

# Thinking about the Mexican Revolution: Philosophy, Culture and Politics in Mexico: 1910-1934

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## Abstract

The commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of the War of Independence and the centenary of the Mexican Revolution make this a good moment for some analysis and reflection on the influence that both events have had on the form and the meaning that Mexican intellectual production and cultural institutions have conserved throughout that time. The aim of this essay, is to examine in how, and by what cultural and institutional means, a process of historical transformation as violent, convulsive, complex and radical as the Revolution ended up producing a remarkably favourable set of conditions for literature, music, the visual arts, education and, in particular, philosophy, whose earliest developments and contributions came between 1910 and 1934.

[**Keywords:** Mexican Revolution; War of Independence; historical transformation; literature, music, the visual arts, education]

## I

November 20, 1910, barely two months after the celebration of the first centenary of the beginning of the War of Independence and the apotheosis of General Porfirio Diaz—who by that point had been dictator of Mexico for the previous thirty years—saw the start of an armed insurrection that eventually led to Diaz' resignation and the elevation to the presidency of the Republic of Francisco I Madero, leader of what came to be called the Mexican Revolution. On February 5, 1917, following countless acts of war, the murder of Madero and the triumph and subsequent fall of a second dictatorship (this time under the leadership of General Victoriano Huerta), a failed Revolutionary National Convention, and the destruction or submission of the different, extremely diverse factions that took part in the armed conflict on the side of the self-proclaimed Constitutionalist forces, finally in the city of Queretaro the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States was enacted, a normative and programmatic document through which an attempt would be made to construct, over the course of the years that followed, the framework of judicial and political apparatuses that would give form to the new Mexican State. The historical experience of over one hundred years of turbulent independent existence, of insoluble and persistent political instability and economic backwardness, of the prolonged dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz and the lack of social justice or the genuine rule of law, but above all of the violence with which the agricultural and indigenous masses had participated in the armed conflict against the old regime and subsequent revolutionary faction fighting, proved to the Constitutional Congress the necessity of building a "strong State", equipped with political institutions capable of steering the country through the profound changes that were required in every aspect of its makeup, especially those of such fundamental importance as the need for

social justice, economic equality and educational and cultural development for the majority, all demands that only a few short years before had thrown together in armed struggle peasants, industrial workers, university-educated professionals and the urban middle classes. Being as it was both a normative political document—the Nation's founding document—and equally a programmatic text, the Constitution established, through the cold, prescriptive language of the Law, what the State's institutions and apparatus should make possible, but by means of real, concrete deeds and transformations.

Nevertheless, the ambitions of the constitutional text were not limited to the strictly political plane. Confronted with the fact of a social fabric enfeebled by long years of violence and fratricidal struggle, and more dauntingly still, the panorama presented by the overall lack of development among the classes and groups that had brought about the destruction of the old regime (mainly peasants, workers and native Mexicans), the state itself had to provide the guidelines, the inspiration and steer the transformations and, when the need arose, to relieve or even substitute for those social actors who were still to achieve full maturity, but who surely would—it was said—with the eventual accomplishment, one by one, of each of the programs and projects for economic, social, educational and cultural transformation so necessary for the modernization of revolutionary Mexico. It was, as every single political, economic, social or cultural event that took place in Mexico from 1917 on shows, a sweeping, vigorous process of social transformation and the construction of institutions.

However, the immediate effect of the implementation of the new constitutional regulations and the new nation-building project was the construction of a state apparatus whose defining characteristics were a harsh inflexibility, organizational verticality and authoritarianism. Supported by a vast, repressive bureaucratic structure, the State legitimized, reinforced and consolidated itself through the pacification and corporatization of the spontaneous rural and urban mass movements by organizing them into mammoth labour organizations: The *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM—Confederation of Mexican Workers), the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (CNC—National Confederation of Farmers) and in its final conversion into "sectors" of the state political party the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR—National Revolutionary Party), which a few years later would become the still-active *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI—Institutional Revolutionary Party). In this way the political program of the Revolution defined itself, for the most part, as a program of domination whose visible "subject" seemed to be the Nation State itself, while in fact this State was a forced coalition between members of various social strata who would eventually impose their interests, leading in the end to the hegemony of the nation's moneyed classes and their foreign allies. Nonetheless, faced with the pressure and the power of the masses, the new State was forced to undertake drastic acts of redistributive justice, along with social and economic improvements in the lives of the majority of the population, such as the redistribution of land and the creation of *ejidos* (collectively farmed plots),

advanced labour rights and fair pay for workers, health services and social security for workers' families and poorer sections of society.

Within this vast process of transformation and modernization, a special place is held by the development of public education and a national culture, whose guiding institutions were to be, during its initial phases, the Department of Public Education and the National University of Mexico, founded in 1910 and reorganized according to the principles of revolutionary transformation between 1920 and 1929, the year in which it achieved autonomous status. At the head of both institutions we find the writer-politician Jose Vasconcelos (1882-1959), justifiably regarded as the leader of the group of intellectuals, educators, artists, musicians and philosophers that breathed life into the educational-cultural project of the Mexican Revolution. It is possible to trace the genesis of this project to 1920, with the appointment of Vasconcelos as University Rector, though officially it is held to begin with the foundation of the Department of Public Education in 1921 (with Vasconcelos as Department Head) together with the celebrations marking the centenary of the conclusion of the War of Independence that took place the width and breadth of the country that same year.

This commemoration was to have a special significance in that it was a celebration, not only of one hundred years of independence, but also of an end to the military and political upheavals of the Revolution, the re-foundation of the State and the embarkation of Mexico on a process of accelerated modernization. However the real vital force of the celebration is to be found in the educational and cultural project led by Vasconcelos, there to be seen in the innumerable artistic, historic or literary events and works which the project set in motion. Their aim, without exception, was to exalt the form and meaning of the national idea, of the specifically *Mexican*. The lawyer, journalist and poet from Zacatecas, Ramón Lopez Velarde (1888-1921) had some years previously published an essay entitled *Novedad de la Patria (Novelty of Fatherland)* in which he argued that the material and spiritual suffering the Revolution brought in its wake had revealed the need for a Fatherland (*patria*) very different from the one enshrined in the official discourse; not a glorious, epic Fatherland, but an intimate one, in touch with personal emotions, experiences and our sense of ourselves, but which, as a consequence would be very, very fragile. So much so, that this intimate sense of belonging must be shored up by those products of the emotions for which our people have such a gift: art, music, poetry and the zealous protection of their historical and cultural inheritance. Based on these conceptual foundations, over the next two decades Vasconcelos and those who carried on his project sponsored the artistic movement known as Mexican Muralism, giving over the walls of Mexico's educational institutions and public buildings to such outstanding artists as Diego Rivera, Jose Clement Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Pablo O'Higgins and Jose Chavez Morado, supported the mass publication of literary works by both Mexican authors and the classics of world literature, as well as the foundation of public libraries throughout the farthest reaches of the country, founded a Symphonic Orchestra and promoted the creation of orchestral works based on Mexican subjects and musical themes, and lastly,

between 1921 and 1940, built the structures for the enactment of a public education system of a marked patriotic and nationalist character. In all these cases what is reclaimed and raised up is "our uniqueness", "what marks us out as a nation": a patriotic history that embraces and actualizes both the Pre-Hispanic past and the contemporary world of indigenous Mexicans. Following on from this and given concrete expression in artistic, literary and educational manifestations, another of the conceptual premises Revolutionary thought and discourse occupies pride of place: the people. The Mexican People, without distinction of race, class or condition; on the ideological plane, because in the revolutionary worldview the People appears as an indivisible national subject, the embodiment of all those historical and cultural manifestations by which we recognize the "authentically Mexican", and on the political plane, because hiding behind the word "people" is the undeniably bourgeoisie concept of class in the new Nation State.

## II

Coming up to 1930, philosophical thought had yet to form part of the reflective arsenal that made up the thinking on, and construction of, the Mexican Revolution. Partly, this was because the exercise of Philosophy as a profession is an enterprise with little or no precedents in the culture of nineteenth-century Mexico—given the National University's Faculty of Philosophy and Literature wasn't founded until 1924—but also because the philosophical interests of Vasconcelos and other intellectuals such as Antonio Caso and Alfonso Reyes were of a profoundly abstract theoretical and discursive nature, utterly disengaged from the social and cultural needs of the time. On the other hand, as philosophers are wont to say, Philosophy always "arrives late", meaning that it can only deploy its analytical, critical and reflexive resources after history has produced changes at once noticeable and profound, both radical and dramatic, to the social fabric. This does not mean that the years leading up to and following the Revolution were devoid of any kind of reflexive consciousness, but rather that this consciousness was based essentially on artistic and literary discourses, as in, for example, the aforementioned essay by Lopez Velarde, *Novedad de la patria*, and yet more so in his patriotic epic *La suave patria* ("The Gentle Fatherland"). It is here, as in painting, music, the novel or the theatre—surprisingly uninterrupted in both the run up and the aftermath of the military phase of the Revolution—that we can find the material and the tools which – though it may not be Philosophy in the strict sense of the word—every reflexive endeavour requires.

The antecedents from which the philosophical reflection of the middle third of the twentieth century takes its cue can be traced back to some essays on social and cultural themes written by Vasconcelos, Caso, Reyes and the Dominican writer Pedro Enriquez Ureña and a number of others between the years 1909 and 1929, whose common denominator is the question of the artistic, social and cultural forms that define the "being" or the "identity" of Mexico and its "place" in the order of world civilization. These questions were still framed in terms that wavered hesitantly between anthropology, history,

geography and aesthetics, a vagueness encapsulated in their framing—particularly in the cases of Caso and Vasconcelos—in the metaphysical, spiritualist language of Bergson or Bouteaux, leading the reflexive intention of these forerunners off to a markedly spiritual, abstract plane where the people, the ethnic groups, the events and the projects they talk of resemble pure or frankly ideal entities or archetypes—The Native, the Creole, *El Mestizo* (mixed race), the Cosmic Race—that have little or nothing to do with real people or historical, concrete reality. It is important not to overlook that the so-called “Athenaeum of Youth”, formed by Antonio Caso, Jose Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes and Pedro Enriquez Ureña had, around 1909, burst upon the Mexican cultural stage with an anti-Positivist philosophical proposal—bearing in mind that Positivism was the official doctrine of the Diaz regime—and that, even while each of these authors pursued a more or less original and independent train of thought, their philosophical sympathies never completely abandoned their original spiritual inspiration, although they were enriched—in the case of Caso—with the Pragmatism of James and Dewey. Among this group, the outstanding member is once more, but now as a thinker, Jose Vasconcelos, who, on leaving the Department of Public Education in 1924, set himself the task of laying down a set of theoretical bases to deal with the need for, and the possibility of, the foundation of a new, truly universal civilization born of the ethnic and cultural fusion of White people (Europeans, bringing with them their “universal culture and values”), Reds, as native Latin Americans (whose contribution was their impressive “natural artist feeling”), the Black people (the primitive race) and the Yellow people (whose contribution was their “originating spirituality”), and to which he gave the name “The Cosmic Race”.

To these efforts to consolidate the Mexicanist cultural movement, we should also add the work undertaken contemporaneously by a number of social scientists working in the fields of Anthropology and Sociology, namely Andres Molina Enriquez, Miguel Othon de Mendizabal and Manuel Gamio. The Mexican anthropological and sociological traditions can be traced back to the nineteenth century, originating in the concerns of some thinkers and politicians about what was termed the “Native Problem”. As is well known, the Spanish conquest and colonization of Mexico produced during its three-hundred-year duration a society organized in castes and classes in which native Mexicans occupied a position that was at once marginal, ambiguous and singular. Although the laws established by the Spanish Crown tended to offer protection to the person and way of life of the natives, the process of colonization itself, driven by the necessities of capital accumulation, paid little attention to such protections and, in cases too numerous to mention, led to the subjugation of the native peoples through slavery or forced labour, or failing this, their complete and utter exclusion from colonial life. In such conditions, in independent Mexico, now structured according to the modern system of classes, natives who did not become proletarians or emigrate to the cities as *lumpen* also failed to find a place for themselves, continuing to exist in a condition of alienation and isolation, despite—with numbers approaching some four million—making up more than a third of the Mexican population. Nevertheless, in a modern state it was necessary to turn all members into

citizens, with rights and obligations linked to the institutions on which that modernity is based, and in which those natives who had up to that point managed to conserve their ancestral way of life had no place. Thus it was that the first thinkers who took on the "Native Problem" proposed a sort of "forcible citizenship" carried through by the unrestricted application of civil law, effectively meaning the total and absolute destruction of the indigenous world and way of life, along with its customs, language and cultural traditions. During the regime headed by Porfirio Diaz, active steps were taken in the northern border state of Sonora and the southern state of Yucatan to ensure this, with the suppression of the Yaqui tribes and the Mayan peoples, respectively. However, resistance from natives and the outbreak of the Revolution put an end to these efforts. The prominent part that native Mexicans played in the armed phase of the Revolution won their cause powerful vindication for its defence and conservation, obligating legislators and actors in the revolutionary project to seek a fair solution to the problem, which involved not only the continued existence of the indigenous world under a suitable judicial and political framework, but also the general recognition of the universality, importance and influence of the culture, languages and artistic manifestations of that world that must be preserved in revolutionary Mexico. As important forerunners of this project of vindication, we can point to the recovery of archaeological sites and the study of pre-Hispanic subjects encouraged—paradoxically—by General Diaz himself in the last third of the nineteenth century; however it is essentially with the movement begun in 1910 by the influential intellectual, Gerardo Murillo—Dr Atl—promoting the reclamation and the aesthetic and cultural appreciation of Mexican popular art. From there, artists such as Saturnino Herran, Adolfo Best Maugard and Francisco Goitia, together with the Muralists, musicians, architects and writers of the post-revolutionary period, incorporated Native Mexican motifs, themes and forms wholesale into their work, a feature of all Mexican artistic production up until the 1970's. But the vindication of indigenous culture was not limited to the artistic plane, although this was its main, indisputable discursive platform. As mentioned above, in the fields of Anthropology and Sociology, the "Native Problem" had given cause to reflect to a number of distinguished intellectuals such as Molina, Gamio and Othon de Mendizabal, whose proposals for a solution, in tandem with those that might be attempted in the legal sphere, sought the vindication of the indigenous by means of a sort of "dialectical enhancement" of the native condition based on the creation—through racial mixing—of a "new race" which was neither indigenous nor Creole, but Mexican, in which were intermingled and preserved, on a higher plane, all those elements of Modernity and all those essential to ancestral culture in such a way that "Mexicanness" would become the receptacle and synthesis of a culture at once original and originating. Precisely because the answer to the "Native Problem" was nothing more than an aspect of the search for a solution to the "Mexican Problem", understood in the light of the fundamental question of what it meant to "be" Mexican" or that of our "identity".

## III

For all that such questions may seem to have been barking up the wrong tree, this essential concern for the "being" of Mexico is indisputably a philosophical question, which, joined to the established "Mexicanist" current that since 1921 has fed most social, cultural, artistic and social discourse, making it both necessary and possible for philosophers to engage, now that they enjoyed the requisite academic formation, with the important and irreplaceable intellectual legacy of their predecessors and the enormous reserve of reflective material produced by poets and artists. This Philosophy in the strictest sense of the word would make its appearance on the post-revolutionary Mexican cultural scene in 1934 with the publication of a seminal book: "The Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico", by Samuel Ramos. But Samuel Ramos, who is recognized as the initiator of the intellectual movement known as the Philosophy of the Mexican, or Philosophy of "Mexicanness", is not a mere continuer of his predecessors' work, much less a submissive disciple, but rather an acute, tenacious critic, both of his mentors Caso and Vasconcelos and of those artists and intellectuals who had surrendered to a form of "Mexicanism" that he considered both unthinking and irresponsible. It is for this reason that Ramos did not seek his theoretical tools in philosophical spiritualism, Anthropology or Sociology, but rather in the post-Freudian psychology of Alfred Adler, with its emphasis on individuals, their psychic structure and their complexes, and in the cultural philosophy of Baron De Keyserling, Oswald Spengler and Max Scheler.

It is clear that Ramos' fundamental concern is not so much Mexicanness as a way of life or the cultural expression of an entire people, but "The Mexican" as a person, as an individual subject. Since it is only through the answer that it is possible to reach the question of "being" for each individual, as "in every case I am myself" (Heidegger), it will be possible, in turn, to find an answer to the question that interrogates the forms and concrete evolution of "Mexican Culture". For Ramos, culture resides, in the first instance, in humankind's mode of existence; it is not external (works, objects, processes), but rather internal, showing itself through feelings, ways of being and behaviours. Given that, in his view, Mexican culture is a failure, it is necessary to look for the causes of this condition beyond the historical processes that down the centuries have shaped its form and content, i.e., in the subject of that culture: Mexican Man. It is essential to consider the circumstances in which the behaviour of this man takes place, but not as something given, but rather as an effect of his own action. And if Mexican culture taken in its entirety as a "circumstance" is a failure, then this is due to the fact that the Mexican is a failure. This comes principally from the fact that, throughout his entire history, the Mexican has renounced self-knowledge, making him prone to the exaggeration and uncritical imitation of templates for, and ways of, being and acting that are actually utterly alien. This self-knowledge is, according to Ramos, urgent and essential because the historical movement begun with the Revolution is the key to shaking the ideological and cultural hold of Europe in order to decide our own destinies.

This involves, however, a profound, clear-sighted understanding of our natural strengths and above all of our weaknesses. As he enumerates these weaknesses, Ramos demonstrates the best of his cultural analysis in his (severely critical) characterization of native attitudes – reproaching their self-marginalization – and in his comments on the Creole and the Mestizo, whom he accuses of being irresponsible and inauthentic in their zeal for the imitation of European models of behaviour while ignoring their own potential and strengths. The root cause, both of native marginalization and uncritical imitation by Creoles and Mestizos, can only be explained in function of the feeling of inferiority, or inferiority complex, that dogs the Mexican. This complex, in its turn, has two sources: The first – not always fully developed by Ramos—appeals to a particular reading of our history, understanding it as a set of "accidents" which have made our lives abnormal and misdirected the psychic evolution of the Mexican people along dark pathways. The second derives from the fact that Mexicans have always compared themselves with foreigners using the wrong scale of measurement. We imitate, says Ramos, because we need to supplement our supposed deficiencies, but by doing this, without realising it we hide what we truly are, with our condition—our psychic disorientation—finally manifesting itself in a conformism and laziness respecting our circumstances that prevents us forever escaping it.

It has been mentioned that Ramos sees Man as a product of his cultural circumstances, but he also argues that these can and must be transformed by people themselves. In this way, a new Man is the effect of a new culture, and a new culture can be nothing else than the product of the actions of a Man transformed in the sense of his own growth and development. This transformation must commence within men themselves, by means of two paths or resources: The first is the intellectual recovery of Experience and its fruits, i.e. the certainty of belonging to a culture objectified in works of worth and importance at the service of human life. The second is Education, understood as the process of successive and dynamic acquisition of knowledge where the objective is not practical in itself—the technical or merely productive—but rather is a state of consciousness and self-knowledge that in itself represents that answer to the question of the meaning of human existence. The sum of these two aspects, Experience and Education is what Ramos calls *Humanismo*, which must be understood in this context to be a proposal for a new kind of Humanism. The constructive element of Ramos' thinking, and the course which Philosophy was to take in the twentieth century would be incompatible if we failed to link them to the revolutionary process initiated in 1910, and especially with its project of educational and cultural transformation. For this reason, although we may say, on the one hand, that Ramos is one of the first and sharpest critics of the Revolution, we should also underline the fact that he is one of its most determined and committed intellectual leaders. Not only because, without the Revolution, Ramos' proposals would have lacked a context, but also because they constitute a specifically philosophical reformulation of the educational and cultural project sketched out by Vasconcelos and up to that point only partially realized by his heirs. Following Ramos, and always as a response to the sense of



transformation attributed to the Mexican Revolution, came authors such as Leopoldo Zea, Luis Villoro, Octavio Paz, Emilio Uranga and Jose Revueltas, who between 1942 and 1968 would write the most brilliant pages of Mexican philosophical thought.

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