

DECOLONIALIZATION DEGREE ZERO: ON EDMUNDO O’GORMAN, PHILOSOPHICAL ADJACENCY AND THE GENEALOGIES OF MEXICAN THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT: This essay discusses the work of Edmundo O’Gorman in connection to the idea of “philosophical adjacency,” that is, the work of a historian who engages philosophers and philosophical questions in the effort of thinking the historical being of Mexico and Latin America. The essay speaks of a “decolonization degree zero” in O’Gorman, claiming that his work provided a philosophical opening to challenge the epistemology and ontology of coloniality in a way that would foreground and render possible a genealogy of work in this line. The essay engages these matters moving through the formation of the disciplines of history and philosophy in Mexico and navigating the influence of figures like Martin Heidegger and Arnold Toynbee in Mexican thought.

Keywords: Edmundo O’Gorman, philosophical adjacency, decolonization degree zero, Mexican philosophy, historiology, Invention of America, existentialism.

Resumen: Este ensayo discute el trabajo de Edmundo O’Gorman en conexión con la idea de “adyacencia filosófica”, es decir, el trabajo de un historiador que se confronta con filósofos y cuestiones filosóficas en el esfuerzo de pensar el ser histórico de México y América Latina. El ensayo habla de una “descolonización grado cero” en O’Gorman, argumentando que su obra proveyó una apertura filosófica para desafiar la epistemología y ontología de la colonialidad de una manera que daría pie y posibilidad a una genealogía de trabajo en este sentido. El ensayo discute estas cuestiones moviéndose a través de la formación de las disciplinas de la historia y la filosofía en México y navegando la influencia de Arnold Toynbee y Martin Heidegger en el pensamiento mexicano.

Palabras clave: Edmundo O’Gorman, adyacencia filosófica, descolonización grado cero, filosofía mexicana, historiología, Invention of America, Existentialism.

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I

The act of writing a paradigmatic book carries a curse: turning the complexity of thinking into a slogan that becomes uncritical repetition. Such slogans often grow unrooted from all the elements that turned them into a concept: their history, their becoming, their nature as “the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components,” to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s characterization (1994: 18-20). Thusly, the resplendent acumen of *La invención de América* (2002 [1958]), and the title concept’s resonance as a departing point to understand the presence of the past in our continent, has overshadowed Edmundo O’Gorman’s vast *oeuvre*. It is so established that most commentators omit the mention of a book published a few years earlier, *La idea del descubrimiento de América*, which lays a lot of the philosophical ground of *La invención de América*—and in fact was published by the Centro de Estudios Filosóficos. To my knowledge, a monograph that would seek to make sense of the totality of O’Gorman’s work, building upon the plethora of tributes, essays and references, remains the task of a future critic, and an exhaustive endeavor that far exceeds the possibilities of an essay. Due to this collective debt towards O’Gorman, the “invention of America” is oftentimes invoked as a stale snippet of commonsense, burdened with self-evidence that occludes the deep intellectual histories that shaped it, and the profound consequences of its decades of conceptual becoming.

I do not seek here an exhaustive account of O’Gorman’s work, much less another revisitation of his famous but inescapable concept. Instead, this essay explores specific issues surrounding O’Gorman’s historiography, building upon ideas I have developed in other essays. I have previously claimed that *La invención de América* constitutes an arriving point for a tradition of writings that gradually performed an epistemological visibilization and critique of the idea of “América” as constructed in European thought. In this essay, I claim O’Gorman as a philosophy-adjacent historian who brings the paradigms of mid-century Mexican philosophy to re-envision the discipline of history as a tool for consciousness and not merely a positivistic study of historical documents. To exhaustively cite the vast body of scholarship available on O’Gorman’s method and thought would be materially impossible, and most of it focuses on *La invención de América* anyways. Thusly, this essay will engage selectively with thinkers that have sparked the ideas behind it, while recognizing that much further reading must be pursued in order to have an in-depth discussion of the matters I raise.

I have provocatively entitled this essay “Decolonization Degree Zero” to describe the stakes of O’Gorman’s philosophy. I am aware that in contemporary critical discourse, the term “decolonial” is often identified with the thinkers advocating for the decolonial option, like Walter Mignolo. I am equally aware that the term “decolonization” in today’s US academy broadly describes the dismantling of logics of coloniality widely understood, particularly in relation to the epistemic and ontological underpinnings surrounding disciplines of knowledge and the institutions that sustain them. To describe O’Gorman’s writing, I propose a deliberately problematic definition of philosophical decolonization through an extrapolation from Roland Barthes’ idea of “writing degree zero.” A few years before O’Gorman’s seminal book, Barthes challenged the idea of literature by noting that it can only exist tied to the forms of history, which is why existing literary categories could not afford writers the ability to think anew. Insofar as literature “carries at the same time the alienation of History and the dream of History,” its “Freedom,” it must arrive at “the consciousness of this division and the very effort which seeks to surmount it (2012: 87-88). Barthes notes that this allows for the imagination of an unalienated language in which “the proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language in order to be a project” (88).

Mutatis mutandis, I believe O’Gorman, like many of his Latin American contemporaries, confronted an idea of human science in which “the alienation of History,” in the guise of Eurocentrism and coloniality needed to be distinguished from “the dream of History,” the ability to account for the being of Mexico and the continent. The language for such a pursuit, in O’Gorman’s time, was yet to come, and in fact remains a utopian horizon of various forms of liberationist and decolonial philosophies. But O’Gorman’s time is the moment in which the freedom described by Barthes appears analogously in the context of Mexican thought. In other words, I claim—following in part some readings of O’Gorman by decolonial thinkers—that his historiographical method sets the stage for a process of decolonization of philosophy, and of thought more broadly, by way of an approach to history via philosophical adjacency.

In my view, O’Gorman belonged to a paradigm of Mexican thinking that gradually opened the conditions of possibility for decolonizing Mexican ontology (concerned with the Mexican self and the idea of *Mexicanidad*) and epistemology (concerned with the ideas, instruments, and perceptions through which we can understand Mexico on

its own terms). Of course, I am not claiming that O’Gorman is a decolonial thinker in the proper sense, something that would be deeply inaccurate. Instead, I suggest that within his career at the center of the discipline of history in Mexico, his writing glimpsed ways to think about the decolonization of thinking, oftentimes against the grain of both his methods and the hegemonic position his work would come to occupy from the 1960s onward. O’Gorman’s trajectory from his first published writing, the short story “El caballo blanco” (O’Gorman 1932),¹ to his passing in 1995 charts the transition between Mexican history as a broad intellectual pursuit of the lettered classes to a well-established and institutionalized discipline, of which he was a central figure. O’Gorman was a lawyer by training, a profession he practiced for a decade or so (Matute 1997: 2), something that was far from uncommon. Founding figures of the disciplines of history, like Silvio Zavala, literary studies, like Alfonso Reyes, and philosophy, like Antonio Caso, held degrees in law and jurisprudence, a common experience central to O’Gorman’s pursuit. I will discuss this below. For the time being, it is worth noting that O’Gorman’s position within the history of philosophy is ultimately a factor of his belonging to a field of humanism in which the professional boundaries of disciplines was a work in progress.

II

There is wide consensus describing O’Gorman as a paradigm-shifting figure in various lines of Latin American philosophy, and as an author whose work sets the stage for liberation and decolonial philosophies forward. One could briefly recall Enrique Dussel’s idea of “el encubrimiento del otro” (1994), which pushes O’Gorman’s account of the “descubrimiento” to the posing the erasure of the other as a condition of possibility for the totalizing conception of European modernity. It is worth noting, though, that O’Gorman himself uses the term “encubrimiento” in his book *La idea del descubrimiento de América* to speak of the way in which the concept of discovery occludes the self of the continent, an idea not too far from Dussel’s (O’Gorman 1951: 5). Similarly, Walter Mignolo recognizes in O’Gorman’s work “a turning point” which “reveals that the advances of modernity outside Europe rely on a colonial matrix of power that includes the renaming of the lands appropriated and of the people inhabiting them” (2005: 5-6). All of this is grounded on what Susana Nuccetelli calls

¹ I thank Edgardo Bermejo Mora for providing me with a copy of this first writing.

“O’Gorman’s anti-realism,” that is, a “metaphysical challenge” to the naturalized idea of America and its discovery, posing that America never existed as such until the arrival of the Europeans, or the emergence of the very idea of “continent” (2020: 16-18).

One can find in O’Gorman’s *oeuvre* many of the same preoccupations underlying what Jairo I. Fúnez-Flores calls the “decolonial and ontological challenges” to the social sciences stemming from Latin American theory’s “efforts to destabilize modernity’s ontological assumptions and epistemological commitments” (2022: 21-22). O’Gorman in particular, and Mexican existentialism in general, played a substantive role in creating thinking conditions able to dislodge the self-evident authority of European thinking, a given in Latin America’s intellectual world well into the 20th century. As José Rabasa observes, O’Gorman did not take the idea of invention to its ultimate consequences, but allowed the conception of a “horizon open to the intervention of multiple actors. Interventions that in some instances appeal to a new name for the continent, for example, Abya Yala, which means in cuna language ‘land in plein maturity,’ assumed by various indigenous organizations since the eighties” (2012, web. My translation).

This epistemological opening not only has ramifications in terms of understanding both Mexico and Latin America as historical and philosophical constructs. It creates mechanisms to rethink historical narratives grounded on the idea of discovery, as well as a variety of ontological questions surrounding contemporary communities borne out of colonized peoples. Rabasa, for example, develops the concept of “invention” beyond O’Gorman’s definition, tracing it back to its usage in Spanish historiography and linking it to the work of later thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau (1993: 3-4). Rabasa’s work (like Dussel’s) is an example of the way in which O’Gorman foregrounded deep discussions on the material constitution of Eurocentrism in 16th-century Spanish historiography, a topic central to critical decolonial moves. Similarly, O’Gorman’s reflections become a condition of possibility for the further exploration of the various forms of naming the region and the politics of underlying such nomenclature, from the exploration of the rise of the term “Latin America” in the 19th century (Ardao 2019 [1980]) to identifying the succession names as the consciousness of the continent evolved over time (Rojas Mix 1991) to the continuous interest in distinguishing our America from North America (Altamirano 2021). In addition, there is no doubt regarding the persistence of the epistemological move behind the concept of invention, as demonstrated in Jesse

Alemán's essay "The Invention of Mexican America," where he invites his readers to consider the "multiple reinventions of America" and to understand hemispheric studies as a tool affording "Mexicans living in the United States a transnational context for imagining themselves against the colonial logic of discovery" (2012: 81-82).

Although these arguments all derive from the broad circulation of *La invención de América*, there is nevertheless the need to recognize that O'Gorman's legacy exceeds the idea at the center of his masterpiece. His legacy, in my view, resides fundamentally in the crystallization of an epistemological stance from which one could glimpse the smooth space of the peoples and territories of the continent away from the striations deployed by colonial technologies and apparatuses of capture.² A degree zero of decolonization as a matter of thought, no less.

To make sense of the idea of degree zero as I present it here, one can depart from the problem of philosophical adjacency. In a very simple way, I use this term to describe the fact that even when we identify well-delineated and autonomous disciplines of knowledge, their praxis frequently involves exchanges with bordering disciplines.³ This is particularly the case of humanistic and qualitative disciplines such as philosophy, history or literary criticism, whose objects and methods seek to encompass the totality of the human condition and its social materiality, as well as the phenomena and potentialities that underlie them. I consider adjacency to be the enduring quality of thinking in resistance to the process of "disciplinarization," which John Guillory defines as "the strategy of locating the production and reproduction of [scientific] expertise in the university" (2023: 26). Latin American philosophy requires us to think beyond what Guillory also calls "the mediating function of the disciplinary form" and the university as the "monopolistic agency for the *institution of the professions*" (2023: 26), insofar as such process not only came to Latin America

² I am using here, for shorthand, the well-known terminology developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1984).

³ There is nothing new under the sun, and I thusly acknowledge that when I was thinking philosophical adjacency, a Google search yielded an article with the title "Philosophical Adjacency. Beckett's Prose Fragments via Jürgen Habermas" by Phillip Tew (2002). The piece is itself a good example of what I am discussing here, in this case the adjacency of Beckett's writing to Habermas. However, Tew's notion of adjacency is grounded on the desire to speak of "provisionality" and "fragile causality" while I am using the term to speak about points of encounter and in-between-ness withing the emerging cartography of fields yielded by disciplinarization.

belatedly—mostly as a result of the modernizing processes of the first half of the 20th century.

Of course, philosophy in Mexico is a longstanding field with substantive development through centuries prior to the foundation of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, borne out the Escuela Nacional de Altos Estudios in 1924 (González González 2008). Still, many of the authors central to the pursuit of philosophical thinking in the colonial period and the 19th century existed in the realm of what Ángel Rama calls “The Lettered City,” namely, the gathering of institutions and discursive practices that bind the practice of writing and its epistemes to the social organization of structures of power (Rama 1996). The various practices that we identify with the liberal arts today (from philosophy and theology to history and even some forms of science) were practiced by individuals—*letrados*—who were also essential in the organization of the signifying and political orders of the region in the colonial period and in the 19th century.

Yet, this horizon of organization does not contradict the transcultural nature of philosophy and other disciplines of thought. Today, it is commonly accepted that indigenous cosmologies and philosophies are a well-established part of the continent’s philosophical tradition (see, for example, Nuccetelli 2002). In O’Gorman’s historical horizon this was clear thanks to the publication, a couple of years before *La invención de América*, of Miguel León-Portilla’s influential *La filosofía Náhuatl. Estudiada en sus fuentes* (1956). As Mabel Moraña observes, “In a multicultural and multilingual space like the Americas, philosophical reflection can only manifest as a hybrid (fluid, impure) practice related to the profound and undeniable cultural heterogeneity that constitutes it” (2020: 8). Furthermore, Moraña continues, “the essay as a hybrid and open genre” was the medium that capture such fluidity (2020: 8). O’Gorman’s career runs parallel to the long *durée* process of disciplinarization of humanistic knowledge in Mexico, but even if today the constitution of disciplinary silos is a matter of fact, the hybrid and impure nature of philosophical thinking has never ceased to be in tension with it.

III

In my prior work, I have engaged O’Gorman’s intellectual context in particular, and the scene leading to Mexican existentialism in general. To avoid repeating myself, I will just weave the basic argument of prior pieces into this essay. In my book *Naciones*

intelectuales (Sánchez Prado 2009), I study the formation of an autonomous literary field in Mexico, tied to figures like Alfonso Reyes and the creation of institutions such as El Colegio de México. In this scene, the field of philosophy also acquires autonomy.⁴ A fundamental factor is the arrival of José Gaos, who introduces Heidegger and leads to the creation of an autonomous philosophical field, which in turn is fueled by the generation of Gaos's disciples, collectively known as Grupo Hiperión, and by Mexican existentialism in general. O'Gorman was adjacent to this formation, not only attending Gaos's seminar but also engaging directly with the work of Martin Heidegger. This was in part afforded, as I discuss extensively in a forthcoming piece (Sánchez Prado 2023b), by a translation scene which allowed key works of philosophy and philology (not only Heidegger's, but also key writings by Hegel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Werner Jaeger and Erich Auerbach) to see the light of day in Mexico, particularly at the Fondo de Cultura Económica.

The core of Mexican existentialism was not only its contribution to the development of Mexican philosophy as an autonomous academic field but also its achievement in terms of a philosophy of the Mexican self, a broadly discussed topic in intellectual history (see, for example, Sánchez 2016 and Santos Ruiz 2015).⁵ Yet, the impact of existentialism (not only in its dominant Heideggerian branch but also in its Sartrean manifestations) was much broader. In both the influential chronicle of the existentialist movement penned by Oswaldo Díaz Ruanova (1981) and the forthcoming book by Stephanie Merrim (2023), there is an argument that existentialism affected literary writers such as Rosario Castellanos, Octavio Paz, Xavier Villaurrutia and Juan Rulfo, among many others. O'Gorman, in turn, had a very

⁴ I use the terms "field" and "autonomy" as developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. See Bourdieu 1996.

⁵ It is worth pointing out that there is a broader thinking about the history of Mexican philosophy that does not center the Hiperión this much, but rather claim a foundational moment in the prior generation. Abelardo Villegas, in his classic *El pensamiento mexicano en el siglo XX*, calls this period "El nacionalismo filosófico" (1993:145-63), which is, in my view, both accurate and reductive, as it misses the dimensions of universalism and cosmopolitanism in the period. Meaningfully, this chapter ends with O'Gorman. More recently, Guillermo Hurtado places Hiperión at a more central place, giving particular centrality to the work of Luis Villoro (2007, 9-134). A much distinct view is that of Carlos Pereda (2013) who subsumes Mexican existentialism to a larger landscape of the reception of German philosophy in Mexico. In Pereda's account, rather than a discussion of Hiperión as a group, Zea and Villoro are considered as part of a larger constellation of contemporaries, alongside figures such as Alejandro Rossi and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez.

significant connection to literature that has yet to be studied in-depth, as we can gather from Gonzalo Celorio's essay on his literary readings (2009: 151-60). O'Gorman's theorization of history must be understood as part of this irradiation.⁶ His philosophical adjacency has come to be recognized in many ways. A quick example is his inclusion in the two major anthologies of Mexican philosophy in English, Roberto Caponigri's *Major Trends in Mexican Philosophy* (1966) and Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Robert Eli Sánchez Jr.'s *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century* (2017).

At the core of O'Gorman's philosophical adjacency lies both the longstanding history of making sense of Mexico and Latin America through historicity and historical teleology, as well as the limits of the historical sciences of the early 20th century in Mexico—embodied for O'Gorman in the figure of Silvio Zavala.⁷ In his extensive reflection on O'Gorman's connection between philosophy and history, Alfonso Mendiola observes that Heidegger allows O'Gorman to break away with the notion of a reality in the past that can be objectively studied and logically inferred.⁸ That is, that while the historian studies history as such, the practice of history itself is premised on an ahistorical premise: the belief that there is a reality independent from the mentalities of the past (2005: 84). Mendiola bases this claim in two assertions by O'Gorman. The first one, coming from *La invención de América*, challenges the idea “that things have always carried, for any subject and in any place, a fixed being, predetermined and unchangeable” (O'Gorman 2002: 83. My translation). The second, from *Destierro de sombras*, asserts the “constitutive paradox of the historical being of the man of New Spain” to respond to the “exigencies of the vital order” raised by the tension between the “inevitable transfiguration of the Indian image into the Spanish image” (of the Virgin of Guadalupe) and “affirming its alterity as a New Spanish [*novohispana*] image” (O'Gorman 1991: 37. My translation).

⁶ At the time of this writing Merrim's book was forthcoming, but her essays on existentialism foreshadowing it give a good sense of her connecting Hiperión to literary writers. See particularly Merrim 2014.

⁷ I do not delve here on Zavala's theory of history, tied to scientificism, but a good account of his ideas and his role in the formation of the field, see Mora Muro 2018. There is also a great study by Andrés Kozel (2012: 133-237) that departs from the polemic with Zavala to develop a brilliant account of O'Gorman's historicism. Although I do not engage Kozel's analysis here, it is mandatory reading for scholars interested in O'Gorman.

⁸ I do not engage with it directly, but Cherif Wolosky 2012 provides another good study of the development of O'Gorman's method between history and philosophy.

Mendiola concludes, correctly in my view, that accounting for contingency is the essential contribution of the consciousness of historicity, ultimately locating history in a paradox: “the historicity of an event is to construct a poetic of the unsayable, which is why historicity is a form of reality (lived experience [*vivencia*], hermeneutics of facticity, etc.) that is never reached” (2005: 102).⁹ Without elaborating too much, it may be important to mention that Heideggerian thinking was, in practice, the mechanism by which O’Gorman arrived at this conclusion, but in the general map of the period, there is a larger array of ideas at play in the arch running from Husserlian phenomenology to Gadamerian hermeneutics. In any case, the adjacency to philosophy in O’Gorman’s practice of history is the consequence of participating in the creation of human knowledge at that precise moment in time in which the lettered city began the process of disciplinarization.

History has been at the core of Mexican thinking since at least the positivist era. A key text of 19th century Mexican liberalism, Gabino Barreda’s *Oración Cívica* (1993 [1867]), narrated the arrival to the juncture of the 1860s, after the French Invasion and the triumph of the Liberal Party, as a historical teleology that, in the words of Charles Hale, represented the former as “the conflict between ‘American civilization’ and ‘European retrogression’” (1989: 8). The text was clearly at the forefront of the history of Mexican philosophy as understood in the time of O’Gorman, and the Hiperión group. José Gaos included it in his 1945 *Antología del pensamiento en lengua española* and the text was clearly engaged in Leopoldo Zea’s *Positivism in Mexico* (1974 [1943]). It is not a coincidence that the historicist approach behind Ortega y Gasset’s circumstantialism and Gaos’s historicism, as well as the Heideggerian philosophy that so influenced these Iberian precursors, takes hold in Mexico. Santiago Castro Gómez reads the line that goes from Ortega to Gaos to Zea and to the Argentine philosopher Arturo Andrés Roig to construct a metahistorical logic to describe consciousness in terms analogous to what post-Foucauldian philosophy would call epistemes (2021: 79-105). Mendiola, Castro Gómez and Hale’s accounts must be put together to make sense of both O’Gorman and Mexican historicism in general.

The philosophy of history and existentialism both led to the constitution of a philosophy-adjacent metahistory (or a history-adjacent philosophy depending on which thinker is approached) that allowed for the problematization of the ahistorical

⁹ A parallel discussion concerns O’Gorman’s continued concern with authenticity. See López 2017.

stance of the historian. This we know from Mendiola. Such a perspective was clear even in the earlier approaches to O’Gorman’s work. Patrick Romanell, for instance, argues that O’Gorman’s main contribution was to understand that “the European was able through the Cartesian *cogito* to rationalize the existence of America as follows: I think of America, therefore she exists” (1952: 177-78). Consequently, there was also the possibility of understanding that historical constructs such as “America” or “Mexico” are not given, but the result of a historical process of coming into Being, which allows the process to be a subject of philosophy and not of historiography. In fact, the clash between positivist and historicist approaches to the discipline of history from which the work of O’Gorman emerged in the 1930s (Moctezuma Franco) results from the inability of positivist history to account for existence. As O’Gorman puts it in his passionate manifesto *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica*, “historiography is, from the point of view of that which is true, the elaboration of the intelligibility of being that history performs, for the quotidian mode of being of existence” (1947: 257. My translation). Nevertheless, as Hale has argued, the liberal leanings post 1910 survived radical and popular challenges, as well as the metaphysical work of philosophers like the Hiperión group (1989: 259). The historicism of the 20th century, including O’Gorman’s, was methodologically a break with positivism, but intellectually sought the same concern: the search of the soul of the nation in its historical becoming.

This is not to say that O’Gorman’s methods did not imply a deep paradigm change in the idea and practice of history in Mexico. Castro Gómez forcefully argues that O’Gorman did not repeat the platitude, present in Barreda as well as in Alfonso Reyes and other intellectuals or prior generations, of the spiritual superiority of America over Europe. Rather, his work put forward the idea that America was in itself a construction of Europe, which turn means that the “ontological program” of Latin American thinkers would have to face a dilemma: either adapt the New World to European standards or “take this model as a *starting point* for creatively transforming it” (2021, 206. Emphasis in the original; O’Gorman 2002: 135-36). Decolonization degree zero is the name I have for this specific moment. Rather than seeking to join what Reyes called “the banquet of civilization” (1950: 41), that is, a Latin American universality to be recognized within the grounds of an idea of culture defined by Europe, O’Gorman essentially set the ground for the region to think itself beyond such grounds.

I depart from Castro Gómez’s account of the genealogy of O’Gorman’s thought, and of Mexican historicism in general, to recover an argument that I have made

elsewhere. In a prior piece, I describe an aggregate of metahistorical texts that lead O’Gorman to a “postcolonialism *avant la lettre*,” by which I mean a gradual development of a critique of colonial reason by taking possession of the epistemological perspective of the colonizer through writing, decades before such operation became canonical in Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism* (Sánchez Prado 2013; Said 1978). The substantive body of historical essays written by Alfonso Reyes, from his canonical *Visión de Anáhuac 1915* to the various essays compiled in his 1942 collection *Ultima Tule*, take the idea of “América” (meaning Latin America) as a given, and claims the sense of futurity that both the European tradition of utopian essays and Hegel’s philosophy of history granted to the continent.¹⁰ Reyes achieved this by taking over, as an essayist, the point of view of the colonizer, from the gaze of the conquistadors in *Visión* to the historicization of the utopian mind in Europe, in order to make sense of how this mind projected into the continent after 1492. Reyes was profoundly influential in existentialist circles. O’Gorman dedicates his essay “Historia y vida,” a programmatic text claiming that historical science should become a “saber de la vida,” to Reyes, who would have wholeheartedly endorsed such call as someone who advocated for the need of the humanities to be at the core of the Polis. O’Gorman’s existentialist idea of consciousness certainly went beyond Reyes’s historicism, but the roots of the epistemological operation that renders the idea of “invention of America” possible was already at work in Don Alfonso’s writing.

Similarly, O’Gorman is not the only thinker to challenge the historical consistency of Europe’s supposed epistemological domain in the Americas. Luis Villoro, for example, developed a dialectical account of mestizo consciousness in *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (1995 [1950]). Villoro laid out in historicist terms the distinction between the “ser del indio” as an ontological category and “indigenismo” as an epistemological operation by the rising mestizo consciousness. In doing so, Villoro did something analogous to O’Gorman, namely, challenge the self-evident idea of the “indigena” and “indigeneidad” and rendering it as a historical construct, foreshadowing what Said would do with his category of Orientalism

¹⁰ Reyes’s work is haphazardly available in English. A good sampling of the relevant works can be found in Reyes 1950 and Reyes 2009: 101-93. I have written very extensively about these questions in the essays collected in Sánchez Prado 2019 so I will not revisit Reyes here. Regarding the utopian tradition of the Latin American essay, see also Sánchez Prado 2023a.

(Sánchez Prado 2009: 219-20; 2013: 80-84).¹¹ It is not surprising that Villoro would follow his Hiperión period with a long trajectory in epistemology and philosophy to later become an advocate of indigenous autonomy and interculturalidad, tied to his work on the Ejército Zapatista. Without further elaborating on Villoro, something for a different essay, I simply want to note that his writings are another instance of decolonization degree zero, and the political thought it rendered possible was essential to think political claims regarding indigenous peoples and the problems of race and ethnicity from the 1990s forward.¹²

This detour into Reyes and Villoro seeks to demonstrate that to productively read O’Gorman we must move away from thinking *The Invention of America* and its main ideas as unique, and to recognize that Mexican thinking at large (not only philosophy, but also philosophically adjacent disciplines such as history and philology) was in the decades that followed the Mexican Revolution a site of ontological and epistemological decolonization distinct but parallel to other forms of such thinking around the world. One could recall here that O’Gorman’s explorations of the philosophy of history in the 1950s run parallel to the arch in which Frantz Fanon wrote *White Skins, Black Masks* (2008 [1952]) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963 [1961]). Mexico was not undergoing a process of political decolonization, as it was happening in Africa or the West Indies, but the long arch of Revolutionary culture and cultural nationalism pushed philosophy into raising questions regarding the epistemology and ontology of consciousness. There is a line in the criticism surrounding O’Gorman that challenges the originality of his theses. Horst Pietschmann (1997), for instance, notes that some of the ideas developed by O’Gorman could also be found in the work of Italian historians such as Antonello Gerbi, whose work was equally available in the Fondo de Cultura, or in the work of Pierre and Huguette Chaunu on Sevilla and the Atlantic.

¹¹ A really excellent account of Villoro’s Indigenism in relation to the history of Mexican philosophy can be found in Hurtado 2007: 115-34. I unfortunately became aware of Hurtado’s exceptional book after writing my essays addressing Villoro. It takes a different route than me (after all I am a cultural studies scholar), but I think his reading and mine complement each other in significant ways.

¹² Villoro, sadly, remains the major Hiperión philosopher without due recognition in English, now that Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla have joined Zea and O’Gorman in the map of Mexican philosophy as studied in the US. I think that translations of his work and more studies are overdue. For the time being, I would invite Hispanophone readers to revisit his work on Indigenism from the mid-century and the end of the comparative fashion. A good place to do so is the anthology prepared by Ambrosio Velasco Gómez (Villoro 2017).

The point to me is not whether O’Gorman is original or not; he was in some ways, and not in others. Rather, *La invención de América* is a book that captures the spirit of the very reconceptualization of the world that was emerging at the time.

IV

Why does it matter that O’Gorman was a historian and not a philosopher like Villoro or a philologist like Reyes? Historical science was undergoing substantive revisions of its own premises in the years in which O’Gorman developed his early work. To close this essay, I want to point towards a few of the aspects in O’Gorman’s horizon as a historian that afforded his philosophical adjacency. The arch between O’Gorman’s early work and the writing of *The Invention of America* runs parallel to major interventions of the very idea of history, which was also moving away from positivist paradigms in other latitude. Alvaro Matute (1997, 4) notes in passing that O’Gorman refers to Raymond Aron’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1961 [1938]). Subtitled “An essay on the limits of historical objectivity,” Aron’s book justifies the need of a philosophy of history as a field. His philosophical system puts forward a complex epistemological reflection on the knowledge of the self and the other, which in turn allows him to reflect on the limits of historical objectivity and causality, and on the possibilities of experience and historicity.¹³

Anecdotally, most authoritative works on O’Gorman and Heidegger (for instance Gilardi 2015) consider O’Gorman’s recourse to historicity to derive from Gaos and Ortega. In some cases (like Hernández López 2006), critics begin with O’Gorman’s engagement with historiography in 1940, omitting his formational period in the 1930s. I have not encountered any reference to Aron as a source for O’Gorman’s idea of historicity beyond Matute’s quick reference. In fact, Aron is not mentioned once in *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica*, even though O’Gorman concludes the book with an extended reflection on the idea of historical truth, just like the French historian did in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Matute is correct to point to the many coincidences between both (1997: 4). In any case, there is no question that the coincidences would merit an in-depth inquiry regarding the extent to which Aron may have been a source for O’Gorman’s historicism. Kozel does point out that O’Gorman likely read Aron in Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista de Occidente* but draws in this reading a

¹³ On Aron’s many adjacencies and relations to existentialism, Sarah Bakewell’s engaging chronicle *At the Existentialist Café* (2016) gives an informal but informative account.

connection to Max Weber instead of Heidegger (2012: 3, 20). For my purposes, I merely want to state that when Heidegger is developing his core philosophical work in the late 1920s, and as Aron writes his essay in 1938, the need to discuss the problems of historical consciousness and truth in ways that would anticipate O’Gorman’s interventions from the 1940s onward, which is to say that in O’Gorman’s formative period such a question was already part of the problems of historiography in the West at large.

The turn towards Aron and Heidegger in O’Gorman’s early years can be read as an intersection between his own understanding of the constructed nature of social structures over history and his desire to theorize consciousness and experience. Even before his debate with Silvio Zavala, O’Gorman was well-aware of the limitations in the study of Mexico and a whole line of his work, which would require a separate essay from this one, embarked on a major revision not only of the narratives underlying national history but also of the very idea of national history as such.¹⁴ In his works prior to his properly Heideggerian thinking, it is already clear that he understands institutions and events to shape consciousness. His 1937 work *Historia de las divisiones territoriales de México* (2007), still in print, is a painstaking history of the ways in which changes in law and jurisprudence (based on his training as a lawyer) related to territory and land not only are essential to the transition independence, but also constitute a process of determination of regional identity. The book is understudied in major works regarding the idea of cartography and territory in Mexico.¹⁵ But it is evident upon reading its highly technical arguments that O’Gorman traces a line between the technicalities underlying legal regimes and how they affect historical events. This were not necessarily a causal relationship in a 19th-century sense (no laws of history are claimed here) but accidental, a list of effects that were real but unintended and not systematic or deliberate.

This is the reason why O’Gorman gravitated not only to existentialism and circumstantialism but also to broader philosophical frameworks that challenged the narrow sense of truth and fact in historical practice. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo notes that O’Gorman “in his *ars historica*, relocated history’s DNA in poetry” (2019: 26). Tenorio

¹⁴ I believe an excellent essay on this subject is Hale 2000, although a more recent perspective is perhaps necessary.

¹⁵ See for example Craib 2004, which cites the book in passing but could clearly has broader connections to O’Gorman’s claims.

states this in reference to the 1991 text “Fantasmas en la narrativa historiográfica,” in which O’Gorman summarizes his craft at the end of his life by calling for “imprevisibles historias,” unpredictable histories (Meyer: 957-85).¹⁶ Throughout his career, O’Gorman was steadfast in identifying causality as a problem in historiography, and the need to have a method that was both self-aware of its epistemological limits, and able to strive to the best representation of the human condition as possible. This is the reason why philosophy is all over his work. David Brading (1996), for instance, reminds us that O’Gorman was the translator of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 2010 [1779, 1942]), a book published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1942 and which continues to be a canonical edition of this thinker. Brading affirms that Hume is a source of at least two key ideas in O’Gorman’s praxis: the criticism against “entes históricos” (such as “America”) and the critique to causality (1996: 700-701). While Brading recognizes that the thesis of the “Invention of América” was only possible after reading Heidegger, he also appears to suggest that O’Gorman’s engagement with Hume (and I would add with Raymond Aron) on causality was crucial for Heidegger to have such an impact on his thought.

O’Gorman’s “historiology” was, from the basis of these concerns and the intellectual scene I have described so far, an intervention that addressed the significant concerns of a historian working from Mexico in relation to a historical science in turmoil. As previously mentioned, O’Gorman took issue with the recently professionalized discipline of history by taking on Zavala, who was a staunch defender of the traditional model of Leopold von Ranke. As Guillermo Zermeño Padilla notes, this in itself was controversial, given that Rankean history was being challenged by figures like Marc Bloch or Lucien Febvre, but Ranke’s “scientificism” was ultimately compatible with the legacies of positivism, and a good adversary for the historicist approach that O’Gorman was defending (2011: 455-56).¹⁷ To be fair (and Zermeño is very nuanced in his account), the Rankean model offered a pathway in terms of pedagogy and methodology that fit the desire to create a professional history field, whereas historicism was, paradoxically, more compatible with the *letrado* spirit of

¹⁶ Tenorio-Trillo makes reference to the text in Meyer 1993, a compilation of writings by historians on their relation to history, which included texts by O’Gorman, Villoro, Paz and Zavala among others.

¹⁷ A good side-by-side comparison of scientificism and historicism in these debates can be found in Hernández López 2006: 50.

encompassing knowledge across and array of humanistic fields. Ainhoa Suárez Gómez usefully defines “historiology” as the desire to “translate to the historiographic terrain the philosophical principle that affirms that the fundamental characteristic of human existence is its constitution as a temporal being” (2020: 232. My translation). The promise of Rankean history to Zavala and other figures aching to create a historical discipline in Mexico was precisely the objectivization of history, while the unpredictable, radically contingent history proposed by O’Gorman, in which grand narratives and causalities were against the model, was likely to make professionalization more challenging.

Suárez Gómez usefully traces the notion of historiology to Ortega y Gasset, concretely to an essay written as a preface to the Spanish edition of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in José Gaos’s translation (2011: 233; Hegel 1928). It is important that, unlike the English editions, the Spanish version uses “historia universal” to translate *Weltgeschichte* in the title, because this aligned the book to yet another preoccupation to understand O’Gorman’s wagers. Even if O’Gorman takes the term from Ortega, there is no question that his work breaks from Hegelianism. Even an unsympathetic reader of O’Gorman like Neil Larsen notes that ascribing to O’Gorman a Hegelian genealogy is incorrect (1995: 111). Larsen admits being relatively new to O’Gorman, and attributes a more strongly Husserlian inclination to his work, considering the Heideggerian influence “super-imposed on this more orthodox phenomenological language (1995:112). Larsen, a Marxist, is clearly turned off by O’Gorman’s ontological claim, since O’Gorman’s rejection of Hegel does carry an implicit rejection of Marxist historical sciences. Indeed, O’Gorman considered Marxist historiography a continuation of Rankean ideology and it is scientificist fallacies (1947: 96-99). Although Larsen suggests through an overstretched interpretation the idea that O’Gorman was, if not explicitly denouncing the threat of communism, at least articulating ideas compatible with it (1995: 116), I think it is more correct to argue that, as the idea of universal history put forward by Hegel had grown into a major term in the discipline, Marxist inclinations towards historical totalization (not unlike Rankean ones) were suspect for a historian reticent to embrace universal laws of history.

The idea of universal history is another interlocutor of O’Gorman’s historiology, in part because the redefinitions of the term in the early 20th century clearly had bearings on any attempt to dislodge Eurocentrism and totalization in history. As early

as 1923, Antonio Caso published a book entitled *El concepto de la historia universal*, which already rejected, as Guillermo Hurtado discusses, both the idea of historical laws and the idea of progress as the constant improvement of humanity, that is the two central tenets of positivism (Caso 1923; Hurtado 2016: 271-72). Without delving too much into Caso, I think it is significant that Mexico's major philosopher of the period engaged in such a question, which means that the ties between philosophy and history had clear precedent among Mexican philosophers before O'Gorman. But the idea of universal history went much further than its postulation in philosophical terms. As Susan Buck-Morss concisely summarizes, "universal history as traditionally understood emerged out of the semi-secularization of Biblical history that followed Hegel's attempt to think the whole of religion, philosophy, and history as a cosmological system of modernity" (2020: 28). Buck-Morss continues by observing that "in the twentieth century, universal history became an attempt to include all so-called civilizations within an academic canon" (2020: 28).

Just to provide one of many possible examples, one can recall here the figure of Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee was an English historian with roots in the fields of Greek and Byzantine history, who would become one of the most widely read historians of the century. This was thanks to his monumental work *The Study of History*, published in twelve volumes from 1934 and 1961, and widely admired as an attempt to encompass a history of all civilizations.¹⁸ Toynbee had many Mexican readers and admirers, including Alfonso Reyes, who in 1948 found many coincidences between his understanding of history and that of his British counterpart (Reyes 2000: 235-42). It is not surprising that Reyes would find Toynbee so compelling. As a fellow Hellenist, he would have been attracted to Toynbee's early work, and Toynbee's idea of civilizations, outdated as it may sound today, nevertheless provided a broad recognition of historical importance to societies far beyond Europe. In this, Toynbee clearly was in the same page as Latin American thinkers anxious to align the region's history to universality.

More to the point of this essay, Toynbee was also a major influence on Leopoldo Zea, who in the 1950s begins to model some of his work, notably *El occidente y la conciencia de México* (1953), on Toynbee's idea of the West. As Guillermo Hernández Flores notes, Toynbee allows Zea to account for the relation between empire and

¹⁸ For a full account of Toynbee's work, see Lang 2011.

colonized nations and make sense of Mexico vis-à-vis the West (2004: 87-90). Presumably, O’Gorman would have at least noticed such influence, given that in this time his work was running parallel to Zea’s. Toynbee visits Mexico in 1953 with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation at the outset of his new status as a “world figure,” as one of his biographer’s terms it (McNeill 1989: 235). The month-long visit was a major event, which included Toynbee’s conversation with the president. The visit inspired a book entitled *México y el Occidente* (Toynbee 1956), which included two lectures by Toynbee on Mexico—part of the work he was conducting for *A Study of History*, whose final volumes motivated his trips through Latin America and Asia—and Zea’s chronicle of the visit. As Nayelli Castro documents, Emilio Uranga was very critical of Toynbee and skeptical that his work would have an impact in Mexico, but Zea’s enthusiasm and Toynbee’s characterization of the Mexican revolution as a “vanguard decolonization movement” validated a “philosophy of history in which universality was constructed, in good measure, through the sum of identity reflections” (2018: 73-74). Similarly, Toynbee’s belief in Mexico as a model for “racial reconciliation” (1969: 343) likely warmed him up to a generation of scholars concerned with *mestizaje* as part of a larger conversation on Mexicanness.

I have not found any direct reference to O’Gorman being influenced by Toynbee (I would not discard its existence, though), but there is no question in my mind that his work was at the very least aware of this new turn towards universal history and towards the presentation of specific civilizations like that of Mexico as part of a new decentered account of the history of the world. In any case, the fact that Mexico was both on the map of mid-century historians around the world as a significant reference meant that O’Gorman was able to build his method in relation to this new standing of universal history. O’Gorman was decidedly opposed to the consequences of the Hegelian notion of universal history. In 1939 O’Gorman mounted a critique of Hegel’s impact in the formation of Panamericanism, particularly in response to Herbert Bolton’s text “The Epic of Greater America” (O’Gorman 1939, Bolton 1933). The text had an enduring influence, and was partially reprinted in Lewis Hanke’s *Do the Americas Have a Common History?* (1964), which also included Silvio Zavala’s defense of international collaboration between US and Latin American historians. O’Gorman is particularly troubled by Bolton’s mention of natural resources as a reason to be concerned about Latin America, and sees in this assertion a reflection of Hegel’s idea of America as a continent without history (1939: 15). O’Gorman would have surely

been aware of the emergence of Latin Americanism in the US as an imperial-adjacent project. One can recall here that the discipline of Latin Americanist literary studies in the 20th century finds its first exponent in Alfred Coester, who openly says that his writing of a history of Latin American literature in 1916 is animated in part by the opening of the Panama Canal (Coester 1916; Degiovanni 2018: 42-61). Although Degiovanni does not directly mention Bolton, it is clear the Boltonian thesis was connected to this impetus.¹⁹

O’Gorman’s philosophical adjacency then can be reasserted as a project of decolonization in the guise of these developments. As Latin America became more integrated in the imagination of a world history, the assertion of the region’s epistemological autonomy carried the resistance of the reterritorialization to Eurocentric history. A history concerned not with method but with ontology was also necessary to ensure that the disciplinarization of history did not entail an erasure of the struggles of the continent. Finally, O’Gorman was a constant antagonist of historians of Spain and early Americas, challenging influential historians on their accounts of America. This was the case with Hanke himself, who O’Gorman challenged in relation to Bartolomé de las Casas (Hernández López 2006: 110-117). His polemic with the French Hispanist Marcel Bataillon—who called him “el historiador filósofo” with a degree of derision—was extensive enough to merit a joint book (Bataillon and O’Gorman 1955). But the reality is that, as Walter Mignolo discusses, this characterization in fact describes O’Gorman’s lucidity, including the possibility of studying the genre of histories of the Indies as something other than historical documents (1984: 197).²⁰ It was philosophical adjacency which allowed O’Gorman to be such a transformational historian. It is what empowered him to raise in history ethical questions related to human realization as Conrado Hernández López, one of O’Gorman’s most careful readers, argues (2006: 151-54). Philosophical adjacency, the refusal embedded in letting history become a discipline that abdicates

¹⁹ Another aspect I am sidestepping but is worth noting is that O’Gorman was committed to the advancement of universal history as a practice even if his work not always addressed it. It is worth recalling that Porrúa’s mass editions of Herodotus and Thucydides carried introductions by O’Gorman (Meyer 2009: 689-710 & 754-806). O’Gorman also translated into Spanish David Thomson’s influential 1969 book *World History 1914-1968* (1970).

²⁰ Mignolo discusses in this text O’Gorman in comparison to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a discussion that certainly adds to his connections to Heidegger.

from the fundamental questions of the human, was the reason why he reached decolonization degree zero. O’Gorman, thanks to this insight, continues to be a required reading for all Latin Americans, and an essential point of reference for Mexican history, philosophy and culture at large.

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