

Methods to Modernity: The Colombian Indigenist Project, 1927-1929

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In all the ways that indigenism or *indigenismo* can be approached, it is common to categorize Indian-related agencies as movements founded on a common ideology or set of principles. José Mariátegui in Peru, for instance, was the salient voice in championing the Indian as an indicator of the logic of a socialist state, while in Mexico, José Vasconcelos, though his discourse on the cosmic race, made indigenism tantamount to the Nation's utopian and homogenous future under the auspices of a new revolutionary government.

In this sense, Colombia is generally not recognized for having produced a significant indigenist movement, although by the late 1920s, many Colombian thinkers did indeed promote a cultural output that would take the "Colombian Indian" as its inspirational starting point. In my research then, I began by trying to answer the question: why is it that we hardly hear of indigenism in Colombia, a country geographically situated at the center of multiple indigenist projects?

To understand why this was so, it behooves us to take a general historical snapshot of Colombia at this time, as well as to recount its then recent history.

Colombian entered the twentieth century with a bankrupted government and amidst a civil war. The constitution -supposed emblem of democracy- was still highly contested almost one years after independence, and even the "resolution" of the War of the

Thousand Days in 1902, did nothing to reconcile the blood-deep rivalry between national conservatives and liberals. Then in 1903, amidst immense inflation and war reconstruction, the nation finds its territorial sovereignty compromised by the separation of the department of Panama, and its immediate recognition by the United States and the world at large. Many Colombians felt stripped of their country, their future panama canal, and also, that there was nothing to be done about it.

But after this lowest point in national history, a more favorable backdrop came into being: throughout the teens and twenties, Colombia witnessed two decades of generally uninterrupted economic and infrastructural growth. But while these processes associated with modernity were heralded as progress by many, Colombia was nonetheless, still a bastion of conservatism. The new changes generated multiple critiques and apprehensions, each based on different principles and ideological foundations. A large part of these can be linked to larger anxieties brought on by modifications in a traditional paternalist and religious system of authority¹. On the other hand, some critiques focused on the fact that new monies were improving the life of only a small fraction of Colombia's population. Social equity and labor rights were coming to be held, especially by a younger generation of Colombians, as the natural corollaries of economic development. Such issues, however, were largely ignored by the government². Thus, while in the late 1920s, many Colombians could point to markers of rising prosperity, many other did not stand behind this same optimism. Many wounds had still not healed, oppositions had not been reconciled, and rapid change, while offering

¹ Ibid XXXX

² Ibid,

material goods, also opened the doors to cultural variance and instability. In this respect, the issues in the mind of many Colombians of this time transcended debates of strictly political or economic nature. It seemed that the very character and integrity of Colombia was at stake.

One publication that gave expression to these topics was the by-weekly magazine, *Universidad*. Moreover, *Universidad* is pertinent to our discussion in that it was Bogotá's most salient promoter of Indian-related themes. Between 1927 and 1929, the magazine regularly featured reproductions of indigenist paintings and sculptures in its pages as well as on its cover, and also, array of articles covering different aspects of Indian-related topics from a political, social, and urban-quotidian perspective. Among these, a series titled "chibcha legends" stands out, in which readers learned versions of the creationist myths of the earliest inhabitants in the central Colombian highlands. It should also be noted that *Universidad* functioned as a gathering place for Indian-related content from other Latin American nations. The magazine's readership could thus gather an international perspective on how to approach the indigenous elements in their own nation. Indicative of this function, is the fact that *Amatua*, a radical Peruvian journal edited by Mariátegui, regularly ran subscription advertisements in the pages of *Universidad*. Moreover, portions of the magazine itself were laid out in such a way as to affirm its indigenist inclinations.

DISCUSS IMAGES

NOSTALGIA:

Turning now to some of the articles in *Universidad*, we can begin to assess the meaning behind this surprising interest in all-things-Indian. I'll cite three examples, and begin with the writings of Armando Solano, who published three texts in *Universidad* between 1927 and 1929 on the theme of "The melancholy of the Indigenous Race". Here, Solano begins by providing a psychological analysis of western society as a whole, which he critiques in the following terms:

In the transformation of our customs produced by recent moral cataclysms - when all of humanity finds it indispensable to forget the suffering and privations, to forget the crimes committed under a foreign impulse- love becomes dejected, in Europe as in Saxon America, the word designates but a miserable physiologic band without ideality, without horizons, without wings and without poetry³.

Only after evoking the love-less logic of prevailing societies does Solano turn to his Indian subject. The indigenous Colombian community, according to him, conserves the meaning of Christina love and though their melancholy expresses dissatisfaction with modern materialism and conventions. The task of the nation thus becomes to recognize itself in the Indian and aspire to their conviction and resolve in the face of change and imported impulses. This does not mean, however, that Colombia should move towards becoming an *Indian nation* per se. The proper course, according to Solano, is for the state to rehabilitate the Indian through legislative measures⁴ thus ensuring the "type of

³ Armando Solano, "La Melancolía de la Raza Indígena" (parte II), *Universidad*, No. 54, Bogotá, 5 de noviembre de 1927, 465.

⁴ Armando Solano, "Introducción al Libro de 'La Melancolía de la Raza Indioena'" (Sic.), *Universidad*, No. 124, Bogotá, 9 de marzo de 1929, 260.

hacienda and patriarchal family in which the young and the laborer are looked upon with protective care (*cariño*)”⁵.

SOCIALISM:

We can contrast Solano’s nostalgia with the quasi-empirical approach of another writer featured numerous times in *Universidad*. Martí Casanovas published several articles on new social projects taking way in post-revolution Mexico. And unlike Solano, this author did formulate a way to, in a sense, *indianize* the nation.

Being constituted the Mexican population by twenty-five percent Indians, it must be said that, undoubtedly, mestizos –constituting sixty percent of the population– are by atavism, inheritors of Indian blood –of their vices and great virtues– and thus, it is within the frame of Indian idiosyncrasy that they must be inscribed, the sheen of western culture not having been sufficiently powerful enough to erase in the mestizo the hallmarks of Indian blood and atavism⁶.

Casanovas’ interpretation of the Indian also differs from Solano’s in that, far from being based on notions of Christian love and paternalism, it is founded on the Marxist ideals. Casanovas does not romanticize the Indian; instead he equates the Indian with the nation’s essential material production. For Colombians then, the implication of Casanovas’ texts would be that by consider themselves a proletarian nation, which through Casanovas logic, also meant an Indian nation, they could then discover a fruitful social trajectory, or in the words of the author, “the future of America and the revelation of its true personality”⁷.

⁵ Solano, “La Melancolía de la Raza Indígena” (parte II), 1927, 467.

⁶ *Ibid*, 514.

⁷ *Ibid*, 515.

CULTURAL/NATIONAL AUTONOMY

Another writer who equates Mexican self-determination, with the destiny of Colombia is Salvador Navarro Aceves. In his 1929 article, however, the author does not play up Mexico's supposed socialist ideals, but instead heralds a perceived rebirth of spirit led by the nation's new leadership, whom he dubs, "the new Aztecs". In a bombastic expression of nationalist rhetoric, the author proclaims that, "the new Aztecs are the vanguard of twenty brother nations that move beyond the conquest of their greatness". Herein, Navarro Aceves reveals shows national autonomy to be his main concern, although he is not clear whether this autonomy should be carried out at a cultural, political, or social level. The conquering force which he alludes to is never named, but Navarro aceves nonetheless makes it clear that an important battle is being waged with the following appeal: "Incas, Chibchas and Guaraníes: the sky begins to be covered with the arrows of our triumph. It is time to awake"⁸.

These previous three articles reveal the extreme diversity in views related to the Indian in Colombia. In one, the Indian becomes the starting point for nostalgia; another posits the Indian as the reservoir of Colombian identity, while another, makes the Indian an exalted symbol of Latin-American solidarity. It is surprising that the magazine editors would unquestioningly support all these views, and moreover, that the authors would forego any debate amongst themselves. One article, published in 1928, even bemoans the nation's "dark and sluggish mass that knows not its ignorance"⁹ yet this becomes just another staple in the magazine's wide offering.

⁸ *Ibid*, 203.

⁹ José Umaña Bernal, "La Realidad Americana", *Universidad*, No. 78, Bogota, 21 de Abril de 1928.

The work of scholar Beatriz González-Stephan goes some way in explaining this flurry of Indian-related postulations in Colombia. As the world's economic powerhouses set the norms and conventions of what would signal progress in the twentieth century, parity became a fundamental concern in the minds of many Latin Americans. In the words of González-Stephan,

To transform fragments of rural reality by means of complex symbolic manipulations into a vision of the past suitable for Latin America's peripheral, urban modernity- here was one of the most conspicuous services provided by men and women of letters to the consolidation of the national state¹⁰.

From this perspective, we can switch our focus from the vain enterprise of trying to characterize the cohesive nature of a Colombian indigenism as a cultural movement, *per se*, and understand Colombian indigenism as a motley method to reconcile change and loss of control. (And here, we find a parallel, in the national indigenist art that is also featured in the magazine).

SHOW IMAGES

In all of these examples, the formal content is secondary to the value of having an ambiguous thematic. Colombia, through the symbol of the Indian, is each time affirmed as sacred and worthwhile. In this sense, it does not matter what the Indian means or how the Indian is represented, but rather, that each author could argue, in his or her own distinct manner, that the Indian simply mattered. Our question thus changes from *what did Colombian indigenism promote in either aesthetic or ideological terms to how was it*

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 237.

that this national discourse could sustain itself despite the lack of any cohesive underpinnings.

As mentioned previously Colombia in the 1920s had numerous loose ends and fragmented notions of its own constitution. Ultimately, we encounter in Universidad an urban mentality unable to reconcile the past and present at the same time that they must prepare for a brand new future. Paraphrasing Eric Hobsbawm, it can be said that, “in the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world”, many Colombians sought to “structure at least some parts of social life [...] as unchanging and invariant” through the invented tradition offered by an Indian symbol. As the content of Universidad makes clear, there was a triumphant tone behind the inventiveness necessary to make the Indian into a reflection of multiple and incongruent hopes and desires.

A good example is offered by Romulo Rozo, the Colombian artist whose hybridic sculptures entered furthest the aesthetic realm of cosmopolitan universalism. Describing his indigenist creation, the artist offers the following explanation, “In it I have placed my ideal of the fatherland (*patria*), my adoration for the national blazon, and all that is contained within the greatness of my country”¹¹- Here are noble words that could offend no Colombian, and yet, these are words that in and of themselves mean very little and certainly explain nothing.

Ironically, the rampant discursive heterogeneity and ambiguity that surrounds Colombian indigenism of the 1920s recalls Jean Baudrillard’s classic text on

¹¹ Isabel Arciniegas, “La Vida Maravillosa de Rómulo Rozo”, *Universidad*, No. 149, Bogota, 31 de septiembre de 1929, 247-248.

postmodernism, “The Ecstasy of Communication”. In it the author describes a media society in which objects are transformed into mere representations, at which point they can take on any variety of meanings. In the case of 1920s Colombia, the real and imagined markers of Colombian indigeneity offered just the vehicle to let the imagination of many urbanites fly and to let them project any number of convenient visions of the future and the nation, or -to return to postmodern parlance- to live outside of time and space. Indeed, if only for a brief time, their communications granted an ecstasy in the form of forgetting. – They could forget their country’s growing economic dependence, their marginality in a newly established world order, their unresolved internal political differences, and the fact that, at the center, they knew not the nations’ peripheral bodies. But perhaps most importantly, they could forget that all these problems, would later, like a time bomb, reassert themselves in lasting episodes of violence and imbalance.