

Identity and Nation: more of the same?

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ABSTRACT.

In an article titled, "Cultural Studies: Reworking the Nation, Revisiting Identity," published some time ago in the Journal for Latin American Cultural Studies, Beatriz Sarlo, focusing on current debates on the questions of nation and identity, offered a succinct analysis of the paths taken, particularly within the field of Cultural Studies, in the elaboration of these topics, which have been central to the reflection on Latin America, from the times of independence to the present. I would like to contribute to that discussion, by pointing out some dissidence with Sarlo's analysis. Nevertheless, I would like to indicate from the beginning that I share with her the general concerns that she expresses in connection with current elaborations on those concepts, as well as some of the conclusions of her study. To begin with, I feel, like Sarlo, that the practice of Cultural Studies has been characterized by a general disposition that is more "public" than "political", a feature that seems to indicate a generalized and somehow vague desire of social intervention among intellectuals. In many cases this impulse is nothing more than a willful expression, which, in any case, provides a good point of departure for the definition of the historical and intellectual "mission" of Cultural Studies, alluded to by Sarlo, a mission that I would also characterize as redemptionist and self-legitimizing, at least in the case of some of the manifestations of Cultural Studies. With this said, I would also like to point out that in my opinion, in the case of Latin America, the problems raised by current theorizations on the issues of nation and identity should be situated neither in the deficient practice nor in the globalizing tendency of Cultural Studies. Although the impulse to "kill several birds with one stone" is, sometimes, understandable, I feel that a distinction between the need to criticize the critic, and the very nature of the phenomena analyzed here could yield a deeper reflection of the issue at hand.

In a work I published some time ago titled "Mariátegui and the National Question: an Interpretive Essay," I analyzed some of the very topics we are discussing today. I then brought up the fact that in the elaborations of the national question, so thoroughly analyzed by Mariátegui in *Siete ensayos*, in *Peruanicemos al Perú* and other works, the Peruvian critic confronts the need to elaborate a concept of *nation* that would account for a fundamental paradox: that, on the one hand, in order to address from a Marxist perspective problems related to the nation-estate "the liberal matrix, in which the culture of bourgeois nationality ferments, constitutes an inescapable political and ideological factor" (p. 156). In the words of Mariátegui, "contemporary socialism (...) is the antithesis of liberalism, but emerges out of its entrails and nurtures from its

experience”. Mariátegui, departs, thus, from this historical premise, but relies, at the same time, on a critique of the “Creole nation” —which is inevitable in the Peruvian case— a nation that was built in the shadows of colonial domination, legitimized by the discourse of the Enlightenment, and consolidated, later on, by the fatuous fires of liberalism and the ideology of progress. (Moraña, 1997: 156). In this sense, for Mariátegui the challenge is to refine the interpretative strategies of the Marxist philosophical discourse, promoting the emergence of an interpretive subject that is uniquely Latin American. The Peruvian critic relates the constitution of this interpretative subject to the definition of an object of study —an object of national-popular *desire*— which will constitute the center from which the problem of national identity could be elaborated. It is from here that he attempts to relate the national question with the concept of internationalism, and effectuate the insertion of *the national* and *the regional*, in a critical manner, within the context of the theoretical universality which is characteristic of the grand narratives of modern Occidentalism. As he himself indicated in a 1924 text titled “The national and the exotic”: “The national reality is less disconnected, is less independent than nationalists would assume (...) the mystified national reality is nothing but a segment, a parcel of the vast World reality.” (Terán, 1985: 92).

It is not my attempt to recuperate here, in an a-critical or a-historical manner, a theoretical approach that emerged so many decades ago, in a socio-cultural reality as specific as Peru’s, even if it comes from one of the greatest thinkers of our continent. I simply wish to rescue two significant facts for the purpose of our current debate. The first, being that Mariátegui’s pioneering theoretical works ought to raise themselves, in their own time, not only in opposition to the liberal tradition, a tradition that he attempts to revert by proposing, “the constitution of a national and revolutionary subject able to question the bourgeois nation from within.” Mariátegui must also raise his arguments from the vacuum —from the negativity— of Marxist thought itself which, though it recognizes the problem of national constructs (e.g. in Marx’s writings on India, or on the advancement of capitalism in China, or Ireland, or rural Russia, etc.) never fully expands on it, at least not with the theoretical scope that would have permitted the conceptual application of this category in the Latin American context. For this reason critics still view the lack of sufficient elaboration on the issue of nationalism as the great “anomaly” of Marxist thought, which emphasis on *internationalism* seems to disregard altogether the previous stage —the national stage—, thus developing what Tom Nairn, for example, considers a “defective” narrative, at least in the first Marxism, whose voids are filled, in a variety of ways, by the works of Lenin and Trotsky in the early 20th century, and by many later studies in the same tradition.

Mariátegui was concerned in his own time, as we are today, with the problems of heterogeneity and national/regional particularism as much as with the universalizing quality of the great Marxist narrative. For the author of the *Seven Essays*, Marxism’s internationalist principle could only be integrated in the specific arena of Latin American debates by taking Latin American —regional, national— exceptionalism as a point of departure for a new reflection on the globalized narratives of modernity and socialism.

With this, we arrive to the current debate on the standing and meaning of nationalism (*lo nacional*), on the articulation of the global and the local, and on the territorial stance of national identities, still affected by the liberal matrix that Mariátegui seeks to counteract, from the Andean region, in the interwar period. In my work on Mariátegui. I ventured to hypothesize that

the Peruvian theorist responds to the topic of the “premodern” of the nation (*pre-modern* in the sense of seeing the nation as a historically *necessary* bridge between colonialism and modernity) with a “postmodern” elaboration *avant la lettre*, based on the primary and productive role played by *difference*. In fact, Mariátegui does reflect on the national besieged by the reality of Andean diversity (multi-culturalism, multi-linguism, what Bolivians have termed the “pluri-multi” condition of the region). Above all, he focuses on the superimposed existence, within the nation, of diverse productive cultural systems which traverse class struggles without canceling them out, and that operate as centrifugal forces threatening to dismantle, from then until now, the unifying quality of the State, as well as the symbolic value of the national as a cohesive and binding category.

As Sarlo recognizes in her opportune call for new reflections on this important topic, other factors are added, since the second half of the XXth-century, to the problem of the nation. Among them, we can mention a few, which have been already extensively analyzed from the perspective of Cultural Studies: the increasing phenomenon of migration, the introduction of virtual channels of communication, which interconnect and superimpose real and symbolic spaces, the acceleration and massive spread of communication technologies, the emergence of social movements that transcend any territorial demarcation, the strategies of capitalist globalization and the increase of economic transnationalism, the overlapping on the periphery of interpretative models created and implemented from within the great centers of theoretical processing, and the new forms of marginality resulting from the new forms of hegemony on a global scale. Without a doubt, these phenomena have contributed to the relative vanishing of the national and the blurring of both real and symbolic frontiers. This also inevitably puts into question the current standing of the nation as a rigid parameter for administrative-political regulation, and demands a radical reformulation of the notion and function of collective identities. At the same time, it indicates the need to elaborate more deeply on the different contents assigned to the concepts of nation and state, and to the particular social and political roles they have in contemporary society.

Nevertheless, along with the phenomena of transnational transformation mentioned above, nothing seems as dramatic as the erosion that is taking place within nations themselves. The political emptying of the State and its ghostly economic capacity, which results mainly from the implementation of neoliberal politics and the increase of public debt, the almost complete disappearance of political leadership and organization of political parties, the dismantling of leftist thought and the lack of models for change from the periphery, deepen the experience of social fragmentation, and lead to a nihilism that extends without borders, like a globalized form of melancholy.

Recognizing these transformations and reflecting upon the phenomenon of the nation-state on a global level, Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out that world history, “can no longer be contained within the limits of ‘nations’ or ‘nation-states’ such as those that used to define politically, culturally, economically, or even linguistically. [World history] would see the ‘nation-state’, and the ‘nations’, or the ethno-linguistic groups, primarily stepping aback, resisting and adapting themselves, being absorbed or dislodged by the new supra-national structure of the world. Nations and nationalisms will be present, but they will play a subordinate and frequently minor role in this history” (Hobsbawm, 1990: 182).

Although Sarlo probably would agree with these considerations, she, with good reason, reflecting on her own social circumstances, disbelieves these universalist explanations, and

distrusts, also with good reason, the ambiguity that has characterized the discussion around the topic of the national question, which has been taking place from the perspective of cultural studies, and from political, economic and social realities that are so different from the Latin American situation. It is well known that these elaborations have often generalized their conclusions about the cancellation of the category of the nation, and about the death of the subject, which, according to some critics, would be occurring as we speak, on a planetary scale. But, at the same time, we ought to recognize that in the task of consolidating the epistemological status of theoretical discourses and asserting the verifiability of these theories taking into consideration local variants, our reflection must incorporate also a serious critique of the protocols and strategies that modernity utilized to impose its models and values, which have weakened considerably as a result of social, cultural, and political transformations, particularly in the last half century, throughout the Western world.

I believe that it is true that the culturalist reflection registers such changes with a deeply *ideological* style (as Sarlo indicates) —meaning by this, by proposing forms of false consciousness that affect the processes of social (self) recognition—. But it is also true that nationalism, in its most common modalities, is at the same time an ideology that consolidates the intellectual leadership of the middle class, and a verticalized version of national identities derived from the centrality of the liberal or neo-liberal state, thus reproducing the myths of national order, progress, and regulated citizenship. This, as if it were still possible to articulate a single social project —political, ethnic, or gender— oriented under the umbrella of the state, and as if authoritarianism, corruption, and political and financial incapacity had not already de-authorized any possible legitimization of the state as the site of social and political truth. Once again, this mandates an extensive discussion regarding the distinction between nation and state, in order to define the role that we would assign to each of these categories, and its degrees of political and historical responsibility.

When Sarlo calls for a new theorization on nation and *identities*, I believe it is in reaction to the generalizing arrogance of cultural studies and its tendency to produce explanations that ignore the concrete realities on which these diagnostic analysis are based. Her position does not depart from a “resistance to theory”, but rather from a legitimate need to rethink the foundations for a new way of conceiving the national-popular subject and the possible forms of organization from which to search for answers to the profound crisis that is currently affecting Latin America, that derives, from the most part, of globalization and neoliberalism.

Nevertheless, it could also be said that perhaps these crises call, now more than ever, for a dismantling of *modern* notions that have comprised the historical foundations of the extreme situations we now face. In this sense we could speculate that rather what is needed is a reflection that taking local specificities as a point of departure, is capable, as Mariátegui would have wanted in a different time and from different cultural horizons, to challenge the bourgeois nation *from within*, with a critical, political thought, which could constitute an alternative to the models of liberal modernity. Concurrently, this crisis also calls for a perspective that would allow us to think of the topic of identity incorporating the experiences of fragmentation and sectorialization, and of the existence of a plurality of collective identities as an indispensable requisite in the process of social (self) recognition.

I also believe, that beyond an analysis of the national, what is also needed is a reflection on *regional* problems, remembering that it was precisely the violence of national compartmentalization the one that broke the cultural and economic logic of different continental areas since

independence. At this moment, it is easy to recognize that problems such as drug trafficking in the Andean region, or the political-economic ruptures in the Rio de la Plata are unthinkable if we are not able to surpass the imposed parameters of the national, even if within them the quotidian battles are taking place, and the worst damages are suffered. Along the same lines, phenomena such as the movements of national liberation, the dictatorships, and the popular resistance that opposed them for decades, or the politics of neoliberalism, have long ago taught us the importance of understanding the dynamics that exceed the limits of the national, and even surpass the predictions that could have been made from the horizons of modernity. Likewise, the importance of *the local* fractures the organic structure introduced by the *national* question: the problem of Argentine provinces, which Sarlo describes in her article, seems to be a good example. But also the fragmentation in other countries, of the notion of citizenship and its concrete referents, which are being displaced by a proliferation of transnationalized, sectorial agendas —each with its own imaginaries, its own traditions, and its own goals— are indicative of the need to rethink cultural identities from foundations and principles that transcend the limitations of the Nation-State, forcing us to use micro-analytic strategies, as well as theoretical expansions that can reach, in a study of *the national*, disperse and expatriate communities.

I believe that Beartiz Sarlo's article does not sufficiently expound on what I feel is the principal condition for a new analysis of the concepts of nation and cultural identity in Latin America: *the return of the political*, what Chantal Mouffe describes as an indispensable requisite in the conformation of “plural and radical democracies” in a variety of contexts. For Sarlo, the idea of nation and identity and their concrete social referents constitute an indispensable platform for this recovery. The question posed by Chantal Mouffe, however, is more concrete. She presents the question about the sort of political identity that could favor the recovery of the political, and suggests *decentralizing strategies*, as well as the consolidation of *subject positions* that without falling into a “radical pluralism” —which could create the illusion of social coexistence based on a diversity “without borders nor conflicts”—, would allow for the recuperation of a “we” that most likely would neither coincide with the modern notion of citizenship, nor would be articulated to State programs. Mouffe's notion of “contingent identities” that replaces the theoretical essentialism of modernity is based as much on *equalities* as on *differences* within the various sectors that currently fragment the utopian political-administrative unity of the nation-state.

Latin America, in its reflection on *the national*, departs then from a double negative. First, from the liberal —and exclusionist— idea that conceives *the nation* as an homogeneous and controlled space for the proliferation of markets that benefits the elite, and *the state* as a mechanism for the production and reproduction of collective subjectivities. Secondly, the Latin American or Latin Americanist reflection on *the national* also has to assume, as was mentioned before, an inadequate elaboration regarding the national question from within the scope of Marxist thought —which, in spite of everything, has been the only alternative thus far to liberal thought having had an impact on our political and cultural imaginaries—. Latin American thought, nevertheless, has retained, as is seen in the debate at hand, the mythic dimension of the national as a place of collective “communion”, “solidarity on a grand scale”, and “daily plebiscite” which Renán would insert into Latin American imaginaries at the beginning of the 20th century and which Mariátegui would later deconstruct from the Marxist-Gramscian perspective. In a final analysis, perhaps it is this dimension what we are really referring to in discussing the nation from the bounds of neoliberalism and globalization: to the need to recu-

perate, as if it were a matter of faith, a fraternal citizenship which would fulfill an agglutinating and mobilizing role in our time. If this were the case, it would be a genuine challenge to both praxis and theory to examine the ways in which the myth of the national could be articulated to the realities of globalization.

I believe that it is not the well known theoretical arrogance of cultural studies what has placed the idea of nation and cultural identities on the fringes of its own programmatic abyss, but rather the global changes that impact in so many different ways, the diverse regions of the planet and the distinct sectors that tensely coexist within nations, ex-nations or inter-nations, in today's world. So, we can speak of "multi-national states" or "trans-state nations", of "nationalisms without nations" or of "nation without state". These same variations give evidence of the ways in which one of the key ideological concepts of modernity —the idea of the nation— persists in a ghostly state in a world in which the real complexity of the social even surpasses the imagined complexity of theory.

In my article on Mariátegui I ended by extolling a trait that I see fit to mention again at this time. That the principal merit of his theorization on the national question was that it allows us to perceive, at least from the ideological margins of the modern nation, not so much the contemporary standing, centrality and perversity of the nation as a bourgeois construct, but rather its dissemi-nation (Bhabba): the intrinsic and agonic plurality of multiple projects and actors that exist and struggle within, and outside of its borders. I still believe, as I pointed out then, that this theoretical dialectics that is established between great narratives: between globalized thought and des-totalization, between universalism and particularism, between national/ regional and internationalist politics, constituted in its time, "a theoretical luxury that traverses history to our days, that still challenges the praxis and the imagination of Latin America" A lesson then, that while it belongs to another time in history, is perhaps still worth recovering for our current debates.

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