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LAST100: VIDEO 6: "Citizenship and Rights in the New Republics"

Last time, we looked at why liberalism and liberal ideals have never really flourished in Latin America. In the nineteenth century, following independence (for most of the region) from its former colonial masters, corruption and violence tended to be the norm, rather than the peaceful civil society promised by adherents of a social contract. Looking more closely, however, at the way in which clientelism and the *caudillo* system functioned, we saw why (counter-intuitively, perhaps) they may have been popular, especially among the poor and the marginalized.

A powerful patron could offer more immediate and concrete benefits than the abstract rights promised by the liberal state. Moreover, the patron/client relationship sustained an *affective* community that appealed to those scorned and excluded by liberal elites. In this spirit, we read Esteban Echeverría's short story "The Slaughterhouse" against the grain: as an allegory of the power of affect, the pull of the body, even for those who lay claim to the Enlightenment values of sober scientific reason.

In previous episodes, we have traced the discourse of rights and representation as it ricocheted between the Old World and the New, South and North, adding fuel to the fire of liberation struggles from British North America to revolutionary Paris, and from the slave revolt in Haiti to the creole sense of injustice on the South American mainland. We have also considered the role of race in the Americas, from the conquistadors' uncertainty as to what to make of the indigenous other, to the light that casta paintings shed on the colonial obsession with categorizing and hierarchizing racial difference.

The casta paintings show that race is social construct, rather than biological fact. For one thing, we see how race is defined differently by different societies: whereas the United

States, with its "one-drop" rule, treated anyone with any African heritage at all as "black," Latin Americans tended (and still tend now) to divide people up according to a much more complex set of categories and sub-categories. For another thing, we see how the drive to categorize becomes self-defeating: it aims to contain difference, but ends up *producing* new modes of differentiation and distinction; it sets out to curb racial anxiety by ensuring everyone knows their place, but it ends up drawing our attention to the permeability of the very lines that it is trying to establish.

But the fact that something is a social construct does not mean it is not real, or that it doesn't have real effects. And just because a way of seeing or classifying the world can be deconstructed (or be shown to deconstruct), this does not mean we can simply wish it away. Race and racial distinction mark the history of the Americas with particular brutality. And the stain of racial violence endures into the present.

We have mentioned the genocide against Latin America's original inhabitants on the part of the Spanish conquistadors: by 1600 (little more than a century after Columbus's first voyage), the indigenous population of the Americas had plummeted to perhaps a fifth of its pre-conquest size. Not that such violence and upheaval is confined solely to the early years of Latin American history. With campaigns such as Argentina's "Conquest of the Desert," in the nineteenth century the region's independent nations picked up the colonial project where the Spanish had left off. And it continues in the twentieth century when, for instance, the Guatemalan state's wave of terror in the highlands left tens of thousands dead and many more displaced or refugees.

We have also discussed the fact that, from very early on, black Africans were transported across the Atlantic to work as slaves in the New World: at least ten million were forced across the ocean, with a million or more dying in the so-called "middle passage"; over three million were brought to Brazil alone; by 1800 probably six times as many Africans as Europeans had come to the Americas. Once on these shores, their treatment was often cruel and heartless; after all, the essence of slavery is that human beings are treated as objects, as merchandise to be bought and sold. Alexander Dawson notes that "more than half of Brazilian slaves died within the first three years of arriving. [Their] life expectancies [. . .] were two-thirds that of whites" (84).

Slavery was not finally abolished in the hemisphere until 1888, in Brazil. This may seem a long time ago, but consider that there were former slaves, people who had direct experience of the institution, still alive well into the twentieth century. As late as 1963, Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet could interview a former slave by the name of Esteban Montejo and publish his story as *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Or think that my grandmother, who is still alive, was born only some thirty years after abolition in Brazil. The end of slavery is about as distant for her as, say, Sergeant Pepper or Pierre Trudeau's first premiership may be for some of you.

No wonder that slavery's legacies are still with us. This was an extraordinarily violent institution that lasted many hundreds of years. Such trauma is not something that simply goes away, let alone in the relatively short span of time since abolition. Moreover, racial violence, oppression, and structural inequality continued in new forms after emancipation. We are all still living with its consequences.

Let's take a break to reflect on this. Previously, we have considered the uses of history, or the notion of a "useable past": the ways in which politicians and others appeal to the past so as to give meaning to the present. But sometimes the past is not even fully past. Pause this video and consider the following questions: How does a history of slavery shape the Americas today? Are there other examples of unresolved conflicts or tensions that linger on into the present? How might we do justice to such histories? While you do that, I fancy some mate. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

So what did you come up with? Those were big questions, and we will continue to address them in other videos. You may have thought of an event such as the Holocaust as another example of a historical trauma that we are all still working through. Or perhaps the dictatorships and military rule in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s: Argentina under the generals; Chile under Pinochet, and so on. These are issues to which we will return.

For now, having pointed out how (relatively) recently slavery was ended, let us also note that 1888 was simply the *final* date that slavery was abolished in the Americas. It was *first* abolished in 1793, in the early years of the Haitian Revolution. In the interim, it was abolished (for instance) in Chile in 1823, in the British colonies in 1833, in the United States in 1865, and in Cuba in 1886. Moreover, there are often different dates for laws of “free birth” or “free womb”: the declaration that the children of slaves are born free. And there is an entire history of the abolition of the slave *trade*, which was, for example, banned by the British in 1807 and by Brazil in 1831, although illegal shipments continued to Cuba and Brazil up to the 1860s.

In short: emancipation was less an *event* than a *process*, comprising struggles that lasted well over a century. Again, no wonder that those struggles continue to this day.

It is sometimes suggested that the abolitionist cause was led by liberals: men such as William Wilberforce, the British MP who introduced a Bill to abolish the slave trade in 1791; or Abraham Lincoln, the United States President who led the Union side during the US Civil War and issued the Emancipation Declaration in 1863. But beyond the fact that neither Wilberforce nor Lincoln were exactly liberals (Wilberforce for instance was decidedly conservative), among other things this ignores the extent to which slaves themselves pushed for their own freedom, whether through large-scale revolts, through defection and escape whether collective or individual, or in everyday resistance and efforts to conserve or construct a culture of their own.

Even where the discourse of citizenship and rights came into play, it’s important to emphasize that these concepts, too, were the object of struggle and contestation. There were different conceptions of rights at stake: as Dawson observes, “emancipated slaves sometimes demanded the right to recompense for their suffering” and “peasants might insist on their right to village autonomy, to the land, timber and water rights they had enjoyed under colonial rule” (74). Moreover, even the rights upon which people agreed were still subject to different interpretations.

Rights have to be first agreed upon and then interpreted before they can be actualized. Whatever the US Declaration of Independence may suggest, no rights are ever “self-

evident." The history of the US Bill of Rights and its interpretations by the Supreme Court is further evidence: the "Dred Scott" decision even endorsed slavery. Rights are at best the site of what is often intense disagreement and rhetorical energy. Or they are the indices of a struggle that takes place elsewhere.

The to-and-fro between María Eugenia Echenique and Josefina Pelliza de Sagasta gives some indication of how such arguments can pan out.

Echenique invokes the discourse of rights, though not until close to the end of her article. Her key term instead is "regeneration." She claims that a new womanhood is being born--"The women of today are not the women of the past" (98)--and that this rebirth requires a new set of conceptual tools, indeed a shift from sentiments to concepts, from "poetry" to "philosophy, practical philosophy" (98). Echenique castigates "spirituality, sensibility, and poetry" by describing them as no more than "beautiful daydreams and gilded illusions" (98). In short, this is a critique of affect: "rights," when they are finally mentioned, are set against "the torrent of disorderly passions that destroy them" (99).

At the same time, Echenique is mindful of the power of affect. Indeed, she opens by acknowledging that she, too, is affected--"There are so many ideas and feelings overwhelming me" (97)--and by admitting the temptation of "purely imaginative games [. . .] beautiful images capable of stirring sweet emotions in the heart" (97). If only for rhetorical effect, she dramatizes the difficulty that a discourse of Enlightenment universalism faces as it emerges from a deep-rooted set of feelings associated with literature and the imagination. To some extent she wants to have it both ways, as she imaginatively charts out a new conception of women's place in the world.

Pelliza de Sagasta's response appeals unabashedly to spirituality, to an image of women's "souls with the softest breaths of divine light and their bodies with the purest of [God's] celestial conceptions" (99). Drawing on religion and tradition, she argues spiritedly that women should be "everything but emancipated, less free in independence and rights than men" (100). But hers is not an uncomplicated anti-feminism, and she indicates what some women (no doubt middle class and white)

worried they might lose as one discourse replaced another. For she rejects equality in the name of the advantages that (some) women felt they enjoyed under the existing regime: the “prestige” that she mentions three times in as many lines (99); or the “unequaled mastery” making them “strong, colossal in the midst of their weakness” (101).

The echoes of such debates resonate even today, not least in tensions within the feminist movement or among those fighting to advance the cause of racial or other minorities. Formal equality has not always treated such populations well; at times it has simply been an alibi for continued injustices. On the other hand, as we will see with organizations such as the Argentine “Mothers of the Disappeared,” the invocation of affect or the spiritual exaltation of femininity have sometimes led to powerful strategic gains where the discourse of citizenship and rights has failed.

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