

Latinamericanism After 9/11

John Beverley

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Latinamericanism After 9/11 emerges out of a series of crises linked to our current, post-9/11 era: a crisis of political articulation for the Left both in the United States and Latin America; a crisis of theory and of the future directions that intellectual work dealing with Latin America should take; and a subjective crisis on the part of the book's author that is linked to his own positionality as a US-based Latinamericanist intellectual thinking and writing about Latin America in a postrevolutionary, postauthoritarian, and now perhaps also postneoliberal moment. John Beverley perceives that we are living a conjunctural moment that is characterized by two axes. First, he sustains that there has been a shift in US foreign policy away from Latin America and toward the Middle East, while at the same time we have seen an overarching rejection by the Obama administration of a "bad" Latin American left (retrograde, statist, populist, authoritarian, anti-American) in favor of a "good" (globalized, neoliberal, market-friendly) left. Quite directly, he critiques Obama for maintaining a policy toward the region that was forged by the Bush administration. Second, within Latin America a so-called "Pink Tide" has taken hold, a series of governments that with varying degrees of success and complication are forging political alternatives based in socialism. The emergence of this Pink Tide, whose future Beverley acknowledges to be uncertain, begs for him certain questions regarding the type of leftist politics that are needed today throughout the Americas in times of globalization and the waning of neoliberalism. What forms should Latinamericanism take today? What kind of theory is needed for the present times we are living? Are older forms of Latinamericanism outmoded? In reading through Beverley's answers and hypotheses, I was struck by the hemispheric character of his arguments. Indeed, the nuanced critiques he registers apply to how Latinamericanism has been practiced and continues to be practiced on *both* sides of the North/South divide.

One of Beverley's main arguments seems to be that Latinamericanism (as the sum of academic, and largely theory-based discourse produced about Latin America both within and outside of the region) has become disconnected from present political realities. How has this come about? His position hinges on a critical reading of the role that deconstruction has played in the field of Latin American cultural theory. In a "first wave" of deconstruction in the late 1980s and early 1990s, academics whom Beverley characterizes as sympathizers of the Left or

left-liberals (although they could also be critical of the Left) deconstructed “certain forms of literary and literary-critical discourse associated with the nationalist or populist left in Latin America, or with positions of ‘solidarity’ with Latin America from abroad, to ‘speak for’ the Latin American subject” (44). These deconstructions, when they came from localized Latin American positions, were often charged with heavy degrees of animosity toward non-Latin American Latinamericanists writing in English and applying theory to Latin America generated outside the region in fields such as Cultural Studies and area studies. From there, this first wave spun into a “second wave” of deconstruction in the late 1990s and 2000s, in which a “New Latinamericanism” set for itself the task of thinking concretely about how the Left could rise again in a post-Cold War, postdictatorship, neoliberal context. For Beverley, Alberto Moreiras’s *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001) is the paradigmatic example of this “new” Latinamericanism, and he analyzes it at length. Beverley is especially attracted to Moreiras’s position on the undecidability of what Latinamericanism *is*. Is it the representation of knowledge about Latin America from metropolitan centers? Is it generated by a Latin American intelligentsia in contention with the metropolis? Or, he asks, “does it refer to knowledges and cultural practices in Latin America that are in tension with *both* non-Latin American Latinamericanism and Latin American Latinamericanism” (48)? Beverley agrees with Moreiras’s acerbic critique of what he calls neo-Arielist Latin American intellectuals who, from a largely middle-class, bourgeois vantage point cast traditional intellectuals as the transmitters and arbiters of Latin American identity. Moreover, he praises deconstruction as a brilliant and key “anticipatory” moment in paving the way for the reemergence of the Left (55). But now that the Left is reemerging, Beverley signals that deconstruction has reached an impasse. While historically a positive gesture toward undermining hegemonic forces, deconstruction, in the current moment, fails as a detonator of radical political transformation. He presents the idea that theory alone will not get us to the point of radical political change, something he feels will only come with struggle and that will require a more conventional and rocky political process, something akin, perhaps, to the Pink Tide (a phenomenon for which he openly declares his cautiously optimistic support). Theory and practice, he thinks, will have to come together to achieve change, as will North and South. For intellectuals on both sides of the divide to overcome what ails them, Beverley suggests that all should work together to come up with new ways of theorizing Latin America and new ways of deepening alliances with social movements. To achieve this implies radically rethinking the relationship between the subaltern, the state, and the intellectual; a healthy dose of self-criticism or reflexivity on the part of intellectuals; and a willingness to cede ground to other actors who might, on some level, displace the traditional intellectual as the mouthpiece of civilization.

Heeding his own recommendation for reflexivity and self-critique, Beverley uses his book as a platform from which to articulate a kind of personal subjective crisis. This, for me, is one of the book's most fascinating aspects, particularly because the crisis goes beyond Beverley as an individual and comes to encompass an entire generation of people who supported revolutionary processes and armed struggle in the 1960s and 1970s and who still identify today with more radical leftist politics. Beverley, of course, closely sympathized with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and was one of the founders of the now defunct Latin American Subaltern Studies Group; furthermore, in a footnote, he calls himself a "TCK," or trans-culture kid, having spent the first 12 years of his life living in Latin America, though he was born, as he says, to "WASP parents" (136). His own ambiguity as a hybrid, "postmodern subjectivity" (his words), coupled with his position as an esteemed intellectual teaching in the United States, force him to ask what it means "for a citizen of the United States to propose that Latin America should define itself, 'in the years that lie before us,' . . . in an antagonistic relationship with our own country?" (25) Beverley's provisional answer situates the debate on Latin America *within* the United States, citing that the magnitude and importance of the Hispanic population in the US makes it such that Latin America can no longer be something external or antagonistic to US interests. To the contrary, "in order to create a United States that can bring to fruition its immense democratic, egalitarian, and multicultural possibility, the articulation of Latin America as an alternative to, instead of an extension of, the United States is a historical necessity" (25). In other words, the emancipation of Latin America (and of that Latin America that exists *within* the US) requires a complete rethinking of the relationship between the US and Latin America, a new foreign policy toward the region, and a recognition that "the United States—a *certain* United States—has entered a period of decline, and that Latin America—a *certain* Latin America—is in a still precarious period of historical ascendancy" (25). It seems that the United States would benefit from engaging in the same kind of self-critique that Beverley himself engages in and that he recommends for the Latin American intelligentsia. What, for example, would it mean for the Left in the United States to look to Latin America to find models for refashioning a vision of itself?

The changes that are afoot in Latin America necessitate for Beverley a reassessment of the period of armed struggle that took place in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. He points to a widespread disillusionment with armed struggle that has permeated the discourse of a defeated, tortured, and exiled generation of former revolutionaries or sympathizers, that is, his own generation. A narrative has emerged through which certain notable and powerful figures, like the Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo (on whom Beverley focuses and against whom he rails at length), have disavowed the armed struggle, casting it as part of the 1960s generation's "romantic adolescence," "prone to excess, error, irresponsibility, and moral anarchy" (99). "By contrast," he points out, "the biological and

biographical maturity of the generation of the sixties represented by our role and responsibilities as parents and professionals corresponds to the hegemony of neoliberalism and political democratization in the 1980s and 1990s” (99). He goes so far as to situate Sarlo and other intellectuals of his generation—quite controversially, I might add—as part of a “neoconservative turn” in Latin American cultural criticism whose main danger is its staunch and somewhat covert defense of a hierarchy of cultural values (mainly embodied by literature) that may ultimately serve to undermine the goals of the Left as it moves forward. This elite that defends its position and the value of its “trade” (as literary and cultural critics) is extremely dangerous for Beverley, and is indeed a version of the neo-Arielist intellectuals he critiques earlier in the book. In a bold move, he recommends revisiting the period of armed struggle not to advocate for the same thing in the present, but to rescue from that period a series of politics, values, and aspirations for radical change that could prove beneficial and informative to the articulation of the Left in the present. For Beverley, the links between the revolutionary era, which some would disavow or see as a bygone era, and the Pink Tide, are striking and obvious.

The book’s final chapter systematically probes a relationship that is alluded to throughout the previous chapters, that of the subaltern and the state. Beverley perceives that that relationship is changing in Latin America precisely because, in certain cases, the subaltern either has become, or is vying to become, the state. If many within subaltern studies have traditionally understood the subaltern as a site that is “outside the logic of the state,” Beverley wonders if for radical change to occur it is necessary at some point for the subaltern to pass *through* the state (110). In a postsubalternist key, he argues in favor of the possibility of reinventing and reimagining the state from the subaltern perspective, informed by the contributions and debates that have occurred within subaltern theory. He feels that a move away from a simple binary opposition between the state and the subaltern may prove beneficial for reimagining the state in ways that foster equality and recognition of rights. This will happen, he continues, only if there is cooperation between traditional intellectuals and subaltern subjects to develop specific and pointed political strategies for transformation, and only if this relationship is both rethought and predicated on the absence of hierarchy. Among the specific strategies he suggests are: “an openness to both insurrectional and electoral forms of political struggle;” “the identification of an enemy” (be it the hegemonic structures, the idea of *mestizaje*, or big business); “a ‘specific’ indigenous cultural and political project;” and “a sense of the need for ‘leadership,’ but leadership exercised *by* and *from* rather than in the name of the ‘indigenous-popular pole” (120). Beverley fears that if the opposition between the subaltern and the state remains radicalized and mutually exclusive, the only alternative that exists for leftist intellectuals is to become either neoconservative or ultraleftist (i.e. antistatist and postnationalist). He appears concerned with the practical side of the

political, unready to declare that the state is dead, and wonders how to effect concrete and radicalized change considering the rules of the game as they are set down in our current, globalized world.

In *Latinamericanism After 9/11*, John Beverley once again demonstrates his ability to ask big questions, questions that concern the very nature of who we are and what we do as Latinamericanists. He rejects certain positions within Latinamericanism (the neo-Arielist, the neoconservative, the staunch subalternist, those who advocate for the “multitude,” and perhaps even ultraleftism). Instead, he tentatively allies himself with the Pink Tide governments in a bold move that points to an interesting evolution in his own subjectivity from the radical 1960s to the globalized 2000s, from the distinguished subalternist scholar of testimonio to the postsubalternist intellectual. The complexities of these transitions are as deep and varied as the necessary but controversial questions they drag up. On a critical note, the book would benefit from the inclusion of more specifically delineated critiques of the Pink Tide. Beverley tells us that governments like that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua have contradictory elements, but he seems afraid to name specifically the antidemocratic, authoritarian, or problematic aspects of these governments out of fear that doing so might take something away from the potency of his overall argument that the Pink Tide is “on the whole” democratic (11). We might also question Beverley’s stance on whether it is sometimes strategic or advantageous for the subaltern to remain marginal or external to the state apparatus. To some extent, his book redeems the necessity of the state and espouses that there are situations in which the subaltern may want to negotiate with or become part of it. For example, he takes the Zapatistas to task for committing some grave political miscalculations around the 2006 elections that have basically resulted, in his estimation, in the containment of their power as an antihegemonic force. But one might wonder if remaining outside the state continues to have advantages in some cases? A case in point: Have the 2011 student movements in Chile succeeded, on some level, because the students have refused to sit down and negotiate with the state? The students’ intransigence as social actors has done much to revive a rebellious spirit within the Chilean citizenry that one can only hope will lead to concrete change and deeper democratization down the line. Even if the students eventually need to become involved with the state and its institutions to have their demands met (and they will), could there be advantages to their rejection of the state in this initial phase of the struggle that would advocate for a defense of the externality of the subaltern? Despite these questions, this marvelous intervention is clearly articulated and, without doubt, essential reading. A wide-ranging treatise on Latinamericanism’s merits, faults, and promise, this book will assuredly offer food for thought for intellectuals on both sides of the North/South divide for many years to come.

Work Cited

Moreiras, Alberto. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001. Print.