New World Soundings

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The parts of this book represent three longstanding interests: the common history of the Americas, here projected through “speech and expression”; the political cultures of Anglo and Latin America and the ideologies they bring to flower; and the Latin American mote, whichimpairs vision in the Anglo-American eye. The last concern underlies the other two even though my handling of it in part III is informal, at moments ludic. These essays are not to be taken as fresh excavations nor as conclusive pronouncements. They simply reconnoiter grounds for departure. My ideal audience would be fellow North Americans who find the platitudes of the academic and political marketplaces indigestible and might be wondering what America, latu sensu, is all about. Ironically, my writings on these themes have found wider ventilation in Latin America itself, perhaps owing to mental blockages, reviewed in chapter 5, that one encounters in grooming our own “Latin Americanists.”

To start with the hemispheric theme, the hazards of mending or transcending the north-south breach in “American” historiography using tradition recipes were evident in Herbert Eugene Bolton’s 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association, where, despite a plea for fresh research and a “new framework,” his prolegomena to an “Epic of Greater America” did little more than to juxtapose conventional
national histories. A sharp dissent came from the Mexican neo-Hegelian historian Edmundo O’Gorman, who in 1939 criticized Bolton’s “well-intentioned leveling vision” and his sympathy for “what—for causes baffling all reason—is called nowadays the Good Neighbor policy.” This could only produce “a history devoid of the human element, a detailed chronicle of a huge organism indifferent to its salvation or to its perdition.” O’Gorman insisted that Bolton demonstrate a spiritual force coercive of inter-American unity: “He must prove as historical reality the existence of an American culture, one specifically American.” Until then his objective would remain “a beautiful, fallacious illusion.”

Since Bolton, fresh trails have been blazed toward a more coherent vision of Greater America. A modest sampling would include Leopoldo Zea’s América en la historia (America in history, 1957; followed by more books on the theme), a study in dual marginalization purporting to show Latin America as a trailing edge, and Anglo America as a leading edge, of the tide of Western history; J. L. Abellán’s La idea de América: origen y evolución (The idea of America: origin and evolution, 1972), which traces the evolution of the idea of hemispheric America through the writings of essayists and philosophers of both Americas; Alfred Crosby’s The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (1972), a study of disease, foodstuffs, and demography in the transatlantic encounter; Hugh Honour’s The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time (1975), richly illustrated from testimony of the visual arts; Antonello Gerbi’s The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900 (1955, trans. 1973), which examines transatlantic controversies over the virtues of the American environment and civilization; and America in Europe: A History of the New World in Reverse (1975, trans. 1986), wherein Germán Arciniegas sportively catalogues innovative and renovative influences of the New World on the Old.

These authors erect a grand prosenium for my ruminations; yet their intentions are not quite my own. They deal less with the process of Americanization than with two-way transatlantic influence and “impact”; flows of people, disease, and commodities; or reciprocal images. An exception is Leopoldo Zea, who with his philosophic mentors and colleagues of the 1950s dropped salient clues as to the meaning of Americanism in their quest for an “ontology” of New World civilization. But here two problems arise. First, the ontologists deal in general categories, while the historian is hostage to emanations from time and place. Second, ontological musings favor the counterpoint between Protestant and Catholic versions of Americanization against common process. Part II addresses this counterpoint, with some attention to the sociology of religion. First, however, we bring commonalities to the fore, favoring the situational over the genetic axis.
For our hemisphere, situation (Americanization) is more elusive than genesis (transatlantic legacies), and Part I offers only two gateways. One is language. Because teachers from England influenced my early schooling and, later on, peninsular speakers introduced me to Spanish and Portuguese, I was intrigued in my first hemispheric travels by what had happened to European languages overseas. Language changes (or archaic retentions), I surmised, might reflect shared responses to circumstance in New World language areas, signifying a human condition that underlies, or modulates, the notorious political and economic disparities. I explored the matter in an essay of 1955 and continued to squirrel away notes. Linguistic research that began appearing in the 1960s reinforced and refined my hunches. My chapter “Language in America” is not for specialists but for those who may wonder how language study might illuminate more orthodox realms of historiography.

If languages of whole societies are a panoramic lens, the single writer offers a prism. In 1980 the U.S. cultural affairs office in Rio asked me to help devise a symposium on modernism in Brazil and the United States. As the meeting took shape I saw that I must not participate as a Brazilianist, for my Brazilian colleagues were far more knowledgeable; nor could I tackle a North American theme, for I lacked the credentials of the eminent visitors from “American Studies.” So I headed for the no man’s land of comparison. It was easy to choose Oswald and Mário de Andrade as Brazilian spokesmen for the “American idea” at the moment of stocktaking in the 1920s. But who were their North American counterparts? For reasons developed in chapter 2, which has grown from my original notes, I lit on William Carlos Williams to pair with Oswald and T. S. Eliot to pair with Mário. The four produced a cat’s cradle for interweaving four private versions of the Americas and Europe at the modernist moment, when both retrospective and prospective vistas came naturally.

Part II deals with the political legacy of Ibero, or “Latin,” America and, less frontally, that of Anglo America. Chapter 3 builds from fragments of essays published between 1954 and 1964, while chapter 4, written and revised recently, moves beyond its simplified Weberian scaffolding. When I began teaching in 1949, I found the Anglo-Atlantic categories of political experience customarily applied to Latin America to be inappropriate or even irrelevant. Because a budding Latin Americanist in those years taught more courses on Europe than in his specialty, I had the opportunity, denied the “desk officers” of contemporary academe, to reflect on the great European ideologists. One day it struck me that the tension between order and liberty stressed by English theorists such as Hobbes and Locke was less salient in the Ibero-American world. Here a rather different polarity set the moral precepts for a hierocratic yet communitarian society against the amoral requirements for state-
building. To illustrate this second binomial I juxtaposed St. Thomas Aquinas and Machiavelli, suggesting in an essay of 1954 that they might be emblematic for Latin America. Only later did I discover that neo-Thomism had indeed won acceptance in early modern Spain and was soon in head-on conflict with Machiavellian doctrine.

In 1964 I proposed that the Thomist and Machiavellian persuasions might be modernized, or generalized, by translation into the Weberian categories of patrimonial and charismatic rule. Although I now tried to rectify my earlier ahistoricism, I could still be criticized for applying ideal types from on high. Clarifying a historical situation did not mean clarifying historical process. In recasting these early papers I have respected my original intention to provide markers for successive forms of Latin American governance while refining my use of Weber's political categories, particularly his characterization of the legal-bureaucratic state. Weberian nomenclature, I now see, serves not simply to identify forms of political legitimation but also to trace the pervasive if, in the Latin American case, irresolute process of social and economic rationalization. Neo-Marxian diagnoses of the 1960s and 1970s helped to energize, or historicize, Weber's ideal types.

The proper test, however, for what academic retailers pigeonhole as the "historicocultural interpretation" is not how obediently it collapses into the energetic, managerial outlooks of economic history, interest-group calculus, world-system theory, and the like. It must be judged not by the "policy" and "prediction" criteria of our instrumental world but by its own methods and purposes and within appropriate temporal horizons. With this in mind I published a short book in Spanish entitled *El espejo de Próspero* (Prospero's mirror, 1982; a Portuguese version appeared in Brazil in 1988), wherein I tried to lend greater historical credibility to the schematic neo-Thomist and Hobbesian constructs of the polity. On one hand these constructs are traced to common origins in the twelfth century; on the other the markedly fresh accents that each has received in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are noted. Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume, although they stand on their own, are in effect the prologue and epilogue to *El espejo*.

Adoption of a more generous time perspective was intended to dispel the notions either that culture seen historically refers to an ornamental "style" of thought and behavior or that it hangs as a deterministic millstone around the neck of civilization. Cultural interpretation should in fact delve to ultimate rationales for social action, to premises of inmost belief. It must explore a realm of dialectic, a matrix for improvisation in time of quandary. The difficulty of the industrial West in dealing with the rest of the world, or of the United States in dealing with Latin America, has to do not only with economic and military asymmetries but also with an ambiguity at the heart of Western culture. For while Western
arts, science, and philosophy have laid forceful claims to universal author-
ity, we use the word *culture* to differentiate the ways and outlooks of a
tribalized world. Terms such as “progress,” “evolution,” “development,”
“empiricism,” “ethnicity,” and even “history” in its general usage spring
from cultural imaginings of the West and may have highly uncertain rela-
tion with the bulk of human experience. Yet this arsenal of notions, cast
in a language of universalism and possessing awesome instrumental
power, has had the ironic effect of blinding its acolytes to the facts of the
global case. In short, the West is increasingly parochialized by its own
universalistic pretensions. For Latin America, attuned to an older West
as well as to the post-Hobbesian, -Cartesian, and -Galilean one and
responsive to persistent survivals of Amerindian and African origin, the
ideological challenge is dizzying. Chapter 3 explores a facet of this chal-
lenge in the section “The Uncertain Headway of Rationalization.”

Chapter 4 plants the question “Whither ideology?” in less historicist
fashion. Its point of departure is the confrontation, not between
Aquinas and Hobbes, but between the pluralist polities of today’s Latin
America and the hyperrationalized Western ones. Facing the existential
present, we here demote history from a conditioning to a contextual
role. We address the future not by renovating inherited categories but by
scouting fresh grounds for discourse. European ideologues of the past
become interesting not for their axioms and therapies but for their strat-
 egyes for reconceptualizing experience in times of trouble. Events of
recent decades dictate a return to fundamentals. This period has allowed
us to see more clearly what survives from “tradition” as a usable past. It
has demonstrated the promise and limits of rationalization, whether in
Anglo-empiricist, Weberian, or Marxist versions. It has led us to take ser-
iously the indeterminacy principle embraced by the “marvelous realists”
of Latin American fiction. Most of all, it has initiated rediscovery of the
people as the foundation of the polity.

Part III addresses the north-south transaction in an autobiographical
mode. Chapters 5 and 6 each offer three successive snapshots rather than
a summation informed by pontifical hindsight. Some readers, moreover,
may be more interested in chance points of traction than in a contrived
outcome. “On Grooming Latin Americanists” accompanies Latin Amer-
ican studies in our country since the early 1960s. The first section consid-
ers the field as a whole, the second the historians’ guild, the third the
Brazilianists’ guild. As personal statements they may say more of my
own shifting enthusiasms than of the development of “the field.” They
are not state-of-the-art reports. Moreover they reflect my critical views of
academe itself, wherein Latin American studies occupies a tiny corner.
Any national establishment of higher learning has cultural limitations,
and one can scarcely ask a sector of it to soar far above them. My hunch,
however, is that the Latin Americanist constituency might stretch its

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wings a bit wider. Although my account may be too personal, even dyspeptic, it at least opens a peephole on the universal process of academic bureaucratization. The direct message, however, is that Latin American studies might take fewer leads from scholastic nitpickers, policy pundits, and the academic dropouts who staff foundations and endowments and devote more thought to an international enterprise for a Third World “critical sociology” in the fashion of, say, the Frankfurt school.

The first two sections of “Puerto Rico: Eternal Crossroads” are pièces d’occasion written during my four years at the University of Puerto Rico between 1956 and 1961. They plunge headlong into two lively debates in the terms wherein they were then cast: the issues of Puerto Rican “identity” and of “localism” versus “universalism” in university education. On the identity question I was attacked from one side by the American geographer Earl P. Hanson, a staunch defender of Commonwealth status, Operation Bootstrap, and the U.S. connection, and from the other by the accomplished Puerto Rican playwright and essayist René Marqués, who assured me that nationalists and independentistas were healthy, sound, and sure of their identity for having recognized the United States as villainous. Both scolded me as an imported social-science “expert” who was blind to the cultural stamina and achievements of the islanders. On education I came out better. The university was associated with “universalism” (whether the hit-and-run research of U.S. social scientists or the Orteguian philosophy endorsed by Rector Jaime Benítez), while both the Commonwealth government and the nationalists who figured in its cultural programs, with allies in the university’s humanities departments, favored local Puerto Rican inspiration. The Caribbean and Latin American contexts fell between these stools, as I discovered in organizing an Institute of Caribbean Studies at the university. In any case my defense of university autonomy won me favor with Don Jaime, while my conciliatory stand on the local-universal issue raised few hackles. It was the “identity” piece that drew fire, along with occasional smirks.

In 1973 I was recruited to chaperone a Yale College seminar on Puerto Rican history and politics, where my Puerto Rican and Third World constituency insisted that I had dealt with symptoms and not causes. I confessed that I had accepted the controversies as I found them and was reluctant to embrace the strenuous Manichean dialectic proposed in the late 1960s to resolve them. By then, however, new formulations were in gestation. My 1984 review of Raymond Carr’s Puerto Rico: A Colonial Experiment, reprinted here as “Embarrassing Colony,” allowed me to retrace the evolution of the island’s status dilemma as context for my early reflections. For all the sagacity of Professor Carr’s diagnosis, I found it locked into familiar premises of the fifties. Neither, it now seems to me, is Puerto Rico a “special” Caribbean case—for each case is
special—nor, consequently, do I now find “status” or cultural schizophrenia or “docility” or colonialism (unless one speaks of internal colonialism) to be pivotal issues. The matter at hand is identity (a shopworn term, alas), which is to arise from beneath and not percolate from above. At the conclusion of “Embarrassing Colony” I briefly reinterpret Antonio S. Pedreira’s “insularist” thesis of 1934, where the identity argument took hold, and then review recent departures in social science, liberation theology, literature, and the national-character essay. These are the openings toward which I was groping so many years ago, for they disclose the path to nationhood, indeed the present reality of nationhood, within the Latin American and Caribbean families.

Finally comes McLuhanaima, a spoof on Mário de Andrade’s classic Brazilian parody Macunaima, often invoked in these pages. On the dubious evidence of its colophon, some claim that I wrote McLuhanaima. In the improbable event that I was the author (or at least the amanuensis, for the text is ancient and predates Macunaima, the very text it satirizes) the composition could be fixed at 1975–76, when I codirected a seminar on modernism at Yale and profited from the literary exegeses of the gifted Brazilian scholar Iumna Maria Simon. Whatever the authorial facts of the case, the anonymous bard was clearly indignant that only southern lands should lay claim to marvelous realism and mythic heroes. The north is fully as entitled to such treasures. The “Brazilianist” whom the tale immortalizes is, in the final analysis, both mythopoeic and in a prosaic sense marvelous.

Predictably, McLuhanaima fell prey to the very academic establishment it aimed to reprimand. Once it was published by the “Ontarisota University Press,” a polemic over its authorship erupted in the prestigious Jornal do Brasil. The saga was shortly reprinted in the elitist Brazilian review Almanaque. It is available on microfiches through the U.S. Library of Congress, is featured in the fiftieth-year critical edition of Macunaima, figures in a graduate syllabus in a Brazilian university, is acclaimed by a British anthropologist as a prime target for structuralist analysis, and is quoted at length in a footnote to an erudite article in the Latin American Research Review. Like the anthropophagous Brazilian Indians, academe consumes its enemies and absorbs their powers. In any case, McLuhanaima fits here because it expresses more directly and painlessly than the preceding chapters what I suppose this book to be about. Or, if the book has fallen short, this could be taken as a playful exercise in self-mockery, a consolation prize for both the reader and myself. Eleven polyglot editors have helped to reupholster the primitive manuscript (actually a Stone Age tape recording), but to have Englished every term and clarified every reference would have taken decades. Let me simply say that although the word *brincar* signifies “to play,” the natives give

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it a more saucy meaning that goes beyond even the connotations of “to frolic.” Any remaining difficulties will be found quite as superable as those of *Finnegan’s Wake*.

The question remains as to the “point of view” informing this collection of rather capacious—some might say capricious—essays. Being a historian rather than a philosopher, however, I feel no special obligation to affirm a “position.” My understanding is that historians, like novelists, work best when their premises are in large measure subliminal, although they *should* unfold over the decades. They are not fixed backgammon rules. That is why I have preserved my concerns and formulations of the 1950s alongside my current notions. When one is younger, one is more audacious and assertive; when one (this one at least) is older, one is more allusive and playful, for one still harbors the original “project” yet perceives its limitations and commands more fully a discourse of attenuation. Within chapters 5 and 6 my early and later statements are simply wrapped as sandwiches. In chapter 1 I have fused them. In chapters 3 and 4 they confront each other as two different but not antithetical ways of relating Iberian political traditions to the contemporary scene—a genetic, governing relation, as I first conceived it, and a permissive, potentially innovative relation, as I now conceive it. In chapter 2, written recently, my sources forced me to be more explicit. It comes out in the final section on fancy and imagination. Here my two pairs of poets led me to acknowledge two ways of construing the historical experience of the New World and perhaps of history in general: one as a “horticultural” im- or transplantation of seeds, shoots, and grafts that requires a linear view of time and a chaperoned view of causality with “identity” as the ultima Thule; the other as a baroque or Baudelairean vision of “correspondences” that allow transtemporal, transcausal juxtapositions and mediations to reveal ancient, continuously self-renewing identities. I was nurtured on the former vision, but the latter now peeps out from each chapter and directly inspires *McLuhanaima*. Were the book to be reworked a decade hence, the precarious balance might no longer prevail. I might by then have moved farther toward the conceits of the Cuban writer José Lezama Lima in his *La expresión americana* (The expression of America, 1957), purposely omitted from my initial list of Americanists. Lezama concentrates on Ibero, Indo, and Afro America, but with a significant final nod toward Whitman, Melville, and Gershwin, which is quite enough to bring Anglo America fully on stage. He sees history as a play of magnetic fields, not a machine that cranks out link sausages.