American Indigenism and Democracy: Churchill, Marshall and Villoro on Assimilation, Pluralism, and Autonomy

Kim Díaz
El Paso Community College

Winner of the Hubert Griggs Alexander Award

Luis Villoro's political philosophy is significant not only for philosophers in Mexico. His thought emerges in part from Native American thought and this is relevant to all of the Americas, North, Central and South, given that the Native American culture is common to all of the Americas and historically previous to our respective colonizers (Spanish, British, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danish).[1] The Native American fate after 1492 has been similar throughout the American continent in so far as Indigenous peoples have suffered great traumas and much of their culture has been wiped out due to colonization and its aftermath.

Given that Villoro's political thought grew out of a colonized consciousness and his experiences with Mexican Indigenous peoples, I argue that Villoro's political insights provide important criticisms of mainstream Western liberalism and mainstream theories of democracy. In order to elaborate on Villoro's Indigenism and his political philosophy this paper is divided into three sections. First, I provide two important perspectives from North American Indigenism. These come from Ward Churchill and Joseph Marshall who argue in favor of autonomy and pluralism, and against assimilationist policies. Our second task is to become acquainted with Villoro's views on homogenization, pluralism, and autonomy. After discussing Churchill, Marshall, and Villoro, the third task is to consider how Villoro's political insights advance what Marshall and Churchill propose. I defend the thesis that Villoro's Indigenist background and his understanding of the historical aftermath of colonization place him in an insightful

position from where he calls into question the assumptions that Western mainstream democratic theories are working from.

I. Current North American Indigenism: Homogenization and Autonomy

Indigenous peoples in North America have had a somewhat different fate than the Indigenous peoples of Central and South America. All Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have suffered great hardships due to the European colonization of the American continent. In Central and South America, The Spanish and Portuguese enslaved the Indigenous people, and forcefully converted them to Christianity. The Spanish divided the land and the people who lived in it into encomiendas so that the Indigenous people who lived in this land were considered to be the property of the encomendado. The Natives who survived the violent attacks against them by the Spanish and Portuguese, and who survived the exposure to European diseases were forced to work in agriculture or mining to export the American resources to Spain and Portugal.

The main difference between the Indigenous peoples in the American continent has been the miscegenation that has taken place in Central and South America. Whereas in Central and South America the Indigenous peoples were enslaved and exploited by the Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch, the North American Indigenous communities were subject to genocide at the hands of the British and French. Indigenous peoples in North America were either killed or driven into decreasingly smaller parcels of land away from European colonies. In some instances the European colonizers engaged in trade with the Native Americans—they traded guns for tobacco and furs, but generally the Native American people were swindled out of their land and forced to relocate in reservations. If, however, the European colonizers needed the land to cross from Eastern to Western routes, or if, mineral deposits were found in the reservations, then again, the Native Americans were forced to relocate or to sell their land. This practice has been taking place since the early English colonies in 1585 and continues today.[2]

North American Indigenous peoples have not only lost most of their land, regrettably, a large part of their culture has also been lost. From 1870 to 1920 The Reservation Boarding School System either adopted out the Indigenous children or simply took them from their homes and institutionalized them in their boarding schools in order to assimilate them into the European culture and away from their Indigenous roots. In a commencement address to a graduating class of Native Americans, Reverend A.J. Lippincott tells the Indigenous children to: “Let all that is Indian within you die!...You cannot become truly American citizens, industrious, intelligent, cultured, civilized until the INDIAN within you is DEAD” (Adams 300).

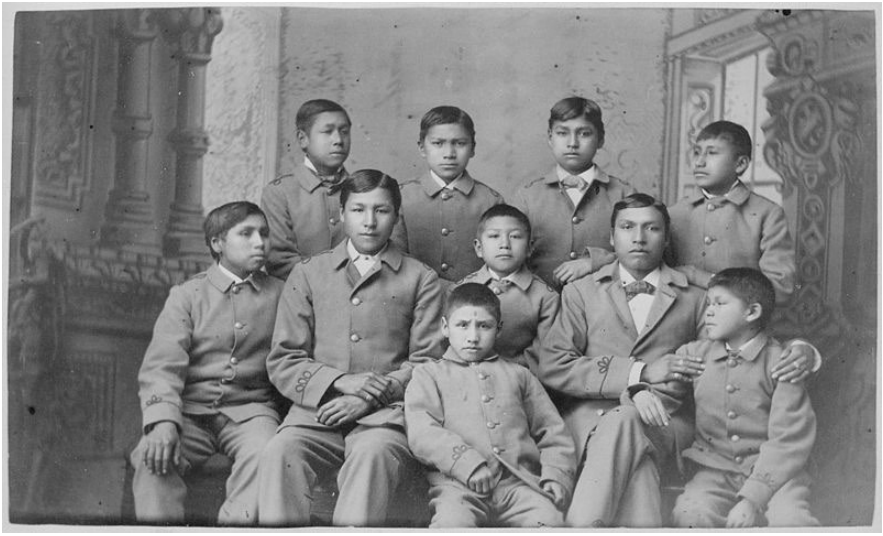

Photo taken from "Remembering the Children."[3]

In his book, *From a Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism*, Ward Churchill argues that modern day North Americans owe it to Native Americans to allow them to have a recognized voice regarding their own land. Churchill's demand is often dismissed by his critics as either unrealistic or not important, given that there are other more critical and pressing issues such as unemployment, or national defense that affect the larger community. To these criticisms, Churchill replies that his demand is not unrealistic. It is true for instance that 200 years ago it would have been unrealistic for women to own property and have the right to vote, or that 200 years ago African Americans would have had equal rights under U.S. law. Ridiculous and unrealistic as these ideas were 200 years ago, women and African Americans forged forward and have gained access to a better life. Churchill writes that Native American recognition stands to "pave the way for the realization of most other agendas—from anti-imperialism to environmentalism, from African-American liberation to feminism, from gay rights to the ending of class privilege—pursued by progressives on this continent. Conversely, succeeding with any or even all of these other agendas would still represent an inherently oppressive situation if their realization is contingent upon an ongoing occupation of Native North America without the consent of Indian people" (Churchill 88).

Regarding the present-day dynamics among Native Americans and European-Americans, Joseph Marshall (Lakota elder) recommends the following. First, awareness of two things: one, of our history so that we do not repeat it, and second, awareness of our attitude towards those who are different from us:

> ...all of us function, or operate, or live from what our values are and what our attitudes are.... Euro-Americans came to this continent with that sense of superiority, that sense that they were a better people, a more moral and enlightened people... there was one Pope ...who issued an edict that it was acceptable tokill native people because they did not have souls like white people did, like Christian people did. When you have those kinds of attitudes, certainly you're going to act from those foundations, from those attitudes. (Marshall)

The attitude of cultural or moral superiority of one race over another underlies the genocide and enslavement of Indigenous peoples of the Americas by Europeans. I say more regarding our attitude towards others who are different from us in conjunction with Villoro's plurality in the following section.

II. Villoro's Indigenism: Homogenization, Plurality and Autonomy

Homogenization

Like Joseph Marshall, Villoro highlights the importance of pluralism. The Mexican Indigenous communities have been assimilated into the mestizo culture by different means than the North American Indigenous peoples. Whereas in the U.S., Native Americans were placed into boarding schools to "civilize" them, Mexico has homogenized its subcultures in a number of different ways.

One of Villoro's concerns is that given the homogenization of the Mexican society, the significance of the Indigenous history and much of the Indigenous' values has, at best, been done away with. Villoro explains that the modern Mexican nation-state conceives itself as a homogeneous unit constituted by the decisions of a number of individuals who are equal among themselves. Historically, this nation-state has ignored or destroyed individual aspects of different communities, groups, and lifestyles. In order to homogenize a society within a nation-state, different tools have been used, such as a market economy, a uniform federal law, a central administration, a common language, patriotic celebrations, national heroes, and so on. The modern nation-state is equivalent to all of its citizens who are allegedly treated as similar elements in a common aggregate. The few in power attempt to assimilate all diverse communities and cultures into a dominant lifestyle. In Mexico, equality is understood as homogeneity. In order to avoid special privileges, everyone presumably gets the same treatment. The individual is not so much a particular subject or a unique human being, but rather a bearer of civil and political rights just as everyone else.

Plurality

Villoro writes how it was not until several years after the Spanish had divided the American land along with the people who lived in it into encomiendas, that the

Jesuits asked themselves whether the Spanish conquest and colonization was an ethical act. Basque Quiroga and Bartolome de las Casas argued that the Indigenous people were human beings with the same rational capacity as the Spanish. Juan Lopez de Palacios Rubios and Juan Gines de Sepulveda defended the Spanish duty to colonize the Natives because these were "natural slaves."

From the disagreement between those who defended the Indigenous peoples' human status and those who justified their slavery, it was decided that the Natives were not entirely natural slaves, but they were not entirely rational beings either (Bakewell 143). The Spanish concluded that the Natives occupied an in-between status, that is, between natural slave and rational human, characterized by an infantile mind that had yet to develop. Thus, the Spanish justified to themselves their paternalistic duty to colonize the Indigenous people and decide for them until they were able to make their own rational decisions. The well known stereotype of the Native with an innocent and infantile mind who is incapable of making his or her own decisions forms the basis of many of Latin America's liberation movements such as José Carlos Mariátegui's revolutionary myth, as well as many of the humanitarian approaches towards social change by mestizos, North Americans and Europeans towards Indigenous people.

The Spanish colonizers exhibited this lack of pluralism as they were not able to consider the possibility that the Spanish and Native cultures were simply two different manifestations of our human spirit. For the Spanish, their culture and religion were the "True" culture and religion. This meant that the culture and religion of the natives was a type of abomination, which needed to be properly assimilated to the Spanish culture. It is precisely this lack of pluralistic sensibility that now precludes mestizos from formulating other options besides either assimilating or separating the Indigenous cultures.

Currently, many mestizos commit a similar mistake insofar as we objectify Indigenous peoples, even when our intentions are to help them. Villoro believes that the development of a pluralistic sensibility is essential in the process of reaching our freedom, a sense of community, and democracy. In his book, *Estado Plural, Pluralidad de Culturas*, Villoro writes that during the Spanish conquest, not even the most subversive monks such as Sahagun and De Las Casas had the capacity for humility in the face of the "other" (159). De Las Casas writes:

> They are fairly tall and good looking, well made. They should be good an intelligent servants, and I believe that they could be converted into good Christians, for it does not appear that they have any other religion. (De Las Casas 204)

The Spaniard's disposition was already habituated to dominate. For them, only the colonized had to be transformed; they, as colonizers, had no reason to change. In other words, their desire to dominate was prior to any exchange with the "other."

Autonomy

Like Ward Churchill, Villoro also advocates the importance of respecting the autonomous decisions of Indigenous peoples on their own terms. Villoro writes how the interactions between the Natives and the Spanish who conquered and colonized/Christianized them ranged from complete domination to the defense of the Indigenous people as human beings. When it comes to Indigenism and the interactions between the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples, two things are clear: The first is that although some of the Spanish did believe that Indigenous peoples were in fact human beings, most Spanish did not consider the Indigenous peoples as equals. For the Spanish, their culture and religion were unquestionably superior to the cultures and religions of the Natives. The second point that has been made clear is that the Indigenous people have been the objects of the Spanish and the mestizos.

Villoro tells us:

> Since the sixteenth century, the Indigenous peoples of America have been for criollos and mestizos, the other – the other who is judged and manipulated for their use, or conversely, for their redemption. We, the non-Indians, have decided for them. We have been not only the ones who use them, but also the ones who intend to save them. The oppression of Indigenous peoples has been the work of non-Indians, and of the Indigenist, who aims to liberate them. While it is European-Americans who continue deciding for Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples will continue being the subject of the history that others make.
>
> True liberation of the Indians would entail recognizing them as the subjects that they are, who have their own fate in their own hands; subjects who are capable of judging us according to their own values, just as we have always judged them; subjects who can exercise their own freedom without restrictions, just as we demand to exercise ours. To be a complete subject is to be autonomous. The Indigenous "problem" has only one definitive solution: the recognition of the Indigenous peoples' autonomy. (Villoro, *Estado Plural* 79)

The disregard for the autonomy of the Indigenous peoples continued after the independence movements in the Americas. Villoro points out that after their independence from Spain, the new republics followed the same administrative divisions as the Spanish colonies without considering the differences among the various Indigenous peoples. The criollos and mestizos formed the new states and imposed these institutions upon the Indigenous communities. Villoro: "The Indigenous people did not enter into this constitutive agreement. No one consulted them regarding whether or not they wanted to form part of the new agreement.

However, they ended up accepting it" (80). The fact is that the Indigenous people never had the option of *not* joining the modern state.
The way in which the human autonomy of Indigenous peoples is ignored when they are subjugated is obvious. Less obvious but equally damaging is how they are not taken into consideration when the mestizos decide to "save" or "help" them. The choices mestizos have generally formulated are as follows:

> (a) Leave the Natives with their pre-Hispanic culture and values and separate them from the rest of society.
> (b) Assimilate them into the Western culture to emancipate them from their oppressed condition and integrate them into the mestizo society.

Both options originate from a mestizo perspective, and do no consider the Indigenous peoples' perspectives and interests. Option (a) would undermine the Indigenous peoples' ability to resist their oppression. This option is similar to the way in which the United States government has dealt with Native American people in North America. They have been removed from the rest of society and placed in reservations. Option (b) entails forcing the Indigenous peoples to adopt a culture foreign to theirs. Villoro writes: "The fanatical Indigenous rights advocate treats the Indian as a free man, but deep down would like for him to remain a slave. The excited Western liberal wants the Indian to be exalted as free, but as a matter of fact treats him as a slave " (Villoro, *Los Grandes Momentos* 242). Both options originate from the mestizo, Western liberal, or European perspectives and these completely ignore the Indigenous peoples' possible interests.

Villoro argues in favor of responding to the assimilation and homogenization push in our governments with pluralist advances, which emphasize that all cultures are manifestations of the human race, even in the vast diversity of its manifestations. In response to the challenge of homogenization, Villoro recommends that we extend to others that which we want for ourselves. People who are physically, emotionally, and psychologically healthy are able to establish their own sense of autonomy. In the existential sense, it is only through our autonomous decisions that we can live an authentic life. "Personal autonomy is the ability to choose a life plan and follow it," Villoro tells us (Villoro, *Los Grandes Momentos* 92). It is by extending to others our own sense of autonomy and authenticity that we are able to understand and judge members of other cultures according to their own expressions, on their own terms. Villoro explains how being able to do this entails understanding and judging others according to their own values and objectives, and not according to the values and objectives of our culture. "This is the only way by which the other is understood and properly judged as a subject and not as an object" (124). This does not mean that we must accept everything the other does, it simply means that we attempt to "trust him, which means understanding and judging him by his own criteria, without imposing our

own" (ibid.). For Villoro, if we understand that just as we ourselves have goals and envision future actions that will allow us to continue our life plan, so likewise all human beings feel the need to live an authentic life.[4] When this realization takes place "the principle of authenticity opens up and along with it the possibility of recognizing the other as a subject" (Villoro, *Los Grandes Momentos* 124). This means recognizing and considering others, however different from our culture, as humans who act based on their goals and values to achieve an independent and authentic life.

The Indigenous culture is a constitutive element of the Mexican state and culture, but it is not the only one. Western liberalism in the form of laws and institutions constitutes most of the modern Mexican state. Villoro writes "the Chiapas uprising... did not seek to subvert democracy, instead it sought its fulfillment. It did not mean the dissolution of the state, but its transformation. It is not against "modernity," but against injustice. For the first time the idea of unifying the two streams that run through the history of Mexico into a new conception of the nation-state became a possibility" (Villoro, *Estado Plural* 47). The two currents that Villoro mentions are Western liberalism (in the modern state) and the Indigenous values.

Villoro explains that it is clear that we cannot go back in history. Mexicans have forged a national identity that is neither solely Indigenous nor solely modern mainstream liberal. Even if it were possible, he does not advocate separating the modern state into its Indigenous and modern elements. What Villoro postulates is that we accept the multiplicity of cultures. "In the face of the homogeneous nation-state, a possibility opens up: a pluralistic nation-state that fits the social reality which consists of a multiplicity of ethnicities, cultures and communities" (Villoro, *Estado Plural* 47). According to Villoro, this would be a state in which no one would impose her values or ideas on others.

Villoro advocates that the role of the state be reduced to coordinating and facilitating the projects of local communities as well as suggesting a common direction. As a consequence of the decentralization in its power dynamics, the homogeneous Mexican nation state that currently subsumes the Indigenous and other minorities would become more pluralistic. This is so because the local communities would be encouraged to stand on their own instead of assimilating to the mainstream culture, language, and so forth. "The source of power would get increasingly closer to the autonomous communities that constitute society," and the acceptance of the plurality of cultures in Mexico would acknowledge the autonomy of the Indigenous on their own terms (Villoro, *Estado Plural* 48).

III. Villoro's Criticisms of Mainstream Democratic Theories

Like Marshall, Villoro emphasizes a respect for plurality as the necessary basis for all democratic developments. Like Churchill, Villoro also argues in favor of

respecting the autonomous decisions of the Indigenous peoples on their own terms. Moreover, Villoro is critical of the mainstream democratic theories because these do not address previous transgressions, instead they focus only on distributive models that do not take into consideration the numerous historical injustices that have led to many people's current context, namely, a context where they are not yet in the position to exercise their rights. Villoro is also critical of our current mainstream democratic theories because these err too much on either the side of liberalism or the left, and both of these extremes are oppressive.

In order to situate Villoro's thoughts on democracy vis a vis other conversations on the topic, we must consider Villoro's starting point. Villoro's approach to democracy is different than mainstream democratic theories because the established theories regarding democracy generally take the starting point of democracy to be a type of consensus, Habermas's ideal speech situation, and Rawls's original position, for instance. Villoro points out that many of the theories regarding democracy have been elaborated by philosophers from developed countries. The background context of these countries is such that they do not experience tyrannical governments, instead, working social and economic systems are in order. Generally, these theories take their citizens to have equal political rights, to be able to speak to each other and come to a rational consensus.

The starting point for democracy that Villoro suggests is due to the fact that there are many countries, Mexico among them, who must think about democracy from a different background context. In this context democracy has not yet been established, and social, political, and economic inequalities abound. In this sense, the starting point to think about democracy cannot be the same for all peoples. Villoro suggests that rather than beginning to think about democracy and justice from theoretical places such as overlapping consensus, ideal theory, or an ideal speech situation, we instead begin to think about democracy and justice from its *factual absence*. Rather than moving from the establishment of universal principles of justice towards their realization in a specific society, Villoro suggests that we move from a real experienced injustice towards a solution of what could ideally resolve the injustice (Villoro, "Sobre el Principio de la Injusticia, 103-142).

Given these criticisms, Villoro believes that democracy can be thought of as a matter of degrees. He recommends that we think of democracy as an ideal, a regulative idea, a standard that guides our practice to approximate our ideal. It is important, however, that we do not make the mistake of thinking either that democracy is already a matter of fact, or that democracy will be an established fact in the near future. Democracy can function as an ideal to guide our interactions with others. Democracy is not something that is immutable, nor is it possible for democracy to become fully permanent at some future time. Furthermore, democracy as an ideal, also functions as a tool of criticism of our existing practices and institutions.

Villoro on Liberalism

Equally important as Villoro's criticisms of mainstream democratic theories are his criticisms of liberalism and the left. Although tolerance is a fundamental and necessary value for democratic practices, the problem is that the modern nation state places too much importance on tolerance and tolerance alone does not make for a healthy community. Villoro explains that to form part of a community, tolerance is a necessary but not sufficient condition because tolerance respects but does not acknowledge the value of our cultural differences. It is possible for a person to tolerate other peoples and cultures while feeling superior to them. This type of tolerance is not helpful. We need the kind of tolerance that acknowledges the value of cultures and beliefs foreign to ours. This type of tolerance attempts to understand the perspective of the other, and this in turn leads us to the dialogue and collaboration needed to feel a sense of belonging within a community.

The criticism developed by Villoro addresses liberal assumptions and the consequences of holding these assumptions, such as exclusion *from* others, exclusion *of* others, lack of opportunities, and our understanding and limitations regarding what it means to be tolerant. Villoro believes the modern liberal state is based on two types of exclusion. First, liberalism contends that the state must respect everyone's right to choose her life plan, but only this much. In other words, liberalism does not ask, and, much less demand of the state to provide the circumstances or opportunities for every individual to be able to realize their life plan. Villoro writes:

> If one wants to accomplish what one chooses, it is not enough to have legal guarantees and consent from others, what is necessary is that there be the adequate social conditions. No individual is free if she is not in a position to realize her reasonable lifestyle choices ... A society that does not seek these conditions for all of its people is necessarily divided. This cannot fail to produce a necessary consequence: the exclusion of a significant portion of the population. The sense of all people belonging to the same community has been broken. (Villoro, *De la Libertad a la Comunidad* 23)

This is the first sense in which liberalism generates a sense of exclusion. The equal opportunity of all people to realize their life plan presupposes, first, that the minimum conditions such as food, shelter, and clothing are already a matter of fact. Second, it also presupposes that there is actual equality of social opportunity to carry out our life plan. However, to demand that these conditions be available to all people is a type of requirement that does not originate from liberalism. The demand that the minimal social conditions be in place for individuals to flourish originates from a sense of solidarity with our community.

Classical liberalism is primarily concerned with the rights of the individual and with the protection of individual privacy. Consequently, each individual is

especially concerned with her own interests, each emphasizes her personal life plan, and may feel that collective interests infringe on their individual rights. A society based on liberal values is characterized by competition among individuals; it is not characterized by cooperation. This is the second sense in which liberalism generates exclusion.

Classical liberalism is concerned with negative rights, so that the liberal concerns work well for those who have the financial means to bring about their life plan without the help of a community. It is important to stress this point because a consequence of liberal democracies is that liberal institutions benefit the few who have the wherewithal, however, they hide a growing inequality among citizens. The legal guarantee of negative rights is not sufficient for the vast majority of people. The vast majority require not only the right to formulate their own life plan, but also the means and opportunities to accomplish it.

The Left as a Moral Stance

Villoro writes "the left is not a doctrine, it is a lifestyle choice" (Villoro, *Los Retos de la Sociedad por Venir* 130). For him, to be a leftist does not mean we have to adopt a particular ideology, but rather to take a moral stance, which consists in adopting a disruptive attitude against any oppressive power. Villoro believes it is useful to distinguish between the left as a way of life and the political left because "the same political doctrine can have a disruptive role in one context and be reiterative of a dominating situation in another" (131). The function of the left can be paradoxical. This means that in one context, the left may oppose the imposition of a dominating power. However, if the left stops its opposition and instead comes to take the place of power, then its government only makes sense if it is carried out in a way that contributes to the elimination of oppressive power structures. "If the left ends up imposing its power, then it has forgotten its dissident vocation and establishes a new system of oppression. The left betrays itself and is no longer a political left" (132). It is, therefore, useful to distinguish between the political left and the left as a value that guides our actions. The left as a value is more than just a political perspective. It is a moral stance and a lifestyle choice that is critical of power and disruptive of oppression in its actions.

CONCLUSION

As other American Indigenists, Villoro is concerned with issues of autonomy, pluralism, and assimilation. Also, Villoro advocates that mestizos acknowledge and respect the autonomous decisions of the different Indigenous peoples. Doing this is not only the right thing to do, but it would also take us a step in the direction of Mexico being a community of people who not only tolerate our differences but who can learn from our differences and be supportive of each other's life's plans. Furthermore, I have argued that Villoro's Indigenist background and his

understanding of the historical aftermath of colonization place him in an insightful position from where he can easily call into question the assumptions that Western mainstream democratic theories are working from.[5]

NOTES

1. See John E. Kicza and Rebecca Horn's *Resilient Cultures: America's Native Peoples Confront European Colonization, 1500-1800*..
2. See Ward Churchill's *From a Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism, 1985-1995*.
3. Jeffries Design. "Copy of Enrollment Records." Found, Remembering the Children, 2023, https://www.rememberingthechildren.org/copy-of-enrollment-records-2?pgid=kb19f33e4-d493c90c-a6a5-11ea-8c85-12879e2400f0
4. This is a generalization on Villoro's part, namely, that all human beings feel the need to live an authentic life, but it is a generalization for the sake of what is plural and specific about each one of us. Here Villoro is making an empirical generalization about humans, not a claim that there is a universal human nature behind our cultural differences.
5. I would like to thank Mario Sáenz for his thoughtful suggestions for this article. All translations from Spanish to English in this text are mine.

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