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John Beverley

THE NEOCONSERVATIVE TURN IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

This paper argues that we are witnessing a neoconservative turn in Latin American literary and cultural criticism. That turn is doubly paradoxical: first, because it occurs in the context of the recent re-emergence of the Latin American left as a political force; second because the turn itself comes principally from the left. The latter consideration is not an entirely new one, of course: it was also the case of Borges and Octavio Paz in a previous generation, for example. I will come back to the question of Borges and his role as a signifier of Latinamericanism at the end.

I am going to consider here three cases that I think represent the neoconservative turn. The first is the book *La articulación de las diferencias* by the Guatemalan writer Mario Roberto Morales, published originally in 1998, with a second edition in 2002. The second is Mabel Moraña’s 2003 essay “Borges y yo. Primera reflexión sobre ‘El etnógrafo’.” The third, which I will deal with somewhat more extensively, is Beatriz Sarlo’s book on testimonio, *Tiempo pasado*, published in 2005.

Broadly speaking—and this is of course a vast overgeneralization—there have been two major innovative tendencies in Latin American literary criticism since the early 1980s. One might be defined as the “social criticism” or (not exactly the same thing) the “social history” of Latin American literature. It follows parallel to or in the wake of, principally, Angel Rama’s work, especially his posthumous *La ciudad letrada* of 1984. This tendency is associated both politically and methodologically with the left. The second tendency involves the grafting of French theory, especially Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida (and sometimes Lacan and French feminism), onto a previous philological model of Latin American literary studies. (It is represented in the North American academy most influentially, perhaps, by Roberto González Echevarría). While this second tendency is deeply dependent on deconstruction and poststructuralism, it tends to distance itself from the usually leftist political inflection of French theory. Its own stance is generally either anti-leftist or skeptical of the claims of the left. Some figures like Josefina Ludmer, Nelly Richard, Julio Ramos, Mary Louise Pratt, or Alberto Moreiras might be said to represent a liminal or intermediate space between these two tendencies, one that uses the tools of deconstruction and genealogy, but with a left-liberal or left-feminist agenda.

A third tendency arises in the ’90s, represented by the Latin American articulations of cultural studies and then postcolonial studies. What I am calling the neoconservative turn emerges primarily as a reaction to this third tendency on the part of critics who to a large extent were associated with the first of them—that is, the “social criticism” of literature.
I apologize if I seem to be laboring the obvious, but before moving on it might be useful to pause briefly to distinguish between neoconservatism and neoliberalism, particularly since these positions are often blurred in concrete forms of right-wing hegemony, like the Bush regime here, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, or the current PAN government in Mexico. Neoliberals believe in the efficacy of the free market and a utilitarian, rational choice model of human agency, based on a maximization of gain and minimization of loss. In principle, neoliberalism does not propose any a priori hierarchy of value other than the existence of consumer desire as such and the effectiveness of the market and formal democracy as mechanisms for exercising free choice. For those purposes, it is just as well if you prefer pop culture to high culture, salsa to Schoenberg. The dehierarchization implicit in neoliberal theory and policy also entails, therefore, a strong challenge to the authority of intellectual elites in determining standards of cultural value and carrying out cultural critique.

Neoconservatives, by contrast, believe there is a hierarchy of values embedded in Western Civilization and in the academic disciplines—a hierarchy essentially grounded in the Enlightenment paradigm—which it is important to defend and impart pedagogically and critically. That role requires the activity and authority of traditional intellectuals, in the sense that Gramsci used this term (that is, intellectuals who speak as intellectuals in the name of the universal), operating through the university and education system and in the “war of ideas” of the public sphere. In extreme cases, such as the one represented in the US academy by Leo Strauss and his disciples, many of whom (including the recently convicted Scooter Libby) have or had important roles in the Bush administration, some neoconservative intellectuals are skeptical about democracy itself and the ability of the masses to effectively make choices and govern themselves. They argue for the preservation of a facade of formal democracy, but for de facto rule by an educated elite. Neoconservatives favor the humanities, especially the fields of Philosophy and Literature; Economics, by contrast, is the model discipline for neoconservatives.

For neoconservatives, it does make a difference if you are listening to salsa instead of Schoenberg. The key text in that regard is perhaps Daniel Bell’s The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism from the early ‘70s, in which Bell identified a growing split between the highly oedipalized character structure necessary for capitalist production, and the narcissistic, pleasure-oriented character structure elicited by capitalist consumer culture. That distinction, which was also for Bell a distinction between “modern” and “postmodern” cultural regimes, allowed Bell, who himself came from a social democratic background, to claim that he was a liberal in economic policy but a conservative in cultural matters. For purposes of illustration, we could say that in a US context Milton Friedman was a neoliberal whereas Bell was a neoconservative. In a Latin American context, Vargas Llosa (father and son), or the so-called McOndo writers anthologized by Alberto Fuguet, or the tendency in cultural studies that puts a primary emphasis on consumer choice and “civil society,” represent an implicit or explicit acceptance of a neoliberal position. But those—and related—tendencies are something quite different than what I mean here by the neoconservative turn. In fact, in some ways the neoconservative turn in Latin America is directed precisely against such tendencies in cultural production and theory, which dominated the scene in the previous period. To use Raymond Williams’ useful distinction, we could say that neoliberalism is the residual tendency and neoconservatism is, or is bidding to be, the
emergent
tendency in Latin American
cultural and literary studies.
And it arises precisely
at a juncture in which
liberalism is losing to some extent
its hegemony as an
ideology among sectors of the regional
and global bourgeoisie and professional
classes
I will come back to this point.

My ironic use above of the
dichotomy salsa/Schoenberg—which derives
from Adorno’s famous
juxtaposition in The Philosophy of
Modern Music of
Stravinsky
(reactionary) and Schoenberg
(progressive)—to represent the
liberal/neoconservative
distinction may strike some readers as facetious.
I mean it, however, precisely to
invoke the link between leftist
Modernist aesthetic theory,
especially as developed by
Adorno and the Frankfurt School,
and the neoconservative turn in the US since the
70s. For Adorno, Schoenberg’s
cultivation of dissonance and the 12
tone composition
method represented, like Kafka or
Beckett in literature, the force of an
esthetic
modernism capable of blasting open, if only for a
moment, the dominant capital

culture, based on commodity
fetishism and consumer
gratification. Stravinsky, by
contrast, represented for Adorno
what Fredric Jameson calls,
in his essay on
postmodernism, “pastiche” (if you go back to what
Adorno says about Stravinsky
you will find the essential bases for
Jameson’s category of
postmodernism). For Adorno,
the critical, anti-hegemonic
force of culture lies in a notion of aesthetic
force and value
that is not subject to consumer
choice.

If figures like Herbert Marcuse represented a
eft wing articulation of
Frankfurt
School “cultural critique” in the 60s,
there was also a more culturally
conservative
elaboration, which took place
particularly within the group known as
the New
You

Artists, generally Trotskyist
Social Democratic in
orientation, like Bell
himself, who interacted with
Frankfurt School scholars
during their period of exile
in the US. Some of the
earliest forms of the neoconservative in
US thought emerge in the
early 70s in the work of art critics like
Clement Greenberg or
Hilton Kramer as a
reaction to the radicalism of 60s
counter-culture and a defense of
esthetic
modernism. 3 It is this unexpected nexus between
a nominally left position
and neoconservatism that seems to me
particularly interesting, and troubling in the
present

circumstances. That is because the
neoconservative
turn in Latin America can and
does
represent itself, powerfully, as a
position that comes from the left and is
still active
within it. The neoconservative
turn in the US
effectively split both the
New Left and
the Democratic Party in the 70s,
partly along
generational, racial and
ethnic lines, and
in that way
inhibited
the formation of a new,
popular-democratic
historical bloc in
American political

culture. In that way, it
helped pave the way for
the conservative
Restoration of the 80s. If I am correct in my
diagnosis of
neoconservative
turn in
Latin American
criticism, my concern is that it
could similarly
act to inhibit or limit
the
Latin American
left’s goals and possibilities in the
coming period.

With this in mind, let me turn to my
three examples, beginning
with Mario
Roberto
Morales’s La
articulación de las
diferencias. (For the record, I
should note that La
articulación de las
diferencias was based on a
doctoral dissertation
Morales completed
under my direction
at the University of Pittsburgh,
and that it bears a
prologue by me.)
Morales
centers his analysis on
the so-called “debate
interétnico” that
developed in the
wake of the 1996
signing of the peace
accords between the
guerrillas and
the government
in Guatemala,
which he
participated in
himself as a
columnist
for the
Guatemalan
daily newspaper
Siglo
Veintiuno.
One of his main
conscerns in his book
is with the
way in which
Rigoberta
Menchú
and her
famous testimony
were
"canonized" in the US
academy by “politically correct” scholars like myself in the name of the “subaltern,” or multiculturalism. He shares that concern with David Stoll in his well-known polemic against Menchú, but unlike Stoll, who intended his polemic as a critique of what he called “postmodernist” tendencies in the social sciences in the US academy, Morales is more concerned with the effects within Guatemala of the academic canonization of Menchú, which, he feels, are to legitimize the emergent discourses (in the ’90s) of pan-Mayan cultural nationalism and identity politics.

Morales’s way of posing the problem of Mayan cultural nationalism stems from a double crisis that crosses his own person: the crisis of the Central American revolutionary left, which he was active in; and the crisis of the concept of the writer as a sort of literary Moses, a “conductor de pueblos,” to borrow Hernán Vidal’s phrase, which was deeply embedded in the cultural practices of the Latin American left in the ’60s and ’70s. The idea of a synergistic relation between literature and national liberation struggle found its most powerful expression perhaps in Angel Rama’s concept of “transculturación narrativa.” Although the idea of transculturation comes from cultural anthropology, and the work of Fernando Ortiz in particular, for Rama, transculturation was something that happened for political or state-related purposes paradigmatically in literature. The Latin American “boom” novel in particular allowed in his view for the representation of a cultural telexology of the national, not without moments of violence, conflict, cultural (and actual) genocide, adaptation or tenacious resistance, but necessary (or inevitable) in the last instance for the formation of an inclusive national-popular culture. Transculturation was meant to be in a sense the cultural or superstructural correlate of the process of economic “delinking” and autonomous national development and modernization advocated by dependency theory.

Morales essentially revives Rama’s idea of “transculturación narrativa,” but now in the newly fashionable idiom of cultural studies and hybridity —La articulación de las diferencias could be read in some ways as a Guatemalan or “glocal” version of Nestor García Canclini’s Culturas híbridas, although it retains a stress on literature in a way that Canclini does not. Morales concedes that texts like Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú and the emerging discourses of Mayan identity politics are born out of conditions of extreme poverty and oppression in a deeply racist neocolonial society, and more immediately from the trauma of the so-called “Mayan Holocaust” represented by the counter-insurgency campaign of the Guatemalan army in the early ’80s. Nevertheless, Morales feels they tend to “essentialize” indigenous identity. Rather than an authentic multicultural democratization of Guatemalan society, he argues, Mayan identity politics propose in effect a negotiation between indigenous elites, the local state, and the global system, a negotiation mediated by liberation theology, postcolonial anthropologists and theorists, and similarly minded NGOs: “Ningun rasgo utópico anima la lucha de la subalternidad étnica en el tercer mundo ni en el primero: se trata de una lucha por insertarse en el sistema establecido [No utopian trace energizes the struggle of subaltern ethnicity in the third world, nor in the first: it is a matter of a struggle for insertion into the established system]” (59). In this sense, he argues, like Stoll about Menchú’s testimonio, that the discourses of Mayan identity politics do not adequately represent, in the double sense of speaking about (that is, mimetically), and speaking for (that is politically), the actual life world of indigenous peoples in their multiple accommodations with both the surrounding ladino, Spanish-speaking world of
the nation and global or transnational cultural flows and products. The fact that one of the most prominent exponents of Mayan identity politics in Guatemala, Estuardo Zapeta, openly took a neoliberal position in the debate lends itself to Morales's argument (perhaps too easily, because Zapeta seems an exception in this regard).

Against the sharp (Morales would say Manichean) indigenous / ladino, dominant/subaltern binaries in both postcolonial theory and Mayan identity politics, Morales advocates instead what he calls a “mestizaje intercultural,” which he understands, very much in the manner of Rama’s “transculturación narrativa,” as a complex and permanent, never completely achieved, process of expression, negotiation, and hybridization of cultural difference. Indeed, in one of the most effective chapters of the book, he argues that Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú is as much a hybrid or “mestizo” text as the novels of Miguel Angel Asturias, which tended to be the target of Mayanist critiques.

Morales' concern in attacking the perspectives of postcolonial studies and multiculturalism and their supposed complicity with indigenous identity politics and social movements is nominally with the reconstruction of the Guatemalan left after defeat of the armed struggle and in the face of the new challenges posed to the Latin American nation-state by neoliberal economic policies like NAFTA/CAFTA and globalization. The notion of a sovereign national space interfered with by foreign interests, including US-style “political correctness” and NGOs, is one of his main concerns. In his view, the rise of indigenous identity politics fragments the potential unity of the nation, which should be based on a commonality that “mestizaje intercultural” both embodies and symbolizes. He concludes that “La negociación interétnica es un asunto interno de Guatemala, y por ello es deseable y conveniente que lo resolvamos los guatemaltecos sin acudir a tutelajes paternalistas [...] El país necesita crearse una ideología nacional lo más integrada posible para enfrentar la globalización con alguna dignidad. Dejemos ya de atrincherarnos detrás de identidades esencialistas como las de indígenas y ladinos, ‘mayas’ y mestizos, y lleguemos a sentirnos todos chapines [Interethnic negotiation is a matter internal to Guatemala, and therefore it is desirable and advisable that we Guatemalans resolve it without turning to paternalistic protection [...] The country needs to create the most integrated national ideology possible in order to confront globalisation with some degree of dignity. Let us stop entrenching ourselves in essentialist identities like ‘Indians’, ‘Ladinos’, ‘Maya’ and ‘Mestizos’ and all of us come to feel like chapines” (419–20).”

On the face of it, there seems little to object to here, especially since Morales makes it clear that he does mean mestizaje in the way Vasconcelos or an earlier Latinamerican did: “el mestizaje intercultural no evade las especificidades culturales ni las diferencias [intercultural mestizaje cannot avoid cultural specificities and differences]” (419). But why put the idea of “interculturality under the rubric of “mestizaje” in the first place then? At this point, I am more interested in describing Morales’s position than arguing with it. But it might help bring what is at issue into focus to ask whether multicultural identity politics is an obstacle to the re-emergence of the left, as Morales seems to feel, or a precondition for that re-emergence? We have all come to understand the contradictions and limitations of identity politics in a neoliberal framework that has no problem with “niche” markets and “difference.” And it goes without saying that all culture is, almost by definition, “hybrid” or transcultured. However, it seems to me at least (but then part of the force of Morales’s argument is to
disqualify my authority to speak in this regard), that a new “interethnic” historical bloc articulated from the left which could bid for hegemony in a country like Guatemala should not be founded on a normative idea of the hybridization of cultural difference or “mestizaje”—rather that it is precisely racial, class, gender, ethnic, linguistic differences (including the actual experience of being mestizo and poor) in a deeply unequal society in every sense that potentialize the left as a genuinely representative and transformative force. Morales seems to feel that mestizaje is necessary as the expression of a “common” ground—something like what Ernesto Laclau calls an “empty” signifier of the political (the figure of Sandino in the Nicaraguan Revolution would be an example of an empty signifier) because the nation-state requires some form of unitary identity to exist as such. But that requirement of a common identity was the problem the formation of postcolonial nation-states in the Americas, including US, posed from the start: the requirements of “citizenship” in a nation-state could not coincide with the territorialities of indigenous social formations or the existence of other nationalities within the supposedly homogenous national space (for example, Spanish-speakers in the US). Can the nation be a culturally plural or heterotopic space, or must it have a “singular” identity (We are all mestizos)? In other words, could it be that it is from multicultural difference that the possibility of reconstituting, or perhaps of constituting genuinely for the first time, the left appears? (I am thinking as I say this of the case of Evo Morales and the Bolivian MAS.) The question concerns not only the means of the left—its forms of organization and strategy—but also the nature of its ultimate goal, which I would see as a society that is at once egalitarian and diverse.

Mutatis mutandis, that is also the question Mabel Moraña’s essay on Borges’s “El etnógrafo” raises for me. The essay expands on and refines certain positions developed in her well-known polemic, “El boom del subalterno,” which appeared in Nelly Richard’s Revista de Crítica Cultural in the late 90s, at a time when the debate about the pertinence of postcolonial perspectives to the Latin American studies was beginning to heat up. Moraña is a major critical voice in her own right, but more importantly perhaps she served in her role as editor of the Revista Iberoamericana and organizer of many conferences and edited collections as a kind of arbiter of the academic field of Latin American literary and cultural criticism for the last ten years or so. So it is not surprising that what is at stake in her essay, which announces itself in the title as an allegory of self, is the relation between the field of Latin American criticism as such and a subaltern “otherness” that threatens to destabilize it.

To recall briefly Borges’ very short short story. A graduate student in anthropology at a mid-western university in the United States, Fred Murdock, spends two years on an Indian reservation gathering materials for his dissertation. In the course of his field work he passes through the rituals of indoctrination into the tribe and receives from the tribal shaman “su doctrina secreta.” He returns to the university, but announces to his advisor that he does not intend to reveal the secret, because it is the process that led him to the knowledge rather than the knowledge itself that he finds important. This renunciation effectively ends his academic career. Borges concludes laconically: “Fred se casó, se divorció, y es ahora uno de los bibliotecarios de Yale.[Fred got married, divorced and is now a librarian at Yale]”

Moraña uses “El etnógrafo” to critique the privileging of otherness in cultural anthropology and cultural theory. The essay gestures towards an acknowledgment of the force of postcolonial and subaltern studies in the Latin American field in recent
years. But what emerges from a close reading of its argument is a discomfort with multiculturalism and identity politics very similar to that expressed by Morales. The precise culprit is not named, but it would not be stretching things too much, I think, to see it as Walter Mignolo and his idea of “barbarian theorizing”—that is, thinking from the place of the other. And, more broadly, perhaps, the project of a specifically Latin American form of postcolonial or subaltern studies, to the extent that, in Moraña’s view, such a project risks the fetishization of an orientalized, pre-theoretical Latin American “other.”

Here are some characteristic passages from the essay that express this concern:

En el menú teórico que el debate postmodernista ha ofrecido a la voracidad disciplinar figuran, entre los platos principales, el del descubrimiento del Otro [...] Notiones como multiculturalismo, subalternidad, hibridación, heterogeneidad, han sido ensayados como parte de proyectos teoricos que intentan abarcar el problema de la diferencia cultural como uno de los puntos neuralgicos del latinoamericanismo actual. Sin embargo, pronto se ha hecho evidente que la simple postulación del registro diferencial no hace, en muchos casos, sino invertir el esencialismo que caracteriza el discurso identitario de la modernidad en distintos momentos de su desarrollo [On the theoretical menu that the postmodern debate has offered to disciplinary greed, there figure among the main dishes: the discovery of the Other [...] Notions like multiculturalism, subalternity, hybridization, heterogeneity have been rehearsed as part of the theoretical projects that try to approach the problem of cultural difference as one of the key points of contemporary Latinamericanism. However, it soon became evident that the simple positing of a differential register in many cases does nothing more than invert that essentialism that characterises the discourse of identity in modernity at different moments of its development] (104).

¿Es la otredad el dispositivo—el subterfugio— a parte del cual el sujeto de la modernidad se reinscribe dentro del horizonte escéptico de la postmodernidad refundando y refunzionalizando su centralidad como constructor/gestor/administrador de la diferencia? [Is otrerness the apparatus -- the subterfuge -- from which the subject of modernity is reinscribed within the skeptical horizon of postmodernity, refounding and reconstituting its centrality as what constructs/manages/administers difference?] (106)

[S]e ha recurrido al concepto de “posiciones de sujeto’ el cual resulta, como Laclau explica, relativamente útil aunque insuficiente para captar el sentido de la Historia como totalidad. Para ser entendida como tal, esta requiere de la existencia de un sujeto capaz de organizar experiencia y discurso para llegar al “conciimiento absoluto” [...] de procesos totales. En muchas teorizaciones, sin embargo, podría alegarse que la reformulacion de la dinámica entre identidad y alteridad se basa justamente en la crisis de la idea de totalidad historica y su sustitucion por el conjunto de microhistorias o historias “menores” abarcables, ellas si, desde posiciones de sujeto variables y acotadas [the resort has been to the concept of 'subject positions' which, as Laclau explains, turns out to be relatively useful although insufficient to capture the sense of History as totality. To be understood as such requires the existence of a
subject capable of organising experience and discourse so as to reach 'absolute knowledge' [...] of total processes. In many theorisations, however, one might claim that the reformulation of the dynamic between identity and alterity is based precisely on the crisis of the idea of historical totality and its replacement by the ensemble of microhistories and 'minor' histories that can be limned from variable and contoured subject positions] (105).9

What is exemplary for Moraña in Borges’ story is Murdock’s act of renunciation itself. Unlike testimonio or theoretical discourses that claim, in the interests of “solidarity,” to let the subaltern speak for itself, or to speak in the name of the subaltern,

El autor de ‘El etnógrafo’ parece sugerir que la culpa del colonialismo no puede ser expiada de manera definitiva—no, al menos, a través de la cultura, no a partir de lo que Clifford llama ‘la arena carnavalesca de la diversidad’, no por las seducciones de la polifonía ni por las promesas de la heteroglosia, ni por la que Homi Bhabha llama ‘anodina nocion liberal de multiculturalismo’ [...] Borges renuncia a articular para el otro y por el otro una posición de discurso y sobre todo renuncia a teorizar acerca de su condicion y su cultura, y aunque le reconoce cualidad enunciativa, afirma con la borrodura de la voz la inutilidad—quizá la improcedencia — de toda traducción (121). [...] Borges nos devuelve a la soledad y a la promesa de la biblioteca [The author of ‘The Ethnographer’ seems to suggest that the guilt for colonialism cannot be expiated in a definitive way — at least not through culture, not on the basis of what Clifford Geertz calls ‘the carnivalesque arena of diversity’, not by the seductions of polyphony nor by the promises of heteroglossia, nor by what Homi Bhabha calls ‘the anodyne liberal notion of multiculturalism’ [...] Borges gives up articulating for and on behalf of the other a position of discourse and above all gives up theorising about his condition and his culture and although he recognises an enunciative quality in him, with the erasure of the voice he asserts the uselessness — perhaps inadvisability — of all forms of translation [...] Borges returns us to solitude and the promise of the library] (122).

Moraña expands on the explicit political implications of this renunciation in a footnote: “Es como Borges rehusara — avant la lettre — transformar ‘demandas de reconocimiento’ que estan llamadas a culminar en politicas identitarias y multiculturales (Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”) en una ‘politica de compulsión’ (Appiah) que obliga al otro a asumir la identidad que le ha sido socialmente construida y asignada por su condición etnico, sexual, político [It is as if Borges refuses — avant la lettre — to transform 'demands for recognition' which are called on to cash out in multicultural and identity politics (Taylor “The Politics of Recognition”) in a 'politics of compulsion' (Appiah) that obliges the other to assume the identity that has been socially constructed and assigned to them by their ethnic, sexual and political condition]” (121, n. 33). But if we are not to have a politically anodyne liberal multiculturalism, or an epistemologically and ethically dubious “anthropological” recuperation of otherness, what is left?

Moraña gestures at several points in her essay to Levinas: she writes, for example, of “un sujeto [que] es representado por Borges bajo la forma de la imposibilidad de conocimiento y la irreductibilidad de la otredad, o sea, por una negatividad no colonizable ni apprehensible [a subject {that}] is represented by Borges under the form of
the impossibility of knowledge and the irreducibility of otherness, or better, by a negativity that can be neither colonised nor apprehended)” (120). But the appeal to Levinas, which seems to be more and more prevalent in the field today, may itself be symptomatic of what I am calling the neoconservative turn. That is because it reduces the problem of difference or subalternity, which is both a political and a cultural problem, to an ethical one, a question of exercising choice, as Murdock does. Borges’s story deals in a strikingly original way with the agency of the academic intellectual in relation to the subaltern; but what neither the story nor Morána’s essay make present is precisely the agency of the subaltern, which in the case of the tribe Murdock studies, might be something like the Mayan identity politics Morales attacks in _La articulación de las diferencias._

The critique of the pretension to speak from or “for” a subaltern other is one thing: it may well be, as Morána argues, echoing Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, that such a pretension represents simply an inversion of the gesture of orientalism—to recall one of the passages in Morána’s essay I cited earlier, “no hace, en muchos casos, sino invertir el esencialismo que caracteriza el discurso identitario de la modernidad. [In many cases, it does nothing more than invert the essentialism that characterises the discourse of identity of modernity]” But what is clear is that the decision to leave the other on the side of silence, “en la otra orilla,” as Morána puts it (122), is also a kind of orientalism, which speaks in the name of the authority of literature to disqualify the effort of indigenous and subaltern subjects to inscribe themselves into history. Because what is asked for in identity politics is not so much the recognition of difference, as the inscription of that difference into the identity of the nation and its history. So the same problem arises as in Morales’ appeal to “mestizaje intercultural”: the possibility of the formation of a new historical bloc a the national, continental and intercontinental levels in Latin America based on alliance politics between social groups (including but not limited to economic classes) with different sorts of experiences, interests, values, world views, histories, cultural practices, sometimes even languages, is disavowed, in favor of a skeptical lucidity represented by the institution of literature and literary criticism that does not succumb to the illusions of an “anthropological” or testimonial appeal to the authority of subaltern voice or experience.

It is the nature of that appeal and of its political consequences that is the object of Beatriz Sarlo’s critique of testimonial and witness narratives— in particular, the voice/experience of the victims of political repression in Argentina during the Proceso— in her _Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo_ [Time Past: The Culture of Memory and the Subjective Turn]. Sarlo’s argument has its roots in an earlier, much anthologized essay by her on cultural studies and the problem of value. There Sarlo was concerned with the way in which standards of literary and aesthetic value were blurred or lost in the appeal to mass or popular culture made by cultural studies, an appeal she characterized as “media neopopulism.” In _Tiempo pasado_, by contrast, her concern is with the way in which the vogue for testimonio weakens the possibility of a deeper literary, historical and sociological reflection on the Proceso and the fate of the Argentine left. But, as we will see, for Sarlo that concern also involves a kind of populism.

The political and ethical authority conceded to testimonio, threatens, in Sarlo’s view, to destabilize the authority of both imaginative literature and the academic social sciences. This is so because it privileges a simulacrum of subaltern “experience” and voice: that is what Sarlo means by the “giro subjetivo” of the title. Although that
privileging is done, usually, in the interests of solidarity and human rights initiatives — for example, *Nunca Más* or the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo—Sarlo feels that it is paradoxically complicit with the market, and in particular with the fashion for confessional or autobiographical narratives (often of film stars or sports figures) in the media. It is almost as if testimonio, instead of being the record of the victims of neoliberalism and at the same time a form of agency directed against it, were itself a product of neoliberalism, a kind of niche market Reality Show of human suffering.

Though Sarlo does not take up the wide ranging discussion /debate over testimonio in the US academy in the 90s, her book might be seen in some ways as a more philosophical version of a book I have already had occasion to mention here: David Stoll’s *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Like Stoll, Sarlo is concerned both with how testimonio erodes standards of disciplinary authority and boundaries, and how it engenders a new form of “subjective” politics: solidarity politics, founded on empathy, and identity politics, founded on the personal perception of loss or injustice in one’s own racial, ethnic, class, or gender identity. In his argument against the authority of Menchú’s testimonio, Stoll claimed, for example, that “…it was in the name of multiculturalism that Rigoberta Menchú entered the university reading lists” (243). “Under the influence of postmodernism (which has undermined confidence in a single set of facts), and identity politics (which demands acceptance of claims of victimhood), scholars are increasingly hesitant to challenge certain kinds of rhetoric” (244). “The identity needs of Rigoberta’s academic constituency play into the weakness of the rules of evidence in postmodern scholarship” (247).

Sarlo similarly attacks what she sees as the pseudo immediacy and authenticity of testimonial voice, contrasting it to what she calls “la buena historia académica” [good academic history] (16). The authority of history has been eroded by the market and media: “Como la dimensión simbólica de las sociedades en que vivimos está organizada por el mercado, los criterios son el éxito y la puesta en línea con el sentido común de los consumidores. En esa competencia, la historia académica pierde por razones de método, pero también por sus propias restricciones formales e institucionales… [As the symbolic dimension of the societies in which we live is organised by the market, the criteria are success and falling in line with the common sense of consumers. In this competition, academic history loses for reasons of method, but also because of its own formal and institutional restrictions]” (17). In the place of a critical or disciplinary thought, we now have a “razón del sujeto [reason of the subject].” The “giro subjetivo” is in turn connected to the prestige of identity as a category and identity politics as a form of political agency: “A los combates por la historia también se los llama ahora combates por la identidad, [Combats over history are now also called combats over identity]” Sarlo observes scornfully (27).

The effect of the “giro subjetivo” is to establish a “hegemonía moral” that must be problematized, Sarlo believes, in the name of a more clear headed sense of both critique and politics. “Del lado de la memoria,” she writes, echoing Stoll without realizing it, “me parece descubrir la ausencia de la posibilidad de discusión y de confrontación crítica, rasgos que definirían la tendencia a imponer una visión del pasado [From the side of memory, it seems to me to discover the absence of the possibility of discussion and critical confrontation, features that would define the tendency to impose a vision of the past]” (57). “Una utopía revolucionaria cargada de ideas [Sarlo is referring to the revolutionary activism of the early 70s in Argentina] recibe un trato
injusto si se la presenta solo como fundamentalmente un drama posmoderno de los afectos [A revolutionary utopia charged with ideas gets an unjust treatment if it is presented as fundamentally a postmodern drama of the emotions/affects]" (91).

Against testimonio and its “version ingenua y ‘realista’ de la experiencia [naive and realist version of experience]” (162), Sarlo privileges three accounts by victims of the Proceso. One is Alicia Partnoy’s quietly vivid collection of short stories or vignettes based on her own experience as a political prisoner, The Little School. The other two are from the social sciences: Pilar Calveiro’s Poder y desaparición. Los campos de concentración en Argentina [Power and Disappearance: The Concentration Camps in Argentina] and Emilio de Ipola’s essay “La bamba.” Sarlo praises Partnoy for her transformation of her own personal experience (Partnoy was imprisoned and tortured in the school she describes in her book) into a work of literature that speaks to the general, shared nature of the situation of disappearance and torture, rather than to her own experience: “No casualmente, The Little School empieza con el relato de la captura de Partnoy contado en tercera persona, de modo que la identificación está mediada por un principio de distancia [It is no coincidence that The Little School begins with the story of Partnoy’s capture, recounted in the third person, so that identification is mediated by a principle of distance]” (71). Both Calveiro and Ipola are social scientists who, like Partnoy, were tortured and imprisoned during the Proceso But, also like Partnoy, in writing about that experience “No privilegien la primera persona del relato […] la experiencia es sometida a un control epistemológico que, por supuesto, no surge de ella sino de las reglas del arte que practican la historia y las ciencias sociales [They do not privilege the first person of the account […] experience is subject to an epistemological control that of course does not emerge from it but from the rules of art that history and the social sciences practice]” (96). “[A]mbos escriben con un saber disciplinario, tratando de atenerse a las condiciones metodológicas de ese saber [Both write with a disciplinary knowledge, trying to abide by the methodological conditions of that knowledge]” (97). “Con el borramiento de la primera persona, la obra de Calveiro no busca legitimidad ni persuasión en razones biográficas, sino intelectuales [With the erasure of the first person, Calveiro’s work does not look for legitimacy or persuasiveness in biographical reasons but in intellectual ones]” (115).

The strong binary between “razones biográficas” and “intelectuales” in this last statement is notable, and betrays a similar tendency throughout the book. Sarlo has to admit that in the case of Calveiro, “probablemente el libro no hubiera sido escrito si no hubieran existido razones biográficas [probably the book would not have been written had there not been biographical reasons]” (115). So why is she so insistent on saying that there cannot be an “intellectual” or aesthetic dimension to a testimonial or autobiographical narrative, or, vice versa, that “razones intelectuales” cannot have a biographical or experiential dimension? How would she propose to distinguish between, say, Augustine’s Confessions and Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia, or Hegel and Kierkegaard?13

Though Sarlo does not make the point in so many words in Tiempo pasado, the tendency to impose through a logic of identification or empathy a vision of the past—“imponer una visión del pasado”—is also what concerns her in her recent journalist writing in the Argentine press about what she feels are the semi-authoritarian politics of the neopopulist left in Latin America, including especially for her Kirchner.14 She had spoken before of an “izquierda testimonial, que se refugia en la reafirmación moral-formal
de sus valores, [testimonial left, that would take refuge in the moral-formal reassertion of its values] opposing to it a “political” left that would also be in alliance with an “anti-minetic,” essentially Modernist, cultural left: “Ser de izquierda hoy es intervenir en el espacio público y en la política refutando los pactos de mimesis que son pactos de complicidad o de resignación. [To belong to the left today is to intervene in public space and in politics rejecting the pacts of mimesis that are pacts of complicity or resignation]”15. The “giro subjetivo” of testimonio which its emphasis on affect over critical theory, empathy over analysis, is in that sense the corollary of political neoliberalism for her. Bad cultural practice—the “giro subjetivo”—leads to bad politics (for her, Kirchner, and presumably now his wife too are bad politics). It is best to leave both in the hands of “experts.”

I don’t mean to homogenize the political or critical stances of these three authors. I am sure they would be the first to indicate points of divergence among themselves. But I think we can see several shared themes running through their arguments, at least as I have presented them here:

First is a rejection of the authority of subaltern voice and experience, and an extreme dissatisfaction with or skepticism about multiculturalism (or to use the term preferred in Latin American discussions interculturalidad) and identity politics. In particular, the notion of a multicultural historical bloc, similar to that represented in the United States by the idea of the Rainbow Coalition in the ’70s is rejected or problematized.

Second, there a defense of the writer-critic or traditional intellectual, and of his or her republican-civic function. Related to this defense is a sense in all three writers of belonging to a generation of the left that put itself at considerable risk during a difficult period in each of their respective countries, but that is now middle aged and in the process of being displaced by new political forces and actors on the left. Rather than seeking identification with these new actors, who more often than not do not come from the intelligentsia and either do not share or openly question its values, Sarlo and Morales in particular see them, somewhat ungenerously, as illegitimate or naive.16 Third, in spite of their explicit or implicit rejection of “identity” politics, there is a paradoxical reaffirmation in all three, of a Latin American criollo subjectivity in opposition to what is seen as the Anglo-American character of postmodernist or postcolonial theory. This emphasis, in which there is of course also an “essentialism” (acknowledged by Morales, but not by Morafia or Sarlo), makes the neocorporatist turn a variant of what I have called elsewhere neo-arielism: the assumption that the cultural identity and values of Latin America are bound up in some especially significant way with its written literature.

Fourth, there is in all three a notable failure to come to turns with what Aníbal Quijano has called “the colonality of power” in Latin America—that is, the persistence of cultural/economic/political institutions and racial and gender hierarchies based on colonial forms of rule, long after colonial rule as such in the formal sense has passed from the scene.17 (Morafia and Morales register the problem of colonialism, but see it as one that has been, or can be overcome in the “national” period of their respective countries). This leads in turn to a failure—
particularly striking in the case of Morales, who comes from a country where over half the population is indigenous—to recognize the forms of autonomous political and cultural agency developed by social movements-like the indigenous movements in the Andes or Guatemala, or the women’s movement—against forms of “coloniality of power.”

Fifth, there is in Morales and Sarlo an explicit disavowal of the project of the armed revolutionary struggle of the ‘60s or ‘70s, in favor of a more considered and cautious left, with the suggestion that a similar “error” is at the heart of the new politics of identity and empathy. This involves an implicit biographically specific (as noted, all three writers are in late middle age) narrative of personal disillusion or desengaño, much like that represented by the Baroque picaresque. (In some ways the guerrillero arrepentido has become the picares of contemporary Latin American letters.) Finally, there is in all three, against the disruptions of what Néstor García Canclini once called “nomad sciences,” a reterritorialization and a defense of the academic disciplines. In the case of literature and literary studies in particular, this entails an affirmation of the canon and canonicity (“value,” for Sarlo; Borges for Moraña; Asturias for Morales), not so much as a repository of an a priori cultural value, but as something that has the depth and consistency to be usefully interrogated by new generations.

This last is a crucial point, because the neoconservative turn in Latin America criticism, like the US neoconservatives in the so-called “culture wars,” also makes literature and considerations of literary and aesthetic value a central concern, rather than something that is supplementary or secondary. Sarlo is especially eloquent in this regard at the end of her book: “La literatura, por supuesto, no disuelve todos los problemas planteados, ni puede explicarlos, pero en ella un narrador siempre piensa desde fuera de la experiencia, como si los humanos pudieran apoderarse de la pesadilla y no solo padecerla [Literature, of course, does not dissolve all the problems that have been posed, nor can explain them, but within it a narrator always speaks from outside experience, as though human beings could take control of the nightmare and not just suffer it]” (166). But all three texts, not just Sarlo’s, are “defences of literature,” aimed at policing the frontiers of what is permissible and what is not within the field of academic Latin American literary and cultural criticism, at a moment in which many of its foundational assumptions, including the idea of Latin America itself, have come under question from within and without.

One can argue of course that I am overstating the case and that the kind of critical operation represented by these three texts is something quite different than neoconservatism of the sort espoused by figures like Samuel Huntington, Allan Bloom, or Dinesh D’Souza in the US “culture wars,” for example, or Octavio Paz (in his “late” period) in Latin America. All three writers still consider themselves persons of the left, and think of their positions as precisely as a defence of the left—a left rooted in the ideas of human progress, emancipation, the nation, reason, science, and secularism, a left that is not afraid to ask radical, structural questions about the nature of the state and society, against postmodernist relativism and the “weak” multiculturalism of identity politics. But, while my own position is not an entirely disinterested one (many of the critical points made by Morales, Moraña, and Sarlo pertain directly or indirectly to my own work), I don’t think I am overstating the case. I am trying to capture a tendency that is
emerging, but that has not become fully conscious of itself as such yet, and may move in several different ways (nor do I mean to necessarily conflate the positions of Morales, Moraña, and Sarlo, which have significant points of difference). My guess is that what I am calling the neocorporative turn will remain a tendency within the Latin American left, bidding to influence in an authoritative way its goals and limits (I will touch more on that prospect below). That is, it will be, like Daniel Bell’s position alluded to earlier, “conservative” in cultural matters but “liberal” in political and economic ones. But it is also possible that, as the political situation in Latin America itself becomes more polarized, the neocorporative turn may move to align itself politically with a conservative or center-right position, as happened with the New York Intellectuals in the US and with the so-called New Philosophers and figures like the historian François Furet in France in the wake of May ’68. The examples of Jorge Castaneda in Mexico or Elizabeth Burgos in Venezuela are suggestive of this possible outcome, I think.

The denial of the possibility of transnational solidarity in Moraña and Morales is above all a denial of the ability of the gringo or non-Latin American to understand and “represent” Latin America. In a situation where both Latin America’s past and future involve a confrontation with the power of the United States at all levels, that is fair enough. But there is also, explicitly in Sarlo and Morales and implicitly in Moraña, a denial of the possibility of solidarity between groups of different ethnic, cultural, social and linguistic formation within the confines of a given Latin American nation-state or across national borders in Latin America as a region. Yet solidarity politics and human rights mobilizations are among the most effective forms peoples movements have elaborated both locally and globally against the force of globalization and repressive or anachronistic local states. And the idea of a political movement or front, based on alliance politics rather than a specific party, is essential in many of the new populist “center-left” governments, as Ernesto Laclau has characterized them, that have come to power in Latin America recently.20 While I do not intend by any means to foreclose debate and discussion within the left, or about the left, it seems to me that there is implicit in the neocorporative turn something like the pernicious distinction between the “respectable” left and the “populist” left—“la marea populista,” as the Spanish right wing politician Aznar likes to call it: in other words, Bachelet, Tabáré, and Lula (if he continues to behave himself) versus every one else, especially Chávez, but also López Obrador, Kirchner, Morales, Correa, the Sandinistas, the Cubans... in Chile or Brazil, the “respectable” left is in power. But in Argentina, Bolivia, or Venezuela, it sometimes forms part of the opposition to the governments of the left in power.

It goes without saying that this distinction, which recalls strongly the critique in the early ’70s of the North American New Left, including feminism and black nationalism, by some of the figures who were to become the neoconservatives, has the potential to split the Latin American left and inhibit its emerging hegemonic force at both the national and the continental levels. It is a distinction that more often than not, as in the case of Aznar, is invoked by the Right, usually by raising the specter of Chávez (for example, in the presidential elections in Ecuador last year). For that reason, it is not a distinction that Lula, Tabáré, or Bachelet, understanding that the Latin American left is itself also necessarily diverse and needs to work together, insist on themselves.

Where does the impulse behind the neocorporative turn come from? Let me risk exceeding the boundaries of my own disciplinary competence to suggest that it could
be seen as a superstructural effect of two developments related structurally to the current stage of capitalism and its impact on Latin America:

1. the crisis of certain sectors of the Latin American middle and upper class, including the intelligentsia, affected in contradictory ways by neoliberal structural adjustment policies, the weakening of state support for higher education (and for education generally), and the spread of commercialized mass culture.\(^{21}\)

2. the recent weakening of the hegemony of neoliberalism itself.

Neoliberal ideology is increasingly seen in Latin America and elsewhere as insufficient in itself to guarantee governability. The consequences of neoliberal economic policies produce a legitimation crisis of both the state and the ideological apparatuses, including the school, museums, the family, religious institutions, and the traditional system of political parties. The inherent libertarianism implicit in the “rational choice” model of decision making is unable to serve as a basis for imposing on populations a normative structure of values and expectations. At the same time, the combination of privatization and the spread of commercialized global mass culture destabilizes the cultural authority of a previous system of norms, standards, and hierarchies, and threatens the economic well being of sectors of the upper and professional middle classes that literary intellectuals, whatever their stated ideologies, tend to come from and represent.

Everyone has come to understand—Saskia Sassen is perhaps the most influential theorist of this\(^{22}\)—that global capitalism still requires the nation state in some ways: to keep populations in line, to ensure governability, to impose and maintain civil order, protect investments and private property, and instill a self-disciplined character structure capable of postponing immediate gratification in the expectation of eventual reward (the nation state is like the proverbial “neighborhood policeman” in globalization). The neoconservative turn offers itself, in effect, as a new ideology of professionalism and disciplinarity, centered on the sphere of the humanities, which were particularly devalued and damaged by neoliberal reforms in education, an ideology implemented by and through the state and the state ideological apparatuses to counter the legitimation crisis provoked by neoliberalism.

If this hypothesis is correct, and I emphasize its tentative character, then the neoconservative turn in Latin American criticism could be seen as an attempt by a middle and upper middle class, university-educated, and essentially white, criollo-ladino intelligentsia to recapture the space of cultural and hermeneutic authority from two forces that are also themselves in contention with each other: 1) on the one hand, the hegemony of neoliberalism and what are seen as the negative consequences of the uncontrolled or unmediated force of the market and commercialized mass culture; 2) on the other hand, social movements and political formations based in identity politics or “populisms” of various sorts, which involve new political and cultural actors no longer necessarily beholden to the political or strategic leadership of a university-educated, ethnically European or mestizo intelligentsia.

The disciplinary “modesty” of the critique offered in these three cases, which limit themselves to the academic sphere of literary and cultural criticism, should not conceal their wider ambitions and implications. More or less consciously, and with notable intellectual rigor and eloquence, they deploy a double strategy of interpellation: 1) an appeal to fractions of the bourgeois and professional classes for a new form of cultural hegemony, understood in Gramsci’s sense of “the moral intellectual leadership of the
nation," which incorporates their own disciplinary standards of professionalism and specialization; and, 2) at the same time an attempt to redefine (and confine) the newly emergent project of the Latin American left, nourished from below by very heterogeneous popular-subaltern, and non-criollo or non-mestizo actors, within parameters that continue to be dominated by the intelligentsia and the professional classes.

Both Moraña and Sarlo invoke a return to Borges (and Morales offers a rehabilitation of Asturias, which amounts for our present purposes to the same thing, that is, a defense of literature). Borges, of course, has never entirely disappeared from the horizon of Latin American literary criticism. The reasons for this are not hard to discern: Borges remains in his disillusioned lucidity and his capacity for literary invention perhaps the most interesting Latin American intellectual of the twentieth century. Moreover, that disillusioned lucidity seemed to fit well with the aftermath of the defeat of the revolutionary left and the end of an era of utopian illusions. Borges' own penchant for inhabiting the boundary between self and other, representation and reality, territory and map makes his own writing a kind of Aleph that allows us to read into it, as Moraña does in the essay discussed here, the burning issues of the day: the Other, deconstruction, ethics, testimonio, the subaltern, cultural and postcolonial studies, the dialectics of a peripheral modernity, the Benjaminian "illumination" in a Latin American key. But to read them into Borges, or with Borges is also in a way to limit those issues to Borges—that is, to the space of imaginative literature.

In this way, the appeal to Borges runs the risk of becoming the figure for the neoconservative turn as such, in the same way that T.S. Eliot was for a time in Anglo American criticism. What happens here is a kind of literary-theoretical neutralization of the actual force of the popular classes and groups that are in struggle in Latin America today. As in Moraña's essay, the threat of a subaltern "other"—a potentially lethal and usually racialized presence always at the edges of Borges' stories, as in "El Sur"—which is finally a threat to decent the political and epistemological authority of the "ciudad letrada" as such, is canceled or postponed, and we return to the private and disillusioned, but finally adequate consolations of literature and "la promesa de la biblioteca."

It is not that the appeal to Borges is in itself reactionary. What is problematic rather is the failure in making that appeal to register adequately the connection between Borges' epistemological and aesthetic strategies and his reactionary and often racist political positions.23

I close with the question of Borges, because I think that it is a particularly difficult one for us. Like Cervantes, Borges is literature, and literature is, finally, what we do. To what extent then are we also, individually and collectively, invested in what I am calling the neoconservative turn in Latin American literary and cultural criticism? This is a variant of the question that is at the heart of the Christian Gospels: Whom do you serve? The particular difficulty of the times we live in and of our own institutional location and loyalties is that it is easier to ask this question than to answer it.

Notes


While the neoconservative/neoliberal distinction is important for understanding the special character and circumstances of the Latin American “turn,” which is explicitly anti-neoliberal and anti-postmodernist, one should not make too much of it either. Neoliberalism is an ideology especially directed at the state and the state ideological apparatuses, including education. But neoliberalism, despite its pretense of being anti-statist, also requires the state, and even, in the case of Chile under Pinochet, a “strong” state, among other things to impose privatization and structural adjustment policies on sometimes reluctant populations and to protect private property. From a conservative or reactionary point of view, the ideal would be neoliberal hegemony over economic policy and neoconservative hegemony, with a strong emphasis on cultural nationalism, over cultural institutions, including the school system. In this sense, as in many others, the Pinochet dictatorship has served as a model for subsequent right-wing regimes like Thatcher’s or G. W. Bush’s. On the relationship between neoliberalism and neconservatism, chapter 3, “The Neoliberal State,” of David Harvey’s A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), is useful.

Though there was a strong anti-Stalinist, and frequently Trotskyist strain among the New York Intellectuals, there was also a shift towards a neconservative position on the part of some figures associated with the US Communist Party, like the historian Eugene Genovese, who shared with the New York Intellectuals a visceral dislike of the New Left and ’60s counter-culture.

David Stoll, Rigoberta Menchí and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans (Boulder: Westview, 1999).

As a novelist and essayist in the ’70s and ’80s, Morales was closely identified with the Guatemalan revolutionary left; his first book of literary criticism, La ideología de la lucha armada, was a study of the political poetry of the armed struggle in Central America. He is also the author of an autobiographical novel, or what he calls a “testinovela,” Los que se fueron por la libre, based on his own experiences as a cadre in a small revolutionary group that was eventually expelled from the UNRG, the main coordinating organization of the armed struggle in Guatemala.

Angel Rama, Transculturación narrativa en America Latina (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1982).

Morales (42) provides the estimate that between 100 and 200 thousand indigenous people were killed in Guatemala between 1982 and 1984, and another million displaced from their homes.


Moraña seems unaware in her appeal to totality here, which I take as a code word for Marxism, that the great central section of volume 1 of Capital, on the Struggle over the
Working Day, is composed precisely out of many “small” testimonial histories of workers, strikes, legal appeals, etc. That is because Marx believed that the historical movement of capital, which is his theoretical object, is itself the product of subaltern identity, will, and agency, not something completely separate from those things. Labor “makes” capital, in other words.

10 See, for example, Erin Graff-Zivin ed., Reading Otherwise. The Ethics of Latin American Literary Criticism (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

11 One might take issue with the "sino" in Morañá’s phrase, however, because there is nothing simple about inverting binary essentialisms, particularly if you are at the bottom end of the pair.


13 This is not simply for Sarlo a question of formal elaboration versus unmediated experience, because Sarlo is also harsh about the hyper-formalized film Los rubios by Albertina Carri, which attempts to reconstruct the director’s memory of her parents, who were disappeared when she was three years old during the Proceso. Sarlo sees Carri’s film as a trafficking in “postmemory”—Marianne Hirsch’s idea of the reconstruction by children of survivors of traumatic events like the Holocaust of the memory of that event in their own lives, even though they did not experience it directly themselves. Sarlo sees postmemory (and Carri’s film) as a fundamentally narcissistic construct: e.g., “La inflación teórica de la postmemoria se reduce así en un almacén de banalidades personales legitimadas por los nuevos derechos de la subjetividad” [The theoretical inflation of post-memory is thus reduced to a storehouse of personal banalities legitimated by the new rights of subjectivity] (134). She seems unaware, however, that since Carri was herself directly affected by the Proceso as a child, as she depicts in the film, Los rubios is not strictly speaking a postmemory text, but a kind of testimonio. I owe this insight to Ana Forcinito.

14 See for example her op-ed column on Kirchner in La Nación, 22 June, 2006. My understanding is that Sarlo did not support the recent campaign of Kirchner’s wife to succeed him in the presidency.


16 A similar sense of displacement of an older left intelligentsia seems to be involved in the decisions of many prominent left-wing Venezuelan intellectuals, like Elisabeth Burgos or Teodoro Petkoff, to identify publicly with the opposition to Chávez, or of many writers and artists formerly associated with the Sandinistas to leave the party and join the electoral front organized by Sergio Ramírez. Similar cases could be found in most Latin American countries today.


18 Apropos the armed struggle, Sarlo notes pointedly in her op-ed column attacking Kirchner in La Nación mentioned in an earlier note: “Muchos sabemos por experiencia que se necesitaron años para romper con esas convicciones... No simplemente para dejarlas atrás porque fueron derrotadas, sino porque significaron una equivocación. [Many of us know from experience that years are necessary to break with those convictions... Not simply to leave them behind because they were defeated, but because they signify a mistake] There is much that could be and needs to be said about the armed struggle, but it seems to me one thing to recognize the sometimes tragically
absurd illusions, errors, and utopian fantasies that accompanied this or that form of armed struggle, and another to simply write it off as a vast historical mistake: “una equivocación.” I think it would be more accurate to say that the strategy of armed struggle was defeated in what turned out to be, especially with the weakening and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, an unequal combat with a much stronger enemy, but that it might have been possible to win—indeed, there were at least two not inconsequential victories, Cuba and Nicaragua, several near misses, including Guatemala and El Salvador, and of course the ongoing civil war in Colombia. The new Latin American left, however pragmatically oriented it may be in its present incarnation—and I am certainly not opposed to pragmatism—needs to recover in a positive way the heritage of both the armed struggle and Allende’s “democratic route to socialism,” if only because they represented an important phase of modern Latin American history, rather than simply renounce those experiences as youthful errors...


20 Ernesto Laclau, “Deriva populista y centroizquierda latinoamericana,” www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a26046.html

21 It is interesting to note in this regard that in spite of their own stated distaste for identity politics and testimonio, there is a “biographical” or personal dimension in each of these three critics, including Sarlo.


23 In early twentieth century Marxism, there was a nagging debate over whether a right wing epistemology—the usual culprits were Kantianism or positivism—could co-exist with left wing politics. The question of Borges might be seen as the reverse of this: how does a left wing or nominalist epistemology co-exist with a right wing or conservative politics? That is of course also a question about the nature of the literary Baroque in both Spain and Latin America.

References

