

Ariel on the border

Alejandro Arturo Villega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2014. 284 pp., £62.00 hb., £22.99 pb., 978 0 25301 248 7 hb., 978 0 25301 257 9 pb.

Alejandro Villega's new book is a philosophical interpretation of the philosophy emerging from Latin America since the early nineteenth century. Not intending to be comprehensive, but rather a *histoire à thèse*, the book tells a particular narrative about a shift in the philosophy of the region in thematic preoccupation and political commitment, spelled out in the second part of the title. For Vallega, there is a change of philosophical focus and topic that marks a political move, a displacement of thematic concern from questions of identity to questions of construction and enunciation from some putative 'outside'. The figures that Vallega discusses are mapped onto this movement and interpretation: other figures perhaps not so straightforwardly placed are ignored, like the important Argentines – philosopher Carlos Astrada, whose trajectory from Heidegger to Mao and beyond is illuminating, and the psychoanalytically innovative thinker León Rozitchner, whose work has appeared previously in *Radical Philosophy* (see *RP* 152, November/December 2008), or even Ernesto Laclau, whose thinking on hegemony and difference addresses the same questions that Vallega's cast do. Vallega puts down a marker for a future discussion of Rodolfo Kusch, already familiar to readers of this journal. Within these limits, the text provides a worthwhile exegesis of figures probably unfamiliar to anglophone readers, and offers a *parti pris* reading of what is to constitute the future of Latin American 'thinking', albeit one that might be strongly contested.

Vallega teaches at the University of Oregon, and is probably best known for his work on Heidegger and the question of exilic thought. This new text owes something to the transformations that Heidegger – in his phenomenological and post-*Kehre* totalizing ontological versions – has undergone in Spanish-speaking America, but is most indebted to the interventions (themselves initially Heideggerian) of the Argentine philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel and the Peruvian Aníbal Quijano with his problematic of 'coloniality in thought'. The centre of Vallega's text is a dialogue with these two figures and their displacement of the focus of Latin American philosophy from

identity to 'radical exteriority', the fulcral but slightly opaque notion that organizes Vallega's own positions. 'Coloniality' and its antithesis 'radical exteriority' are the political and metaphysical pivots of the text and their articulation provide the programmatic element of Vallega's polemic.

But to begin at the beginning: what constitutes Latin American philosophy? In a way, such a question is of a piece with a central topos of Latin American culture: that is, the lack of ground for the unity of what is gathered together under the name. In Vallega's philosophical history this also links to the way in which philosophy as a master discourse has restricted what is to count as thought, and how 'thought' links to other forms of 'sensibility' (the terms are never quite clearly determined). Philosophy thus occupies an ambiguous place within a place that is ambiguously denoted. Vallega starts with Simón Bolívar, certainly not a philosopher in any disciplinary sense, and the problematic of identity. For Bolívar, Latin America is an in-between space, 'neither-nor', almost constitutively lacking in identity, but impelled to discover or construct one. What might constitute a Latin American philosophy thus becomes contaminated by the uncertainty of identity of the Latin American as such, an uncertainty that permeates much of the work of the later, post-independence period.

Vallega discusses a set of thinkers all preoccupied with what is proper to Latin America and to any philosophy that might think its experience – Leopoldo Zea, Ernesto Mayz Vallilla, Augusto Salazar Bondy (all early-twentieth-century figures) – and shows that their preoccupation with European models and the imprecision and incompleteness of Latin American identity condemns them to condemning Latin American philosophy as mere mimicry – a false image of the real thing that lies elsewhere – but also to condemning Latin Americans to impropriety because what is their own is unavailable for thought. Latin American philosophy here lives out the fate of Latin America itself – dependency. In setting out this account, Vallega already announces a subsidiary theme: Latin American philosophy must begin from

'lived experience' or the Latin American 'situation'. But he qualifies this with a concern that this culture not be the colonized experience registered in precisely those mimetic moments that merely mark the extension of 'Western' forms.

Here the work of Dussel is central. Dussel begins from the system of (modern) thought and knowledge that condemns Latin America to the secondary and derivative by mounting a critique of its systematicity, showing how that will to totality depends on the exclusion of its others, first and foremost the other that was the world prior to the conquest of the Americas, a diremption that founded rationality on the denial of rationality to the barbarous other. It is the effect of what Spivak calls 'epistemological violence' that produces inauthenticity: what would be authentic is devalued in order to strengthen the source of value. For Dussel the system of modernity excludes and occludes the others it depends on, inverting appearances such that dependence is now *the* characteristic of the other. Dussel engages with the thought that emerges from Europe – in some sense from Europe's own critics: Heidegger, Ricoeur, Levinas and later Apel and Habermas – to criticize that thought, and to open it up, to 'expose' it to its constitutive others. Vallega sees this move as substantially positive, in that it illuminates the forms of exclusion that operate within modernity, but worries that Dussel remains within the limits of the system in that he only imagines an extension of that system to include the excluded, even as he demands a positioning within a radical exteriority, a space outside the conceptual framework that hierarchizes a (restricted) version of rationality.

For Quijano, the 'coloniality of power' is the systematic subalternization of the non-European world after 1492, with domination constructed through the installation of a system of labour and racial hierarchy justified by a hegemonic ideology that exalts the centre against the periphery, a subject of power and calculative rationality against an object of exploitation and depredation. In Vallega's terms an *ego conquero* precedes and founds the *ego cogito*. For Quijano, there is no outside to this system: the world is produced by the monological conquering Western subject as it constructs a linear and unitary form of time, whose central conceit, 'progress', organizes the multiple potential histories of the world and reduces them to a single line of march. Critique is possible but only immanently.

So, for Vallega, the displacement of philosophical questioning from what it is to be Latin American

to how it might be possible to go beyond the categories that have constituted the Latin American are Dussel and Quijano's critical contributions, but they remain this side of the radical exteriority that would be the place of enunciation of a trans-rational thinking. He sees this exteriority limned in the work of the contemporary Colombian thinker Santiago Castro Gómez, whose untranslated work *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana* (Critique of Latin American Reason) begins with a critique of the very demand for a Latin American reason, showing how that demand maintains the principles that subordinate the historical experience of the many histories within Latin America. Explicitly adopting Foucault's method of critical ontology, Castro Gómez looks to the multiple 'little histories' that might exceed (and dissolve) the grand historical narratives with their exclusions and subjugations: a move to the singularities and particularities that lie outside, but also to hybrid forms that mark singular trajectories. In a critique of Hardt and Negri, he notes that the subalternized knowledges that undergo recognition in the current phase of capitalist development are differences that are only recognized pragmatically or instrumentally: an outside that can be further colonized to yield value for capital, as in traditional plant cultures and their mobilization by biotech. The asymmetry here has to be challenged by an 'epistemological democracy' which would counter the situation where 'no dialogue is possible between a Harvard trained biologist and a Putumayo [Peruvian] shaman'.

For Vallega, however, the exemplary thinkers are those who move to a 'de-colonial thinking' that at the limit attempt to delink from the conceptual forms that apportion value, rationality and domination. These are the Puerto Rican Nelson Maldonado Torres, and the two contemporary Argentines Walter D Mignolo and María Lugones. Maldonado Torres sees the outside as constituted by the violence and deprivation that mark the excluded, and sees inclusion as the entry of 'enslaved subjectivities into thought', Vallega glossing this as the transformations effected by the 'pre-theoretical sensibility' that provides space for insurrection. Mignolo and Lugones seek to think from this outside, both sharing a concern for a 'broken site of enunciation' that in its fracture provides the place where hegemonic discourses and resistant discourses play out simultaneously. For Mignolo, modernity's discourses produce subaltern subjects, but these latter are never entirely caught; rather, there is some 'outside' that informs 'life' and its forms, and allows a contestatory or resistant

moment. These sites are the ‘colonial difference’, places where it is possible to say something beyond the mere repetitions of the system. In Lugones’s case, a ‘decolonial feminism’ would engage with the colonial imposition of the gender system and look to specific historical situations that would provide ways out: the forms of Western thought that mould gender relations can be countered by other experiences of the body articulated, say, in Aymara or Quechua relational accounts.

As Vallega finishes his conspectus, he defines his own contribution to decolonial thinking as a ‘decolonial aesthetics’ that would look to the ‘pre-rational ... pre-theoretical’ as the site of a flight beyond the coloniality of power. Rather than immanent critique which remains at the level of instrumental rationality, or a dialogical critique which only includes the excluded as another moment of the expansion of the Same, Vallega proposes the generation of decolonial images to set against the dominance of images of the subaltern provided by coloniality (here the discussion centres on a reading of Fanon’s works, especially *Black Skin, White Masks*) and the incitement and

strengthening of new forms of sensibility to provide sites of contestation. The book closes with a discussion of some instances of art practice that might exemplify such a strategy.

As this schematic account indicates, the ground that *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* covers is extensive, and the text is a dense, at times repetitive, working-through of material that will be unfamiliar (and occasionally linguistically inaccessible) to anglophone audiences. Its interrogation of its own founding notions is illuminating and it raises philosophically rich questions about the occidental tradition(s) of thought. If philosophy finds its *fons et origo* in the classical Greek experience, and its canonical expressions within a tradition and disciplinary form that constantly reiterates and rearticulates that moment, what does it do with thought that emerges elsewhere? Obviously, part of the critique in terms of coloniality is entirely apposite as philosophy consistently derogates as non-thought – superstition, religion, anthropology, or mere unreflective culture – traditions that are articulated otherwise. But does that make all such traditions equally valid? The arguments from and about relativism are banally ubiquitous here: what is more germane is how the field of encounter can be constructed.

The strong ‘colonial thought’ argument is that all of Western thought is systematically organized around power: that is, there is no real dissent within that tradition (only its appearance) – it is all of a piece and has no critical or emancipatory potential. Western thought is a totality and totalitarian. Hence the drive to a ‘radical exteriority’. But that exteriority cannot be accessed by any of the categories deployed by the totalizing subject: *ex hypothesi* this would be merely to extend its power. To be truly radical, this exteriority has to be absolutely different, but how to characterize this without appropriating it? This is a question that Vallega explicitly raises: ‘How does a thinking from below arise without being determined by the systems of power and knowledge that have organized philosophical discourse...?’ Vallega vacillates: at times, it is the ‘life world’ that looks familiar in Habermasian terms; at times it is ‘people’s lives’ that ‘take their orientation from their specific historicity’; at times it is a ‘listening intently to life’; at times it is the pre-linguistic, pre-rational space, ‘a life in the flesh, in corporeal, existential and affected dispositions situated at the limit of fact and reason’ that provide this thinking. However, the link between the silent other and its enunciation is poorly explicated. This starts to look like a fairly traditional



Nadín Ospina, *Critico extático* (*Ecstatic Critic*), carved stone, 1993

inversion of the valences of rationalism (echoing the eminently European Kristeva's *chora*) voiced by a dissatisfied representative of that rationalism, who is tempted to be the voice for the subaltern, or at least a voice of the desiderata that would make the subaltern subaltern. Exposure to exteriority within a fractured locus of enunciation doesn't quite do the required 'radical' work either: the constructive and resistant moments are necessarily co-present, and how that fractured site develops is underdeveloped in Mignolo et al. Much of this reminds one of the aporias of Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of Enlightenment, and their difficulty in seeing anything Other outside of its voracious digestive potential.

One problem may well be the model of power as coloniality, with its binary and exclusive articulation (the occasion for the Foucauldian critique of Frankfurt School-style understandings of power): to what extent does the 'development' of Latin America deploy other forms of productive power on the back of and in place of the diremptive forms that characterize conquest? What is striking about Vallega's text is how few examples of 'delinking' there are and how many of them are from within a traditional art world context. Now this may illustrate the difficulty of articulation of the Other – the problem that Spivak encounters after 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and her

recourse to the (untranslated) indigeneous languages of India – or providing a space for the Other to speak, but it may also illustrate a prior construction of the dissident aesthetic as 'art' within its Western self-understanding.

Nevertheless the questions raised in and by *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* are important, as are the ways in which the particularities hymned by Vallega might encounter particularities from elsewhere – the post-colonial archive not exhausted by Fanon. Is there something of a residual narcissism in Dussel and Quijano's privileging of the Latin American instance, and a deeply problematic theodicy in their seeing the Conquest as an originary and seamless imposition of system? Mignolo, for one, tries to make delinking links in his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, but it is not always clear in his texts where decoloniality differs from assertions of neo-nativism; that is, a version of exteriority that in fact contains more than traces of its antagonist, and the instance of Islam is always a difficult one, as the most successful and problematic resurgence of a subjugated thought. More needs to be said here to avoid the suspicion of ultra-radicality obscuring what might be real engagement with traditions beyond the repetitions of Occidentalism.

Philip Derbyshire

Weaponizing life

Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014. 512 pp., £45.00 hb., 978 0 23116 340 8.

Hunger striking as a tool of protest and resistance has become widespread in prisons and detention facilities, from Guantánamo Bay to prisoners, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in diverse locales around the globe subject to cellular isolation and panoptic surveillance, for whom every aspect of life is managed by a state. At the same time, self-destructive acts such as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in 2011, considered to have sparked a series of popular uprisings across the Arab world, can alter existing political dynamics in profound ways. Banu Bargu's new book places the 'death fast struggle' in Turkey from around 2000–2007 in this context of the growing use of self-destructive tactics of protest against the state's power over life and death. In Turkey, thousands of people were involved in this struggle between leftist groups and the state in

which 122 people died, mostly of self-inflicted deaths. While Bargu extensively chronicles and analyses the dynamics of the death fast struggle, *Starve and Immolate* is more than a rigorously documented account of a major resistance movement; it is a complex and erudite, yet lucid, theoretical analysis of the politics of life and death that draws upon, but ultimately moves beyond (among others), Foucault's and Agamben's readings of sovereignty and biopolitics to make a major contribution to thinking about relations of power and resistance in contemporary society.

The weaponization of life, according to Bargu, is 'a tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals'. Hunger striking, self-immolations and suicide attacks have often