

The Pen and the Scepter
Octavio Paz as a Public Intellectual
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March 28,2014

Like many of you, I was a witness to a famous moment in Octavio Paz' career as a public intellectual. The year was 1990, the place Mexico City, the venue a conference organized by Paz, with the active support of then President Salinas and the media conglomerate, Televisa, on the future of freedom at the end of the Cold War. Mario Vargas Llosa, fresh from his recent defeat in the Peruvian Presidential election, arrived at the conference and proceeded, in the course of a debate, to take Paz to task for applauding the collapse of single party regimes in Eastern Europe, while remaining silent about the single party regime that continued to dominate Mexico. Mexico, Vargas Llosa, famously said, was a 'perfect dictatorship'.

Paz indignantly replied, defending the Mexican revolution, and the PRI as the moderate alternative to the Castroite caudillismo of the left and the military authoritarianism of the right.

It was a historic moment: two great Latin American intellectuals, both liberal anti-communists, confronting each other in public. Each represented a different kind of liberal intellectual: Mario, convinced of the necessity of radical economic reform, and if that required an attack on the powers of corrupt, corporatist public sector unions, so be it. Mario also convinced that running for public office was the only effective way to secure political change; Octavio, less convinced that free market reforms would work in Mexico, critical of the sclerotic paralysis of the Mexican revolution in the hands of the PRI, yet unconvinced that there was a genuinely democratic alternative.

This moment made me realize just how complex Paz' position was. I'd always known that being a liberal in Latin America—believing in constitutional checks and balances, rule of law, private property, markets and limited government-- is an especially friendless position.

Socialists, Marxists, sympathizers of Castro will accuse you of being complicit in American imperialism and capitalist inequality. Right-wingers will accuse you of biting the hand that feeds you: not respecting the order that makes freedom possible.

Everywhere it is the same. To be a liberal is to be anti-Communist and anti-socialist, but on the left. That was Paz' position by the 1960's. What I hadn't realized he was also attacked by his fellow liberals, for complicity with a soft-dictatorship, and for failing to say clearly enough that Mexico's corporatist political economy desperately required competition, just as its political system needed democracy. Mexico, under the PRI,

was not, in Popper's words, an open society, but a single party oligarchy. That was the essence of Mario Vargas Llosa's criticism, and it seemed right, at least to me.

'Perfect dictatorship' struck a chord: the phrase endured, and worked its way into people's minds, contributing in a small way to the liberalization of Mexican political attitudes and the transition to multi-party rule that occurred at the end of the 1990's.

So when I was preparing to return to Mexico for this conference, I re-read *Labyrinth of Solitude*, to see, in effect, whether Mario Vargas Llosa had been fair, whether it was true that Paz had been the intellectual accomplice of single party rule in Mexico.

It seems, on the contrary, that Paz' attitude towards the PRI, as the heirs of the Mexican revolution, was more complex.

In the first edition, in 1950, you can find him deploring the political culture of his society,

“this servility towards the strong”, especially servility towards politicians, but he does say, at least in 1950, that compared to other single parties, the PRI is at least an open an avenue for upward mobility, not an instrument of class rule or oppression, as in Eastern Europe.

In 1968, eighteen years later, of course, Paz, then Mexican Ambassador to India resigned in protest against the Mexican regime’s massacre of three hundred students during the Olympic Games. In lectures and writings after that incident, his portrait of the PRI is unsparing:

“The party has not produced a single idea, not a single program, in its forty years of existence. . . . In its ways of functioning and its immoderate use of revolutionary jargon, the party could be thought to resemble the Communist Parties of Eastern Europe. . . .”

If the PRI has spared Mexico military dictatorship, Peronism and Pinochet, its effect on the political culture has been stultifying:

“In Mexico, there is a horror—It would not be too much to call it a sacred horror—of anything like intellectual criticism or dissidence.”

It's simply wrong, therefore to think of Paz as the house intellectual of a corrupt single party regime. He was outspoken in his criticism of its brutality, but also of its deadening impact on freedom of thought in Mexico. Fossilized and stagnant heirs of a revolution suffocate the space societies require for free inquiry and free expression.

So what kind of intellectual was Paz? He was not a 'party intellectual', an 'organic intellectual' not a house intellectual for the PRI.

Pablo Neruda was the anti-model. He revered the Chilean as a poet, but distanced himself sharply from any model of intellectual engagement in politics as 'conversion'. His remarks about Neruda are revealing:

Neruda was a poet, a great poet. He joined the Communist Party, but for generous, semi-religious reasons. It was a real conversion. So his political militance was not that of an intellectual but of a believer. Within the party, he seems to have been a political pragmatist, but, again, he was more like one of the faithful than a critical intellectual. As for me, well, I've never been a member of any political party, and I've never run for public office.

This in turn differentiated him from Vargas Llosa. As Paz said in the same interview:

I have been a political and social critic, but always from the marginal position of an independent writer. I'm not a joiner, although of course I've had and have my personal preferences. I'm different from Mario Vargas Llosa, who did decide to intervene directly in his country's politics.

Yet Paz could never be a private writer. He was a 'public intellectual', in the tradition of

his family. His father and grandfather had been active in Mexican revolutionary politics, and his poetry evoked the constant presence of political argument in his childhood:

*My grandfather, taking his coffee,
would talk to me about Juarez and Porfirio,
the Zouaves and the Silver Band.
And the tablecloth smelled of gunpowder.*

*My father, taking his drink,
would talk to me about Zapata and Villa,
Soto y Gama and the brothers Flores Magn.
And the tablecloth smelled of gunpowder.*

*I kept quiet:
who was there for me to talk about?*

Measuring up to that inheritance took a life. In the end, he found that he could speak in his own voice.

His other function, as a public intellectual, was to interpret Mexico to itself but from the outside. The idea for the *Labyrinth of Solitude* came from being in Los Angeles, and watching Mexican Americans in Los Angeles,

seeing in their exile and alienation, an image of himself and of the Mexican character. Labyrinth established his authority as an intellectual: it wove myth, history, poetry, art and politics into a portrait of a country that has still not been equaled. But its signal feature was to interpret from the outside in: to bring Freud, Levi Strauss, Nietzsche, to the interpretation of Mexican national character, to see how his country looked when you saw it from New York, Los Angeles, Paris, New Delhi or Madrid.

He was the most cosmopolitan of intellectuals, at home in many cultures, but his glance was always backward, towards home, towards Mexico. In this sense, he was like Czeslaw Milosz, the most universal and cosmopolitan of poets, yet even in happy exile in Berkeley, always turned backwards to his native language and to his home.

In an interview in 1992, Paz recalled being a lonely teenager in Los Angeles and fighting with Americans in the schoolyard over his

English pronunciation, only to discover, when he returned to Mexico City, that he got into a fight with Mexican kids, because now they taunted him as a foreigner.

“I discovered,” he said, “ I could be a foreigner in both countries.’ For Paz, this was a decisive moment. Instead of being alienated in Mexico, and nostalgic for it abroad, he understood his role as an intellectual to interpret Mexico to the world, and the world to Mexico.

Expatriation was a liberation for Paz. As he said of one trip to the States:

I was reborn, and the man who came back to Mexico at the end of 1952 was a different poet, a different writer. If I had stayed in Mexico, I probably would have drowned in journalism, bureaucracy, or alcohol.

Travel allowed him to see just how provincial the Mexico of the 1940s and 50's actually was. As he wrote in *Labyrinth*, in 1950,

“We have done very little thinking on our own account, most of our ideas are borrowed from the United States or Europe.”

He set about changing that, giving Mexicans an entirely original account of its political culture. What gave him the right at 40 to say all these things? He is a fascinating example of the ways intellectuals create their own authority: by the quality of their scholarship, the depth of their insight, their willingness to be daring and to be responsible at the same time.

He was a master translator between cultures, but he was also a shrewd psychologist, understanding that Mexico was a screen on which others, especially Americans, projected fantasies that had precious little to do with reality:

"In general, Americans have not looked for Mexico in Mexico; they have looked for their obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, hopes, interests -- and these are what they have found. In short, the history of our relationship is the history of a mutual and stubborn deceit..."

Translator between cultures, interpreter of Mexico to Mexicans and Mexico to the world, an independent man of letters, never an organic or party intellectual, a man who avoided so many pitfalls that lay before the intellectual: the temptation to be an expert, a clown, an entertainer, an apologist, a spokesman. He avoided these temptations, conserved his intellectual authority shrewdly, served his country with truth and without flattery, all in all, Octavio Paz showed what it is to be a liberal intellectual in our times: 'sceptical, ironical dispassionate and free.'

