

INTRODUCTION

LATIN AMERICA IN BAD TIMES

Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.

*Where there are bad times,
there is also salvation from bad times.*

—Hölderlin, “Patmos” (1803)

BAD TIMES? In the United States, certainly Trump: whatever happens to him personally, whether he can win the 2020 election or whether he is impeached or forced to resign, the deeply reactionary consequences of his administration will last for the better part of a generation. In Latin America, the precipitous decline of the so-called Pink Tide governments, after some fifteen years of relative hegemony and success. The most tragic case is, of course, that of Venezuela and its project of twenty-first-century socialism, which is pretty much in a meltdown. But the most consequential is the impeachment of Dilma Roussef and the imprisonment of Lula in Brazil, which has led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro, an ultraright, racist, openly authoritarian candidate as president of Brazil. Very hopeful on the other hand is the victory of Andrés López Obrador and his party Morena in the Mexican elections, suggesting a new direction for that vast and complex country.

The bad times correspond with the waning in academic criticism of the idea and project of postcolonial studies. We have gone from a mild dissatisfaction with multicultural identity politics, suppos-

edly linked in part to postcolonial theory, to white nationalism and Brexit.

It has been clear since the early years of the new century that there is an impasse in the postcolonial project. I am certainly not the first to say this: there is an abundance of critical literature predicated on the “post” of postcolonialism. I had originally intended to title this book “After Postcolonialism,” but I quickly discovered that this title already had been taken more than once. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2002 book, *Habitations of Modernity*, carried with it the qualification: *Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. These are also essays in the wake of subaltern studies, but sixteen years after Chakrabarty’s.

If postmodernism was the “next big thing” of the 1980s in the humanities, fitting with the neoliberal, global turn in economics and the collapse of communism, postcolonial criticism, itself bound up in some ways with postmodernism, was the next big thing of the 1990s. But now it too has come to seem like a ship that has passed, leaving us, as Chakrabarty wanted to signal in his subtitle, amid a roiling wake of possibilities: indigenous literatures, queer theory and criticism, media studies, performance, posthegemony, the digital humanities, ecocriticism, robotic ethics, global humanities, the posthuman, the Anthropocene (a concern in Chakrabarty’s own subsequent work), neophilology, new materialism. . . . Above all, perhaps, the “affective turn”—Deleuze, having become (certainly against what would have been his own inclination) the new Angel of History. I don’t mean to be dismissive: I understand that on these words careers and lives—our careers and lives—are built or collapse. The academic humanities are a space of perpetual renovation. I think it was Richard Rorty who remarked that if what is in fashion today in humanities departments is still fashionable fifteen years from now, something has gone wrong. But one cannot avoid noting that there is missing here what Georg Lukács would have called, channeling Hegel for this purpose, the “totality.”

Postcolonialism was the last critical wave that sought to seize the totality, to constitute itself as a kind of Archimedean point from which one could move from but also beyond the academic disciplines

to change the world. The new approaches are usually postsocialist, not so much in the sense of rejecting socialism as of celebrating their distance from any such notion as totality. Like postmodernism generally, they are against metanarratives and metaexplanations, like Marxism or Freudianism. They have the same relation to Marxism or Freudianism that Derrida had to structuralism.

Still, someone of my generation—the generation of the sixties—might feel certain nostalgia for the moment of structuralism itself (before the “post”). Embedded in structuralism was the claim that the “human sciences” had discovered in a way the nuclear physics of the human subject itself—Lacan or Foucault, Althusserian “interpellation,” Greimas’s “semiotic rectangle,” or the idea of cultural studies and its “political aspect,” to recall Stuart Hall’s characterization, would in different ways signal this claim.

It goes without saying that the melancholy loss or cheerful abandonment of totality is connected with the emergence of a vigorous global form of capitalism; a capitalism that, as Fredric Jameson put it in his famous essay on postmodernism, unlike the capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no longer has an *outside*: nature, traditional forms of community (*Gemeinschaft*), the Third World, the former socialist countries, the individual psyche of existentialism and modernist art . . . all have been colonized, including, it now seems, postcolonialism itself.

But if you think, as I do, that there is a necessary connection between the rise and character of modern capitalism and the project of European colonialism from the late Middle Ages onward, then globalization heralds not the end of the colonality of power but rather its *universalization*. (By colonality of power I understand the persistence, into modernity and postmodernity, of forms of thought and organization derived from historical colonialism: modern racism would be one of these, for example.)

Yet even in this recognition, there persists a sense of loss of totality. First, because while it explains a lot, the idea of the colonality of power doesn’t explain every contradiction or possibility of change, and, second, because there remains the question: What will the

decolonial be? A new form of life and society? Or simply global capitalism with a cheerful face, what the cultural critic Coco Fusco called “happy multiculturalism” (or perhaps a not so cheerful face, as in the case of ISIS or Anglo and European white nationalism)?

The problem of loss of totality is not only an epistemological one: that we no longer know or want to know what determines what. It is also a political one: the humanities seem no longer capable of producing a hegemonic narrative, understanding by hegemony, in Antonio Gramsci’s phrase, “the moral and intellectual leadership of the nation.” What we do in the humanities should be connected to the analysis and production of hegemony—that is where we earn our keep. Different sorts of theory and practice might count toward that end. But if we can’t do that, if we happily renounce that task, then it should be no surprise that society, under conditions of neo-liberal market capitalism and ruled by calculations of monetary gain or loss, does not feel it needs to take our courses or read our books anymore or give us tenure.

In the United States, the last attempt to assert the role of the humanities in producing hegemony was neoconservatism, which had a large impact on American public culture and politics but relatively little impact on the academic humanities. The problem with the neocons was that they had to turn their backs on almost everything new that had appeared in the humanities and social thought since the 1960s, which they despised and saw as a moment of anti-American nihilism rather than of democratic, multicultural possibility. The question that faces us today instead is whether it is possible to reanimate the project of the humanities from the “Left,” so to speak, at a moment when the possibility of socialism seems to be making somewhat of a comeback.

What has emerged in recent years against the core assumptions of the neoliberal creed, and now also against the postneoliberal populist, ethno-nationalist scenarios, has been a new attention to the question of equality. I mention in this respect Thomas Piketty’s great book, *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (2014), which became something of an international best-seller when it appeared.

Piketty's main thesis is that in its present form global capitalism is leading inexorably to a greater concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands (the returns on capital being greater than the returns on production): that is, to something like a new oligarchy. With this shift, which is going on now, Piketty argues, the assumptions that have undergirded Western modernity since the Renaissance dissolve.

My proposal in these essays is that we put at the center of our work, as a kind of string that will guide us out of the labyrinth of the bad times, the question of equality. Equality is not a totality in the orthodox Marxist or Hegelian sense that Lukács admired, but it is in a way an Archimedean point: if there is not equality, there is something wrong with things as they are, and that something has to do with culture and values; that is, with what we do in the humanities.

In making this proposal I do not mean that equality should be conceived only as a goal; I am also concerned that it be seen as a condition of emergence of the humanities, what phenomenology would have called their *Grund*. The question of equality is not limited to the question of the postcolonial or coloniality of power. But there is at least one way in which the proposal to put equality at the center of the work of the academic humanities could not have been articulated as such before postcolonialism. That is because postcolonialism reveals the extent to which the European project of modernity, which begins with the struggle against Islam, anti-Semitism, and the institution of African slavery, involves the violent, systematic, and continued imposition of inequality on large sectors of the world's population.

As we know, the relationship between the humanities (and secular literature in particular) and the idea and practice of equality is present in their origin, since in the European world the humanities and Protestant Reformation begin in the late Middle Ages with the premise that any person can be an interpreter of texts—even of the Bible—and that there is no relationship needed between authority and a certain virtual or actual “community” of interpreters. This community implies equality not by resemblance—the members of

that community can be of different ages, ethnicities, classes, genres, or nations, as the group of literary critics in the first part of Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666*—but by the act of participation and solidarity.

We know that this community—the community of critics or “readers”—can also be, was, the pedagogical model for training a new elite—the literary critics in search of the novelist Archimboldi in Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666*, which is in part about the place of literature within globalization, are Eurocentric, social democratic, careerist, and occasionally racist. This relationship between literature, criticism, pedagogy, and power is directly involved in a self-constitutive articulation of the project of European colonization of the world. Modern literature not only represents the process of colonization, but it is one of the ideologies that justifies colonization. The debate about *testimonio* (testimonial narrative) was born partly from this complicity of literature with the coloniality of power.

To the extent that literature and literary and cultural criticism participate in creating or reproducing relations of subordination and inequality, then equality as an immanent condition, prior to cultural semiotization, presses against the authority of literature and criticism. There is a certain violence in this push back, a violence that is alternatively anticolonial (as in Fanon), subaltern, avant-garde, modernist, structuralist, and anti-Oedipal. But this process of negation of cultural hierarchy and authority is precisely what allows the flow/reflux of democratic energies and affects inherent in the cultural text, which has been mummified by its canonization or commodification.

Let me link the question of the impasse of postcolonialism to the question of the downturn of the fortunes of the Pink Tide. By the Pink Tide I understand the wave of governments of the Left and center Left that swept across Latin America in the years between roughly 2000 and 2015.

These essays are beholden to the Pink Tide. They are shadowed by its current distress and impasse. They seek a way out of that impasse, without a clear vision of what that might be. They also participate in the ups and downs of the academic field of Latinamer-

icanism, which can be described as the way in which postcolonial and poststructuralist theory remakes what Walter Mignolo called “the idea of Latin America” (Mignolo 2005). The Pink Tide was, in a sense, the political or hegemonic articulation of some of issues that began to take shape in Latinamericanism, particularly around coloniality of power, social heterogeneity, subalternity, new social movements, feminism and queer theory, and multiculturalism (or, as many Latin American thinkers prefer, intraculturalism).

We are now in a situation where the Pink Tide has receded. Not disappeared but certainly receded. “Tide” (flowing, ebbing) and “pink” are of course metaphors—allegories of history. They carry with them the suggestion that the tide will flow back, there will be another resurgence of the Left. But to say that is in the dimension of hope (and rhetoric) rather than certainty. I see the Pink Tide as an “event” in the sense (also metaphorical) that Alain Badiou gives to that term: that is, something unexpected, unpredictable, radically contingent and overdetermined, which opens a whole new series of possibilities and determinations simply for having occurred. Being “faithful to the event,” to recall Badiou’s injunction on this score in *Ethics* (2013), is not a question of insisting that we have to agree with this or that measure or this or that government. The Pink Tide has had more than its share of disappointments, contradictions, miscalculations, corruption, and compromises with both global and local capitalism. Our function is in any case one of critique, not of hegemonic aggregation.

And it is important to register and understand why, in the name of a fairer distribution of wealth via state control and planning, governments that call themselves socialist have a bad track record of wrecking economies. In Latin America, Cuba is one such case, as is today, even more catastrophically, Venezuela. But I think it is legitimate to ask whether what we do in the name of critique contributes to a necessary renewal of the possibility of the Left or rather, in the name of a supposedly more authentic radicalization, hinders that possibility (and in some cases, inadvertently makes common cause with the bourgeois opposition). I am worried, in other words,

by the presence of “ultraleftism” in the discourse of contemporary Latinamericanism.

The preferred explanation for the political recession of the Pink Tide is that it has been a victim of its own success: its initiatives to expand the consumption of the popular classes undercut its own militant base, creating a new population of consumers. The power of the governments to satisfy consumerism declined with the declining prices for exported raw materials, especially oil and energy, and with that their popular support also declined. Formulas of neoliberal entrepreneurship became attractive again, along with the celebration of the agility of capital, a “hip” technocracy in sync with the global market and with the web, positions that are supposedly “postpolitical” but actually constitute something like a New Right.

The Ecuadorian Jaime Durán Barba, Macri’s one-time political advisor in Argentina, is spoken of as the most influential theorist of the articulation of this New Right. Durán Barba proposes the emergence of a “new political subject” in Latin America, defined by labor flexibility and integration with the business and technocratic culture of the market and globalization. His slogan is “PC ahora no es Partido Comunista sino Personal Computer” (on Durán Barba and the Latin American New Right, see the special issue of *Nueva Sociedad* edited by Pablo Stefanoni; Stefanoni 2011). Durán Barba’s New Right is high tech, syntonized with global markets and services, mobile, innovative, flexible, strongly tolerant of identity or life style differences. But to its right, the right of the right, so to speak, we are beginning to see in Latin America the emergence of an ethnonationalist authoritarian right, as in Brazil and Colombia.

The essence of the critique of the Pink Tide from the Left has been that it was a project developed within the rules of capitalism and the coloniality of power, without being able to overcome them, and thus fated to come to bad end. But how could it overcome these rules without grasping first the forms of power, including state power? The critique of the Pink Tide tends to suggest in its place only one other possibility for the Left, a possibility that presents itself as libertarian and insurrectional but is in a sense *catastrophic*:

an extension or a resurgence of poverty and misery of the popular classes and minority subjects and a deepening of the destruction of the Latin American biosphere, a degradation of the state and civil society. One is reminded of the tragically wrong slogan of the German Communist Party, justifying their rejection of an electoral front with the Socialists in the 1930s: “After Hitler, us.”

There is a utopian logic that often seems to subtend the discourse of Latinamericanism (and that itself is part of the heritage of colonialism). What happens is something akin to what Walter Benjamin called, in his essay “The Author as Producer,” an “aestheticizing of politics,” a phenomenon he identified with fascism. In the case of Latinamericanist ultraleftism, the phenomenon has more to do with an *impatience* about the imminence of social change or communism. Against what Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo called a “postcolonial utopianism,” there has begun to emerge at the center-right, so to speak, of academic Latinamericanist discourse a critique of “the excesses of all sorts of cultural studies” (Tenorio-Trillo 2017, 123, 143).

An ultraleft and a “soft” right, in other words. My position in these essays is that the Pink Tide governments established a *horizon of expectations* that will remain in place beyond their present difficulties. These expectations are the precondition of any future hegemonic articulation, in other words. To abandon this possibility in the name of a radicalism of the “street” or the “multitude” or the “grassroots” seems to me to concede the possibility of political hegemony in advance (for a less sanguine view of the failure of the Pink Tide, see Gonzalez 2019).

A final thought along these lines, that connects with the title and the final essay here. The ebb of the Pink Tide obliges us to recognize that in some ways the project of Latin America itself has failed. This is especially evident if we compare Latin America with China or India in the same time frame (from the end of the Second World War to the present). It has failed in leftist, authoritarian capitalist, and neo-liberal forms. What the consequences of this are in terms of thinking about the Latin American future I am not capable of saying with much confidence, though I attempt a diagnosis in the final essay.

What is clear is that some new point of articulation is required that goes beyond the existing consensus around the postcolonial but that is not just cheerleading for the Pink Tide or fantasies about the “multitude” or the “post-hegemonic” or a neoconservative return to disciplinary rigor in the academy. For that purpose I raise in these essays the question of equality, a question that in academic discourse is rooted in the stance and work of subaltern studies. Equality *with* difference; that is, egalitarianism modified by the postcolonial legacy. I argue that this combination—equality with difference—is a particularly Latin American possibility: the possibility of a new form of socialism that emerges from Latin America itself. In that sense, I do not favor the increasingly fashionable abandonment of Latinamericanism in the academy. Will it come to pass? To speak of ebb and flow is to recognize that there is no permanence, except the permanent pressure of inequality itself. Latin American modernity may have failed, but in its failure (because of its failure?) it retains the possibility of an *alternative* modernity, not so bound to the domination of global capitalism as China and India. Latin America’s failure is Latin America’s *difference*. It is to the renewal of that possibility that the essays that make up this book are connected.