

Hispano-skepticism, Classical Liberalism, and Popular Historiography

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On *Guia Politicamente Incorreto da América Latina*. Leandro Narloch and Duda Teixeira. São Paulo: Leya, 2011.

In a brief, scathing review published on August 30, 2011 in the *Folha de São Paulo*, Sylvia Colombo wrote that Leandro Narloch and Duda Teixeira's recent *Guia Politicamente Incorreto da América Latina*, "coloca agora mais um tijolinho no muro de ignorância e soberbia que separa o Brasil do resto do continente," before summarily judging the book "horrible" (*ruim*). Colombo's dismissal of the *Guia*, though uncharitable, is comprehensible. Narloch and Teixeira's book follows Narloch's *Guia Politicamente Incorreto da História do Brasil* (2009), an exercise in deliberately provocative revisionist history that, though a popular success, angered academic historians and political leftists with its heretical interpretations of the national past—in which, for example, Brazil's indigenous communities benefited from colonization through exposure to the edifying force of global trade. With the second *Guia*, Narloch and Teixeira, self-described "diretistas liberais," have expanded the polemic to the scorched terrain of Latin American identity politics, presenting a series of critical character studies meant to demystify leftist heroes like Simón Bolívar (as interpreted by Hugo Chávez), Che Guevara, Salvador Allende, and the Peróns. In their introduction they argue parodically that the only thing Latin Americans have in common is a tendency toward the excesses of leftist historiography, which they enumerate as a series of rules "para se preparar um bom latino-americano" (18). The list advises would-be Latin American historians

to, among other things, complain, invariably interpret local culture as a form of resistance, and most importantly, admire the worst heroes possible. If this list and Colombo's review are indicative, Narloch and Teixeira can expect a noisy, if not uniformly positive reception for their book.

It is tempting to dismiss Narloch and Teixeira's *Guia* as a lightweight, deliberately sensationalistic attempt to profit from Latin American history's more obvious contradictions and most salacious episodes, which the authors serve up to Brazilian readers eager for accessible, entertaining history, but suspicious of the conventions, jargon, and politics associated with academic publishing. Narloch plays on these suspicions in the introduction to his first *Guia*, in which he castigates academic historians for distorting the past, and implies that if one digs beneath the surface, the historical truths the experts "don't want you to know" will reveal themselves:

Existe um esquema tão repetido para contar a história de alguns países que basta misturar chavões, mudar datas, nomes de nações colonizadas, potências opressoras, e pronto. [...] Os ricos só ganham o papel de vilões— se fazem alguma bondade, é porque foram movidos por interesses. Já os pobres são eternamente “do bem”, vítimas da elite e das grandes potências, e só fazem besteira porque são obrigados a isso. (22-23).

It is ideology, for Narloch, that leads older generations of unreconstructed Marxist historians (a spectral category whose membership remains ambiguous) to populate their narratives with evil rulers, iron-fisted oppressors and social structures rigged to favor certain groups. It falls to civic-minded popular historians to tell “the other side of the story,” to illustrate cases in which authority was deserved, groups interacted equitably, and meritocratic social advancement worked to undermine what an American conservative might term the “culture of victimhood.” The sweeping task Narloch sets out for himself is undermined by his (and in the second *Guia*, Narloch and Teixeira's) reliance on satirical humor, which makes it difficult to discern just how seriously the authors view their subject. Indeed, Narloch occasionally turns his satirical gaze on himself, as when he described his motivation for writing the second *Guia* in an interview

published in the same newspaper edition as Colombo's review: "O livro foi desenhado para ser um best-seller. Se fosse para não ganhar dinheiro com ele, eu ficaria em casa jogando videogame" (Messias and Almeida).

What, ultimately, should we make of Narloch and Teixeira's book, which lies somewhere between serious historical survey (complete with endnotes and bibliography) and popular entertainment, and which oscillates between provocative critique of leftist historiography and juicy asides about sex, drugs, and scandal? Despite its contradictions, I do not believe Narloch and Teixeira's book unworthy of serious analysis—quite the opposite. As a book that is likely to be widely read, academics should closely scrutinize it, and from a variety of angles. Leaving it to historians of Latin America to judge the quality of the authors' historiography, I will attempt to contextualize Narloch and Teixeira's *Guia* in relation to two intellectual currents in which I believe the book participates, so as to see past its more jarring elements and appreciate something of its inner logic. These are first, what we might term the "hispano-skeptical" tendency of many Brazilian national *intérpretes* and second, the classical liberal view of human nature, as articulated by thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and later, Jacob Burckhardt. Taken together, these help us explain two of the more intriguing questions occasioned by the *Guia*: why do the authors begin a survey of Latin American history by casting doubt on the conceptual validity of "Latin America," and why do they fault Latin American leaders for advancing reforms premised on the notion of human perfectibility?

In the provocatively titled introduction to their *Guia*, "Como Deixar de Ser Latino-Americano," Narloch and Teixeira make clear their view that Latin America is, in their words, "uma ideia tão vazia quanto abrangente" (17), and by implication, that it is a waste of time for Brazil to identify as "Latin American." The authors assert that the term "Latin America," "[r]eúne sujeitos e povos dos mais diversos: o que há em comum entre ribeirinhos amazônicos, vaqueiros gaúchos, executivos da Cidade do México, índios das ilhas flutuantes do lago Titicaca e haitianos praticantes de vodu? Eles falam línguas derivadas do latim, mas... e daí?" (17-18) Subsequent chapters depict Latin America as an exotically amusing dystopia—fun to laugh at from afar, but not the sort of place with which any serious person (or country) would want to associate. It is

in these descriptions, heavy on tango, tacos, and cheap shots at the quality of Argentine football and Mexican music, that the authors' penchant for mean-spirited humor misfires most egregiously, denouncing a degree of intellectual provincialism Colombo rightly criticizes.

But let us return to Narloch and Teixeira's argument against the idea of "Latin America," which consists of their observation of what Mário de Andrade decades earlier termed the "incontrastável afastamento" of Latin America's component peoples. It is striking how similar the authors' position is to one staked out more than eighty years previously by Manoel Bomfim, in his *O Brasil na América* (1929):

Nós outros—argentinos, peruanos, brasileiros, chilenos... que somos dos chamados *latino-americanos*, nunca pensamos em *América Latina*. Para os nossos conceitos de realidades, no simples positivo das relações comuns, ou como convergência de qualquer ação imediata, tal unidade não existe. Consideramos, apenas, cada um dos povos com que os dissertadores formaram o latinismo da América. O mesmo acontece a qualquer estrangeiro que aqui tenha feito vida conosco: falará de—Venezuela, Paraguai, México, Nicarágua... mas nunca sentirá a necessidade de concentrar o espírito nesse conceito—*América Latina*. Em compensação, todos que não nos conhecem, se fazedores de teorias, com língua em coisas sociais, históricas, ou políticas, não falham no repetir de enfáticos e pueris preconceitos acerca da irreal unidade—*América Latina* (31; author's emphasis).

The resemblance of Narloch and Teixeira's argument to Bomfim is likely not coincidental. Brazilian intellectual history is full of such declarations, which question the valence of "Latin America" as a concept, and as a viable identity for Brazil in particular. The long-standing "hispano-skepticism" of certain elements of the Brazilian intelligentsia runs from late nineteenth century monarchists like Joaquim Nabuco, Eduardo Prado and Euclides da Cunha, through later critics like Bomfim and Andrade, and was observed as recently as 2007 in an address, titled "Brazil: A Latin American Nation?" given by Fernando Henrique Cardoso at Brown University. Narloch and Teixeira are among the latest

Brazilian commentators to evince a significant degree of “hispano-skepticism,”¹ and in doing so, implicitly champion the cause of Brazilian national exceptionalism. While the authors pay lip service to Brazil’s inclusion in a conceptually fragile “Latin America” (“Bolivianos, mexicanos, brasileiros e todos os demais, quando vislumbram o próprio passado, contam exatamente a mesma história” [18]), I find it more significant that they have effectively cordoned off Brazilian history from that of Brazil’s neighbors by first publishing a “guide” to Brazil, then devoting a subsequent volume entirely to Spanish-speaking countries, as if to imply that “Latin America” and “Spanish America” are equivalent terms, and that even if Brazil is *said* to be part of Latin America, it is somehow less “Latin American” than its neighbors. This “hispano-skeptical” tendency is best understood, in my view, as a strategy by which Brazilian commentators have defined their nation in opposition to Spanish-speaking Latin America, rather than as a compelling argument against the conceptual validity of Latin America—which it is not. As numerous scholars remind us, “Latin America” is an invented term, a designation whose actual value is tied not to any sort of inherent or essential meaning, but much like paper money, depends on our common, unstated acceptance that it actually means something. As such, “Latin America” is something of a terminological paper tiger, though one that has nonetheless drawn a good amount of fire from commentators, Brazilian and non-Brazilian alike.

Moving away from the question of “hispano-skepticism,” both *guias* devote significant attention to refuting the idea, which Narloch and Teixeira consider erroneous though widely accepted among credulous leftists, that non-European groups in the Americas are, as victims of oppression, morally superior to their Portuguese or Spanish aggressors. The *guias* dredge up numerous examples of indigenous-on-indigenous violence (Narloch and Teixeira are, rather unoriginally, fixated on Aztec human sacrifice) in advancing a claim that Amerindians and Afro-Latins have shown themselves perfectly willing to exploit, enslave, or kill each other if given sufficient opportunity and motivation. In an example that recalls an episode from Machado de Assis’s *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), in which the ex-slave Prudêncio purchases and abuses his own slave, Narloch in the first *Guia* tells the tale of Zé Alfaiate, a Brazilian slave-turned-slave trader. Though where Machado explains Prudêncio’s behavior as compensatory

retribution, Narloch interprets Zé Alfaiate as entering the slave trade for profit: “O mais provável [...] é que visse no comércio de gente uma chance comum e aceitável de ganhar dinheiro, como costurar ou exportar azeite” (70).

Underlying these descriptions there appears a dreary, though equitable view of human nature, one championed by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Burckhardt—and incidentally, quite similar to Machado’s view as articulated in *Brás Cubas*. Early in the second *Guia* Narloch and Teixeira write: “Conhecemos bem as tragédias que nossos antepassados índios e negros sofreram, mas, honestamente, estamos cansados de falar sobre elas. E acreditamos que todos os povos passaram por desgraças semelhantes” (19-20). If we jettison the authors’ not atypical insensitivity, we can distill from their statement this idea: all people, if given the opportunity, will abuse others, because we are all marked by what Alexander Hamilton termed “the ordinary depravity of human nature.” As Hobbes helpfully explained in his *Leviathan* (1651), our imperfect nature predisposes us to crimes resulting from our “hate, lust, ambition, and covetousness.” Seen in this light, our prospects for moral improvement must be questioned. Indeed, Burckhardt argued in his posthumous *Reflections on Universal History* (1905): “Morality as a power [...] stands no higher, nor is there more of it, than in so-called barbarous times” (149).

This view of human nature led social contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke, and later the writers of the Federalist Papers (including Hamilton), to view government’s basic task as, in Locke’s words, to “restrain the partiality and violence of Men,” and led Adam Smith to call in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) for channeling individual self-interest toward productive trade, a view that would make Zé Alfaiate a model economic actor. From this standpoint, social reforms premised on a sunnier or more flexible view of human nature (in which our generous and non-acquisitive tendencies are revealed, à la Rousseau, once we are freed from oppression), are necessarily unrealistic. Hence the common critique that communism is premised on utopian fantasy rather than the “reality” of a human nature that is constitutionally unable to adapt itself to solidarity over self-interest.

This view of human nature is also the basis for Narloch and Teixeira’s critique of Che Guevara, which builds from charges that the Cuban revolutionary

leadership has violated citizens' rights and that Che exercised incompetent stewardship over the Cuban economy to a more general argument on the misguided optimism that apparently underlay Che's project to fashion a "new socialist man":

"Para construir o comunismo, tem de se fazer o homem novo", escreveu Che. A expressão, que ele repetia diversas vezes em discursos e escritos, tem uma longa história. Vem da crença dos filósofos iluministas de que a natureza humana é maleável, que o homem é uma tabula rasa em que se pode gravar diferentes comportamentos, dependendo da educação, do espírito revolucionário ou da influência da sociedade. O homem altruísta e bondoso, que deveria deixar de lado interesses individuais e colocar-se à disposição do governo, era um princípio que norteava ideias não só de Che, mas de todos os comunistas. Na prática, essa busca resultou na perseguição de todos aqueles que pareciam não se encaixar na moldura do tal homem novo (42).

In other words, Che, unable to mold the Cuban people into an assemblage of what Narloch and Teixeira derisively term "soldadinhos de chumbo" (42), chose instead to turn on those who most diverged from his vision of the "new man," such as bohemians, homosexuals, and political dissidents. Che's decision to establish Cuba's first "labor camp" at Guanahacabibes for the purpose of reeducating dissenters implicates him in what Jorge G. Castañeda, in *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (1997), terms "one of the most heinous precedents of the Cuban Revolution" (178) .

Whether or not we believe Narloch and Teixeira's implication that it was Che's Rousseauian rather than Hobbesian view of human nature—along with a personality they paint as near-sociopathic—that drove him to develop his vision of the "new communist man" and found Guanahacabibes, I agree with the authors that it would nonetheless benefit Che's sympathizers to consider the dark side of their hero. Similarly, it would benefit those partial to Bolívar, Eva Perón, Villa, or Hugo Chávez—or any prominent political figure, for that matter—to read both favorable and unfavorable accounts of their object of admiration. Indeed, one of the helpful features of satire is to bring the powerful "down a peg," to illustrate the flaws, vulnerabilities, and contradictions that make their

behavior or arguments fallible. In this regard Narloch and Teixeira's book makes a useful contribution—and certainly interesting reading—though this reader was left, along with questions about the book's scholarly quality, with the suspicion that the authors in the main chose easy targets and took cheap shots in the quest for the almighty dollar, or in this case, the almighty *real*.

Note

¹ I describe in much greater detail the “hispano-skepticism” that runs through a good portion of Brazilian national exegesis in my book, *Nossa and Nuestra América: Inter-American Dialogues* (Purdue UP, 2012).

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