

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Latin American philosophy contains ideas that seem to have come full circle, from the first peoples who imprinted their philosophies on the consciousnesses and worldviews of the all subsequent inhabitants, even the Spanish, who incorporated deities and beliefs into their religion, even as they ostensibly actively resisted or rejected indigenous beliefs and practices. Latin American philosophy is a fusion of indigenous, African, and European ideas and beliefs, and philosophers have often used their unique perspective for idealistic, transformational purposes, first on a personal, individual level, and later to transform society itself.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

**K'uh:** The dominant Maya philosophy had to do with identifying, preserving, and channeling divine life force in order to maintain cycles of existence. The divine life force is also understood as a sacred force and the most important role of humans is to respect the divine life force, or the sacred. Showing respect for the divine force is a way to please the gods. Humans were created in order to honor the gods.

**Three Creations / Three Apocalypses:** The sacred texts, Popol Vuh, and the Chilam Balam, give insights into the Maya worldview and underpinning philosophy. According to the Popol Vuh (of the highland Maya), there is no permanence and the world and people are to be created, destroyed, and recreated, each time to correct a defective approach to the gods. On a metaphorical level, the idea of all of life and consciousness as cyclical rather than linear will have an influence on one's mindset.

**Time / Calendar:** Reality and hence all of existence for the Maya tied closely to the calendar, which showed the peak moments for contact between the gods and human beings.

### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Ontological Instability:** For the Aztecs, the key problem of existence is its essential ephemeral nature. It is not stable, and the corporal, tangible aspects are impermanent. The nature of human spirit and the heart, however, were considered unchanging.

**Calendar:** The Aztecs believed in five consecutive worlds of the sun, which translates into a philosophy of time and change, and the idea that nothing is ever permanent and that the world is constantly in motion. The calendar is a vital tool for imposing balance.

**Sacrifice:** The underlying philosophy perpetual change helps understand the need for constant and recurring rituals and sacrifice to assure mankind's continuance.

**Dualism:** The Aztecs believed that everything has a potential duality, and hence many of the deities had contradictory qualities. They also believed in rituals in which individuals are able to take on attributes of animal spirits. Shape-shifting is an important manifestation.

**Nature of Reality and Destiny in the Stars:** The Incas believed that every tribe or community sprang from a specific place in the earth, where they had been seeded (in the form of clay figures) and brought to life based on the energy from the heavens. Each community had a specific star that was their place of origin. They truly believed they were people from the stars, and their destiny was mapped in the constellations.

**Ancestors as Shapers of the World:** Although it may seem grotesque now, the Inca liked to have their mummified ancestors accompany them at important events including harvests and marriages. They stored the mummified ancestors in tombs, and then would bring them out to participate. The mummies would be dressed in ceremonial clothing and ritually fed. For the Inca, the ancestors also embodied gods and spirits, and the essential spirits manifested on earth in mountains, rivers, caves, and other forms.

**Search for Truth:** The Incas believed in the necessity of understanding one's own inner nature in order to appreciate the truth in the world. The truth, for the Incas, was in the messages in the stars and in the bodies of their ancestors, both of which communicated directly with the gods.

**Ethics / Right Action:** Respect for all forms of life: At the heart of all forms of life is the sun, according to the Inca. They did not worship the sun, per se, but the fact that it expresses the divine. Pacha Yachay, the Universe, is the magnetism and linking force that holds everything together.

#### EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

**Rights of Conquered Amerindians:** Amidst the tremendous carnage of the conquest, there were a few priests and writers who argued for the protection of the conquered peoples in his *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, and *The History of the Indies*. His writings were apologies for the rights of Amerindians, and he opposed slavery and abuse. His writings deal with questions of human dignity. Alfonso de la Vera Cruz also wrote to defend the human rights and dignity of the indigenous peoples.

**Bartolome de las Casas (1484-1566):** A Spanish priest, de las Casas maintained journals of his experiences in Mexico and wrote impassioned letters in defense of the indigenous peoples. His view of the indigenous peoples is that they were ignorant and barbaric, but somehow innocent. De las Casas's viewpoint, unfortunately, was very influential and incorporated in literature, where the indigenous person or "noble savage" became a stock figure of a wild human or outsider who was not yet corrupted.

**Alonso de la Vera Cruz (1504-1584):** His philosophical treatises revolved around the nature of logic and justice, emphasizing the ethical treatment of all people. Born in Spain, but emigrating to Mexico, Vera Cruz was a priest who founded a number of universities in central Mexico. He espoused the philosophy of Aristotle and Augustine.

**Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695):** A Mexican nun who spent her youth in an estate with access to her family's library, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz was largely self-taught, with access to her grandfather's collection of European literature. She wrote important works of poetry, philosophy, and treatises. Her work includes her "Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz" which argues for the right of women to education. Her poetry reflects a philosophy of oppositions, in which the essence of something is known by juxtaposing it with its opposite.

#### 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Philosophes in the New World:** The French Enlightenment deeply influenced Latin America, and the notions of self-determination, freedom, and liberty were deeply appealing to a group rebelling against old aristocratic orders (and concentration of power). Thus, Hidalgo, Bello, and Bolivar essentially evangelized the French Enlightenment throughout Latin America. The tangible first expression was in independence from Spain.

**Miguel Hidalgo (1753-1811):** Mexico. Miguel Hidalgo was a Roman Catholic priest and a brilliant strategist who not only led the uprising of the Mexicans against the Spanish, whose tariffs, crop controls, and restrictive rule resulted in poverty for peasant farmers, but also transformed the previously Spanish-aligned Catholic Church to something uniquely Mexican, and a powerful player in the development of a clear idea of Mexican identity. The Virgin of Guadalupe was given an even higher place of prominence and became the heraldic image (or battle flag), thus suborning at least on some level, the power, influence, and riches of the church.

**Andrés Bello (1781-1865):** Born in Venezuela, Bello embraced the ideas of Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire which formed underpinnings of the French Revolution and then applied them to the situation in Latin America. He taught Simon Bolivar and participated with Bolivar in convincing the people of Venezuela to become independent from Spain.

Simón Bolivar (1783 – 1830): Venezuela. Simon Bolivar has achieved the reputation as The Liberator of Latin America, although he worked closely alongside the Argentine general Jose de San Martin and also Antonio Jose de Sucre (later the first president of Bolivia). Bolivar traveled throughout South America and encouraged individual countries to become republics. Unfortunately, most converted instantly into dictatorships, but the prevailing political philosophy was not of dictatorship, but of free societies with individual liberty and self-determination.

**Positivism in Latin America:** The 19th century, and its thrust toward Independence from Spain, rejected mysticism and intuitive knowledge. Instead, it focused on logical, mathematically-supported arguments, all of which were directed at giving individuals the freedom to make their own rational decision. This was a variation of the positivist writings of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Ernst Haeckel.

**Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888):** A prolific writer and the president of Argentina, Sarmiento's philosophy was deeply positivist and focused on the rational advancement of human society by means of technology and modernization. He was not a technocrat, and yet, his major Works, including *Civilization and Barbarism*, point to the rational organization of human beings and their collective efforts to incorporate labor-saving technologies as the prime drivers and transformative forces of a society.

**Jose Ingenieros (1877 – 1825):** Ingenieros was a positivist philosopher in late 19th century and early 20th century Argentina, which saw the great rise of the middle class and the production of wealth, and the development of a city, Buenos Aires, with culture that rivaled and some cases outshone Europe. His focus was on the use of rational thought to improve the human condition, and he focused on individual responsibility to overcome what he considered "mediocrity." In fact, his most famous work, *El Hombre Mediocre*, focuses on how to develop a code of values and ethics, and to truly differentiate oneself by being an Idealist. Those values would, when combined with actions and correct decisions, help one succeed in the world. His views were very popular as they encouraged upward social mobility and aspirational striving.

**José Martí (1854-1895):** Influenced by Bello and Bolivar, Martí was a Cuban writer, thinker, and philosopher who led the Cuban War of Independence. His philosophy is idealist and socialist, with a belief that the collective efforts of individuals can bring about a better world for all.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Generation of 1900 (Generation of Founders) (1910 – 1940):** The "Generation of Founders" was a movement that reacted against the positivist philosophies of the time because they were seen as simply reinforcing the very rigid class hierarchy. Jose Enrique Rodo (1871-1917) published his seminal work, *Ariel*, in 1900, in which he argued that the world tended to see Latin Americans as "Caliban" in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but instead it should be an idealistic spirit, such as the character of Ariel. Other important members of this generation are Alejandro Korn (Argentina), Antonio Caso (Mexico), and Raimundo de Farias Brito (Brazil).

**Generation of 1915:** In this generation, the anti-positivist revolt continued. It was seen as a revolt against the social, economic, and cultural domination of the elites and a desire to recognize the indigenous peoples, and the poor mestizos. The underlying dream or vision was to create a new mixed race that would fuse all races and achieve peace and a restoration of ancient traditions. Jose Vasconcelos's *The Cosmic Race* (1925) articulates the vision, and suggests that the 1910 Mexican Revolution was an enactment of the vision of creating a peaceful world through a new people. Interestingly, this also corresponded with the American writer, Jean Toomer's mystical vision of a brave new race in *The Blue Meridian*.

**Generation of 1930:** Known for forging the framework of what was considered to be a new philosophical framework that was uniquely Latin America, and thus fused from multiple traditions (indigenous, African, European). Their main focus was on finding a new perspective, and they were deeply influenced by the work of the Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, who encouraged looking at reality deliberately from a different perspective. Miro Quesada first used the term, "forjadores" (forgers) to describe the process, and he was accompanied by Samuel Ramos (1897-1959) and José Gaos (1900-1969) in Mexico; Francisco Romero (1891-1962) and Carlos Astrada (1894-1970) in Argentina; and Juan David García Bacca (1901-1992) in Venezuela.

**Generation of 1940:** Philosophies of norms and institutions. This group of philosophers turned to the universities and state-supported institutions of culture and education to solidify and codify what was considered to be a uniquely Latin American philosophical perspective. The Latin American philosophy continued to emphasize a fusion of indigenous mindsets, as well as deep questioning of the European social fabric. In many ways, this group put together a framework that made universities not only bulwarks of identity, but also the muscle behind future revolutions or paradigmatic upheavals later in the 1960s and 1970s. It is important to note that these institutions

were state-supported and access was free to qualifying citizens, which allowed greater diffusion within society. Philosophical thinkers included Risieri Frondizi (1910-1985) and Augusto Salazar Bondy (1925-1974) in Argentina; Miguel Reale (1910-2006) in Brazil; Arturo Ardao (1912-2003) in Uruguay; and Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004) and Luis Villoro (1922- ) in Mexico.

**Generation of 1960: Liberation philosophies.** Philosophy manifested itself in social upheavals and political action in this generation. Marxist ideologies found receptive hearts and minds in the universities and public institutions that had been focused on the efforts of looking at the world through uniquely Latin American lenses. Thus, Marxist and deconstructivist philosophies that emphasized discovering the often hidden hegemonic and self-interested forces that determine (and enforce) a socially constructed notion of reality, were welcomed because they could find many examples in Latin American daily social, economic, and political daily life. Further, ethics and issues of the rights of the indigenous, women, and issues of protecting the environment were incorporated. Key thinkers include Paulo Freire, Arturo Andrés Roig (1922-2012), Enrique Dussel (1934- ), and Horacio Cerutti Guldberg (1950- ). Most were imprisoned or fled in exile due to the fact that their ideas were destabilizing for the dictators that ruled their countries.

**Generation of 1980 and Beyond:** The ideas of the Europeans, primarily Rorty, Habermas, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, were extremely influential in the 1980s and beyond, since they provided a framework upon which the ideas of globalism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism could rise. Feminist thought, which expanded into a general notion of the phenomenology of oppression, and the exposure of the webs of exclusion based on gender, class, ethnicity, language, sexuality, and level of “otherness” was powerful. Many authors (along with artists) focused on the ways in which otherness manifested itself. They opened the door to an examination of how existing power structures tended to fall into a state of decadence instead of finding ways to adapt or grow. It is useful to note that the “Power/Decadence” decline happens to all, regardless of how “pure” the original philosophy might have been. Important thinkers include Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Walter Mignolo, María Lugones (1948- ), and Susana Nuccetelli (1954-) from Argentina; Jorge J. E. Gracia (1942- ) and Ofelia Schutte (1945- ) from Cuba; Linda Martín Alcoff (1955- ) from Panama; and Eduardo Mendieta (1963- ) from Colombia. One example is Luis Villoro (1922-2014) a Mexican philosopher who explored the metaphysical concept of Otherness, the limits and extents of reason, as well as the link between knowledge and power. Completed an important study about Indigenismo in Mexico, which he called ‘The Revolution of Independence’, after the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1994.

### Discussion/Questions

1. The Spaniards walked into a deeply unstable world. The Aztecs, the Incas, and then the remnants of Mayan culture that persisted all spoke of world after world, apocalypse after apocalypse. The main thrust of their religion was to keep the gods happy enough to not destroy the world. Given the Spaniard’s recent experience with the “Other” that threatened to destroy their world, how do you think that the Spaniards regarded the beliefs? Discuss the key elements of Maya, Aztec, and Incan thought.
2. Conquest which involves the virtual extermination of people and cultures does not often pause to contemplate the finer points, such as the question, “What are we doing to the fate of women? And, heaven forfend, how are we to work with the highly educated freemen and wome? Explain how the Spanish colonialist philosophers addresses issues of the condition of women and indigenous peoples.
3. Liberty, equality, fraternity. Does that sound familiar? It should, except it’s in English and not in French, where the French Revolution turned the world upside down. Simon Bolivar and Andres Bello were definitely two of the intellectual Pied Pipers who periodically recruited True Believers into their fold, where they would foment dissent and agitate for uprisings so that the countries could separate from the mothership. Describe how French revolutionary thought had an impact on Latin American philosophy and philosophers.
4. Along with a proliferation of newly formed independent states, 19th century Latin America experience a dramatic expansion of the number of writers who pointed to the responsibility of the individual to take responsibility for social change. Discuss positivism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America.
5. Costumbristas recognized and documented indigenous cultures and folklore, along with mestizo traditions. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers took it a step further and made a conscious effort to incorporate indigenous beliefs into a

philosophical framework. Explain how the 20th century philosophers incorporated older ideas and traditions with the new ideas coming from Europe.

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