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Eulogy for Bolívar Echeverría

WITH THE LOSS OF BOLÍVAR ECHEVERRÍA, Latin America will miss one of its leading intellectuals. Since his decease on June 5th, 2010, many testimonies have appeared to commemorate his memory as well as to distinguish his important work as a philosopher and a thinker on issues of public interest; nonetheless in this eulogy I essentially wish to honor this Mexican university professor of Ecuadorian origin as a specialist on the question of the Baroque.

Over the last decades Bolívar Echeverría became known as one of the leading figures in the re-conceptualization of the Baroque, both in its historical and in its contemporary manifestations. As a member of a major international research initiative on the Hispanic Baroque, located at Western University in London, Ontario (Canada), since 2007, the line of research he followed was presented in the International meeting “Religious Aspects of the Neobaroque” held at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM, Mexico City, in 2009.

His singular approach to the Baroque was original in many respects. First of all, he did not relegate it to be a pre-modern or reactionary phenomenon of cultural history, but endeavored to place it within the parameters of modernity. As a Marxist thinker, he conceived modernity as linked to the course and evolution of capitalism, to the extent that the syntagm “capitalist modernity” he quite often employed tended to become a pleonasm in his writings.

I first met Bolívar Echeverría in 1994 at an international conference organized by Petra Schumm at the Freie Universität in Berlin. The debate searched for novel approaches to understand the Baroque phenomenon in Latin America, and while most of the speakers proposed the analysis of vari-

ous aspects of the “Baroque in America”—its transfer from the Iberian Peninsula within the colonization process, its specific aesthetic features, the Baroque as popular culture or the construction of national identities on the basis of the Baroque—, Bolívar Echeverría focused his intervention on the Jesuit project of the *Misiones*.¹ He presented this project as the most genuine expression of modern utopia within the Latin American Baroque. This focus on the “Guarani Republics” as fostered by the Jesuits, made it possible for him to demonstrate that the Latin American Baroque, in one of its most important political manifestations, was essentially a modern undertaking and that it thus carried the most authentic impetus of European modernity, in terms of the reorganization of social, cultural as well as of political life and cultural forms, in the New World. Calling them “socialist theocratic republics” he posits that the Baroque does not represent a form of culture subjected to the reactionary program which followed the Council of Trent (1545-1563) also called the “Tridentinum,” and places it as an important manifestation of progressive modernity in Latin America. Bolívar Echeverría also expresses his regret for the *Misiones*’ decline and destruction, in the aftermath of the 1750 treatise of Madrid that settled the border conflicts between the colonial empires of Spain and Portugal in America, once the Jesuits were expelled from South America in 1776.

Nevertheless, he did not view the annulment of the modern project of the *Misiones* within the Iberian colonial empire as the end of a Latin American constellation that encouraged the conceptualization of the Baroque within an encompassing paradigm of modernity. Quite the contrary, he developed a concept tied to capitalist modernity that included what he termed the “Baroque *ethos*.”² The development of this key concept is certainly one of his most important and original contributions to Baroque and Neobaroque studies.

In order to fully appreciate Bolívar Echeverría’s postulates, they must be positioned within the global framework of his theory of modernity. He be-

1. Published in Bolívar Echeverría, “La Compañía de Jesús y la primera modernidad de América Latina,” in Petra Schumm (ed.), *Barrocos y modernos. Nuevos caminos en la investigación del barroco iberoamericano*, Madrid/Frankfurt am Main, Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 1998, pp. 49-65.

2. In several publications, he develops the concept *Baroque ethos* (“*etos barroco*”) in both its historical and theoretical dimensions. See: *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural y ethos barroco*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/El Equilibrista, 1994 and *La modernidad de lo barroco*, Mexico City, Era, 1998.

gins by criticizing a *doxa* he identifies as having its origin in the writings of Max Weber, at the same time as he observes that it reduces capitalist modernity and the modernization of the world to a single and uniform execution. Furthermore, he places “modernity” in the plural and rejects the exclusivity of this Euro-American version of North-European origin. With this dismissal, Bolívar Echeverría recognizes the Hispanic claim, that manifests itself both in Spain and in Latin America, for another modernity, and sees a different construction of identity within modernity, primarily opposed to that conceived by the Hegelian-protestant North.³ Thus breaking open what he considers an erroneously exclusive paradigm to diversity and plurality by distinguishing four different *ethoi* within modernity.

Bolívar Echeverría derives these *ethoi* from his Marxist analysis of capitalist modernity. For him, the historical entry into modernity takes place within the transition from use value (*Gebrauchswert*) to exchange value (*Tauschwert*), when an accumulation of capital becomes possible as the consequence of the establishment of such an abstract value. In this opposition, “use value” is axiologically positive and associated with a state of nature and a concrete human community that would be transhistorical—in my view with some subliminal nostalgia for it—, while “exchange value” is seen as negative; it is an historically situated notion that signals the entry to capitalist modernity and that is associated with abstract social relations and with the modern constitution of subjectivity. The result of this historical transition is an un-resolvable conflict between these two values and principles, a conflict which is so profound that it would, in principle, make life unbearable within the new social configuration. In order to override this systemic impossibility, four different behavioral attitudes have been developed throughout the history of modernity to serve as survival strategies. They share the common objective that translates this impossibility into a practical way of life within capitalism. Bolívar Echeverría calls the principle of such a strategy of survival an *ethos* and he distinguishes four such *ethoi*, each of which pursues a different strategy:

3. Among many texts that articulate this opposition, often used as a foundation for identity constructions, see: José Ortega y Gasset's essay “Hegel y América” (“El Espectador VII,” in *Obras completas*, Madrid, Santillana/Fundación José Ortega y Gasset, 2004, vol. II, pp. 667-679) and José Lezama Lima's collection of essays *La expresión americana* (Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993 [first edition, 1957]).

The realist ethos

This *ethos* aims to make the contradiction within the system disappear, or at least to neutralize it. Its strategy consists in naturalizing the logic that derives from the exchange value by presenting it as the only possible reality. This reality then seems to present the lost concrete values, among others, in the illusionary form of products of consumption (*Konsumgüter*). This *ethos* emerged within the context of USA hegemony, where it is still dominant and in the Empire that is the result of this hegemony.

The romantic ethos

It too, aims to abolish the contradictions. But in opposition to the realist *ethos*, it pursues this aim differently: beyond the negative consequences of the capitalist system, it projects a revolutionary future. In the perspective of this utopian projection, the negative aspects of the system appear as a transitory sacrifice that will make for a better future. In this distant future the concrete logic of the use value should be reestablished in its validity. This specific *ethos* can be narrativized in the modern meta-narrative of the coming revolution.

The classical ethos

The procedure of this *ethos* is quite different from the previous ones. Instead of striving to make the contradictions disappear, or at least to neutralize them, it presents them as a systemic necessity that—for the benefit of society as a whole—, people would have to accept and endure. This expectation is then made bearable by means of the advocacy of a pragmatic ethic with, at its core, altruism as a virtue.

The Baroque ethos

This *ethos*, likewise, seeks to recognize the systemic contradictions and to make them bearable. Though, in opposition to the classical ethos, it does not renounce its claim to a natural social praxis and in which the logic of the use

value would maintain its validity. This claim is reaffirmed amidst its adaptation to the concrete consequences of the logic of exchange value. It appears, then, that this *ethos* manifests itself as a heterogeneous strategy that in itself might seem paradoxical.

Of these four *ethoi* it is quite evident that Bolívar Echeverría privileges the “Baroque *ethos*.” Why? I can surmise two reasons, the first being political, the second related to identity. In his conceptualization, the Baroque *ethos* can be easily interpreted and translated to political terms. It becomes a strategy of resistance against capitalist modernity, and within the negative form of life, it is conditioned by this very same modernity. Beyond this resistance it fosters the—revolutionary—hope for the re-conquest of a concrete, non-capitalist form of life. And with this hope, opens the likelihood of finding a way out of the capitalist system of modernity. Thus, Bolívar Echeverría conceives an alternative to the dominant paradigm of modernity that is in crisis and envisages another kind of modernity. Not only as a romantic utopian projection that will never be attained, but as a concrete social praxis whose radicalization contains a real revolutionary potential. It is evident that this no-more-capitalist or post-capitalist modernity, as a revolutionary projection, remains quite vague in his texts. But what is relevant is the fact that his concept “Baroque *ethos*” not only reintegrates the Baroque into modernity as one of its strategies of survival, but also presents a manifest attitude of resistance towards capitalist modernity, with the promise of a concrete access to another kind of modernity.

The second interesting aspect of Bolívar Echeverría’s reconceptualization of the Baroque is its impact on, and contribution to the ongoing debate on Latin American identity. His theory of the Baroque *ethos* is indeed linked to the Americanist discourse. With Alejo Carpentier, the essayist, for instance it shares its roots in a typological approach, such as proposed by Eugenio D’ Ors. This approach sees the Baroque as a general cultural paradigm or type that can be activated in various chronotopes, although Bolívar Echeverría restricts this generality by inscribing it within the historical framework of modernity as we have seen. One of these possible chronotopes is Latin America, for which he sets the *terminus post quem* within the inception of the Iberian colonial enterprise. Bringing his re-conceptualization of the Baroque “home” to Latin America and articulating its bearing on the ongoing discourse of Latin American constructions of identity.

His intervention in this discourse is quite original in so far as he rejects any essentialist position, at the outset. Cultural, social as well as political col-

lective identities are not pre-given substances, permanent and stable contents, and cannot be derived from instances that are not products of human processes. Thus, the Baroque does not constitute a Latin American identity *per se*, as he states quite clearly when he writes:

Baroque *ethos* can be nothing other than the beginning of an ordering of the life world [...] but not the core of an “identity,” if one understands it as the inertia of a community’s behavior—“Latin America,” in this case—, condensed in history to the extent that it constitutes a peculiar type of mold in which exclusively its members are made. To substantiate Latin Americans’ uniqueness, happily folklorizing them as “Baroque,” “magical realists,” etc., is to invite them to take on, with somewhat doubtful pride, the same old qualifiers that the discourse taken from other modalities of modern *ethos* have always used to relegate Baroque *ethos* to the non world of pre-modernity and to thus cover up the effort of integration, deformation and refunctionalization of its peculiarities with which they have imposed themselves.⁴

Insofar as the Baroque *ethos* has to do with Latin American identity, it is not substance but process. As we have seen, *ethos* refers to an attitude, to a behavior, to a strategy and brings about the “ordering of the life world.” It is a dynamic process of a performative nature. And the Baroque *ethos* develops a very particular dynamic in Latin America, because it is tied into the process of miscegenation. In this sense, Bolívar Echeverría seems to agree with authors such as Carpentier once again, though he conceptualizes miscegenation in a particularly dialectic manner. Within the process of colonization, the dominant European culture destroys the indigenous culture, but

4. “El *ethos* barroco,” in *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural y ethos barroco* (n. 2), p. 28: “El *ethos* barroco no puede ser otra cosa que un principio de ordenamiento del mundo de la vida [...] pero no el núcleo de ninguna ‘identidad’, si se entiende a ésta como una inercia del comportamiento de una comunidad —‘América Latina’, en este caso— que se hubiese condensado en la historia hasta el grado de constituir una especie de molde peculiar con el que se hacen exclusivamente los miembros de la misma. Substantivar la singularidad de los latinoamericanos, folclorizándolos alegremente como ‘barrocos’, ‘realistas mágicos’, etcétera, es invitarlos a asumir, y además con cierto dudoso orgullo, los mismos viejos calificativos que el discurso proveniente de las otras modalidades del *ethos* moderno ha empleado desde siempre para relegar al *ethos* barroco al no-mundo de la pre-modernidad y para cubrir así el trabajo de integración, deformación y refuncionalización de sus peculiaridades con el que ellas se han impuesto sobre él” (trad. de Emilie Carreón).

the descendants of the colonizers, in order to survive far from their respective metropolis, have to integrate the ruins of the very same indigenous cultures into their behavior, thus transforming their own European identity. Viewed from the perspective of the colonized: in order to survive in the hostile context of cultural destruction and domination, indigenous people are obliged to adopt and reproduce European codes of behavior, they devour the identity of the dominating other, thus transforming it decisively. Bolívar Echeverría uses the term “*codigofagia*” to designate this process:

Miscegenation [...] is [...] a semiotic process that could well be called “codephagic” [*codigofagia*]. The singular and concrete sub codifications or configurations of that which is the code of human kind seem to have no other way to coexist in themselves other than devouring one another; that of destructively striking at the core of the constitutive symbolization they have before them, appropriating and integrating, submitting themselves to an essential alteration, the surviving living remnants of itself.⁵

Thus, miscegenation is a double survival strategy in which both, colonizer and colonized, view their respective identity as different cultures radically transformed. This general logic of miscegenation—which, by the way, comes close to Hegel’s dialectic of the master and the slave, or to Fernando Ortiz’ logic of “cross-culturalization,” and which reproduces elements of the Brazilian metaphor “anthropophagy” to represent inter-cultural processes—, is then reinserted within a specific Latin American context:

In 17th century Spanish America it is the dominated who first instigate and execute the codephagic process, a means by which the dominators’ code transforms itself in the assimilation of the ruins in which the destroyed code survives.⁶

5. Ibid., p. 34: “El mestizaje [...] se trata [...] de un proceso semiótico al que bien se podría denominar ‘codigofagia’. Las subcodificaciones o configuraciones singulares y concretas del código de lo humano no parecen tener otra manera de coexistir en sí que no sea la del devorarse las unas a las otras; la del golpear destructivamente en el centro de simbolización constitutivo de la que tienen enfrente y apropiarse e integrar en sí, sometiéndose a sí mismas a una alteración esencial, los restos aún vivos que quedan de ella después” (trad. de Emilie Carreón).

6. Ibid., p. 36: “En la España americana del siglo xvii son los dominados los incitadores y ejecutores primeros del proceso de codigofagia a través del cual el código de los dominadores se transforma a sí mismo en la asimilación de las ruinas en las que pervive el código destruido” (trad. de Emilie Carreón).

and constitutively linked up with the Baroque *ethos*:

The strategy of cultural miscegenation specific to the Iberian American tradition is a Baroque strategy, that perfectly coincides with the characteristic behavior of European modernity's Baroque *ethos*.⁷

The result is the solid configuration of Latin American identity with modernity, miscegenation and Baroque *ethos*. And in view of this alignment, one is entitled to wonder whether a Latin American collective subject would be particularly called upon to perform the revolutionary defeat of capitalist modernity.

In a more recent, and still unpublished essay he presented in Toronto at the 2007 conference "Moving Worlds of the Baroque" under the title "Meditaciones sobre el barroquismo," Bolívar Echeverría elucidates on the Latin American specificity of the "Baroque *ethos*." In the second part of his essay entitled "El guadalupanismo y el *ethos* barroco" he engages in a polemic debate with Edmundo O'Gorman in regards to the collective initiator of the Baroque survival strategy in Latin America. While O'Gorman ascribes the origin of Baroque miscegenation to the *criollos*, descendants of Spanish colonizers, he insists on locating it within the defeated and uprooted indigenous peoples. Instead of building their States in the *reducciones* under the guidance of the Jesuits, they were obliged to settle in new colonial cities, where their only chance of survival and resistance resided in the Baroque *ethos*:

The Baroque identity which has been taken on by a good part of Latin America's population throughout considerable periods of its history—an identity made manifest [...] by the forms of their everyday life and politics—had already had its' origin in the 16th century, in a manner of conduct spontaneously conceived by the Indians who survived in the new cities, once their parents were defeated in the conquest of America by Iberian Europe; a form of behaviour originated in Mexico and Peru, that would become rooted and generalized throughout America in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁸

7. Id.: "La estrategia del mestizaje cultural propia de la tradición iberoamericana es una estrategia barroca, que coincide perfectamente con el comportamiento característico del *ethos* barroco de la modernidad europea" (trad. de Emilie Carreón).

8. "Meditaciones sobre el barroquismo," ms., 2007, p. 12: "La identidad barroca que ha asumido una buena parte de la población latinoamericana a lo largo de considerables períodos de

In the religious domain, Bolívar Echeverría finds this Baroque behavior best exemplified by *guadalupanismo*:

It is difficult to find a clearer example of the Baroque behavior that would spread through Latin American societies beginning in the 17th century than that found in this alteration of Christian religiosity as conducted by the Guadalupan Indians of Mexico in the 16th century.⁹

Since *guadalupanismo* holds deep historical roots and given its manifestations are still alive, this example also portrays the longitudinal dimension of Bolívar Echeverría's theorization of the Baroque. His concept of Baroque *ethos* can easily be carried over from the historical Baroque to the contemporary period and applied to the Neobaroque phenomena in contemporary culture and society. This is just one more example of the scope, the originality and the importance of his intervention in the debate on the Baroque.

This all too sketchy and rapid review of some of Bolívar Echeverría's writings on Baroque and Neobaroque themes should suffice to evidence his seminal contributions to both fields of study. Throughout it I have also tried to show the relevance of his thoughts and the magnitude of the loss suffered by his demise, though, concurrently, I am convinced that his work on the Baroque holds the potential of being applied in the future to generate future research. His work will live on, and we can best honor his memory by activating it in our own research. ❀

su historia —identidad que se ha hecho manifiesta [...] en las formas de su vida cotidiana y su política— tiene su origen ya en el siglo xvi, en una forma de comportamiento inventada espontáneamente por los indios que sobrevivieron en las nuevas ciudades, después de que sus padres fueron vencidos en la conquista de América por la Europa ibérica; forma de comportamiento que originándose en México y en el Perú se afianzará y generalizará por toda América en los siglos xvii y xviii” (trad. de Emilie Carreón).

9. Id., p. 19: “Es difícil encontrar un ejemplo más claro del comportamiento barroco que se extenderá en las sociedades latinoamericanas desde el siglo xvii que el de esta alteración de la religiosidad cristiana llevada a cabo por los indios guadalupanos de México en el siglo xvi”.