FROM ORTEGA Y GASSET TO MEXICAN EXISTENTIALISM: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF CHICANO IDENTITY

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The question of identity, especially if one is talking about racial or cultural identity, can take many forms and be approached in a myriad of different ways. For that reason, conceptions as to what constitutes identity end up conflicting with one another, so that, for instance, a sociological conception of identity is at odds with the psychoanalytic conception. The sociological story of what constitutes Puerto Rican identity, for example, might have it that Puerto Rican identity is more or less rigidly determined by a certain set of characteristics, such as an Afro-Caribbean heritage, a common language, and an intimate connection to the Puerto Rican "homeland," characteristics defining what it means to be "Puerto Rican." As a sociological view it *describes*, in fact, how a certain people at a particular time understand themselves and their reality; by doing this, moreover, it tends to *prescribe* the necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying oneself as Puerto Rican, so that whoever does not speak the language or does not identify with the Puerto Rican homeland will be considered as someone "other than," outside the parameters for group membership. Conceived as a determination of cultural, or group, identity, a cultural hermeneutic utilizing a philosophical method remains always on the verge of sliding from a philosophical to a merely descriptive project, since it aims at formalizing necessary and sufficient conditions for group membership, in which case it is hard to conceive it as either philosophical nor insightful.

In thinking philosophically about these issues, one attempts to transcend the essentialists' conceptions of identity that tend to prescribe the parameters of what it means to be part of a particular culture, race, or ethnicity. In this paper I consider the question regarding Chicano identity using a philosophical framework similar to that used by the Mexican existentialist thinker Samuel Ramos; moreover, this approach is grounded on the existential hermeneutic developed by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset.[1] My overall view is that Chicano identity, as a confluence of Mexican and Anglo cultural and historical values and traditions, can only be made *phenomenologically* transparent by attending to the *being* of that entity referred to by the term "Chicano," by noting the manner in which the Chicano *cares* for his or her "circumstances" (the *circum-stare*, the things around), and finally, by making clear the manner in which the Chicano represents a concern for the

authentic being of others amongst whom the Chicano exists.

I will begin with some preliminary remarks on the current state of Chicanos in general and on how the question of identity has become problematic. That it is problematic can be seen in the current mood within the Chicano intellectual community; it is a moment of existential crisis in need of resolution. This moment of crisis, I believe, is similar in many respects to that undergone by post-Revolutionary Mexicans as they struggled to piece together a Mexican identity centuries after the Conquest and a few decades after a revolutionary war that exposed a deeply-divided Mexican self. This time saw the birth of a new Mexican intelligentsia, one fueled by the existential doctrines of José Ortega y Gasset. I end by attempting an analysis of the *being* of the Chicano self along the lines of the existential hermeneutical framework provided by Ortega and Ramos.

Ontic Preoccupations

The need to define a Chicano identity comes as a need for social empowerment. If we know *what we are,* perhaps we can call to all those that fit the definition and can mobilize politically as well as culturally. Social empowerment has its underlying motivations; although the Hispanic community, including Chicanos, is the fastest growing minority group in the United States, it has been, generally speaking, economically underdeveloped, low skilled, uneducated, politically apathetic, and culturally marginalized.[2]

Nevertheless, what sets apart Chicanos in the United States is their unwillingness to fully assimilate into this culture with the ease exhibited by other minority groups. Some observers have argued that "assimilation for most *Chicanos* would involve the trading of a genuine human culture for a bland, dehumanized, consumer-oriented, made-in-America mass culture."[3] The pressures of modern society, however, make the search for a unique identity even more urgent. One writer predicts: "[W]e are all to become Latinos *agringados* and/or gringos *hispnizados*; we will never be the owners of a pure, crystalline, collective individuality because we are the product of a five-hundred-year-old fiesta of miscegenation that began with our first encounter with the gringo in 1492."[4]

Assimilation of the type envisioned by the writers quoted above becomes more difficult when one considers the fact that most Chicanos still consider themselves Mexicans who, by some violent historical act, are living in the United States. As a popular adage goes, "*We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us*" (for instance, the case of "Californianos"—Mexicans

living in California when California was still a Mexican territory). Thus, in the United States, the Chicano faces the problem of *being in* but *not being in* the dominant, Anglo, culture. This "being in but not being in," calls for the appearance of the question regarding Chicano identity, and at the same time it sets itself as the stumbling block toward its resolution.

The fact is that there is no clear conception of what it means *to be* a Chicano. Chicanos from Northern California have different self-interpretations than Chicanos from New Mexico or Arizona, for instance. Some define Chicanos as Mexican Americans, while others as Mexicans in America, and still others as Spanish (not Mexican) Americans.[5] What is clear, however, is that what the term "Chicano" attempts to capture is a unique historical and cultural circumstance, a circumstance somehow rooted in the land south of the border but effective north of it. Thus, it captures a self attempting to find a foothold on two different realities, or attempting to consolidate these realities, but ultimately a self trying to stake a claim to its own *being-in-the-world.*

The question of Chicano identity is made much more interesting when we consider that it must account for a history of transgression which leads to a sense of displacement in Anglo society. But besides the common array of negative identity markers, such as transgression, and consequently immigration, marginalization, exploitation, resentment, violence, homesickness, and so on, Chicano identity is also said to be comprised of familial and communal loyalty with those who share the common experiences. In the end, however, the attempt to impose a definition on the Chicano self leads to essentialism, where the *What* a Chicano is takes precedence over *Who* the Chicano is. The problem with the essentialists' approach to identity is that it prohibits individual growth and progress by the very fact that *What* one is defines the limits of one's possibilities; whereas, *Who* one is allows for continual modifications to one's self-interpretation.

If one attends philosophically to the question of identity, however, we notice immediately that it arises out of a social *need* for self-identification, and from the sense that an ability to identify is needed in order to begin the process of self-interpretation; a need, moreover, for distance, a wish to be distinct and as such to take possession of a distinctive Chicano destiny. The problem is that this *need* to be "other than the rest," or as is the case with assimilation, to be "just like" others, is an act of "bad faith," as Sartre would say. It is a moment of inauthenticity which ignores the fact that the Chicano is *always already* self-interpreting, the Chicano is always already *being.* What this suggests is that even the quest for a definition of Chicano identity

is doomed from the start, as is the suggestion that there is none, or there can not be one. This might be so. However, clarification of the nature of the being of this being is a quest worth pursuing, if not for its pragmatic value, at least for the philosophical significance of asking a question which we have a feeling cannot be asked without showing that the Chicano's identity is indeed identical—ontologically, that is—to the rest of human kind.

The Rise and Relevance of Mexican Existential Thought

Mexican influences on the Chicano sense of self are significant, as well they should.[6] These influences are, to name a few, cultural, religious, and intellectual. Of the intellectual sources, the writings of the Mexican existential philosophers, and disciples of José Ortega y Gasset, Samuel Ramos, Octavio Paz, and Leopoldo Zea first come to mind, and there are reasons to believe this, especially if Chicano writers during the early days of the "Chicano movement" (1950's and 60's) were seeking a framework from which to speculate on the nature of Chicano identity.

Modern Mexican philosophy itself grew out of political frustration at the end of the 19th century. The pre-revolutionary political administration had instituted Auguste Comte's positivist ideology as the national ideology. This meant that politics, culture, history, mythology, religion, and education would be re-modeled and based on a positivist agenda of "order and progress." In effect, the scientism of the positivist administration justified their dictatorship on the basis of bourgeoisie economic, technical, and scientific superiority and progress. Consequently, Porfirio Diaz, president and dictator, ruled Mexico for more than thirty years until the breakout of the revolution. Culture and history were seen as unprogressive, so educational reforms instituted a positivist curriculum in all secondary schools and universities. Religion was considered oppressive, creating a permanent break between church and state.

The technocracy of the Mexican administration sparked a debate between the positivist bureaucrats and a group of young intellectuals led by Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos, a professor of philosophy at the National University, stressed the importance of a liberal education, cultural differentiation from Europe, indigenous values, and an ardent rejection of scientism. Vasconcelos regarded aesthetic appreciation as more important than the mechanization of nature to human development.[7] Vasconcelos' passionate lectures sparked a heated debate with the positivists which eventually led to the view that positivism was destructive to the Mexican mind and the Mexican sense of cultural identity.

The rational philosophy of Vasconcelos, who believed that through reason one could access universal principles capable of grounding a genuine Mexican philosophy, did not provide sufficient grounding to explore the question of a post-revolutionary Mexican identity. After centuries of oppression by imperialistic governments, Mexico was finally free after the revolution. However, this sudden freedom brought with it the need to define the future of Mexico and *who* the Mexican was. Once again, the young intelligentsia turned to European sources for direction.

The 1920's and 30's saw the growing interest in existential phenomenology. The ideas of Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, and José Ortega y Gasset, for instance, offered post-Revolution Mexican intellectuals an alternative perspective through which to look at the existential situation of the Mexican individual. As one commentator puts it, at this stage, Mexican philosophy "came to be understood *not* as an abstract set of universal norms that are independent of men's and women's concrete situation, but as universal in the sense of a set of norms grounded in particular cultural experiences that reflected the individual's concrete situation."[8] The Mexican individual came to be understood in terms of this individual's unique situation, as a human self rooted in a set of circumstances with which this self had to deal; the Mexican was seen, plainly and simply, as a *being-in-the-world*, as Heidegger says, or as *circumstantial*, as Ortega put it.

The Mexican assessment of the Mexican self, however, was not the abstract hermeneutics of the German school. As the Mexican philosophers, such as Ramos, saw it, their assessment was an interpretation of existence particular to a post-Revolutionary *Da-sein,* and this Da-sein's generation was still reeling from the effects of the revolution, and was still engulfed by the long shadow of the Conquest. The effects of these events on the Mexican sense of self were indeed detrimental: the Conquest was a constant reminder that the Mexican self is a dichotomous self, part indigenous and part European. It is, in this respect, "neither fully European, since it was transmitted to America, nor fully American, since it was dominated by Europe;"[9] the Mexican is, in this respect, a "Mestizo." This gives rise to the idea that the European contribution to the Mexican self is dominant, and even worse, that it completely destroyed the indigenous contribution, leaving in its wake an individual with no real history and, ultimately, identity. As Ramos writes, "It is true that there was a mixing of races [*Mestizaje*], but not of cultures, since in the clash between the conquistadors and the Indians, the culture of the latter was destroyed."[10] Thus the Conquest still exists as

an event which not only defines the Mexican sense of identity—and what Ramos calls its "inferiority complex"[11]—as that of a dual identity, but as an inauthentic identity, a homeless identity unable to come to grips with itself; an event, moreover, which created the modern Mexican individual, the "Mestizo," the mix-breed, a mix of the colonizer and colonized.

The hermeneutic of the Mexican self could not end in the particularities of an apparent schizophrenia. The hermeneutic delved into the being of the Mexican, into the ontological roots of the Mexican identity. What it found was that the being of the Mexican was an inauthentic mode of being-in-the-world; the Mexican identity did not own up to its history and its circumstances, regarding them, instead, with resentment and anger. But this owning up to the circumstances has to take place; as Ramos saw it, "man must do something in order to live, for life is given as a majestic problem that must be resolved, and the demand to guarantee existence is pressed upon him as an inevitable necessity since life is given as a continuous risk, the risk of being lost."[12] Man is confronted with the problem of his own existence, Ramos thought. Man is the only creature with this problem, and with the risks attached to it, thus the only entity capable of "being lost." But, lost where? And what is this "something" that man must do? Reading *Profile of Man in Mexico*, Ramos' master work, the sense is that what man must do, what the *Mexican* must *do*, is to face up to the reality of the distinctly Mexican historical and cultural circumstances, and in the process, relinquishing the belief that these circumstances are hybrids of other cultures and consequently of lesser quality. What Ramos is calling for is, in fact, for the Mexican to appropriate his circumstance, and whatever projects this circumstance calls for—to *project* in a distinctly Mexican way and, in this way, take possession of a distinct destiny.

The manner of thinking about culture and identity that Ramos instituted, while transcending the superficial renderings of the Mexican self as "other-than-European" by lending attention to the existential dimensions of this self, was nonetheless situated in a definite Mexican context. The being of the Mexican was clarified by what the Mexican did with the Mexican circumstances, but, more importantly, this being was brought to light through a clarification of what these circumstances were. The Mexican could now work on authenticating his sense of self in spite of, or together with, these circumstances.

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Ortega y Gasset: The Doctrine of Circumstantialism

It is no secret that Mexican philosophy owes its soul to the work of the *Spanish* philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. As Ramos noted, "Ortega's most valuable teaching for Mexico . . . is the profoundly Spanish character of his thought and of his style. In these, we can see an exemplary attitude, offering us the philosophical bases for legitimating the aspiration to realize a national philosophy."[13] The national philosophy Ramos envisioned would be a product of the uniquely Mexican circumstances, and would endeavor to bring to light the plight of the Mexican and consequently the *projects* that the Mexican had to undertake in order to live an authentic existence. "The entity of the person," writes Ramos, "manifests its real existence in action."[14] The being of this being, in other words, becomes phenomenologically transparent when one attends to the manner in which this being, this person, *cares for* its circumstances.

In this sense, Ramos' philosophy is indeed Ortegean. In his 1914 monumental work, *Meditaciones sobre el Quijote*, Ortega argued against the metaphysical distinction between the subject and the object by proposing that this dualism was a rationalist fiction without basis in reality. Ortega concluded, "I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself."[15] That is, I am a being necessarily involved with those things which stand around, in Latin, the *circum stancia*; in a very special sense, these things constitute what happens to me and what I do with myself. But these *circum stancia* also lend their being to history and culture; I must consequently rescue them from obscurity and misunderstanding or else I am also in danger of losing myself. "Man," writes Ortega, "reaches his full capacity when he acquires complete consciousness of his circumstances. Through them he communicates with the universe."[16] Ultimately, human existence is constituted, Ortega says, *sub specie circumstantiarum*, in relation to the circumstances—in relation, that is, to what I do with these circumstances and what stance I take toward them.

Ortega refers to this relation of dependence between the self and its circumstances as *radical reality*. I can own up to my radical reality, as the sum total of my circumstances and my self, or I can relinquish this responsibility and fall into the mass (into bad faith or inauthenticity). If I choose the latter, however, I am still choosing; "even to abandon life to chance, in a moment of despair," writes Ortega, is a choice.[17] Since we are *thrown* into circumstances which we did not create, we must exercise our

will over these circumstances and confront them with resolute fortitude. He writes,

> The task, as we have said, is called 'living'; the essence of living is that man is always existing within an environment, that he finds himself . . . projected into and submerged in a world, a set of fixed surroundings, into this present, which is now about us.[18]

Again, as Ortega observes in his most well-known work, *The Revolt of the Masses*:

> We are not thrown into existence like the bullet of a gun, whose flight is absolutely predetermined. The misfortune is that we fall, fall in this world—the world is always this, this of now—it consists in all the unfavorable. Instead of imposing on us a trajectory, it imposes for us various ways and consequently, it forces us . . . to choose. The surprising condition of our life! To live is to feel oneself fatally compelled to exercise this liberty, to decide whom we are going to be in this world. Not a single instant does it stop to rest our activity of decision. When exasperated we abandon ourselves to what will come, we have decided not to decide.[19]

Heidegger noted that inauthenticity is a mode of being-in-the-world. Here, Ortega brings the same point home: our thrown-ness is not reason to accept our faith, but a reason to choose our own trajectory, to self-actualize. However, we could also decide to be authentic, decide to be inauthentic, or be indifferent to this decision, "not to decide."

A Philosophical Conception of Chicano Identity?

The question now before me is whether a *philosophical* conception of Chicano identity is possible. As we have seen, both Ramos' existential hermeneutic of the Mexican man and Ortega's circumstantialist dictum that "I am myself plus my circumstances," suggest that any such interpretation of Chicano identity must take into account the circumstances, historical, social, and cultural, without which the Chicano would *not be* an authentic self. The philosophical conception of Chicano identity, however, can only state in very abstract terms that the Chicano is an entity among many, a being who is there amongst its circumstances, and who must create its projects to the benefit of those circumstances. Thus, the philosophical conception of Chicano identity, or German identity, or Cuban identity, is an ongoing

hermeneutic with no definitive parameters. To give a definition of what a Chicano is, consequently, is to violate this ongoing hermeneutic and to essentialize identity.

A philosophical conception of Chicano identity cannot be given. It is clear that the Chicano individual is capable of explicating his or her "life" in terms of the circumstantial nature of this life. We need only to look at those artists and intellectuals struggling with question of identity and culture.[20] But the attempt to give a philosophical conception that captures the unique *being-there* of the Chicano can only suggest that the Chicano, in his search self definition, must take a liberating step away from an essentialist conception of the self toward an existential approach of what it means *to be*.[21] In this sense the Chicano becomes a self amongst other selves, no doubt, but with a certain historical, cultural, geographic, and political experience that *he/she* recognizes and finds complicated. The revered Chicano intellectual, José Antonio Burciaga, points out that these circumstances are, for a variety of reasons, absurd, contradictory, and confusing. However, this absurdity must be overcome; the confusion must be replaced with consciousness of the confusion, that is, an acceptance of the historical peculiarities that have influenced this confusion. This confusion is acceptable as long as the individual recognizes that confusion exists, that reality *is* problematic.[22] As Ortega reminds us,

> The man with a clear head is the man who frees himself from those fantastic 'ideas' and looks life in the face, realizes that everything is problematic, and feels himself lost . . . he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground.[23]

The philosophy of Ortega y Gasset offers a platform from which to begin thinking of Chicano identity, as was the case for the Mexican philosophers of the 1930s. What we discover in the course of our investigation is that if we aim to find an answer to the question "What does it mean to be Chicano?" a philosophical approach will not provide an answer; it leaves open the possibility for a proper hermeneutic and, simultaneously, for the Chicano to define him/herself in lieu of his/her own peculiar existential circumstance. Consequently, I believe, a circumstantial conception of the self should allow for Chicanos to feel empowered over those circumstances that surround them; it is only a matter of taking up arms against our circumstances and approaching them with clarity and honesty that we can find our ontological

footing to properly self-interpret and gain a sense of self and authenticity.

Chicano identity, a construction of historical causes and effects, a by-product of revolutions and European and Anglo intellectualism, colonialism, immigration, marginalization, exploitation, resentment, violence, tradition, language, and a history rooted in Mexico, can be made phenomenologically transparent and found to be a being engaged with a set of circumstances which are either dealt with authentically (dealing with the circumstances head on), inauthentically (not capable of genuinely understanding the circumstances), or indifferently (not caring about them). The validation of Chicano authenticity comes as a result of genuine contemplation and resolute action where the Chicano brings about the concreteness of his lived experience and the place of the "*yo*," the "I," in it, as Ortega proposed. Only to this extent can the question regarding Chicano identity be reflected upon philosophically.

NOTES

[1] Some might question my use of the term "existentialist" to describe these thinkers: Ortega y Gasset himself refused the title of "existentialist," and Ramos' sometimes psychoanalytic approach to the Mexican situation seems to cloud over his existential hermeneutic. However, themes considered "existential" are found everywhere in the writings of these authors. Roughly, if the Martin Heidegger of *Being and Time* is an existentialist, and he was concerned with the *same* existential themes, then Ortega and Ramos are existentialists.

[2] "The New Majority," *San Jose Mercury News*, 18 Dec. 1998.

[3] Mario Barrera et al. "The Barrio as an Internal Colony," *Voices of Wisdom: A Multicultural Philosophy Reader*, ed. Gary E. Kessler (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992) 182.

[4] Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995.) 12.

[5] This can be seen by the different names given to academic departments dedicated to studying this unique phenomenon throughout the Southwest and the West: Chicano Studies, Mexican American Studies, Southwest Hispanic Studies, or, as is the case in one particular institution, Chicano/Hispano/Mexicano studies; the list goes on.

[6] Because some Chicanos consider themselves Mexicans first, and only afterwards, Americans, Mexican influences will be necessarily strong. A unique aspect of the Mexican American experience, as opposed to other minority groups, such as the African-American or Asian-American experience, is our geographical proximity to the "Mother country" (with the obvious exception of Native Americans). This allows for easy integration of Mexican intellectual and cultural ideas into our own intellectual and cultural projects.

[7] José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cosmica* (Mexico DF: Escalpa Calpe Mexicana, S.A., 1948) 25ff.

[8] Jesse A. G. Contreras, *"Existential Phenomenology and Its Influence on Mexican and Chicano Philosophy and Philosophy of Education,"* diss., UC Berkeley, 1994, 208.

[9] Ofelia Shulte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993) 74.

[10] Samuel Ramos, *El Perfil del Hombre y Cultura en Mexico* (Mexico DF: Escalpa Calpe Mexicana, S.A., 1934) 28 [my translation].

[11] Ramos, *El Perfil del Hombre,* 111ff.

[12] Ramos, "Toward a New Humanism," in *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed., Jorge J.E. Gracia (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984) 70.

[13] Ramos, *Historia de la filosofia en Mexico* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1943) 32.

[14] Ramos, "Toward a New Humanism," 77.

[15] José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961) 45.

[16] *Meditations on Quixote,* 41.

[17] Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University,* trans. Willard Trask (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1951) 44.

[18] Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis*, trans. Mildred Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1958.) 22.

[19] Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, trans. Anonymous (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1932.) 77.

[20] For a great example, see José Antonio Burciaga, *Weedee Peepo* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1988).

[21] All I am saying here is that the profound results of an existential self-interpretation include thinking about one's own death, one's indifference in the face of life as "risk," etc.

[22] Burciaga, *Weedee Peepo*, 47.

[23] Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses,*