HABLE CON ÉL: LEOPOLDO ZEA’S LAST INTERVIEW

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of my father.

ABSTRACT: Leopoldo Zea, one of the most important and original thinkers in contemporary Latin-American thinking, analyzed through his very long and fruitful career, the problem of cultural identity, focusing in particular on the complex relationship that has arisen between Latin-American culture and Western culture. This article presents, after a brief analysis of the most characteristic aspects of Zea’s thought, an interview, which I did with Zea in 2001. In this interview, probably the last that the Mexican philosopher was to give (Zea died in June 2004), some of the fundamental passages of his philosophy are re-examined and explored in greater depth.

Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place.¹

—Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones, 1944

This article aims to examine the ideas of Leopoldo Zea through a short introductory analysis and an interview with the Mexican philosopher. The interview was held on 25th September 2001 at the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City.

One of the aspects characterizing Zea’s research is most certainly the problem of the originality of any given culture, both in the general sense, and in comparison with other cultures. In the majority of the works that comprise Zea’s prolific intellectual output, we find, in particular, much attention to the difficult relationship between Latin American culture and the cultures of Europe and the United States. In this connection, the Mexican philosopher, in an attempt to propose a solution to the approach of passively imitating
Western models that has long characterized the *modus agendi* of the Latin American elites, has, since his first works, set two important guidelines to apply to this sensitive issue. The first consists in recognizing and accepting as its own the Spanish culture that established itself in the colonial period, while the second consists in not insisting at all costs on creating a culture that is forcibly different and unique with respect to all the other experiences that have arisen over the centuries in other parts of the globe. This behavior, for Zea, as well as representing a form of submission, would deprive Latin American culture itself of a precious resource: being able to take, select, and choose one solution or another to improve one’s own condition, if carried out honestly and responsibly, does not mean giving up one’s originality. A culture is original, Zea holds, not because it always creates new, strange systems or exotic solutions, but because it is capable of providing the answers that a specific reality and a definite time have given rise to.\(^2\)

Zea thus holds that Latin American culture has one of its most important roots in the Western experience. This “link” is based however on the premise of the uniqueness of each cultural process. Starting from this premise, Zea developed an actual philosophy of circumstance, and finds in Ortega, in German critical historicism in general, and in Max Weber in particular, his most important points of reference. In any case, the Mexican philosopher, in a work of 1971, *La esencia de lo americano*, claimed that

> in the field in which historicism is applied to better understand our America, it is [that] of the History of Ideas. A field that has been developing on a large scale throughout the Americas, North and South. Dilthey, Ortega and with them Max Scheler’s Sociology of Knowledge, Karl Mannheim’s Sociology of Knowledge, and in recent years, Arnold Toynbee’s Study of History have become the most apt tools scholars of ideas in America can use to address their history to capture therein the significance of these ideas in relation to the reality within which they arose and in relation to the world from which they originated.\(^3\)

Historicism thus represents for Zea an indispensable epistemological instrument for the definition of a culture, a reflection and philosophy that are meant to be considered as a concrete expression of Latin America. Zea’s indebtedness to this theoretical approach, and some aspects in particular, such as the *centrality of circumstance* and the *specificity of the moment*, can be traced right back to his philosophical initiation, which occurred when, at the age of twenty-seven, he enrolled in 1939 in Samuel Ramos’s course on the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset (Zea 1988, 12). His interest in Ortega then led the young Zea to Gaos who, by no mere coincidence, became his mentor in the early 1940s, a mentor who was to have a decisive role in Zea’s philosophical development.

It should come as no surprise then that Gaos and Ortega became two important points of reference in Zea’s philosophical speculation. In particular, the Mexican thinker was profoundly affected by a fascination, along with many Latin American philosophers of his generation, with Ortega’s perspectivism. Zea’s “cultural relationship” with Ortega was not easy, however, as can be seen from an article of his that appeared in the *Cuadernos Americanos* of 1956, yet his relationship with
Ortega was fundamental in defining that concept of originality on which Zea built his intellectual fortune. In this connection it may be of interest to recall a passage taken from one of Zea’s first works, *El positivismo en México* (1968), where he states that “if the idea one has of the truth is that it is circumstantial in nature, the truths of philosophy will thus be bound to a specific space and time. Truths will be circumstantial.”

It is precisely in taking a cultural suggestion based on circumstance as a starting point that it is possible to begin that recovery of the Ibero-American experience that Zea dreamed of, a recovery that has to move in the same direction as the experience of historicism:

The History of Ideas in Mexico and the rest of South America has found its best legitimation in the Historicism of Dilthey, Scheler and Ortega. Historicism was a starting point for debate on the existence of an American Culture, Thought or Original Philosophy. On the basis of its assumptions and using its methods, it has been possible to emphasize the originality of our thinkers when it seemed that they were simply imitators. It has become apparent that they assimilated the ideas they imported to suit our reality. What seemed like a poor copy of an imported philosophy has proved to be something quite different from what they were trying to imitate. Very often something of their own—something original—emerged despite the intentions of the thinker. Thanks to Historicism we have seen what is original in our thinkers, and thanks to this we have also understood its importance, because its circumstantial nature is no greater than that of another idea in other circumstances, however different. Phenomenology has provided methods for studying our situation, elevating it to more abstract fields. Heidegger and Sartre also legitimated our concerns about Man’s Being. (Zea 1955)

Zea proposes, then, an interpretation of historicism, which aims to reinforce the idea that philosophy and cultural experiences, established in America over the centuries, have to be considered as fundamental elements both for defining and understanding Latin American cultural identity. The Mexican philosopher seems especially to provide an example of his theory when he analyses the dynamics that have characterized the affirmation of positivism in his country. For Zea, the positivism that took root in Mexico must in fact be analyzed not only from the philosophical and theoretical point of view, but also, and above all, as a fundamental element for understanding those historical and social aspects that have characterised Mexican reality. In any case, as stated above, historicity makes up one of the key points of Zea’s *Weltanschauung*. Zea conceives the human being as a historical being, whose essence can only be in *becoming*. Philosophy itself, as a human product, possesses this historical characteristic as well. From this historicist perspective, no philosophy, and similarly, in more general terms, no culture, can prescind from the unique and unrepeatable contingency that produced it and in which every individual finds him or herself operating. The cultural and philosophical originality Zea talks about can thus only truly be created when one accepts this contingency as a starting point. According to Zea, there is no philosophy or culture that does not aim to solve the problems of its own time and space. And in the end, it is precisely because of this
that there can be no philosophy or culture that cannot, in some way, be considered original, even when, as happened in Latin America, a culture is forced to reinterpret categories of thought that were imposed upon it from outside. It is no coincidence that the Mexican philosopher proposes a philosophy sin más for America, i.e., a philosophy that is representative of its context with nothing else added. This position is not meant to be opposed to all that comes from European culture, but, on the other hand, constitutes an attempt to affirm an American cultural identity able to stand on an equal footing with the West or any other cultural identity. Only in this way will it be possible to reach the long-awaited liberation which the Latin American philosophy and culture had hoped for, a liberation which, as Mario Aldo Toscano correctly observed concerning Zea’s thought, “is not only the liberation of oppressed men in one region of the Earth, it is a liberation of man in general, even where he does not appear to need it and, in fact, displays the vanity of domination” (Toscano 1993, inside cover).

The historicist perspective that Zea applied to his philosophical system is based on an attempt at cultural contextualization within Ibero-American society. This contextualization is founded on philosophemes of European origin that must, however, be analyzed in terms of how they have been able to adapt to the reality where they have been inserted, and not in terms of being external agents imposed by another civilization. Starting from this premise, Zea defines the difference that endures between European and Latin American trajectories of development. European development follows a dialectic process that makes the past an instrument of the present and the future, while in Latin America development is a process characterized by continuous juxtapositions. In Latin America, in fact, “the subject becomes an abstraction of a reality that it does not accept as its own, and the object, its own reality, as if it were something alien to the subject that is inserted within it” (Zea 1978). On this issue, Zea goes on to say, “awareness of this double expression of the philosophy of history, its own and that of Europe or the West, has given rise to what may be the end of this juxtaposition and the possibility of a philosophy of history that can make Aufhebung, the process of sublation, possible” (Zea 1978). In fact, on the basis of this “humus,” so to speak, the concepts of “center,” of “periphery” and of marginalization arise, concepts that Zea sets himself up against, through a philosophical proposal that, both by overcoming the Ibero-American perspective, made up of juxtapositions, and the European perspective, based on transcendent claims, presents as its main principal the legitimation of all cultural specificity. On this matter, as Antonello Gerbi rightly stated, American philosophy, “like any other spiritual activity which is adjectivized, . . . will be all the more philosophical the less American it is” (1991, 183), i.e., specificity has meaning only when it manages, precisely because it is a specificity, to have a universal utility.

This complex and delicate balance between specificity and universality profoundly characterizes Zea’s thought, as he identifies also from within the history of Latin-American thought a number of intellectuals, such as Bello, Alberdi or Martí, who had already taken positions very close to this type of approach in the past. These intellectuals were the first to emphasize the propensity for the Universal with which Europe projected its own philosophical and cultural discourse onto Latin
America on one hand, and on the other, stifled its maturing process, particularities and individuality. And also because, according to Zea, the universal character of a culture is not derived from the aims or results it manages to attain, but from the spirit that moves it when giving an answer to the questions it poses. A “spirit” that, on the one hand, must be founded on a creative tension in which every human being must recognize himself, and, on the other hand, can be an expression of the unique and unrepeatable conditions of reality in space and time in which each individual is inevitably immersed. Such a vision of culture is naturally incompatible with the choices put into effect by the Latin American ruling classes, aiming to blindly and passively reproduce the political, economic and cultural models imported in a sterile way from Europe and the United States.

The philosophy of Leopoldo Zea becomes a point of reference not only for the area that he represents, i.e., Latin America, but for all those peoples whose existence the West has denied. Latin America, in Zea’s interpretation, thus becomes a type of symbol, a paradigm of a culture that over the centuries has been neglected many times and that today strives to become a model of other culture, of a point of view different from, but not antagonistic to, a West to which it anyway feels it belongs.

These themes, as I stated at the beginning, have also been discussed in an interview that Leopoldo Zea granted me in September 2001, and that I recorded in Spanish on audio cassette during my visit, funded thanks to a scholarship from the Università degli Studi di Napoli, Federico II, to study contemporary philosophical thinking in Mexico. On the basis of the documentation that I have been able to access, this would seem to be the last interview the Mexican philosopher gave before his death in June 2004. The following pages contain the first complete English edition of my interview with Zea in 2001, published here in order to present the philosopher in his own words. It is my hope that these introductory remarks will be a useful guide to the readers of this interview.

MEXICO CITY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2001, 11.00 A.M.

Interviewer: What is the relationship between universality and particularity, in your opinion?

Leopoldo Zea: a person who speaks of universality always does so from his own point of view, also because he cannot do otherwise. The relationship between individuality and universality cannot be different, can it? I really don’t think it can! In this sense, for example, the philosophy produced in Latin America doesn’t have to be understood only as Latin American. In America, in fact, the human pathways for finding concrete solutions are produced starting from a person-place, which can be Mexican, or Mexican-Latin American, arriving at a concept of American in the Universal sense.

I: What do you mean when you say Latin-American philosophy?

Z: The point of view from which Latin-American philosophy starts is the same as French, Italian, English, German philosophy, etc. So, you can say that a part of Germany, or England has produced a part of Latin America!
I: What is the relationship between European culture and that of Latin America?

Z: Let’s take, for example, the Spanish language. It is a language that is not from here, but that comes from Europe. In Latin America we also speak other languages, originally from the Old Continent, that we have assimilated, speaking them, so that we can understand others and others can understand our thinking. My opinion on this is that human cultures are not a specific product of Europe or Latin America; in this sense America and Europe are the same thing. To the question “What am I?” what answer can I give, from my point of view, apart from that our cultural roots are shared with those of European and Asiatic cultures?

I: But, in your opinion, has European culture influenced Latin American culture?

Z: It isn’t a question of influence. For example, I can consider myself both European and indigenous, as I have combined the two cultures. So, simply, if we consider my “work tools,” my cultural roots are in part also European.

I: But you study this kind of problem from a Mexican and not a European perspective.

Z: Of course, from a Mexican perspective, but Europeans use their perspective too, and the Chinese use theirs too, right? Don’t they?

I: Yes, but, for example, Europe hasn’t had the problem of colonization, whereas here, in Latin America, this problem existed . . .

Z: Colonization imposes a series of ideas that we have assimilated and that we have transformed into methods of knowledge and, so, into tools. There is a quotation that I use often, that of Prospero and Caliban, where Caliban says, “I taught you my language so that you might learn to know your place. . . . I learned your language to curse you . . . to instruct you in the errors you believed in. . . . I am not your slave. I am like you, you know? I am like you.”

In the end, culture is like a calling card: I am Leopoldo Zea and this distinguishes me from another man who might be called P. de Cardin. Our name distinguishes us, but, even though we are different, we can communicate with each other.

I: For you, then, is it possible to speak of identity?

Z: Everyone has an identity since everyone is something concrete. Identity is strictly connected to concreteness. You are concrete. A lot of people live in Latin America and no-one is the same as anyone else; we are different. And it is exactly this aspect that makes us similar, akin.

I: I have an identity, we all have an identity, but, . . .

Z: So we have to find a way to communicate . . .

I: But I, in this moment, in 2001, have an identity that may be different from what I’ll be able to have, for example, in 2005.

Z: Certainly, identity is a thing that changes with one’s experience of life; it transforms day by day. For human beings, identity is not something that remains
unchanged, as happens, on the other hand, with the animal species. Only animals or stones have an immutable identity, but human beings don’t; human beings think.

I: What do you think of historical identity?

Z: This type of identity is created by history to unite different populations. For example, when Latin America was discovered, very different peoples came into contact, who were thus able to set up a process of mutual understanding.

I: In the course of the centuries however, the ruling élites have often imposed their identity on others.

Z: This is the identity that a conqueror imposes. The conqueror imposes an identity, but, naturally, cannot really impose it since identity is in continuous transformation. I, for example, even if I wanted to, as a Mexican, cannot be identified with the identity of another nation. I cannot because my individual identity will come out anyway. When people say “Latin American philosophy is a poor imitation of the European one,” they’re saying something that is not correct. Latin American philosophy cannot copy, because its own identity prevents it, as you Europeans cannot imitate us because your identity prevents it. It is mainly a problem of communication, of *logos*, i.e., the ability to understand and communicate. I, if I understand, communicate and if I communicate, I suppose that I understand the others. In reality the central point of this discussion is very simple: all men are the same because they are different. In this way, in effect the problem of identity is reduced: we all have a well-defined identity: Italian, French, German, Chinese, Japanese or African. However, all these identities, in the end, can find a point of agreement, meeting each other, communicating. Anyway, the aim that we have to set is precisely the communication between identities and not behavior that leads us to state that my identity is superior to yours. On this matter, basic respect for all identities proves fundamental. In this era, for example, we live subjected to North American identity. The problem is that this identity sets itself up as the only one.

I: It is true, the identity of the USA is the one that propagandizes itself the most, also because it is the one that is imposed and which we have to refer to.

Z: In the end, it’s always been like that; the logic of conquest has always been the same. But the problem is that in the past, conquest, for example, in Europe, was carried out by a people who, for different reasons, decided to occupy another people: the Lombards, the Austrians. . . . Now, however, there is a power that wants to impose its identity on everyone. This creates violence. You see, if I receive violence, I react with violence. This does not justify violence, but, if there is violence, the answer will be violent.

I: Identity is, however, something that is also imposed through culture. In this sense, instruction and education have a very important role: what do you think?

Z: Instruction and education are not the same thing. You instruct people so they know how to obey. People are educated so they know how to behave.
I: Often however, instruction and education are perceived as similar, if not identical, concepts . . .

Z: In this way different elements are put on the same plane. If we opt for instruction, all we’ll be able to do is construct a plane where we four, for example, will no longer be people because we will think the same thing. Instead, if we seek the interlocutor, it will still be us. Instruction makes robots, machines; education makes people.

I: Currently, in your view, throughout the world, and in particular in Latin America, is there more education or more instruction?

Z: Instruction imposes imitation; for example, if I want to become like the United States of America and for this reason found the United States of South America, my intention will be simply to create a clone of the United States. We realize, however, that this is not possible, that despite our wish to do so, we cannot. And then we meet a figure such as Rodó, who says: “No, Northmania isn’t possible. I can’t be North American, even if I want to, I can’t because my identity will come out. I can do what North Americans do, without being able to be a North American.” Afterwards, with the Revolution, in Mexico, knowledge coincided with the concept of education. For example, when they appointed Vasconcelos Minister of Instruction in the 1920s, he answered: “Not Minister of Instruction, but Education.” Instruction teaches us to serve well; education, however, tells me why I act in one way rather than in another.

Vasconcelos and Bolívar are my idols.

I: What do you consider to be the trends currently taking root in Latin American philosophy and in particular in Mexico?

Z: At this time we are living through a period of great presumption, i.e., we are victims of the model that the United States is imposing. This model is creating a “Nation of non-national Nations” with the aim of imposing a “Nation above all other Nations.” In this way deep contradictions are being formed that bring about a series of problems that in fact have no answers, other than senseless theories, such as, for example, that Islamic terrorism is the root of all the ills of this society. This is, in reality, a policy of terrorism; in fact it is real state terrorism. I am against state terrorism and am also against terrorism carried out by capitalist powers. Fundamentalism is also state terrorism. But the US also carries on a terrorism of identity and we, the Latin Americans, often find ourselves having to address this.

I: A terrorism of identity that Latin Americans can recognize more easily as they have lived with it from birth.

Z: Yes, especially in Mexico. No country in the world has a border like the one that Mexico shares with the United States. And for this reason we have suffered; they have set their sights upon us, and even though they have not managed to do it, they have several times tried to annex us to them. They wanted to annex us in ’47, but they didn’t manage it because it would have meant having to do away with all the inhabitants of Mexico. Basically the problem is this: we are Mexican,
i.e., we are Americans, but we are not North American. Yes, I have to convince myself that I am a black North American, a blue, green, North American, I’m any color, I’m North American like you, like the Swahili. I’m one like you, not less than you. I’m like you.

I: Back to the question of colonies and colonialism.

Z: In reality the United States cannot colonize the Latin American world because they already have them in their midst. When Clinton said that it was necessary to make the United States a great multi-ethnic Nation, the greatest on Earth, he was suggesting none other than Latin-Americanization. Latin America in fact has the character of Latinity, i.e., the ability to bring diversity together in an equilibrium. In Europe, Latinity, through its culture, expressed through the language, was able to unite the Northern regions, such as Germany and England, with those of Africa and Asia. The concept of Latinity isn’t, however, only a concept linked to linguistic unity, but is essentially the ability to be able to present oneself as a meeting point between different cultures. Latin America is precisely this: a meeting point for national differences, where all diversity can find its equilibrium.

In this regard, Bolívar said that as the Mediterranean area had a single sea, which in effect saw the concentration of different cultures, so Latin America has two seas, but two seas that merge, in some way, with Latin American land and that bring Latin America into contact, via the Atlantic, with Africa and Europe, and via the Pacific with Oceania. For this reason Latin America can achieve authentic universality.

ENDNOTES

1. Borges 1944/2002, 53. Original Spanish text: “Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió” (Borges 1944/2006, 56). Unless noted, all translations are the author’s.


3. Original Spanish text: “En el campo en que el historicismo es aplicado para el mejor conocimiento de nuestra América, es [el] de la Historia de las Ideas. Un campo que ha venido tomando un gran desarrollo en toda la América, incluyendo la sajona. Dilthey, Ortega y con ellos la Sociología del saber de Max Scheler y la Sociología del conocimiento de Karl Mannheim y, en los últimos tiempos Estudio de la historia de Arnold Toynbee, han venido a formar el más idóneo de los instrumentales con que el estudioso de las ideas en América se ha venido enfrentando a su historia para captar en ella el sentido de esas ideas en relación con la realidad dentro de la cual surgieron y en relación con el mundo del cual eran originarias” (39).

4. Original Spanish text: “Si la idea que se tiene sobre la verdad es la de que ésta es de carácter circunstancial, las verdades de la filosofía estarán ligadas entonces a un determinado espacio y tiempo. Las verdades serán circunstanciales” (22).

5. Original Spanish text: “La Historia de las Ideas en México y en el resto de la América ibérica ha encontrado su mejor justificación en el Historicismo de Dilthey, Scheler y Ortega.
Partiendo del Historicismo es como ha lanzado su interrogante sobre la existencia de una Cultura Americana, un Pensamiento o una Filosofía original. Apoyándose en sus supuestos y utilizando sus métodos se ha podido destacar la originalidad de nuestros pensadores cuando parecía que simplemente imitaban. Se ha visto como éstos han asimilado las ideas por ellos importadas para adecuarlas a nuestra realidad. Lo que parecía una mala copia de una filosofía importada, ha resultado ser simplemente algo distinto de lo que se pretendió imitar. Muchas veces lo propio, lo original, ha surgido a pesar de las intenciones del pensador. Gracias al Historicismo hemos podido ver lo que hay de original en nuestros pensadores, y gracias al mismo nos hemos también dado cuenta de su importancia, pues su circunstancialidad no es mayor de la que puede tener otro pensamiento en otras circunstancias por diversas que sean. La Fenomenología nos ha ofrecido métodos para estudiar nuestra realidad elevándola a campos más abstractos. Heidegger y Sartre han justificado también nuestras preocupaciones por el Ser del Hombre” (254–255).


7. In this article, the term ‘West’ refers to the cultural, economic and political entity geographically identifiable with the countries which make up the so-called, at least in Sauvynian terms, the “first world,” which has, in different forms throughout the centuries imposed some kind of dominion over various parts of the planet.

8. Original Spanish text: “El sujeto abstrayéndose de una realidad que no quiere aceptar como propria, y el objeto, la propria realidad, como si fuera algo ajeno al sujeto que en ella está inserto” (19).

9. Original Spanish text: “La conciencia de esta doble expresión de la filosofía de la historia, la propia y la europea u occidental, ha dado origen a lo que puede ser el término de esta yuxtaposición y a la posibilidad de una filosofía de la historia que haga posible el Aufhebung, el proyecto asuntivo” (19–20).

10. A few brief passages from this interview have also appeared in Italian in Colonna 2008, 125–133.

11. Leopoldo Zea is referring to Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He is quoting the dialogue between Prospero, Caliban and Miranda in which they discuss the use of language as an instrument of dominion of one another. In reality this dialogue is not between Prospero and Caliban, but between Miranda and Caliban: Miranda says “I pitied thee, / Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour / One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage, / Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes / With words that made them known. But thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in it which good natures / Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou / Deservedly confin’d into this rock, / Who hadst deserved more than prison. / Caliban: You taught me language; and my profit on ’t Is, I know how to curse” (Shakespeare 1612, Act I, Scene II).

12. The four Zea refers to are the four people present at the interview, i.e., Leopoldo Zea, his wife, one of his assistants, and the interviewer.

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Shakespeare, William. 1612. The Tempest.


