
New Marxisms in the Making: Thinking *Desencuentros* and *Abigarramientos*

José Aricó (2014). *Marx and Latin America*, trans. David Broder, Leiden: Brill, Lii, 153 p.

Martín Cortés (2015). *Un Nuevo Marxismo para América Latina. José Aricó: traductor, editor, intelectual*, Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Ediciones, 264 p.

René Zavaleta (2018). *Toward a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia*, trans. Anne Free-land, London: Seagull Books, Xxvi, 342 p.

Luis Tapia (2018). *The Production of Local Knowledge: history and politics in the work of René Zavaleta Mercado*, trans. Alison Spedding, London: Seagull Books, 456 p.

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Argentinean José María Aricó (1931-1991) and Bolivian René Zavaleta Mercado (1938-1984) hold a leading place among Latin American radical thinkers; however, they are still limitedly known elsewhere. The recent translations of Aricó's *Marx and Latin America* and Zavaleta's *Toward a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia* into English come to build some bridges in this sense, alongside other recently published scholar works on Aricó (Martín Cortés' *A New Marxism for Latin America*) and Zavaleta (Luis Tapia's *The Production of Local Knowledge*). This review argues that these elaborations provide important perspectives to understand the contemporary global conjuncture.

Desencuentros of Marx(ism) and Latin America

Aricó is a decisive figure of socialist debates in Latin America, not only for his

writings but also for his organization and editorial efforts. Tireless contributor to the diffusion of Marxism across the Spanish-speaking public, an insightful overview of his life and work can be found in Martín Cortés's article in the "Classic Revisited" section of this volume. Arguably, Aricó's paramount contribution to these debates is *Marx and Latin America*. Published in 1980, in Lima, and republished in 1982, in Mexico, with an important epilogue by the author, the English translation is based on FCE's 2009 Mexican edition, thus including Horacio Crespo's introductory study. The book itself comprises eight sections for the main argument and nine appendixes delving into texts and topics related to the Marxist tradition.

The main purpose of this work is to explain Marxism's overlooking of Latin America's reality, as the latter has proved irreducible to the former's universal

historical schemes. For Aricó, the question is “to give account of a reality that is, to a certain extent, ‘unclassifiable’ in the terms in which Marxism has historically been posed qua the predominant ideology within the socialist movement” (p. 3). Therefore, the singularity of the region vis-à-vis capitalism and the theoretical straitjackets of Marxism’s universalistic pretensions are identified as the two terms of a long-lasting *desencuentro*. The Spanish word *desencuentro* cannot be directly translated into English and refers not to the absence of encounter, but rather to a clash of forces or opinions –being thus akin to misunderstandings or disagreements. Importantly, a *desencuentro* relies on the possibility of an encounter.

Aricó analyzes the customary explanation for this *desencuentro*: Marxism’s alleged Eurocentrism. He identifies a bias toward the systematization of the critique of political economy along scientific lines within both Marxism and Marx’s thought itself (pp. 13-15). This –he goes on– has amounted to the deployment of a “philosophy of history”, a universal grammar in which advanced countries indicate the road to the backward ones. Yet Aricó proposes another way of reading Marx, demonstrating that his late writings sustain a more indeterminate, open stance on historical evolution, at a time when closer attention is paid to the relations between development and the so-called backwardness. Aricó concludes that “[u]nderdevelopment plays out a function of the development of the metropolis”, thereupon “a series of elements

fundamental to the elaboration of a ‘phenomenology of underdevelopment’” (p. 19) was firmly established in Marx’s thought.

If Eurocentrism is not the explanatory factor, why then, when looking at Latin America, did not Marx make use of such perspective? What were the “obstacles that prevented Marx from seeing something *that he had to see*”? (pp. 27-8). For what reasons did Latin America remain an “evaded reality” (pp. 1, 27) to him?

These questions are addressed by Aricó from a reading of from Marx’s “Bolívar y Ponte” (Appendix Nine), written in 1858 on demand for the *New American Cyclopaedia*. It is an “anomalous” text (cf. Kraniauskas, 2015), to the extent that it undoes Marx’s own progressions (cf. Anderson, 2010). The article offers an uncharacteristically Western-centered picture of the independence processes, in which Marx qualifies Bolívar as a minor Latin-American Bonaparte in a gesture that relegates the region’s events to a repetition of Europe’s political history. The role of European elements is also overemphasized in the explanation of the campaigns, since “like most of his countrymen, [Bolívar] was averse to prolonged exertion” (Marx, as cited by Aricó p. 105). In short, Marx proposes the image of Latin America as a place of irrational, repetitious events, away from the historical rationale around capital that he helped to grasp.

Aricó's ultimate answer relates Marx's blindness to the twofold presence of Hegel. Firstly, in the silent but identifiable notion of "non-historic peoples" (pp. 58-9) –populations considered unable to make history; hence history is made for them. In second place, Marx famously inverted Hegel's model of determination: whilst in the latter civil society is produced by the state, according to Marx, a strong civil society produces its own state. Aricó argues that Marx's universalization of this criterion "had the contradictory effect of clouding his vision of a process characterized by an *asymmetrical* relation between economics and politics" (p. 61), a process "so noticeable 'from above'" (p. 63) –from the state.

The utmost consequence of this model of determination, Aricó concludes, is that it forestalls the possibilities to think, *from* Marxism, about the specificities of processes whereby neither 'normal' transitions to capitalism nor strong capitalist classes have taken place. By questioning its universal validity in describing any given capitalist society, Aricó finds a way to depart from economic determinism and launches a timely invitation to consider the relative autonomy of the political from a socialist viewpoint.

Abigarramiento, and the virtues of 'local' knowledge

Zavaleta grew up in the midst of Bolivia's 1952 Revolution and its aftermaths. His trajectory is usually described in terms of

three successive moments: (1) an initial adscription to revolutionary nationalism that included his participation in the new government and ended with a fierce criticism of this ideology (a stance reflected in his 1967 book, *The Formation of the National Consciousness*); (2) a brief moment of 'orthodox' Marxism (represented by his 1974 book, *Dual Power*); and, finally, (3) his last period of creative "heterodox" Marxism that culminates with his unfinished work *Toward a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia*, published posthumously in Mexico by Siglo Veintiuno, in 1986.

The forthcoming 2018 publication of Zavaleta's *Toward a History...* and Tapia's *The Production of Local Knowledge* will allow the English public a view of the former's most mature work, accompanied by what is, in my opinion, the most comprehensive scholarly work of his entire oeuvre. Tapia argues that a hallmark of Zavaleta's thought is the pursuit of "local knowledge" –that is, knowledge of what remains historically specific in the midst of the capital's worldwide generalization.

Zavaleta addressed concerns similar to Aricó's. However, while the latter questioned the Marxist theory's ability to come to terms with the region's particularities, Zavaleta departs from the question about the possibilities of "underdeveloped" working classes making creative uses of Marxism. He posits the problem elsewhere, when referring to "the subsumption of scientific socialism [...] into the concrete reality of a socio-economic formation which is capitalist only

hegemonically and sometimes upholds the capitalist mode of production only as an enclave" (2013a: p. 388).¹ In turn, this question demands from the materialist historian a closer look into the actual, historical (rather than theoretical and logical) process, which by far overrides the working class alone.

The concept of *abigarramiento* significantly captures Zavaleta's approach. The adjective *abigarrado* [motley] is defined by the Royal Academy of Spanish Language as the displaying of various colors, particularly when they are oddly matched or not matched at all (2013a, p. 388).² Its nominalization (*abigarramiento*) can be rendered as "disjointedness". To Zavaleta, Bolivia's most salient trait is the non-unification of society or, at least, the dissimilar value of the penetration of capitalist unity in its sectors, *which is what abigarramiento refers to* (...) [i.e. the] disconnection or non-articulation between [productive] factors" (2013b, p. 521, emphasis added).³ Accordingly, *abigarramiento* refers to the uncombined coexistence of different modes of production and worldviews within a country. Like Aricó, Zavaleta understood that the bulk of Marxism was premised by an ideal-type figure of capital totalization

that projects a "normal" trajectory molded by countries of "classical" transitions to capitalism (England, France). Meanwhile, *abigarramiento* emerges from the contrast that non- or ill-totalized societies provoke upon such an image, whereas considering them as capitalist societies all the same.

Zavaleta's Toward a History... was conceived as a project of writing Bolivia's history of *abigarramiento* against the grain of state narratives of unification by analyzing "the formation of the national-popular in Bolivia, that is, the connection between [...] social democratization and state form." (p. 1) Social democratization is a term borrowed from Max Weber and refers to the extent to which the juridical equality among free individuals has been accomplished. Accordingly, it would be more accurate to speak of a "disconnection" between such dimensions, since Zavaleta's account of Bolivia's national-popular movement arises precisely from the mismatch between material and juridical inequality and the state's claims of representative democracy.

In its projected finished form, the book would contain an introduction and four chapters, whereas each chapter would address a particular moment of crisis (also called "constitutive moments"), starting from the War of the Pacific and the loss of territory against Chile, and culminating in the 1952 Revolution and its aftermath, which lasts up to Zavaleta's final days. Unfortunately, this chapter has never been written (unlike the others). And yet, *Toward a History...* is not a historiographic,

1 "la subsunción del socialismo científico [...] de una formación económico-social que es sólo hegemónicamente capitalista y que, a veces, no tiene el modo de producción capitalista sino como un enclave...". My translation henceforth.

2 "De varios colores, especialmente si están mal combinados; Heterogéneo, reunido sin concierto." (RAE, 2017).

3 "la no unificación de la sociedad o, al menos, el diferente valor de la penetración de la unidad [capitalista] en sus sectores, que es a lo que se refiere el abigarramiento [esto es, la] desconexión o no articulación entre los factores [productivos]...".

but a social-science exercise, so each of these constitutive moments is addressed by means of audacious theoretical displacements that shed further light upon the non-articulation between Bolivian *sociedad abigarrada* and “its” state.

Analyzing Bolivia’s crises, Zavaleta also discloses crucial epistemic ruptures. Particularly, Chapter 2 revisits the inter-oligarchic Federal War of 1898-1899, focusing on the instrumentalization and subsequent slaughtering of Indigenous – chiefly Aymara – uprisings. These events, and the fear they have awakened, had as a consequence the adoption of social Darwinism as state ideology; therefore, Zavaleta makes visible that the fear of the “Indian hordes” relies on the foundation of Bolivian modernity (pp. 158, 163-4, 223, 294). *Mutatis mutandis*, “[c]risis can be understood [...] as a moment when things appear not as they are experienced [...], but as they truly are.” (p. 17) The crisis is thus an instance of totalization or synthesis (even if virtual, potential) of non-totalized societies such as Bolivia, insofar as “the moment of crisis, in its results or synthesis, [...] constitutes the only phase of concentration or centralization [in] a formation that otherwise would appear only as an archipelago...” (pp. 17-8) Crucially, this concentration moment is envisaged as a space of encounters for those disjointed modes of production and worldviews that, in “normal” times, compose the archipelago’s isles.

Think local, act global: translating abigarramiento worldwide

Is it possible to translate the concepts of *desencuentro* and *abigarramiento* into contemporary use? In my view, they concretely delineate a much-needed renovation of Marxism’s apparatus, starting from the fact that both are premised on careful attention to the unbalance between universal and particular, “local” claims. The reflections that have shaped these concepts are propitious to productive developments, perhaps today more than at the time of their own elaborations – as they were made still under the hegemony of an identifiable Marxist “orthodoxy”. Moreover, they can be of singular relevance to observe a conjuncture in which global neoliberalization has arguably altered the North/South divide in a decisive yet still uncertain manner. In this context, the traits of *sociedades abigarradas* are increasingly visible at the very core of “advanced” capitalism. In what can be seen as a sign of global *abigarramiento*, the related phenomena of migratory crisis and new struggles for quality-citizenship and social rights are skyrocketing all over the world. In an important sense, *abigarramiento* can be instrumental in terms of intersections without abandoning Marxism.

Zavaleta recognized that *lo abigarrado* posits further difficulties for the ability of subaltern classes to articulate organic forms of solidarity among themselves. In this regard, Martín Cortés (2015) proposes that Aricó’s category of *desencuentro* envisage a renewed modality of theory

making. Insofar as it embraces a potential encounter, a *desencuentro* calls for a form of theorization following the model of translation: translation always presupposes production of a novelty in the encounter with an object of analysis; the opposite is the application of closed concepts that achieve a reality considered as an established unity. (p. 34).⁴ The translational model takes into account the specific forms of reception and assimilation, but also of equivocation, that any cultural or knowledge exchange imposes. In doing so, it prevents mere projections of universal grammars upon disjointed realities, at a time that allows a focus on the very nature of the exchange.

4 "la traducción supone siempre la producción de una novedad en el encuentro con el objeto de análisis, es decir, lo contrario de la aplicación de conceptos ya cerrados que arriban a una realidad considerada una unidad consolidada."

Proposing exchange and mutual determination instead of patronizing the imposition of allegedly universal schemes, the translational dimension brought about through *desencuentros* can be of value for the contemporary crisis of representation that accompanies global *abigarramiento*.

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