

## VALUING MEXICAN PHILOSOPHY: SUSPECT ENDEAVOR OR LIFE-AFFIRMING PATH?

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay begins by juxtaposing Mexican philosophy with world philosophies and philosophy writ large, offers an assessment of salient moments in the history of Mexican philosophy (including indigenous contributions, Sor Juana, anti-positivist thinkers, and innovative philosophical concepts/terms) and suggests their applicability to North American life. The essay concludes by highlighting a few areas that could benefit from ongoing philosophical reflection by Mexicans in an increasingly challenging human rights context.

**Keywords:** Mexican philosophy, Sor Juana, Óscar Guardiola-Rivera, Leopoldo Zea, Octavio Paz, anti-positivism, indigenous, sustainability, center, margin, nobodiness, femicide, border

**RESUMEN:** En este ensayo se ubica la filosofía mexicana en el contexto de la filosofía mundial y la filosofía sin más. Luego plantea un análisis de varios hitos de la filosofía mexicana (los aportes indígenas, Sor Juana, los pensadores antipositivistas y algunos conceptos y términos novedosos) y su aplicabilidad para la vida norteamericana. Se acaba por resaltar algunos temas que exigen la sostenida meditación filosófica por pensadores mexicanos debido al contexto actual que desafía tanto los derechos humanos.

**Palabras clave:** Filosofía mexicana, Sor Juana, Óscar Guardiola-Rivera, Leopoldo Zea, Octavio Paz, antipositivismo, indígena, sostenibilidad, centro, margen, ninguneo, femicidio, frontera

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The term “Mexican philosophy” has been scrutinized for decades from a variety of vantage points, some less sympathetic than others. Some potential readers are reluctant to engage with what they believe are nationalistic philosophies, occasionally rightly assuming that linking nationality to philosophy can be a form of partisanship. A larger framework here is what can be termed a clash between anthropology and philosophy. In that phrasing, anthropology is suspect as being too rooted in specific history. Often, on the other hand, philosophy is presented as a kind of thinking that claims to have escaped the situations of history. Certainly, some famed philosophers have not felt a need to think much about such situations and seem to feel that philosophy can be rendered independent of what history has wrought, without any need to keep up with either current events or revisions of mainstream historical interpretations.

Another intellectual “peril” many commentators have focused on when considering arguments favoring intellectual developments like “Mexican philosophy” is an idea that such philosophical inquiry is, at heart, a kind of politics. Of course, political philosophers are one group, among others, who might not resist this description. For instance, just as many philosophers in Europe responded directly or indirectly to the World Wars, philosophers in Mexico were once acutely aware of the collapse of the Spanish empire in 1898. One result of Spain’s withdrawal was that Mexicans and other Latin Americans essentially were confronted with the responsibility of having to take a stance toward the United States, and it usually was clear that most would not sympathize with a country that would become infamous for dollar diplomacy, big stick diplomacy, and its not very “good neighbor policy.” In addition to the Spanish-American War, memories also have lingered in Mexico of earlier imperialist episodes such as the Mexican-American War, the annexation of Texas, and the loss of a vast amount of Mexican territory, famously including California. There was considerable, deep worry in Mexico and throughout Latin America about the ambitions of the Colossus of the North, yet there was no small amount of fascination with the United States. Such a historical backdrop would give philosophers in Mexico ample opportunity to consider their place in the world and the nature of the philosophy they produced.

My take on Mexican philosophy does not mean a choosing of anthropology over philosophical speculation or discovery. Instead, looking at the ideas presented by many Mexican philosophers, it is clear much of the time that they are wrestling with what Western philosophy has termed fundamental questions, fruitful meditations, or traditionally respected philosophical topics. In other words, even when some Mexican thinkers claim to be opposed to the domination of Western thought, they usually demonstrate respect for certain

thinkers, methods, perspectives, logics, images, arguments, and theses that can be found in much mainstream Western thought and also in famous counterpoints to Western thought, even though still generally expressed within Western culture. That such Mexicans have claimed the very term, “philosopher,” also makes this point.

Historical oppression has often pulled philosophers into political discourse, when less political stances and forms of philosophy were pushed aside and their exploration postponed. National and cultural liberation efforts can be topically or intellectually narrowing even as they are urgent and required. While the danger of partisanship or anthropologically-linked philosophy exists, a national adjective can precede some practices of “philosophy” without falling victim to either.

“Mexican philosophy,” then, can refer to philosophy done by Mexicans, philosophy which deals with issues that Mexicans experience, both, and more. There has been exhaustive and sometimes exhausting debate over whether “Mexican philosophy” refers to philosophy conceived by Mexicans, philosophy that possesses a particular Mexican character, both, or some other criterion, such as a methodological approach. In this essay, I will not revisit that robust debate. Instead, I will place Mexican philosophy above the fray and treat it, in effect, as any other philosophy—situated and contextual.

For example, the category “French feminist philosophers” usually engenders a list of names that would be similar for many serious about modern thought. While a list that comes to mind for one person might be longer than one that another person comes up with, there would still likely be overlap of certain names. That these feminist philosophers are French is less important than that they have produced a significant, well-known body of work, yet their Frenchness is not irrelevant to the philosophy they produce. Crucially, translations of their work into other languages have enabled many in philosophy and allied fields to become familiar with French feminist thinkers. On the other hand, “German philosophers,” perhaps now a less commonly used phrase, would probably not generate the same list of names for everyone. One person might think of Kant, another of Heidegger, the next person of still others, but the German context and linguistic practices of most of these philosophers would not be altogether immaterial. Overall, the historic dominance of German, French, and Greek philosophies, together with their translations into many other languages, means that they are more often referred to simply as “philosophy,” with no adjective needed. Many world philosophies, however, still benefit from an adjective to locate them because they remain comparatively unknown. What most of the lesser-known world philosophies need is for more of their works to be translated into other languages and for philosophers to

become more interested in exploring ideas from outside the traditional Western mainstream. To expand this point, in this essay I will outline the value of pre-Columbian philosophy in Mexico, showcase a few exemplary cases from the post-Conquest, and respectfully suggest some topics for Mexican philosophers going forward.

What is often called “Mexican philosophy” today has for most of its students centuries-old roots in the thought of indigenous precursors. When a foot soldier of Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* recounts the dramatic moment in 1521 when he first laid eyes on the busy, developed civilization he observed beneath him in the valley of Mexico, we are now aware that philosophy was being done in that valley by some of its people. However, for many years in modernity, much of what we thought we knew about indigenous cultures was incorrect. Many traditionally-trained Latin American area specialists were taught that when it comes to studying the indigenous past of the region, too much crucial information has been lost, sadly, whether through destruction by the Spanish, mysterious extinctions, archeological pillaging, or other means. Therefore, many have been discouraged from serious hope that we would be able to learn anything truly specific and significant about indigenous thinking in Latin America. Recent scholarship significantly challenges this traditional understanding, even as it also cannot recover all that was indeed senselessly destroyed.

To be more precise, there are “new topics” that can be shown to have arisen in Latin American thought and that help make this expansive potential clear.

According to Óscar Guardiola-Rivera, in *What if Latin America Ruled the World? How the South Will Lead the North into the 21st Century*, the relationship between humans and nature was a problem that the indigenous had fruitfully wrestled with long before the *conquistadores* set foot in the New World. As an analogue, we now acknowledge that the indigenous could not be accused of being inexpert at engineering. The purpose of indigenous community projects “was not the glorification of the past, but, rather, the modification of the world for the purposes of creating a future” (Guardiola-Rivera 2013, 29). Guardiola-Rivera highlights the deep spiritual link that existed for the indigenous between nature and the human being (81). For pre-Hispanic civilizations there is an exchange between the two: the human being must offer sacrifices to nature in exchange for nature allowing human beings to take what they need from the natural world. The involved ritual the Aztecs would undertake before they felt they could cut down a tree should make us reconsider what we have usually been taught about the Aztecs. There clearly existed among indigenous cultures a sense of responsibility for the environment that was superseded and shriveled after the arrival of the Spanish.

Guardiola-Rivera repositions Latin America's indigenous peoples in relation to the world they inhabit. As common perception has it, Amerindians are ontologically stuck in a space without time: Nature is a God-like force and must be pleased by way of sacrifices: "these people" failed to hop onto Hegel's train of history. Not so, says Guardiola-Rivera, who argues that this equilibrium of human being and surrounding world has been misunderstood. Nature is not viewed here as a normative force in and of itself, but rather understood "as a common space for the interaction of natural and essentially social forces, framed by changing laws and contingency" (29). Because of this fundamental contingency—and Guardiola-Rivera means it, for he states "there is nothing that exists as a matter of necessity"—human beings have an obligation to behave in a different way than we are accustomed to. Instead, we often assume that we can continue to live in the same ways we have been living. Just as the Amerindians modified vast areas of land to suit a model designed to ensure long-term sustainability of resources, today we must "responsibly create and recreate future environments for the use of all, rather than exhausting them now" (29).

From Guardiola-Rivera's perspective, the oppression of slavery, together with the need to return to community consciousness of collective well being for the future in place of self-destructive gratifications, constituted the backbone of the movements for independence and liberation in Latin America. He writes, "the Indian Wars were an outburst against the destruction of their future environments in the name of short-term gains, which would, ultimately, be disastrous for all.... these rebellions were supported by the desire to create a different future, in which the entire population participated, including women and children" (185). Guardiola-Rivera effectively shows how the knowledge systems of Amerindian civilizations can teach us about sustainable living that is considerate of the community at large, and presupposes the necessity of commons (water, air, certain spaces, etc.) to be available to all.

A somewhat different additional philosophical expansion is James Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* as it provides an in-depth analysis of an original metaphysics developed in Nahua culture, which flourished in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries leading up to 1521. Maffie helpfully unpacks many of the terms required to engage with this metaphysics involving a dynamic reciprocity between humans and the earth, *teotl* and *nepantla* chief among them. The central Nahua problematic involved the question, "How can humans walk in balance and so flourish upon the earth?" (Maffie, 2013, 12) Together with Guardiola-Rivera's analysis, we can appreciate the relevance and timeliness of this question today.

The works of both authors can lead to the notion that a solution to our problems, at least in part, may lie in considering the worldview of groups which

have often been called “uncivilized” or “marginal.” Thinking about the past from the perspective of the vanquished can illuminate present-day problems. For instance, one key historical moment in Latin America, according to Guardiola-Rivera, was the conversion of marginalized populations into beasts of burden, into objects that were “even below slavery,” which resulted in economic and political inequality between colonized and colonizing nations under the guise of progress (177). In the end, the author suggests that the *conquistadores* were the barbarians and savages who disembarked on a continent where progress had not arrived in the form of factories and gunpowder, but instead had arguably been achieved as a sustainable equilibrium between human beings and nature. The “New” World was not so unaccomplished or underdeveloped after all. For those accustomed to reading official histories of Latin America, unexpectedly these authors stress the capacity for agency that marginal groups possessed. This capacity, and other vestiges of pre-Conquest philosophies, can still be seen and are perhaps getting increased, deserved attention.

Post-conquest, in a very important sense, “the view from the margin” remains often insightful and can deepen philosophical appreciations. Because philosophy from the margin has, for many of its practitioners, more reason both to criticize itself and to try to understand all that not being in the center may mean, it can offer perspective not found in philosophies of the center, which have not felt pressured to question their existence or their capacity to produce worthwhile ideas. To expand on Alfonso Reyes’s metaphor, although Mexicans were not invited to the banquet table of Western civilization, they have much to offer. Now that Mexican thinkers have pulled up a chair anyway and claimed a space from which to participate, others would do well to sample what they have to contribute. In recent decades, many key works have been translated into English, making now a good time to explore Mexican ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Mexican philosophy after the Conquest arguably offers insights that can be very useful to people in the United States and elsewhere. Distinguishing among the works of philosophy that have proliferated in Mexico, usually written by Mexicans, but also by others who have made Mexico their home, cannot be the task of a brief essay, but I would like to highlight a few moments in Mexican philosophy that I think may be especially fruitful for readers in the United States.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century poet, philosopher, and nun, is an unexpected gem of history, some of whose engaging works fortunately were

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<sup>1</sup> See Zea (1992), Sánchez (2012, 2021), Sánchez and Sanchez (2017), Sánchez and Gallegos (2021), Díaz and Foust (2021).

saved.<sup>2</sup> In “Reply to Sor Philotea,” a philosophical, autobiographical essay written four months before her death in 1695, she compellingly questioned authority (male, religious, and hierarchical) before many in Mexico realized it was possible to think so resistantly. Thoroughly scrutinizing the treatment of women, most of all herself, especially in regard to their right to education, Juana artfully weaponized irony to challenge the powers that be in the colonial Mexico City of her day without them easily being able to accuse her of having communicated explicitly the serious criticisms she carefully lodged between the lines of her essay. Upon sending her epistle, she knowingly assumed the risk of further discipline or even death, though unexpectedly she died of natural causes soon thereafter when a plague swept through her convent.<sup>3</sup>

Fast-forwarding several centuries later, early and mid-twentieth century Mexico offered a unique environment for philosophy. A strong and fruitful reaction against varieties of positivism began before the Mexican Revolution and continued in force afterwards (see Stehn 2013). Members of the *Ateneo de la Juventud*, most notably Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos, engaged in an intellectual movement that devalued positivism and revalued the humanities, especially metaphysics, classics, and the writings of select European philosophers. Members of *El Grupo Hiperión*, notably Leopoldo Zea, further developed anti-positivist analyses in the 1940s and 1950s.

The anti-positivist philosophical backlash in Mexico has continuing relevance for more than Mexicans. Just as Leopoldo Zea demonstrated how there were interests at work behind the scientific, positivist agenda of the *porfiriato*, and that certain classes benefited while others lost out, we can apply his insights to our experiences today of “data-driven analyses,” “algorithms,” “metrics,” and “best practices,” which may conceal dubious interests that promote these purportedly scientific standards. Similar vestiges of positivistic thinking can be seen in terms like “zero sum game,” “quid pro quo,” “exchange relations,” “quotas,” “objectivity,” “universality,” “value-neutral” claims, and in policies that mandate minima and maxima. In universities, abolishing philosophy departments and other humanities departments has sometimes been explained away in part through positivistic approaches to calculating certain kinds of “outcomes.” Having to defend the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts to protect them from defunding or cancelation has been presented as requiring advocates to demonstrate their utility, which has in fact been done both qualitatively and

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<sup>2</sup> A 4-volume set of her works was published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1951. See also Octavio Paz’s biography of Sor Juana (1988).

<sup>3</sup> See the selected works of Sor Juana (2016). See also my essay on irony in “Reply to Sor Philotea” (1988).

quantitatively, but not as easily as the National Institutes of Health is able to justify its existence. Whenever the measurable is put forth as the best or only way to make judgments, philosophers need to challenge. Mexican anti-positivist philosophers offer many models of how to do so.

In addition to the enduring inspiration of Juana Inés de la Cruz and the widespread applicability of anti-positivist perspectives, a Spaniard indirectly contributed to creative philosophical language in Mexico. José Ortega y Gasset, an innovative wordsmith, often developed inventive concepts such as *ensimismamiento* (in-oneself-ness—with a uniquely positive connotation) and *lugarcomunismo* (commonplace-ism). This intellectual tradition encouraged José Gaos, Ortega's student, and other philosophers who came to Mexico after the fall of Republican Spain to call themselves *transterrados* (which signified that they were content to view themselves as transplanted rather than exiled).

In the early 1950s, continuing attention to language contributed to Leopoldo Zea frequently using the term *toma de conciencia* (consciousness-raising), which independently would later become a critical term for the U.S. feminist movement in the 1970s (see MacKinnon 1989). Octavio Paz explored the dehumanizing concept of “nobodiness” in the late 1940s: “I remember the afternoon I heard a noise in the room next to mine, and asked loudly: ‘Who is in there?’ I was answered by the voice of a servant who had recently come to us from her village: ‘No one, señor. I am’” (Paz 1985, 44). Paz goes on to describe how this process works: “Our dissimulation here is a great deal more radical: we change him from somebody into nobody, into nothingness” (45). Coincidentally, in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. describes a similar phenomenon: “when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness.’”

Leopoldo Zea used the term *latinoamericanismo* to encourage philosophical reflection about the region, and he demonstrated how Mexican philosophy could be considered *filosofía sin más* (a concise phrase to indicate a philosophy without apology, qualification, adjectives attached, or external judgment—simply philosophy). Horacio Cerutti Guldberg writes of *nuestraamericanismo* (named for the spirit embodied in José Martí's famous essay, “Our America”), a call to think from within and address the problems of Latin America in concrete, situated, embodied, conscious, and present ways. *Latinoamericanismo*, *nuestraamericanismo*, and, more specifically, *mexicanidad* help explain how cultural and personal identities can be constructed.

Creative language employed in philosophy that delved into human existence generated unusually rich phenomenological and existential writings during the twentieth century. Certain historical impacts contributed to a unique philosophical context in Mexico. For example, the arrival of José Gaos and other *transterrados* from Spain imported the ideas of José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno beginning in 1939. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* was translated into Spanish in 1943, nineteen years before it was published in English. Mexican philosophers enthusiastically studied European philosophers such as Max Scheler, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Nicolai Hartmann, who were less widely read in the United States. These and other factors were advantageous for shaping Mexican approaches to phenomenology and existentialism as they examined issues of felt or alleged inferiority, applicability of classical philosophy to the Mexican situation, the reality of being Mexican, and other related questions.<sup>4</sup>

While the above represents only a sliver of what might be said about Mexico's centuries of salient contributions to philosophy, there is ample reason to watch for continuing insights. Mexico presently offers many themes for philosophy, not many of them pleasant, but most of them fundamental to the human condition.

For example, femicide looms in the context of the Ciudad Juárez murders, where hundreds of women and girls have been murdered since 1993, with no end in sight. Moreover, the killings of women and girls continue throughout Mexico at a current rate of approximately a dozen a day. Protests have taken place following high-profile murders such as those of Fatima Aldrighetti, who was kidnapped and tortured first; Ingrid Escamilla, who was skinned first; and journalist Lourdes Maldonado, who was shot and killed January 23, 2022, as she sat in her car outside her home in Tijuana. Cristina Rivera Garza describes the general situation of disappearance and murder among the entire population in the country as follows:

What we Mexicans have been forced to witness at the beginning of the twenty-first century—on the streets, on pedestrian bridges, on television, or in the papers—is, without a doubt, one of the most chilling spectacles of contemporary horror. Bodies sliced open from end to end, chopped into unrecognizable pieces, left on the streets. Bodies exhumed in a state of decay from hundreds upon hundreds of mass graves. Bodies tossed from pickup trucks onto crowded streets. Bodies burned on enormous pyres. Bodies without hands or without ears or without noses. Disappeared bodies, unable

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<sup>4</sup> For more detail, see Jalif de Bertranou (2010) and Sánchez (2016).

to claim their suitcases from the bus stations where their belongings have arrived. Persecuted bodies, bodies without air, bodies without fingernails or eyelashes. (Rivera Garza 2020, 2)

Response to this horror by government authorities has been underwhelming at best. However, some philosophers have not shied away from trying to understand the meaning of this continuing brutality. Some interpret it as an assault on thinking itself (see Reed-Sandoval 2016; Valencia 2018; Sánchez 2020).

Border issues also invite reflection. Human beings apparently can be “legal” until crossing an international border, when they suddenly can become “illegal,” with far-reaching and sometimes catastrophic consequences. Also, environmental challenges highlight the increasing extent to which North Americans are in this together. Air, water, and wildlife cross borders without regard for boundary markers.<sup>5</sup>

Three additional topics come to mind:

The *mestizo* consciousness and identity constructions of Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica region of southwestern Mexico is an area ripe for study.

While considerable commentary exists on the effects of technology on human beings, still more might be offered regarding the effects of lack of access to technology.

A set of contemporary gender issues provides much to contemplate: abortion access, atypical sex anatomy surgical interventions, non-gender-conforming identities, trans rights, conversion therapy, and identity markers for official documentation.

More translations of Mexican philosophical works would be welcome. Among the neediest candidates, I would argue, are Antonio Caso's *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*, a re-translation of *Perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* by Samuel Ramos, as well as his *Hacia un nuevo humanismo*. These are only a beginning.

Mexican philosophy still may still appear marginal from mainstream academic perspectives, but it is not outside the most valuable themes of our lives. Mexican philosophy still may be underappreciated, but it is present and vital to a multigenerational community, and so may continue to be present and helpful to those who seek its illuminations as this century and its crises continue to unfold.

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<sup>5</sup> On philosophical border issues, see Cantú (2019). On philosophical immigration issues, see Mendoza (2017).

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