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Billotte, Katie

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# THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

## DEFINING EUROPE IN LATIN AMERICA

Katie Billotte

Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany/ CUNY, New York City, USA

*ABSTRACT - This article will examine the construction of 'Europe' and 'European' in Latin America from the early twentieth century through the present. It will explore how Latin Americans have defined 'Europe,' with particular attention to distinctions which have been made among various national identities. Latin American engagement with European culture has, by its nature, been more fraught than in other regions where the complete rejection of European culture might be a more viable option for those engaged in the project of a postcolonial (re)assertion of identity. Defining Europe is ultimately an exercise in the assertion of identity, regardless of who is undertaking that definition. By engaging the Latin American discussion of what defines Europe, it is possible to highlight critical issues in that definition and its relationship to larger questions of identity. This paper will attempt to grapple with those issues and in doing so provide a unique and relevant perspective on what Europe might be.*

In recent years there has been an ever increasing interest in defining Europe. The reformation and reappraisal of Europe and its place in the geopolitical order has been an important feature of post-war thought, as the loss of overseas territories shapes the political and psychological realities of the continent (which is, more often than not, no longer The Continent). In this sense, Europe itself is every bit as much 'postcolonial' as those regions which were formally colonised by Europeans. For this reason, the national and regional identities developed in regions normally identified as postcolonial in relationship to Europe are remarkably helpful in coming to a comprehensive view of what Europe means today.

This article aims to seek a non-European perspective on the definition of Europe by focusing on the perception and construction of Europe within Latin America. Since the period of formal political colonisation (which here is roughly defined as lasting from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century) is critical in understanding the world's perception of Europe and Europe's perception of the world. For this reason, it is particularly helpful to examine how Europe has been constructed in Latin America, the first site of European colonisation in the modern era.

While Spain and Portugal, the first European colonisers of Latin America, might seem the obvious templates on which Latin American concepts of Europe are based, the actual picture is much more complicated. One complicating feature is the now century-long intervention of the United States in the region. This long history of intervention in Latin American affairs (like most histories of such interventionism) has not been a happy one. "Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos" (Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States) goes the old refrain widely attributed to Don Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's most famous revolutionary-cum-dictator. This is a sentiment that is not only familiar to Mexico but to the other nations south of the United States border.

The political consequences of American interventions in Latin America have been well-documented. The aesthetic and cultural consequences however have been less thoroughly examined. Yet these manifestations offer the best possibility to see the circumstances which have shaped the Latin American conception of Europe. This conception was largely formed by the Francophile impulses that emerged as a response to the American involvement in Latin America. France has, in many instances, become the foil for the United States, and embracing French culture and a French conception of 'Europe' has proven to be a very effectual way of culturally combating American neo-imperialism in a way that is (as we shall see) not completely alien to the historical realities in the region.

This French-American dichotomy is a paradigm that is not only seen in Latin America. In the twentieth century, particularly since the end of the Second World War, Franco-American antagonism has run the gambit from the serious to the silly. Everyone knows that an ‘American in Paris’ should result in much entertainment and we need not forget ‘freedom fries’. The idea of the United States and France representing two opposite, competing poles has manifested itself in a variety of ways, mainly within the two nations in question – which is what makes the Latin American case so fascinating. Latin America, particularly the Latin American Left, has entered into this debate heavily on the side of France. Lacan, for example, is taught in the psychology departments of universities throughout Latin America – something that almost never happens in North America or in Europe outside of France where Lacan has largely been relegated to modern language departments. Moreover, politicians and political theorists in Latin America sprinkle their talk with concepts like ‘Republican universalism’ and rail against Anglo-Saxon contamination of labour laws in a way that would make any Frenchman proud.

The French affinity of Latin American political language dates to the French Revolution, which along with its American counterpart is largely responsible for independence movements throughout the region. Latin America was one of the first sites of European colonialism, but it was also one of the first regions to gain independence. The period of Latin American revolutions against the European powers, therefore, coincides with and relates to the revolutionary upheaval of nineteenth-century France. Napoleonic reforms to the civil and criminal code deeply influenced newly formed Latin American nations and continue to shape the legal and political landscape of those countries.

The adoption of French law by Latin American nations was not solely a matter of military conquest (though that undeniably helped). This was also a conquest of ideas as the principles of the French Revolution spread and were

reflected in legal practice. The example of Mexico highlights the relationship between these two kinds of French intervention in the region.

Taking advantage of Spain's occupation by Napoleon's troops, Mexico declared its independence from Spain on 16 September 1810. In 1814, seven years after Napoleon's army left, Spain recognised Mexican independence.<sup>1</sup> The period following independence was one of great upheaval in Mexican life. Mexico lost nearly half of its territory to the United States in 1848 at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War. There was persistent and violent civil conflict between Liberals and Conservatives, and by the 1860s the country was heavily in debt. In 1861 the Mexican president, Benito Juárez, suspended interest payments on foreign debts, a move which enraged Mexico's primary creditors: France, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In response, the three creditor nations signed the Convention of London in which they agreed to occupy Port Veracruz in order to force repayment. While all three nations initially agreed not to pursue territorial claims in Mexico, Napoleon III had different ideas and ultimately installed Maximilian, Archduke of Austria as the puppet emperor of Mexico. Maximilian's actual reign was quite brief: by 1867 he had been captured and executed by Liberal forces. However, the consequences of the French intervention in Mexico were significant.

Although his reign was supported largely by Mexico's conservative landowners, who feared the repercussions of the French Revolution, Maximilian himself had been deeply influenced by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment ideas that had created it. He brought with him notions of liberalism that were quite different from those promulgated in the United States, which had hitherto been the primary source of not only resources but also ideology for Mexico's Liberals.<sup>2</sup> One of the results of the new French influence on Mexican liberalism was the adoption of a penal code in 1871 which was heavily derived from the Napoleonic Penal Code. The importance of France's influence on Latin American political thought is difficult to overestimate. Not only has French political and legal philosophy found its

1. It is important to note for our purposes here that Spanish recognition of Mexican independence came one year before Spain adopted a new penal code that was largely inspired by the French penal reforms.

2. For an introductory comparison of the American Revolution and the French Revolution, see John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

way into practical application throughout Latin America, but France has also provided an intellectual framework for democratic government which is not obviously tied to the United States, a country that has arguably frequently undermined the execution of democratic principles in the region.

All this is to say, that for many in contemporary Latin America to imagine Europe is to imagine France. Not necessarily as France is, but as what it could symbolise—something that is not American and where artists instead of cowboys are famous, where culture and fashion rule the day and everyone is very, very sophisticated.

#### WE ARE THE PRIMITIVES: FRENCH PRIMITIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA

3. John Beverley, "The Impossibility of Politics: Subalternity, Modernity, and Hegemony," in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ileana Rodriguez (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 55-57. Also see Alberto Moreiras, "A Storm Blowing from Paradise: Negative Globality and Critical Regionalism," 94-96; and Josefina Saldana-Portillo, "Who's the Indian in Aztlán?: Re-writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanism from Lacandón," 402-423, both in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*; and Thomas Davis Schoonover, *The French in Central America: Culture and Commerce 1820-1930* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000).

4. Angel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1984), 120.

The translation of this affinity from politics to literature and art provides an even more remarkable picture of a mutual staring contest. It is, perhaps, in Latin America where the hybrid nature of (post)colonial culture has been most pronounced.<sup>3</sup> It is in Latin America that the real or imagined pre-colonial past is most distant, creating limitless peril in artistic assertions of identity. The famed twentieth century Uruguayan writer Angel Rama said of Latin American literature:

The literatures of Latin America, those born under the violent imposition of a ruthless colonial regime, blind and deaf to the humanist voices who recognised the rich otherness of America; Latin American literatures, progeny of the rich, varied, elite, popular, energetic, savoury Hispanic civilisation, then at its zenith; Latin American literatures, offspring of the splendid languages and sumptuous literatures of Spain and Portugal; Latin American literatures have never resigned themselves to their origins, nor ever reconciled themselves with their Iberian past.<sup>4</sup>

The indigenous, pre-'Columbian' past however has proven just as difficult

to reconcile with as the Iberian one. As both a political and aesthetic matter, 'traditional' indigenous culture has proven important within the Latin American context. The pre-Columbian 'Indian' has been an important symbol of an independent Latin America that exists separate from European and American colonialism. Yet even this seemingly independent source of identity is deeply linked to European conceptions of the 'Other' and of Latin American conceptions of Europe.

The effects of primitivism as an ideological and aesthetic ideal have proven very important in the creation of Latin American art and literature. As an historical, political, and aesthetic phenomenon, primitivism is a set of concepts, as opposed to any one unified model.<sup>5</sup> In 1935, Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas argued in *History of Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* that there are two principle types of primitivism. The first is a 'chronological' or historical primitivism which posits that history is the story of decline from the Golden Age that existed at humanity's origin. The second is 'cultural' primitivism, a cultural attitude in which urban, 'civilised' people express a dissatisfaction with the ultimate outcomes of civilisation and imagine that the lives of those living in more natural and rustic surroundings, such as a rural peasantry or foreign tribal groups, experience greater happiness or plenitude.<sup>6</sup> Lovejoy and Boas establish here a system for understanding primitivism that nicely reflects the situation in Latin America.

It is important to note that both these ideological systems predate colonialism and were fundamental in the establishment of colonial ideology. European perceptions of native people were indelibly influenced by utopian and pastoral imagery from Classical antiquity; arguably, these images were as influential in shaping colonialism as the Christian concept of evangelism and the evangelical efforts of Counter-Reformation Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> Unlike their French and English counterparts further north, the native people that the *conquistadores* first encountered in the New World were not, by and large, the hunter-gatherers that conventional primitivism would desire. The Aztec,

5. Eric Camayd-Freixas, "Narrative Primitivism: Theory and Practice in Latin America," in *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America*, ed. Eric Camayd-Freixas and Jose Eduardo Gonzalez (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 100-125.

6. Ibid.

7. David A. Lupton, *Romans in a New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006), 140-53; 265-93. Also see José Rabasa, "Utopian Ethnology in Las Casas' Apologetica," in *1492-1992: Re/Discovering Colonial Writing*, ed. René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini (Minneapolis: The Prisma Institute, 1989), 263-291.

Mayan, and Incan empires were vast, urban, and highly developed. This glaring fact certainly complicated the creation of a colonial ideology for the first Spanish conquerors.<sup>8</sup> However, after much debate the notion of the indigenous peoples of the New World, as well as those indigenous populations of subsequently colonised lands, as primitive savages in need of Europe's civilising influence emerged as the principal model of discourse. Later colonial powers such as Britain and France did not experience the same level of anxiety around these issues as the first Spanish colonisers. Debate, if any, on the subject did not centre on whether or not subject populations were 'primitive' but whether or not the attainment of civilisation was a wholly good thing.<sup>9</sup> We need look no further than Shakespeare's Caliban to see this question in effect. There is no arguing that prior to his contact with Europeans Caliban was in all ways 'savage' and yet Caliban is quick to note that "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!"<sup>10</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, this had become the focus of the colonial debate. As independence movements swept through Latin America, greater and greater emphasis was given to the native past. This was particularly appealing to the middle classes who not only made up the base of revolutionary support, but where overwhelmingly mestizos, that is of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. This class had been denied political and social power on account of its indigenous heritage. Reclaiming that heritage was not only politically expedient, but personally empowering. The empowering aspects of this reclamation were not lost on the leaders of the Chicano Movement in the United States. The construction of Chicano ethnic identity was heavily focused on the indigenous aspects of mestizo identity and was even marked by sporadic attempts to reintroduce the Nahuatl language of the Aztec.

Yet this reclamation of a non-European history was - ironically - largely influenced by aesthetic trends coming out of Paris. The icon in most Western

8. Lupher, *Romans in a New World*, 9-58.

9. Camayd-Freixas, "Narrative Primitivism", 100-125. Maxwell A. Cameron and Brian W. Tomlin, *The Making of NAFTA: How the Deal Was Done* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

10. The *Tempest* I.ii.366-68.



minds of artistic primitivism is Paul Gauguin fleeing the refined environs of Paris to the natural backwater of Tahiti. This story, among other things, is a very colonial narrative, even as it seems to celebrate the colonised society as a better way of life than that of the coloniser. Gauguin is celebrated for some kind of triumphant return to a more natural way of life. In the words of Eric Camayd-Freixas in his brilliant essay “Narrative Primitivism: Theory and Practice in Latin America”:

This idea that the modern psyche somehow harbours the primitive or encompasses it, as it were, as part of its patrimony, suggests an absorption of the Other into the same, an act of cultural cannibalism, ultimately another way of proclaiming the ‘universality’ of modern Western man.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these obviously colonialist and imperialist overtones, aesthetic primitivism proved enchanting to Latin American artists and intellectuals seeking a means of creating a cultural identity outside of the colonial context.

## MAGICAL REALISM

It is from this desire to reclaim the primitive, or rather to reclaim the indigenous cultural heritage, that magical realism in Latin America was born. Magical realism gains its strength from its ability to accommodate local epistemological systems and conversely challenge the epistemological boundaries which have governed Western thought – arguably from the Renaissance onwards, but certainly since the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> There are several ways in which magical realism challenges these boundaries. Perhaps most notably, magical realism embraces a mystical conception of time. Camayd-Freixas, once again, expresses it best when he writes the following:<sup>13</sup>

Time for primitive man does not flow in a straight line but follows natural, liturgical, or ritual cycles, such that men who live today meaningfully repeat the archetypal, transcendental actions of

11. Camayd-Freixas, “Narrative Primitivism”. Cameron and Tomlin, *The Making of NAFTA*, 110.

12. Robert A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologization* (Leiden: Brill, 1974). Also see Paulos Gregorias, *A Light Too Bright: The Enlightenment Today* (Albany: SUNY Pres, 1992).

13. Camayd-Freixas, “Narrative Primitivism”. Cameron and Tomlin, *The Making of NAFTA*, 116-117.

their mythical ancestors, and associate their reality with a primeval age.<sup>14</sup>

This circular conception of time is radically different than the modern linear chronology and has many cultural consequences. The Messianic natures of all the Abrahamic faiths impose upon time a linear trajectory which will flow predictably from Creation to the Final Judgment. This is certainly not a feature of many non-Abrahamic faiths which look to circular chronology. The chasm between these two views can be seen in all the cult hype in Western societies surrounding the conclusion of the Mayan calendar in 2012. While it is fashionable in Western media to associate the end of the Mayan calendar with 'the end of the World', the understanding of this date as the end of a cycle which will lead into other cycles is much more in keeping with Mayan understandings. Magical realism is true to the ideals of primitivism expressed by Gauguin and others when it rejects the Western notion of linear time in favour of a cyclic chronology.

Magical realism also defies modern Western notions by adopting a perspective that embraces the unity of the natural and the supernatural and accepts a mythic causality to events.<sup>15</sup> In the past three hundred years, Western science (and consequently Western society) has made a radical break from the past moving beyond the traditional Western dualism of body and spirit to an epistemological position which completely denies the existence of a spiritual dimension. This is a radical break from the whole of human history which has, at the very least, posited the existence of a spiritual realm. In fact, the importance of the spiritual dimension often outweighed that of the material and was seen as influencing the events within the material world. Spirits, curses, and oracles have been a consistent feature in human societies from their earliest days. Though Western modern culture has attempted to divorce itself from this kind of superstition, it is important to remember that it was not long ago that the relics of saints were sold as cures on the streets of Europe and that the last trial for witchcraft in the United States took place in

14. Ibid.

15. Camayd-Freixas, "Narrative Primitivism". Cameron and Tomlin, *The Making of NAFTA*, 118-121.

1878. Magical realism not only reclaims this older epistemology, it reaffirms and legitimises it by re-normalizing it. The characters of a Garcia Marquez novel give no more thought to the appearances of spirits than they do to the passing winds. The cultural authority which this asserts works to powerfully subvert the dominant, Western discourse of empiricism.

By writing in a literary style that is paradoxical to contemporary Western framing, Latin American literature in general and magical realism in particular could have completely alienated themselves from the dominant literary culture. But the fact is that primitivism, magical realism and other ways in which Latin American literature celebrates the indigenous past do not exist in complete opposition to Western paradigms and aesthetics. They are, as discussed above, part of and in conversation with Western aesthetic understandings, particularly as those understandings relate to the construction of the Other. French primitivism provided for Latin American writers and artists an acceptable Western, European image of themselves. In accepting this image, they also accepted the image of Europe painted within these paradigms. That is they, in many ways, accept the model of the primitive versus the civilised even if that model is dressed up in the longing for a lost innocence.

## CONCLUSION

The sceptre of France looms large over the Latin American conception not only of Europe, but also of its own identity. France has provided Latin America with the ideology of its revolutions and the means by which it could embrace its indigenous past and communicate that past to the larger world. The relationship between Europe and Latin America is now centuries old and it is fair to say that both entities exist not only in relationship to one another, but also largely because of one another even if it is impossible to completely tell what each is.

A native of Aurora, Colorado, Katie Billotte is completing her thesis on French influences in the reception of Greek and Roman tragedy in contemporary Latin America at the University of London. She earned a B.A. in Classics from the University of California, Berkeley in 2005.