows one to transcend the idea of a senseless life
• must help solve practical problems
• promotes tolerance of diverse perspectives
• ties the universality of the human condition to the particularity of the individual circumstances by encouraging both a respect for humanity and for the significance of historical developments.
• is a creative, active and dynamic process of defining for and by Latin America “what is ours”
Bondy was trained in the analytic tradition of philosophy. When asked in 1973 at a symposium on Latin American philosophy how he defined the word he said it was… “a systematic body of conceptual elaborations that in one way or another are found at the level of a certain type of ‘technical’ thinking, made by a certain type of person who is a ‘specialist.’ This is what philosophy is.” (p.97)
Argued that there is no truly autochthonous (indigenous) Latin American Philosophy because of imperialism.

Defined philosophy as “a cultural product expressing the life of the community in a rational form.” (p.98)

Defined culture as “the organic articulation of the original differential characteristics of a community.”– not to be confused with history, ways of acting, or peculiar character traits – it is “the way in which a community is organized in relation to other communities” (ibid.)
The Mission of Philosophy According to Salazar Bondy:

- Maintained that Latin Americans should be focused more on the problem of economic dependence and underdevelopment.

- Argued that authentic philosophical works can only emerge from a culture which is “fully itself,” a culture which “fully corresponds to the needs of the community.” (p.98)

- Concluded that “an alienated existence cannot overcome the mystification of philosophy; a divided community cannot generate a genuine and productive [type of] reflection.” (p.100)
Bondy concluded that there has been no genuine Latin American philosophy because there has been no genuine Latin American community! (p. 101)

Further, he argued that in order to be truly authentic, Latin American philosophers must connect themselves with those who would end the domination of the region and work from this perspective of liberation. (p. 103)
Zea’s Response to Salazar Bondy:

- Zea rejected Bondy’s idea of negating the past and argued that this might be a way of avoiding facing reality (p. 103).

- He also argued for the inclusion of different ways of doing philosophy beyond just the analytic method.

- Zea argues that the works dealing with the issues of Latin American identity do present authentically Latin American philosophy.
Bondy presents a false dilemma in claiming that either there are no authentic Latin American philosophical works or there is authentic philosophy that is “both technically good and born out of a society that has opted for a revolutionary way out of underdevelopment” leaving no points possible in between these extremes. (p.105)
Schutte’s Conclusions:

- She argues that the critical question arising from Bondy’s analysis is “how philosophers in such countries can assist in creating values that strengthen their cultural heritage, giving meaning to it in the face of contemporary problems and needs.” (p.107)