

# Politics and subjectivity, head-to-head

León Rozitchner, 1924–2011

**W**hen León Rozitchner passed away on 4 September 2011 after months in the hospital where he had been battling the complications of a cancer operation, his long-time friend and the current director of the National Library of Argentina, Horacio González, referred to him as ‘*the philosopher the country has had for the past sixty years*’. A man of untiring energy and vitalism, he had formed many generations of younger scholars, intellectuals and activists. And yet, a strange half-silence surrounded his own writings during much of his lifetime. When I would ask older friends of mine about their familiarity with the work and thought of this prolific philosopher, many of them would recall for me how they learned their Freud from ‘the old León’, whether at the university or in clandestine seminars during the military dictatorship, which forced Rozitchner into exile in Venezuela; but, until recently, there was almost no published discussion of his many books – at least a dozen of which have been published, including two smaller collections of essays and interviews in the last year.

León himself did not seem too bothered by this academic silencing of his work. Nor did he seek out recognition abroad by appealing to the latest fashions of ‘theory’ from across the Atlantic. He studied at the Sorbonne with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Adventures of the Dialectic* and *Humanism and Terror* he translated into Spanish, and he wrote a thesis on Max Scheler, later published as *Persona y comunidad (Person and Community)* in 1961, but he was scornful of the structuralism of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan. To their theoretical antihumanism and linguistic idealism, he preferred his own form of sensual, embodied and historical Freudo-Marxism, summed up in the crucial book *Freud y los límites del individualismo burgués (Freud and the Limits of Bourgeois Individualism)*, 1972, based on a detailed reading of Freud’s ‘social’ works *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. The core of his proposal, which has remained remarkably – some would prefer to say stubbornly – consistent over the years, combines a thorough investigation into the roots of power and subjection in terror, on the one hand, with a wilful retrieval of the collective potential for rebellion and subjectivation, on the other.

As early as in 1965, in a pivotal text titled ‘La izquierda sin sujeto’ (‘The Left Without a Subject’), he argued that, unless it grasped the subject as the locus of political transformation, left-wing militancy would be bound to repeat the political failures and terrorizing excesses that mark its history throughout much of the twentieth century. Earlier, in *Moral burguesa y revolución (Bourgeois Morality and Revolution)*, 1963, he had begun to unravel the logic of bourgeois individualism by offering a discourse analysis *avant la lettre* of the hearings of the *contras* captured by Castro’s troops after the Cuban victory against the US-supported invasion in April 1962 at Playa Girón in

the Bay of Pigs. Many readers and moviegoers will actually be familiar with this last book and thus with the core of Rozitchner's lifelong work, albeit without knowing it. Sergio, the main character in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's masterful film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*), 1968, reads long passages from *Moral burguesa y revolución* in didactic voice-overs that accompany documentary footage from the hearings of the *contras*, under the subtitle 'La verdad del grupo está en el asesino' ('The truth of the group lies in the assassin').

About the *contras*, Rozitchner writes in *Moral burguesa y revolución*:

Among them, there is no ethical sense, only a personal morality; there is not a single one who can take charge of his action and extend its meaning so as to reencounter in it the signification of the acts taken on collectively, by including the full materiality in which they are grounded.

It is no exaggeration to say that the alternative to this pseudodialectic constitutes the core of León's lifelong investigations: a search for a historical dialectic in which subjects collectively take on the full materiality and signification of their actions.

Rozitchner thus worked for over fifty years in the domain where questions of politics and subjectivity come head to head, particularly in the historical contexts of left-wing populism and guerrilla struggles, right-wing authoritarianism, military dictatorship, and the transition to democracy. All of his writings contribute to the unrelenting effort to uncover the hidden recesses in which power is capable of thriving on the terrorizing fear of, and simultaneous seduction by, the figure of authority. However, this is not merely an analytical attempt to locate the origins of power – in the structure of the superego, for instance; rather, such an analysis also marks the onset of an alternative democratic politics that would be able in a completely different way to elaborate these profoundly affective and bodily materials with which subjectivity is constituted. The aim, then, is dialectically to think terror and death, not just as uni-



versal structures beyond history, nor only as moralizing figures of evil located outside and at a safe remove from one's self, but rather as historical appearances and as subject formations that go to the core of one's very own being.

Beginning in the 1980s, Rozitchner's books gradually move further back in time, so that the overall chronology of his publications follows an order that strangely inverts the chronology of the historical content that is their subject matter: from the two-volume investigation into the theory and politics of Peronism, *Perón: Entre la sangre y el tiempo. Lo inconsciente y la política* (*Perón: Between Blood and Time. Politics and the Unconscious*), 1985, to a long book on Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, titled *La Cosa y la Cruz: Cristianismo y Capitalismo* (*The Thing and the Cross: Christianity and Capitalism*), 1997. We thus gradually gain access to a historical *longue durée* – somewhat along the lines of Michel Foucault's sweeping return from modernity to Ancient Greece, which likewise passes by way of Augustine's *Confessions*, in his unfinished *History of Sexuality*.

Read today, many of these writings seem prescient. Rozitchner's obsessive inquiries into the roots of terror, which originally referred to the military dictatorships in South America, since then have become timely and uncanny investigations into the terrorizing logic behind the war on terror itself. No great leap of the imagination is required to move from the books written from exile in Venezuela in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Argentina was under military rule, to the recent collection titled *El terror y la gracia* (*Terror and Grace*), 2003, which includes Rozitchner's comments on the

aftermath of the 11 September attacks and on the war in Iraq. But a similar temporal loop already overdetermines some of the earlier books. Thus, while the investigation into Peronism was actually initiated well before the military coup of 1976 in Argentina, its underlying logic regarding the continued presence of war at the heart of politics as such, presented in a daring juxtaposition of Freud, Marx and Clausewitz, already anticipates not only the regime of terror under the military junta, but also the illusions that undergirded the later transition to democracy in Argentina. It is almost as if by a perverse counterfinality, the more we step back in time to dig up the prior origins of the power of subjection, the more history catches up with us from behind by turning the distant past into an ominous premonition of the present.

Finally, it is also worth noting how Rozitchner seems to have devoted most of his work to critiquing others, be they friendly opponents, useful adversaries, or full-blown enemies. This is already the case in *Moral burguesa y revolución*, if not earlier in Rozitchner's doctoral thesis on Scheler, whose reluctant materialism is shown to be unable to counter the moralizing idealism of his theory of affects. But the trend to write as it were from within enemy territory becomes more pronounced in response to what Rozitchner perceives to be the ill-constructed compound of left-wing Peronism, and it clearly reaches a pinnacle with the painstaking analysis of Augustine's *Confessions*.

Why would an incredulous Jew want to write, Rozitchner himself asks, about the *Confessions* of a Christian saint? Among the various answers, the most audacious one – certainly outdaring Max Weber's hypothesis about the ideological affinity between capitalism and Protestantism – holds that capitalism simply would not have been possible without Christianity: 'Triumphant capitalism, the quantitative and *infinite* accumulation of wealth in the abstract monetary form, would not have been possible without the human model of religious infinity promoted by Christianity, without the imaginary and symbolical reorganization operated in subjectivity by the new religion of the Roman Empire.' Augustine is *the* model of these profound transformations in the psychic economy. His *Confessions*, Rozitchner proposes, can be read as a user's manual for subjection and servitude. The complete devalorization of the flesh, of pleasure, and of the social in general, together with the newly constituted subject's submission to the rule of law and imperial order, constitute the lasting religious premisses of the political sphere.

Given his interest in the subjective, bodily and affective roots of thought, I would be remiss not to talk about León's personal intensity and generosity. When he came to Cornell University to participate in a conference on 'Marx and Marxisms in Latin America,' he was – at the age of eighty-three – easily the most outspoken and energized interlocutor. This was the only time that we met in person, but something immediately clicked between us and we kept exchanging long letters by email in the final years of his life. His last message came just days before he was to undergo surgery, in February 2011. He was still full of optimism and vitality, confident that he was going to defeat the disease. Sadly, he would never leave the hospital. León's last words to me were meant as a temporary pause, a promise to be continued. '*Si sigo no llego*', he wrote, referring to his desire to catch up with his wife and young twin daughters, who had gone on a day trip to the Delta del Tigre: 'If I continue, I won't get there.' But you did get there, León, and now you are also here, always, though you will be missed.

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León Rozitchner, 'Exile, War, Democracy: An Exemplary Sequence', appeared in *RP* 152, November/December 2008, pp. 40–50.