

From Translating to Introducing: *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo*¹

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Resumen. Es una práctica habitual para los trabajos que se traducen al inglés atenerse a ciertas convenciones genéricas con respecto a su material previo. De manera tradicional, una “Introducción” sirve para situar el texto en cuestión dentro de su contexto cultural pertinente, mientras que una “Nota del Traductor” se ocupa de los detalles y dificultades lingüísticas que surgen a partir de las cuestiones prácticas de la traducción. El resultado: dos clases diferentes de tareas, que requieren diferentes tipos de conocimientos y que se delegan habitualmente en diversos tipos de especialistas. Esta división del trabajo ha demostrado ser insostenible en el caso de *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo* de Juan Carlos Rodríguez. Con esta obra, la tarea de traducir se funde inexorablemente con la de interpretación. El presente artículo explora los motivos.

Palabras clave: *althuserianos; empirista; tipos narrativos; títulos e índices; Foucault; Brecht.*

Abstract. It is normal practice for works translated into English to abide by certain generic conventions with respect to their prefatory material. Traditionally, an ‘Introduction’ serves to locate the text in question within its relevant cultural context, whereas a ‘Translator’s Note’ occupies itself with the linguistic details and difficulties that arise from the practicalities of translation. The result: two different kinds of task, requiring different kinds of expertise, which are habitually delegated to different kinds of specialist. Such a division of labour has proved to be unsustainable in the case of Juan Carlos Rodríguez’s *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo*. With this work, the task of translating fuses inexorably into that of interpreting. The present article explores the reasons why.

Keywords: *Althusserian; empiricist; narrative types; titles and indexes; Foucault; Brecht.*

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1. Introduction²

I confess at the outset to feeling personally implicated in Rodríguez's seminal *Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica* (1974, 1990, 2017), having first become acquainted with it in the mid-1980s. I was lecturing at the time at the University of Auckland and had come across a reference to *Teoría e historia* in the first volume of *Historia social de la literatura española* by Carlos Blanco Aguinaga et al. Auckland's library did not possess a copy of Rodríguez's work and I was obliged to order one through inter-library loan. When it eventually arrived, I discovered that it had been supplied not by an Australian library, which was the first port of call for most requests from New Zealand, but by the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, on the far side of the world. That was the first surprise. The second was that use of the volume was restricted to the Auckland library. Seemingly, this was either a very rare text, notwithstanding its comparatively recent publication, or one that had had a limited circulation, or possibly both. What was so special about it? Turning these thoughts over, I sat down to peruse *Teoría e historia*, focusing initially on the Introduction.³ This proved to be densely theoretical, excessively so, it seemed to me at the time, to the extent that I considered returning the work immediately. My instincts, imbibed unconsciously (as, subsequently, I would come to discover), were those of the classic British empiricist, who distrusts 'theory' as so much verbiage. But feeling slightly embarrassed, given the time, effort, and cost involved in acquiring the text, I read on. Then came my third surprise. Some of my most cherished convictions, about literature and society, began to crumble as, notwithstanding its initial inaccessibility, *Teoría e historia* gradually drew me into its problematic.

The process of inveiglement had, admittedly, much to do with my own academic trajectory. Born into a working-class family in the industrial Midlands of England, I had failed the infamous 11-plus examination and, on leaving school at the age of fifteen, had been forced to make my way into higher education via various technical institutes and colleges of further education, which I attended alongside the apprentices from Rolls-Royce and British Celanese. The barriers to be negotiated, it hardly needs to be added, were considerable and the notion of the school as an 'Ideological State Apparatus', expounded by Rodríguez, resonated profoundly with me. As also did the existence of an 'ideological unconscious' that, secreted by the prevailing social relations, ultimately sustained the whole school system. So, this was how it all operated! I had, in effect, been *conditioned*, nay, *constructed*, to 'know my place', and *unconsciously* to boot, in preparation for a lifetime of manual labour. In stark contrast to the students with whom I had come into contact at university. These, I recalled, had arrived either from the grammar schools of an aspirant middle class or from the 'public' schools of the aristocracy, and were imprinted accordingly with a sense of their innate superiority and free-floating status.

² The projected 'Introductory Study' to the forthcoming translation into English of Juan Carlos Rodríguez's *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo*.

³ This introduction forms the first part of chapter I of the present volume.

It took me several years to master the contents of *Teoría e historia* and explore its associated problematic. I had already realized the need to engineer a ‘break’ from the British Hispanism to which I had been exposed at university but was looking at the time to psychoanalytic theory to help free me from earlier, disciplinary entanglements. While vaguely socialistic in my outlook, in the Labour tradition, I knew very little about theoretical Marxism and even less about its Althusserian branch. My initial attempt to contact Rodríguez, to express my admiration for his work, proved abortive, and it was not until the early 1990s that we successfully exchanged letters, and the mid-1990s that we made each other’s acquaintance. I was the first to visit Granada and Rodríguez reciprocated with a trip to New York, during which he gave a lecture to my graduate students at Stony Brook. After that, we worked closely together, through my translations of *Teoría e historia* and *La norma literaria* (1984, 2001), and sections of *Althusser: Blow-up (Las líneas de un pensamiento distinto)* (2002, 2003).⁴ Gratifyingly, Rodríguez refers to me in *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo* as one of two people –the other one being his editor, Ramón Akal– who ‘have always helped me’.

Truth to say, my connection to *De qué hablamos* is even closer than the above suggests. If my memory serves me correctly, the idea of a volume of material collected from Rodríguez’s major texts was originally mine. I had in mind something along the lines of a ‘Reader’, examples of which, dedicated to the work of comparable scholars, already existed in the metropolitan academy. And that was not the limit of my involvement. My suspicions, never confirmed, are that I was the person responsible for introducing Juan Carlos to the work of Roy Bhaskar. It was certainly me who presented him with a copy of Bhaskar’s *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998), which was to become the target of a critique mounted in chapter one of *De qué hablamos*. Our relationship was of the kind that contrived to be both comradely and adversarial: I undertook to offer critical support to Juan Carlos, whereas he felt at liberty to be brutally honest regarding my residual attachment to what Spaniards refer to as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ empiricism. Exchanges between us could be heated affairs and I was invariably the loser: it was sometimes difficult to get a word in edgeways. Ideas spilled out of Juan Carlos endlessly. On many occasions I would leave his flat in the centre of Granada in a rather befuddled state, to wend my way back to my hotel.

And yet, when Juan Carlos presented me with a copy of *De qué hablamos*, I confess initially to feeling somewhat disappointed. Of course, it sparkled with his usual insights, and the combination of texts that focused on Marxism was certainly impactful. But *The Rodríguez Reader* of my imagination contained excerpts from the major texts on Lorca, Cervantes, and Borges, none of which were to be found in the present selection. However, on mature reflection, I could see the logic behind my comrade’s choice. Attempts to mediate ‘theory’ specifically through Spanish culture, I should have been the first to realize, through my own experience, always confronts a major obstacle: the prejudices of high bourgeois

⁴ *Theory and History of Ideological Production: The First Bourgeois Literatures (the 16th century)* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002); *State, Stage, Language: The Production of the Subject* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008) and *Althusser: Blowup (Lineaments of a Different Thought)*, PMLA, 123 (3) (2008), pp. 762-79. *La norma literaria* was retitled with the permission of Rodríguez.

scholarship. Spanish culture, Hispanists would be routinely informed in university common rooms across Britain, boasted only one novel of any importance, namely *Don Quixote*, and not a single philosopher of international repute. Unsurprisingly, Spain was routinely ignored in texts that professed to address ‘European’ culture and history. Rodríguez’s solution, then, had been simply to side-step claims regarding Spain’s secondary status: he would draw together published texts that addressed ‘Marxism’, a topic that was guaranteed to speak across disciplinary divides and appeal to a wide audience.

Clearly, *De qué hablamos* needed to be translated. But having recently entered retirement and feeling jaded after nearly five hard decades in the academy, I was reluctant to undertake a project that, earlier experience suggested, was likely to prove arduous. But the occasion of Juan Carlos’ early death in 2017 led me to reconsider the situation. Forty years had passed, I reflected, since the publication of *Teoría e historia*, fourteen since the appearance of its English translation, and still Rodríguez’s work had failed to take! In the meantime, Althusserianism itself had been assessed retrospectively by, among others, Robert Paul Resch (1992) and Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (1993), and re-energized, in the new century, thanks to Warren Montag (2003, 2013) and the publication of previously inedited material by Althusser himself (2003, 2006, 2014). Nor, seemingly, was there to be any end to the process of renewal: more recently, discussions of Althusser continued to occupy whole issues of major journals, like *Crisis and Critique* (2015), even as attention shifted to Althusser’s aleatory Marxism, in debates conducted by Katja Difenbach, Sara R. Farris, Gal Kirn, and Peter D. Thomas (2013). More recently still, a younger generation of scholars –Stefano Pippa comes to mind (2019)– has taken up the challenge, against the backdrop of a global crisis of capitalism and, more significantly, a crisis in the dominant ideology. And while all of this was happening, Rodríguez, arguably the leading Marxist theoretician of ideology, remained unreferenced and ignored!

And so, somewhat belatedly, I decided to translate *De qué hablamos*. This, perforce, led me to re-engage with the work’s content. Such, I came to reflect, had always been the case: I had only ever really come to grips with Rodríguez’s ideas in the process of translating them. It was one thing, I learned early on, to understand these ideas *in abstracto* and quite another to engage with them dialectically, *in praxis*. Which is yet another reason why the present critical commentary cannot be detached from the performative act of translation, beginning with the very title of the work in question: *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo*.

2. On titles and indexes

The ‘de qué’, with the accent mark on the ‘qué’, as any student of Spanish immediately realizes, invites a translation along interrogative lines: ‘What do we talk about when we talk about Marxism?’ A perfectly legitimate title, to be sure, and one respectful of, and faithful to, the content of the work. Except that, as Rodríguez himself confessed to me, the title is calqued on *What We Talk About When We Talk About*

Love, a collection of short stories by Raymond Carver (an author much admired by Rodríguez). Calqued, in other words, on a statement of fact, not a question, whether direct or indirect. When informed of the nuanced distinction, Juan Carlos was quick to point out, by way of defence, that he was simply following in the footsteps of the Spanish translator of Carver's work.⁵

A minor detail? Possibly. Although similar complications immediately arise. The 'contents' page of the present translation is not, strictly speaking, a 'contents page' at all but an 'índice', which appeared at the end of the Spanish original, in accordance with Spanish editorial practice, and has simply been shortened, re-categorized, and transposed to the beginning of the text, in accordance with Anglophone editorial norms. Another minor detail? Again, possibly. Although that is the least of it. The Spanish 'índice', it transpires, is not an 'index', in the English sense, but something that falls midway between an 'index' and a 'contents' page. An index in the English sense is conspicuous in *De qué hablamos* by its absence, as it is from most other Spanish works of the same ilk.

How are such differences to be explained? Provisionally, I suggest, by confronting the existence of two distinct *terrains*, respectively empiricist and Althusserian. On the empiricist terrain, an individual subject views a text qua *real object*, the general outlines of which are sketched out in the form of a 'contents'. (Rodríguez talks in terms of an 'eye' that 'sees the thing', also of an empiricist 'fascination with the object'.) This object is then progressively revealed in the fullness of its detail over the course of a distinctively *linear* narrative. The subject clings to its object like the mountain climber to a rock face. 'Theory', in such circumstances, can only compromise the descriptive immediacy of sense impressions, which is why an empiricist text teeters constantly on paraphrasis. The process of analysis proceeds from the particular to the general: in effect, the original object is broken down into its discrete elements, which can finally be listed alphabetically in the form of an 'index'. The principle of *linear* or *transitive* causality, which is to say, of colliding billiard balls, dictates the interaction between elements. Perforce, descriptive accuracy is at a premium. Sadly, this accuracy is the only thing that some empiricist texts have to recommend them.

On the Althusserian terrain, by way of contrast, the text focuses not upon a real object but upon a *thought object*, which is explored through the mediation of key theoretical concepts. The meaning of the latter is determined by a prior analytic process; in effect, their existence can be taken for granted for practical purposes. From this abstract basis, analysis *ascends* synthetically towards an understanding of the concrete totality. The narrative type that corresponds to it takes a cyclical or spiral form, which constantly doubles back upon itself, in an ongoing attempt to grasp the totality and its *modus operandi*. The Spanish 'índice' denotes the point at which the narrative arrives, after a long detour through the concepts. While the above perspective allows for the operation of transitive causalities, of the billiard-ball kind, discrete structural elements are bound together by a causality of a distinctively intransitive kind. This second species of causality

⁵ *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de amor* (1987).

determines the matrix effect of the text, just as it determines that of a social formation, conceived as a totality. Theoretical accuracy is prioritized. Viewed from the empiricist standpoint, structural analyses, of the Althusserian kind, can appear remarkably casual and careless of descriptive detail, also of stylistic and editorial niceties.

The key theoretical concepts pertinent to *De qué hablamos* are those of the 'ideological unconscious' and 'radical historicity'. In his Introduction, Rodríguez explains how, at an unconscious level, capitalist relations secrete the notion of a 'free subject', itself constitutive of something called the 'human condition' or 'human nature'. The narrative corresponding to these notions traces the gradual emergence of the individual out of the darkness of the 'Middle Ages'. To this transcendental notion of the subject, Rodríguez opposes his concept of a historical identity or 'I am', inscribed within its corresponding type of narrative. The latter take the form of variations upon a common theme, namely that of exploitation, within the horizon of a 'radical historicity'.

The above terrains find themselves pitched in mortal combat in what is arguably the key section of chapter one of *De qué hablamos*, in which Rodríguez subjects to a withering critique a text by the British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, leader of the school of Critical Realism. In *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) Bhaskar undertook to promote the claims of ontology, by drawing a fundamental distinction between the real, identified in terms of underlying mechanisms or laws (such as the law of gravity); the actual, with reference to events generated by these mechanisms (the falling apple); and the empirical, which consists of experiences (of the falling apple). Similarly, figuring prominently in Bhaskar's thinking was the 'epistemic fallacy', defined as 'the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge'.⁶ Specifically, Bhaskar was concerned to oppose idealist theories that relegate real mechanisms to a lower ontological status, as 'logical constructs'. Such distinctions came like a breath of fresh air to British Marxists, awash as they were with an all-pervasive empiricism, which prioritized the 'verification' of observable facts, and currently fashionable postmodern/post-structuralist approaches, which reduced the real to language or 'discourse'. In *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) and subsequent works, Bhaskar undertook to extend his thinking to the social sciences, in which form 'critical realism' began seriously to impact upon Marxism and would eventually give rise to an 'emergentist Marxism'.⁷

In a brief review of *The Possibility of Naturalism*, reproduced in chapter one of *De qué hablamos*, Rodríguez argued that Bhaskar was guilty of discussing Marx from the standpoint of bourgeois ideology, whose defining feature is that it takes as its starting point the opposition between 'individual' and 'society', or variations of the same, instead of the 'social formation' and its associated Marxist concepts. The effect, allegedly, was to 'sink' Marxism, for which the dichotomy in question simply does not exist. Bhaskar had failed to 'change the terrain', with the result that he had produced an account of Marxism

⁶ Roy Bhaskar, *The Realist Theory of Science* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 36.

⁷ See, for example, Sean Creaven, *Emergentist Marxism: Dialectical Philosophy and Social Theory* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

that was a ‘mickey-take’. Bourgeois ideology, Rodríguez would elaborate, exists in the form of traps that await the unwary, such as Bhaskar. These traps are the subject of chapter two of *De qué hablamos*.

3. Towards a Symptomatic Reading

The first trap, according to Rodríguez, consists of the invention of the subject. In the Introduction to his seminal work, *Teoría e historia*, included (to reiterate) as the first section of chapter one, a crucial distinction is drawn between the Subject/subject opposition, characteristic of capitalist societies, and the master/slave and lord/serf oppositions, characteristic respectively of slave-owning and feudal modes of production.

Teoría e historia was the first work of Rodríguez’s that I chose to translate. While translators are not guaranteed any superior insight into a text, it is certainly true that they are driven, by the nature of their undertaking, to transcend the notion of discursive transparency and to engage in practice of a ‘symptomatic reading’.⁸ A symptomatic reading presupposes the existence of a dialectic between, on the one hand, the problematic whose structural principles govern the reading of a text and, on the other, the structural principles that constitute the unconscious structure of the text itself. I was to confront the practical ramifications of such a dialectic on undertaking a translation of *Teoría e historia*. Within this context, the problems relating to ‘contents’ and ‘indices’, referred to above, quickly turned out to be but the tip of an iceberg. I was particularly disconcerted by long paragraphs that sometimes extended over pages. By my criteria, they appeared emphatically ‘rambling’, and I soon found myself breaking them down into smaller, more manageable units. And once this process had begun, there was no end to it. The units themselves underwent internal reconstruction, along the lines of the larger structures. Specifically, sentences were systematically shortened, and material often transferred from the body of the text to footnotes.

Such steps were taken in all innocence: my criteria, while consciously applied, were unconsciously held. It was all part of pressing Rodríguez’s narrative into a recognizably *linear* form. In the same spirit I proceeded to correct the numerous errors and errata that I was soon discovering, with an eye to facilitating the comprehension of a text. Any such ‘carelessness’ or ‘disorderliness’, I had learned to my cost as an undergraduate student, readily courted dismissal within an Anglophone academy. Except that, very soon, the resolution of what I initially took to be practical details, of an editorial kind, began to evolve, imperceptibly, into issues that required decisions over interpretation, as I struggled, hermeneutically, to capture the semantic intricacies of the text in English. A whole conceptual field, it transpired, was being radically reconfigured in ways that I felt were important but that were difficult to decipher. Why, I wondered, had Rodríguez not defined more clearly the nature of his concepts at the outset? His failure to do so

⁸ The term is taken from Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left, 1920), p. 8.

was certainly causing me some problems as a translator. I particularly recall, for example, puzzling over the meaning of the Spanish ‘segregar’, on the third page of the Introduction, used in reference to the image of the ‘free subject’: ‘*segregada* desde la matriz ideológica burguesa’.⁹ The cognate term for ‘segregada’, of course, is ‘segregated’, except that ‘segregated from’ was clearly not the meaning intended here. ‘Secrete’ was certainly a legitimate possibility but, at this point, did not seem entirely appropriate – I suspect I found its materialist resonance rather off-putting. ‘Derives from’ was my original preference,¹⁰ but this was subsequently displaced by ‘secreted from’, which, with the benefit of hindsight, is the solution adopted in the revised translation included in the present volume.

Let us consider the stages of the symptomatic reading *in abstracto*. The process, begins with a hermeneutic moment at which one reads the texts as if it were written by oneself (‘segregar’ equals ‘to segregate’), then moves onto a more sophisticated level, at which one begins to learn the language of the original (‘segregar’ equals ‘to derive from’), before finally arriving at the indigenous structure of the text’s meanings, which presupposes the ‘secretion’ of meaning, at a deeper level, mediated through causal mechanisms operative at the level of the structural whole. A grasp of the final stages of the process proved to be a prerequisite for understanding what preceded. Herein are to be discerned, *innuce*, the outlines of what Rodríguez refers to as the ‘ideological unconscious’. Althusser, it is true, in whose work Rodríguez’s concept is rooted, prefers to talk in terms of a Freudian, as opposed to ideological unconscious.¹¹ But the substantial claim is that the ‘latent’ structure of a text is to be identified not with the ‘manifest’ or visible content, understood as the intentions of its author, but with the structural mechanisms that make the text possible.

We will be returning to this ‘ideological unconscious’ below and the complex mode of its secretion by social relations. At this point, I am more concerned with the fact that I arrived at an understanding of it through the application of the concept itself. At first blush, this may seem a somewhat paradoxical enterprise. How can a concept, developed in a text, be a precondition for an understanding of the same text? Althusser posed the same question with respect to the use of Marxist concepts to interpret the text of Marx and famously replied that the paradox is only apparent, that a symptomatic reading is circular but not vicious. In the philosopher’s own words: ‘[T]he circle implied by this operation is, like all circles of this kind, simply the dialectical circle of the question asked of an object as to its nature, on the basis of a theoretical problematic which in putting its object to the test puts itself to the test of its object.’¹²

So much is clear. But there is an additional complication in the present context. My understanding of the ideological unconscious was conditional upon my struggles as

⁹ Juan Carlos Rodríguez, *Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica* (Madrid: Akal, 1990), p. 7.

¹⁰ Rodríguez, *Theory and History of Ideological Production*, trans. Malcolm K. Read (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), p. 18.

¹¹ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 16.

¹² *Reading Capital*, p. 38.

a translator. Translating Rodríguez's text required that I enact, in practice, issues that were being explored in the text in theory. Which leads me to offer a word of warning: any reader who approaches *Teoría e historia* from an empiricist standpoint, as I unconsciously did in my capacity as translator, is destined to feel frustrated at every turn by a text that perversely appears to resist interpretation. To gain access to the text, I would further suggest, this same reader will likely need to 'break' with ideological norms that are unconsciously held, will need, in brief, to 'change terrain' from one that presupposes an opposition between the 'individual' and 'society' to one based on the 'social formation', structured on the basis of a 'mode of production'.

In the light of such considerations, the significance of the 'break' described by Rodríguez in the postdata to the second edition of *Teoría e historia* becomes, retrospectively, more significant. 'I literally threw them out into the street', he writes, with reference to the theoretical presuppositions of his earlier work.¹³ Dispensed with, as he precedes to explain, are the notions of 'author', 'critic', and 'reader', and – superordinate to these – the notion of the ('free', 'autonomous') 'subject', a list soon to be extended to include 'Reason', 'unreason', 'mind', and 'internal psychology', all of which are now placed under erasure. And that is only the beginning: similarly, to be 'picked up with pincers' (to use Rodríguez's own turn of phrase) are the period concepts of the 'Middle Ages' and 'Renaissance' together with those of 'form' and 'content', and 'text' and 'context', in short, everything associated with the transhistorical notions of 'Man' and 'Literature'.

4. Mapping History

The second trap that, according to Rodríguez, awaits the unwary concerns the *history* of ideological production, specifically, the *invention* of history, to be considered in the second part of chapter two of *De qué hablamos*. In essence, the material contained in this section, which first appeared in article form, retraces the ground covered *in extenso* in the main body of *Teoría e historia* or, as we will henceforth refer to it, *Theory and History*.

In his seminal text Rodríguez mapped the transition in Spain from feudalism to liberal capitalism along classically Althusserian lines, with attention focused upon the 16th century. The clash between the conflicting modes explained, in Althusserian terms, the *dominance* of the political instance, in the context of a social formation *determined* 'in the last instance' by the economic instance. The Absolutist State, to which the ensuing class struggle gave rise, was characterized by a single structure: the opposition between a public and private sector. This opposition, which had been absent from feudalism, was a result of the pressure of the bourgeoisie or, more exactly, of bourgeois social relations upon a prior set of servile relations. At the ideological level, conflict took the form of a struggle between a feudal *substantialism* or, as Rodríguez sometimes described it,

¹³ *Theory and History*, pp. 32-33.

organicism, and *animism*, the first form of bourgeois ideology. Spain was unusual in that, after a brief efflorescence of the bourgeoisie, in the early 16th century, control over the State passed to the nobility, which led to a process of re-sacralization or re-feudalization, culminating, ideologically, in what traditionally came to be known as the ‘Baroque’. And it is to the latter that Rodríguez turned his attention in *De qué hablamos* to explore the invention of history.

Perforce, the basic theoretical framework remains the same as that set out in *Theory and History*. The point of departure is the contrast between feudal and capitalist modes, the first of which is characterized by the opposition between lord and serf, based on notions of ‘blood’ and ‘lineage’, the second, by the opposition between Subject (employer) and subject (employee), based on the ‘freedom’ of the ‘individual’. But with significant re-adjustments: the ‘ideological unconscious’ theorized in *Theory and History* is here reconfigured as the ‘ideological/libidinal unconscious’, in response, doubtless, to the growth of interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis in the 1980s and ’90s. But not to the detriment of ‘radical historicity’: within the new scenario, ‘I’ exists as little more than a ‘grammatical phantom’, imprisoned within the physical and psychic drives of pain and desire. In brief, the ideological unconscious determines its libidinal counterpart. When the medieval hero, the Cid, proclaims that ‘I am Rui Díaz’, he asserts his identity as a servant of his lord, King Alfonso, just as the King envisages himself as a servant of *his* Lord, God. The bourgeois subject only makes its appearance between the 14th and the 17th centuries, in the guise of a proto-form or ‘beautiful soul’, as articulated by animism. This emergent subject was driven underground by the forces of re-sacralization and, at the institutional level, by an Inquisition that, in its capacity as a feudal apparatus, would refuse to recognize the distinction between public and private sectors. Some leading animist ideologues or ‘humanists’, notably Sánchez del Brocense and Fray Luis de León, found themselves subject to oppressive laws of censorship; others, such as Luis Vives and Juan Valdés, took refuge in exile.

In the broad sweep of his analysis in *Theory and History*, Rodríguez had focused on the classic bourgeois ideologies, principally the idealism of Kant and Hegel, and the empiricism of Locke and Hume. The idealist subject, his argument ran, still retained the fullness of the beautiful soul or proto-subject, whereas its empiricist counterpart was vacated, partially by Locke and totally by Hume. In the present context he chooses to contrast the substantialist body/soul dichotomy to the *immanentism* of the exiled Spinoza, based on the parity of body and soul and the existence of a univocal language. Against the backdrop of this philosophical scenario, a confrontation is staged between the two great ‘baroque’ poets, Francisco de Quevedo and Luis de Góngora. In *Theory and History*, the same comparison had been drawn in very precise terms. In the case of Góngora, a substantialist or organicist superstructure is overlain by an animist infrastructure; the pilgrim-protagonist of the *Soledades* is, at root, a ‘beautiful soul’, whose sensibility finds *expression* in exterior form. In the case of Quevedo, on the other hand, we have the inverse

situation whereby a ‘platonic shadow play’ is ‘deposited’ on an organicist infrastructure, registering thereby the seigniorial dominance operative at the political level.¹⁴

The same opposition survives in *De qué hablamos*, although now with an eye to the parallel between Spinozist immanentism and Góngora’s poetics. The latter, Rodríguez argues, draws its potency from the immediacy of a literal life and from linguistic signs that have now been released from their substantialist attachment to matter. Words are as freely interchangeable, in the poetic context, as are commodities on the open market. The pilgrim is above all a spectator on life, who is fascinated by the *history* of the objects he beholds: the milk that is offered to him by the goatherds, the bowl in which it is served, the spoon with which it is served and even the piece of flotsam that saves the life of the shipwrecked pilgrim – all have a tale to tell. Life culminates in the marriage ceremony, to which the pilgrim bears witness, and in the beauty of the bodies of the wrestlers who perform as part of the celebrations. Quevedo, on the other hand, remains a poet of death, of corruption and rottenness. The organicist body, it is true, fleetingly manifests itself in the guise of ‘enamoured dust’, but for the rest can be saved only by Pauline grace.

In his discussion of the Baroque, Rodríguez is again effectively displacing the focus of attention from the subject/object, alternatively, individual/society opposition, to the social formation. The bourgeois dichotomies prove analytically dysfunctional in this context for the simple reason that, even in its resurgent form, feudal substantialism lacks a ‘subject’ form. Not so the structuralist approach, which focuses attention productively on the opposition between two diametrically opposed economic systems, at a particular conjuncture, in the first part of the 17th century. These systems, as the detailed analysis of the poetry of Góngora and Quevedo reveals, not only existed side by side but reacted each upon the other, to the extent that each *deformed* the other. The struggle between them is what Rodríguez understands as the ‘baroque’, a Europe-wide phenomenon that was thrown into prominence in Spain on account of the resurgence of feudalism. Although a total regression to the latter was never likely, the political dominance exercised by the nobility, within the apparatus of the newly constituted Absolutist State, proved effective enough to retard the full development of capitalist relations at the economic level.

In sum, Rodríguez brings home with a vengeance what Althusserians refer to as *over-determination*, through which to capture poetic nuances at the level of the text. Animism, the early form of bourgeois ideology, greases a set of social relations that are increasingly based on wage labour but that have yet to be subsumed, either ‘formally’ or ‘really’, under capital. In this situation, escaping the clutches of capital, particularly in the colonies but also in the Old World, remained a real possibility. The result is a fitting reminder of the centuries that it took before free workers would be compelled to sell their very capacity for labour in return for the price of their customary subsistence. A bourgeois revolution would only be achieved in Spain in the 20th century, under the umbrella of a fascist dictatorship.

¹⁴ *Theory and History*, pp. 79-80; 88.

5. A detour through British Hispanism

When I first became acquainted with Rodríguez work, I was in the process of distancing myself from linguistic behaviourism, via Noam Chomsky and his transformational grammar, and from ‘psychology’, thanks to Freudian psychoanalysis, as reconfigured by Norman Brown. But the ‘break’ demanded by Rodríguez and Althusserian theory was of a wholly different order, and when I first encountered *Theory and History*, I was still mired in the native empiricism of the British Academy. E. P. Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory*, targeted at Althusserianism, was an indication of the barriers to be negotiated, even within an overtly Marxist context. Within British Hispanism, where I happened to find myself located, the same aversion to ‘theory’ was further compounded by a Catholic conservatism. Admittedly, the same conservatism also weighed heavily in Spain – it was the dominant ideology of Franco’s dictatorship and had recently been re-imposed with a vengeance. Except that, in this case, a delayed entry into modernity guaranteed the existence of an alternative, contradictory terrain, from the standpoint of which ‘theorizing’ remained a possibility.

From the Althusserian standpoint, of course, ideologies are notoriously invisible to those constrained within their horizons, which is to say, as far as British Hispanism was concerned, within boundaries determined by a Kantian ‘sensibility’, structured on a Scholastic base, overlain by an empiricist obsession with technical detail. A scholar such as Derek Lomax, one of this discipline’s leading exponents, could readily persuade himself that he operated, analytically, ‘with few or no pre-conceptions’ of a theoretical kind. Those who ventured into ‘deeper waters’ usually arrived at conclusions that were ‘largely unverifiable’ insofar as sustained by ‘pseudo’ concepts.¹⁵ Such are the typical workings of an ideological unconscious, as theorized by Rodríguez. We need to consider them in some detail since, ironically, it is they that, in large measure, will explain the non-reception of the Spaniard’s own work within British and, more broadly, Anglophone academy.¹⁶

As the 1960s fed into the 1970s, British Hispanists attempted to negotiate a transition from Scholastic orthodoxy, with its preoccupation with sin and moral corruption, towards a more humanist, liberal perspective on ‘Man’, inflected along vaguely existential lines. But, for all that, they remained embedded, at the ideological level, in an unthinking empiricism, hence, incapable of entering into ‘theoretical debate’. When challenged by more pragmatically oriented American Hispanists, they were accordingly left with little alternative but to target what they perceived to be the descriptive inadequacies of oppositional texts. Called upon to review Stephen Gilman’s *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, for example, Keith Winnon chose to focus upon Gilman’s ‘unpardonable betrayal’ of scholarly standards and to parade all the ‘trivial inaccuracies’ that ‘popped up’ on every page.

¹⁵ For a full discussion and bibliographical information, see my *Educating the Educators: Hispanism and its Institutions* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).

¹⁶ The purview of British Hispanists did not extend to the work of Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, E. P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, and other British Marxist historians.

It would be premature to speak in terms of incommensurability between Britain and America: Hispanists of all stripes were still operating within a common disciplinary framework. But, that said, the signs of tension were clear enough. Thus, when Melveena McKendrick came to review David Hilner's *Reasons and the Passions*, a work inflected towards Marxism, she found the nature of its thesis 'elusive' and 'allusive'. Understandably so. From her standpoint within Hispanism, what was she to make of the claim that Calderón's dramaturgy was part of 'an ideology which attempted to refeudalize Spain as the aristocracy felt its bases beginning to slip away'? Such claims were, from McKendrick's perspective, unsupported by hard 'evidence' and lacked 'historical underpinning', at least of the kind with which McKendrick was familiar. A discipline that had been concerned, from its origins, to promote social harmony, whose point of departure was the unified subject, specifically Calderón's conscious intention or 'purpose', is frankly puzzled by Hildner's notion of over-determination: 'the author seems now to argue for a less dogmatic, less closed Calderón, now for a Calderón intent on indoctrination who puts his art at the service of largely secular ideology.' From the non-dialectical perspective, Calderón must be one thing or another, but cannot be both at the same time.

Of course, the North American Hispanists continued to operate within the boundaries of empiricism, albeit of a pragmatist variety, hence, limited themselves to the *application* of theory, which meant that their conflict with their British counterparts was correspondingly muted. But when Anglophone Hispanists came to review texts by Spanish Marxists, the spectre of incompatibility reared its ugly head. Paul Gallagher, for example, resiled before the use of the term 'conflictive' by Julio Rodríguez-Puértolas, with which to describe social formations that were 'over-determined', hence contradictory at their core. 'Groups of people', Gallagher objected, crucially displacing the focus of debate from 'class', are ultimately reducible to 'individuals' in that, though societies 'produce' individuals, 'it is the individuals, not societies, that produce the works of art'. Similarly, for Alan Deyermond, when reviewing another work by Puértolas, the attempt to think textual ambiguity in terms of 'a fourteenth-century crisis of the feudal system' cannot help but seem 'arbitrary and even perfunctory'. The notion of a feudal system in decay 'does not seem to follow from the evidence adduced', nor could it, given that the British Hispanist is attached to the importance of 'facts'.

The advent of 'Cultural Studies' signalled a deepening of theoretical commitment within the British Academy at large, from the effects of which British Hispanists could not wholly isolate themselves. Their reaction was simply to throw up their hands in despair. For example, James Mandrell's *The Point of Honour* told José Alberich more about American Hispanism than it did about the Don Juan legend within Hispanic culture. Quite simply, he could not understand its psychoanalytic discourse: 'Good God!' Some of the older Hispanists chose to cash in their 'cultural capital' and join the University Administration. Those that remained were forced to accept that the impetus now lay with younger scholars. Among these, Paul Julian Smith and Nicholas Spadiccini had begun to challenge an 'unexamined positivism and empiricism still dominant in Golden Age

Studies’ and to charge their traditional colleagues with a ‘lack of critical self-awareness’. Soon, even anthologies on Calderón were boasting ‘a wide variety of methodologies’.

The promise of a new dawn did not last for long, as educational apparatuses that serviced production found themselves rapidly being displaced by an ideology of production that regulated the apparatuses. In their enthusiasm to ‘catch up’ with theory, a new generation of Hispanists cut straight through to post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism, effectively by-passing Marxism and Althusserianism. In this respect, they were simply going with the flow. The ultimate put-down came in Luc Ferry and Alain Renault’s *La pensée 69*, which famously located Althusserianism, along with the Beatles’ music, within a recent but vanished pass. Some of Althusser’s most prominent critics included former students and others who, while at one time deeply indebted to him, subsequently made every effort to distance themselves from him and, even, to deny their former allegiance. The prospects for Rodríguez looked grim.

6. *Understanding the Manifesto*

In Part II of *De qué hablamos* Rodríguez conducts a symptomatic reading of the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels. This, it will come as no surprise to learn, addresses the ‘break’, understood along Althusserian lines, between an early Marx, still caught up in philosophical debates around Hegel, and the late Marx and author of *Capital*. The *Manifesto* falls within the category of ‘transitional texts’ and, according to Rodríguez, exhibits all the defects of the same, notably an unresolved tension between class conflict and forces of production as the motor of change.

Some of the difficulties had already been spelt out in *Theory and History*, in which, even as he made much of the conflict between the ‘bourgeoisie’ and the ‘aristocracy’, as the cause of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Rodríguez had shown himself anxious to avoid the trap of conceiving such agencies as ‘subjects of history’: ‘the impact of the bourgeoisie is not only that of a social class, but of a whole structure that this class brings with it, with its own new political, economic and ideological instances.’¹⁷ One needed to think, he proceeds to elaborate, of one complex social structure impacting upon another. It could never be a question of measuring classes numerically: so many aristocrats, so many members of the bourgeoisie. By the same token, when it came to the Rebellion of the *Comuneros* and the battle between the towns and the Absolutist State, membership of either side was quite fluid.¹⁸ The broader point is not to be missed and was duly emphasized by Rodríguez in his Introduction: the ideological state apparatus materializes ideology that is secreted ‘originally’ by the dominant social relations, ‘before’ being legitimized and formulated within the superstructure, although, strictly speaking, the mechanisms of structural causality render such temporal distinctions largely otiose.

¹⁷ *Theory and History*, p. 104.

¹⁸ *Theory and History*, p. III.

By Rodríguez's reckoning, Marx was still struggling in the *Manifesto* to relinquish the category of the subject, understood both in the Hegelian sense of a single internal principle or Spirit, which unfolds over time, through successive, epochal totalities, and of a human singularity that, while posited *outside* history, needs to be realized *inside* history. In either case, Spinoza's concept of an immanent force is effectively set in motion, but at the price of a regression: history consists of the process of an expressive, subjective becoming or self-realization. In an attempt to break out of this infernal circle of bourgeois thought, Marx targeted the figure of Max Stirner, whose systematic defence of the 'free subject' enabled Marx to concentrate his rage.

The key rupture, Rodríguez argues, occurs at the outset of the *Manifesto*, when Marx splits bourgeois 'society' into two: 'bourgeois and proletarians', otherwise exploiters and exploited, before proceeding to frame the history of their relation in terms of a 'class struggle'. With the proviso, already emphasized in *Theory and History*, that social classes are not to be envisaged as two teams in a football match, in other words, as *prior subjects*, but as products of class conflict. Bourgeois ideology, by way of contrast, wishes to talk about a unified 'human nature', its progressive emergence, over history, in the guise of 'human reason', and, by extension, of the 'rights of man' and the role of 'citizens'. Faced by Marx, bourgeois ideologues predictably hastened to conduct a cover-up by dividing societies into masses and elites, into groups and professions, and so on.

Of course, residues remain in Marx of his former attachment to Hegel: modes of production unfold along suspiciously idealist lines, after the fashion of a Moving Spirit, from slave-owning, through feudal, to capitalist formations. Although with an important difference: the transition from one mode to the other does not entail an *Aufhebung*: in no sense can capitalism be construed as the culmination of feudalism. Marx's schema, it follows, escapes the teleologism that characterizes the Hegelian legacy: it is not the Spirit that overcomes material obstacles but productive forces that overwhelm relations of production. In the same way that a child outgrows a set of clothes, so do productive forces of capitalism outstrip their productive relations. Except that a problem suddenly arises. What has happened to the earlier narrative about class conflict? Where is the motor of history to be located? In the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat or between the productive forces and relations of production? The formulation in the *Manifesto* along technological lines, Rodríguez elaborates, is no incidental slip. On the contrary, it also features in Marx's preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). And a related problem arises in both texts: instead of being inscribed in social relations, where it properly belongs, a decidedly nebulous ideology is left hanging in the superstructure, sustained only by the conflict between the produce forces and relations.

A complete break with the subject was only possible after Marx had introduced the concept of *surplus value* in *Capital* and the corresponding concepts of *absolute* and *relative* extraction. These new concepts led him to displace the focus of attention from 'species being' to economic exploitation and, correspondingly, from the notion that we

are ‘born free’ to the notion that we are born either as exploiters or exploited. By the same token, the causal relation between the productive forces and relations of production is reconfigured in favour of the latter. Within the new scenario, the emphasis falls upon history and upon what is anti-natural.

In sum, while the *Manifesto* is, unquestionably, a rich document, it fails to transcend the philosophical battles in which Marx and Engels were engaged at the time. Prior to the introduction of ‘surplus value’, Marx had been guilty of simply inverting the traditional opposition between matter and spirit (or body and soul), to the advantage of matter. All this changes with the introduction of surplus value. In terms of the theoretical argument being developed in *De qué hablamos*, the change of theoretical terrain is crucial: from an unconscious attachment to subject/object opposition, we have passed to focus upon social formations, consisting of different levels or ‘instances’, structured on the basis of a mode of production.

7. ‘Breaking’ with tradition

In chapter four of *De qué hablamos* Rodríguez will assess the problematic legacy of Althusser, with whom he had studied in Paris in the mid-1970s. But before we review this, let us briefly regress to assess the impact of Althusserianism on the Spaniard.

In the postdata to the second edition of *Theory and History* (1989), Rodríguez salutes ‘the lasting presence of Louis Althusser, who continues to speak over his silence’.¹⁹ True, Althusser’s only visible presence in the text itself takes the form of two footnotes, but doubtless for the reason explained in the second of these. ‘In reality,’ writes Rodríguez, ‘there is no “source” or “influence” more direct than that which is exercised from a shared, common, ideological problematic, as opposed to an alien ideological problematic.’²⁰ The effect of the ‘change of terrain’, from the emphasis upon the subject to the social formation, is such as to marginalize the notion of influence between *individuals* at the outset. ‘Sighting’, within the Althusserian problematic, is not the act of an individual but subject to its structural conditions. Which, of course, is not to deny that scientists communicate like others between themselves but, rather, to situate *Theory and History* in the context of a structural ‘break’ between different problematics.

Given the traumatic nature of his own experience –to recall, Rodríguez literally threw his prior formulations into the street– it is certainly strange to find that more care was not taken to elucidate the Althusserian formulations and their differences from their traditional counterparts. Stranger still that Rodríguez should dismiss the controversy surrounding the Althusserian break as unworthy of consideration. ‘I have no intention at this point of replaying the notorious polemic over “humanism”, which a few years ago

¹⁹ *Theory and History*, p. 33.

²⁰ *Theory and History*, p. 63n36.

surrounded the work of Althusser'.²¹ Even in the context of the mid-1970s, when the major humanistic assaults upon Althusser were still to be mounted, the dismissal of a problem that was likely to determine the (non)reception of *Theory and History* was, to say the least, ill-advised. Specifically, the claim that it was 'boring for being confused' could only appear condescending to any readers –and they were likely to be in the majority– who were still attached to the humanist tradition.

The situation might have been saved had Rodríguez clarified what he wanted to put in the place of the humanistic apparatus. Yet, curiously, his own concepts are introduced *obliquely* into *Theory and History*, beginning with opening remarks in which 'literary discourses' are traced to their historical origins, in a unique set of conditions that 'we associate with the ideological level characteristic of "modern" or "bourgeois" social formations, understood in the general sense'.²² The emphasis upon history, even the radicalness of history, is not in itself likely to trouble the reader unduly – there is, after all, little about it that is particularly Marxist, at least in principle, and much that would be shared by critics of different persuasions. Nor is there anything particularly scary about the quote-marks that decorate 'modern' and 'bourgeois'. But the unmarked categories of 'social formation' and 'ideological level' are drawn from the heartland of Althusserianism. To those readers already familiar with the Althusserian tradition, their appearance poses no problems. Indeed, as we explained earlier, structural Marxism proceeds on the assumption that its key concepts are given at the outset, and that these will be extended and enriched during the critical process that follows. But for those new to the problematic, Rodríguez's discourse can only consist of free-floating abstractions, without any grounding in the empirical world.

Initially, the obstacles to comprehension, for the novice, are not overwhelming, and a reader possessed of sufficient goodwill might well be expected to press on regardless. But their impact can only prove cumulative. 'The productive logic of the text' and 'ideological matrix' soon make an appearance, without being explained, although both concepts only make sense within the framework of an Althusserian problematic. They are soon joined by Rodríguez's seminal concept of the ideological unconscious, which similarly arrives unannounced. 'The notion of the subject (and the whole problematic within which it is inscribed) is radically historical because [...] it derives directly (and exclusively) from the very matrix of the bourgeois ideological unconscious: the "serf" can never be a "subject"'.²³ To have a key notion – that of the 'subject' – snatched from view, precisely as a series of unfamiliar concepts press for consideration, is likely to prove a step too far. And if the bourgeois reader has yet to grasp the fact that s/he is an unwelcome visitor, then the arrival of the notion of 'state apparatus' is guaranteed to persuade them otherwise.

²¹ *Theory and History*, p. 20.

²² *Theory and History*, p. 17.

²³ *Theory and History*, p. 21.

Given the conjuncture at which *Theory and History* appeared, a certain familiarity with Marxism, if not with Althusserianism *per se*, might reasonably have been assumed. In the mid-1970s, the Spanish Communist Party was still basking in the credit it had received from its struggles with a fascist regime, and its positions had been clearly staked out. The choice was no longer between the ‘immobilism’ of the Franco dictatorship and the opening engineered by reformists but between reform and oppositional rupture. But that situation, as Rodríguez explains in the first chapter of *De qué hablamos*, proved to be short-lived. In the ‘transition to democracy’ that followed the death of Franco, the Party quickly found itself eclipsed as a political force. Althusserian Marxism, it is true, continued to enjoy a certain presence in Spain – symptomatically, in 1976 Althusser would deliver one of his most famous lectures in the University of Granada, attended by an audience of thousands. But by the 1980s the death of Althusserianism was being routinely pronounced and its followers considered to be an irrelevance. In Spain attempts were made to distance Rodríguez from the work of his former master and some among his so-called defenders hastened to deny the existence of a ‘juancarlismo’ or ‘rodriguismo’, in other words, of a Rodríguez school of thought, doubtless to further insulate Rodríguez against any Althusserian contamination.

Amidst all of which, Rodríguez was, arguably, his own worst enemy: he was certainly quick to correct me when I spoke of an Althusserian school in Granada: there was, he insisted, no such thing. With inevitable consequences: the thicket of commentaries that have grown up around the work of such scholars as Terry Eagleton and Fred Jameson are conspicuously absent in his case; the only serious full-length commentary to appear on Rodríguez’s work, to date, is that of a student located outside of Spain.²⁴ This is all very strange insofar as the Granada academy has recently, and belatedly, sought to foreground Althusser’s famous 1976 lecture.²⁵ But to better assess Rodríguez’s relation to Althusser, let us turn to Rodríguez’s own discussion thereof in *Althusser: Blowup*, a monograph that is included in its entirety in *De qué hablamos*.

8. Reassessing the Althusserian legacy

It is significant that when he came to assess the extent of Althusser’s personal influence upon him, Rodríguez should emphasize that, quite simply, ‘he taught me how to read’; also, that, in his full-length discussion of the Althusserian legacy in *Blowup*, he should continue to prioritize Althusser’s notion of ‘symptomatic’ reading. To conduct such a reading, we have been arguing, presupposes the importance of paying an attention to the nuances of language, as determined by the pressure of the ideological unconscious. These nuances, I have further argued, impact upon the translator with a particular force,

²⁴ Juan Manuel Caamaño, *The Literary Theory of Juan Carlos Rodríguez: Contemporary Spanish Cultural Critic* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

²⁵ Louis Althusser, *La transformación de la filosofía: conferencia de Granada*, trans. Juan Manuel Azpitarte and Juan Carlos Rodríguez (1976), ed. José Luis Moreno Pestaña (Granada: University of Granada, 2021).

given the exigencies of their craft. Bearing which in mind, let us resume the thread of the displacement of focus from the subject/object opposition to the notion of the social formation, but with an eye to specific problems posed in *Blowup*.

We referred above to the two footnote references in *Theory and History* in which Rodríguez references the work of Althusser directly. In both these, we are reminded, Althusser was insistent upon the plurality of knowledge, upon the existence, historically, of ‘sciences’ as opposed to ‘Science’. Notwithstanding which, it transpires, he sometimes falls into an evolutionist way of thinking of bourgeois extraction. The reasons, Rodríguez explains, ‘probably have to do with academic-professional prejudice: after all, Althusser is “administratively” a philosopher.’²⁶ And, as a philosopher, will resile before the notion of a radical historicity. The same argument is given a further twist in *Blowup*: his confidence in ‘human Reason’, it is claimed, leads Althusser to promote the notion of a philosophical tradition from Plato to Husserl, hence of a transhistorical conflict between idealism and materialism; which gives rise to a ‘philosophism’ that effectively neutralizes the notion of a ‘break’ and that of a radical historicity. The road to ahistoricism thereby stands open: according to Althusser, ideology has no history, and the subject has always existed.

Matters come to a head in Althusser’s essay on the Ideological State Apparatus and, specifically, with respect to the mechanism of interpellation. The example used to illustrate the latter, namely the burning-bush encounter between Yahweh and Moses, is, according to Rodríguez, ill-chosen in that it radically infringes the notion of historical individuation: Yahweh addresses Moses in his capacity as a *serf* or *servant* of His Lord, not as a *subject*, as Althusser argues. The Spaniard is insistent: while, admittedly, a handful of desires and drives, encapsulated under the pronoun ‘I’, have always existed, the act of saying ‘I am’ is radically historical. There is nothing prior to the process of individuation; the term ‘subject’ is locked within the framework of a specific ‘mode of production’, namely capitalism, as is, by implication, that of the ‘individual’. And thus does the argument proceed. Capitalist relations of production distribute ‘individuals’ into classes, while they furnish the means of production to a particular class. ‘Individuals’, whether exploiters or exploited, are trapped within these same relations, are pre-determined by them at birth, nay, prior to birth. Things happen rather differently under slave-owning and feudal modes to the extent that it is ‘individualities’, not ‘individuals’, that are pre-determined and are individualized as masters and slaves, lords and serfs.

Now, surely, there is much to be said in favour of Rodríguez’s claims. By his own admission, Althusser was no historian, nor had he ever seriously engaged in historical scholarship. Hence, while he certainly knew how to apply the theory of ‘modes of production’ to periodize history, the temptation was always there to pitch his discussion of history at an excessively abstract level, detached from empirical detail. Hence the abstraction that clouds his discussion of the encounter between Moses and Yahweh. Moreover, it was a temptation that, unfortunately, would become more pressing in the late Althusser who, in the context of his ‘philosophy of the encounter’, let slip the notion

²⁶ *Theory and History*, p. 63n36.

of a 'break'. The effect was to prioritize the continuity of history. In *Blowup* Rodríguez protests accordingly: the encounter between the employer, who owns the means of production, and the employee, who merely owns his labour power, is emphatically not comparable to the political encounter, staged by Machiavelli, between *Fortune* and *Virtue*.

But, while persuasive, Rodríguez's claims come at a price. Once the process of historicization sets in, it is hard to stop and pretty soon the spectre of reductionism rears its ugly head. If, as Rodríguez suggests, materialism is to be defined strictly in relation to class conflict, between masters and slave, lords and serfs, then, yes, Althusser's attempt to construct a subterranean, transhistorical materialist tradition falls at the first hurdle: the work of classical Democritus and Epicurus, within the slave-owning mode, and feudal nominalists, have nothing to say on the relevant dynamics. But is that fair? And how far is Rodríguez prepared to press his argument, even in terms of his own scholarship? What about Juan Huarte de San Juan, for example? What does his emphasis upon bodily 'humours' amount to if not a philosophy of materialism, conducive, among other things, to a denial of immortality of the soul, whether of lord or serf? The Spanish Inquisition certainly knew a materialist when it saw one and hastened to place the *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (1575) on its list of forbidden texts. Of course, any analysis of this work with claims to adequacy will need to engage the convergence of contemporary ideologies and the conflictual complexities that this convergence involves, but that, as Rodríguez has taught us, is an obligation to be assumed, not to be avoided.²⁷

And that is not the least of our concerns. Pressed to its logical conclusion, the notion of a radical historicity issues, by Rodríguez's own reckoning, into a species of radical incommensurability that complicates the distinction to be drawn, along Althusserian lines, between 'thought objects' and 'real objects'. Particularly so if one wishes to argue, as Rodríguez does in *Blowup*, that a real object is not the same thing for bourgeois thinking as it is for Marxism and that, specifically, Althusser's reading of Rousseau has little to do with traditional interpretations of the same, just as his own reading of Garcilaso has little to do with that of the famous American Hispanist, Elias Rivers. Does not this line of argumentation result in a performative contradiction? For if two things are radically incommensurate, are they not by definition incomparable? In which case, why should different readings be raised in the same breath?

To conclude, we would suggest that his notion of radical historicity blinds the Spaniard to one of the key features of Althusserianism, namely its capacity to hold in productive tension the generality of modes of production and other such categories, on the one hand, and, on the other, the details indispensable to historical accounts of specific social formations. It might reasonably be argued that the 'subject', as understood by Althusser, operates as little more than a 'holding category', at the level of 'ideology in general', to be set alongside its material, historical embodiment at the level of 'particular ideologies'. After all, Rodríguez's notion of 'individuality' performs much the same

²⁷ See Malcolm K. Read, 'Ideologies of the Spanish Transition Revisited: Juan Huarte de San Juan, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, and Noam Chomsky,' *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 34 (2) (2004), pp. 309-43.

function in that, in its capacity as a general category, it allows him to pitch the ‘subject’ (along with ‘master’, ‘slave’ and so on) at a lower level and, correspondingly, to bind the ‘individual’ to ‘society’ in the context of bourgeois ideology. Unfortunately, such a distinction, between different levels of abstraction, is only ever implicit in Rodríguez’s work. With serious consequences. Most damagingly of all, the exclusive focus upon the concrete arguably commits the Spaniard to a flat ontology, conducive to a species of actualism, of the kind that refuses to recognize the existence of real mechanisms beyond the level of empirical detail.

9. Bertolt Brecht: vital distinctions

A useful point of entry to Rodríguez’s discussion of Bertolt Brecht is the Spanish word ‘vital’ and the problem that it poses for the translator into English. Of course, it may not immediately be apparent wherein the problem lies, given the availability of an English cognate, with a seemingly comparable meaning. True, ‘vital’ in Spanish seems to connect directly with ‘vida’, both semantically and etymologically, whereas in English ‘vital’ is synonymous with ‘important’ and located, by way of contrast, at some distance from ‘life’. Still, with a few minor adjustments, one anticipates, to accommodate minor connotations, the rest should be straightforward. But from the outset of *De qué hablamos*, things turn out to be nothing of the kind.

Already, in the opening pages, neo-liberalism is held to spell our ‘socio-vital ruin’, shortly to be followed by a characterization of apartheid as a form of ‘socio-vital exploitation’. At this stage, it might be assumed, a distinction is being drawn between the ‘life’ of the individual and ‘society’. But it soon transpires that the individual/society opposition is precisely the principal target of *De qué hablamos*, which is concerned to press the contrasting notion of a social formation that, in the case of capitalism, has become ‘life’. It is precisely from this standpoint –that of a ‘vital exploitation’– that Marxism proposes to *think*. And to do so, it must adopt the position of a *radical historicity*, which perforce plunges us into the realm of ideology. At this level, feudalism, we soon discover, while it is certainly characterized by exploitation, of serfs by lords, lacks the notion of ‘life’, a position that will only be challenged by the first forms of bourgeois ideology. ‘I refer to life’, writes Rodríguez in his discussion of the Baroque, ‘not in the abstract sense, but in the form in which it reaches Góngora, unconsciously, at the exact moment when it is being denied.’ We are now entering the realm, note, not only of a radical historicity but also of the ideological unconscious. And this is the context in which the true complexities of ‘vital’ will emerge, specifically in relation to the material ‘immanence’ of Spinoza, for whom form and matter and other such dichotomies, extending to individual /society, do not exist. At which point, enter Brecht.

Initially, as Rodríguez explains, we encounter a young Brecht who is distinguished by a ‘sexual, *vital*, and even moral literary precociousness’ (italics added), which distances itself from ‘established life’ in order to embrace life in its entirety, as a drug.

Such idealism, of a positive kind, will soon be relinquished but not the attachment to nature, with its roots in Romanticism. Brecht's Baal is the epitome of the Romantic hero, whose only recourse, on finding himself alienated from society and pressed up against the limits of thought, is finally to retreat from civilization into the Black Forest. In *The Jungle of the Cities*, attention will be further displaced, from the natural setting of the Black Forest to the urban environment, in which is staged, by Rodríguez's reckoning, a battle between Master and Slave, against the backdrop not of semi-feudal relations, as in Shakespearean theatre, but of present-day capitalism. We suggest, in passing, that this shift in environment, to urban capitalism, figures as the context in which 'vital' begins to lose its connection with 'life', through a process of semantic attrition, to assume the meaning of what is (merely) 'important'. Brecht registers the fact negatively: the petty bourgeoisie and lumpen of the urban world find themselves without possibilities and without the slightest 'vital profile' or, as we have preferred in the present translation, by becoming 'socially detached'.

'Vital', then, is starting to cause problems for the translator into English. And those problems are not going to go away as Brecht moves on in *Threepenny Opera* to show how subjects are *produced*. In an evident attempt to 'distance' the practices of an Aristotelian theatre, Brecht has Peacham demand that his beggars perform in such a way as to move the hearts of the public; otherwise, their contracts will not be renewed. But it is in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* where Brecht reveals the extent to which his thinking is being impregnated by Marxism. Emphatically, what matters is not money or gold – these are mere signs – nor even the individual entrepreneur, but the social relations that not only enfold people but that also *produce* them. The same social relations, we would note in passing, that account for the semantic devaluation of 'vital'. Which brings us to *Refugee Conversations*. 'No other text better illustrates the true maturity attained by Brecht, better displays what he was about, namely the practical application of dialectics, dialectics lived as a *vital* act, as itself a theatrical act, as another form of life that is not life' (italics added).

The practical application of vital dialectics – herein lies the challenge to Brecht's theatre. More specifically: how exactly to project, in theatrical terms, the notion of characters as simply the vehicle of the social relations that sustain them, relations that, in a manner of speaking, they simply *act out* or *stage*, in the form of a construct. In *Refugee Conversations*, he discovered the perfect setting. In this work, we encounter a situation made to measure: two refugees, symptomatically located in an impersonal railway station, are only able to individualize themselves through the possession of a passport. Without such a document, it transpires, a person lacks individuality, is simply a value in the market of social individuation. The identity of the proletariat undergoes a similar effacement, 'except, possibly to the extent that it becomes an object of contempt, from a moral perspective'. In fact, in literal terms, 'an object of moral and *vital* contempt'. (The translator, it is to be surmised, has despaired of being able to find an exact equivalent in English for the Spanish 'vital'.) The annulment of a positive vitality has major ramifications: effectively disqualified is, firstly, the bourgeois understanding of the individual as *prior* to the passport, hence of

the passport as *exterior* to its holder; secondly, the notion of the Romantic subject who, as in the case of Baal, is alienated through his encounter with society; and, finally, something of much more immediate concern to Brecht and his refugees, who are confronted by the realities of exile, the promotion by the Nazis of the nation or Volk as a spiritual identity.

The two great classics of Brecht's theatre, *Life of Galileo* and *Mother Courage and Her Children* stage the problems surrounding the process of individuation in terms of ideology. Not that Brecht himself specifically used the concept, as Rodríguez is quick to concede. Indeed, he appears positively suspicious of a term that, through his reading of *The German Ideology*, he identified exclusively with ideas that are consciously held and imposed on society by a dominant class. Brecht's target was, rather, the fetishization of a system that was interiorized, of an objectivity that was subjectivized, in the guise of an ideological unconscious that 'assumes the material form of the *gestus*, which can be either *vital* or theatrical, or both, as Brecht perceived it and as we can perceive it today' (italics added). Brecht, we would elaborate, implicitly accepts the claims that would be formalized by Saussure: words in themselves can never be vital, they are merely arbitrary tokens that are maintained by their differences, in which capacity they serve merely as a material means of communication. But, by Rodríguez's reckoning, the dramatist adds a qualification, to the effect that:

Everything depends upon the *gestus* or unconscious that is inscribed in words and that constitutes them, that lends them value or robs them of it, in the same way in which the bodily *gestus* or ideological unconscious configures each individuality in the theatre as a form of life, in the same way that it conforms daily life for all of us.

Construed in such terms, the individual biography of Galileo was less relevant than the historical configuration of individualities at a key juncture in the transition from a dying feudalism to an emergent capitalism. The parallel between Galileo's situation and his own was not lost upon Brecht: just as the scientist confronted Aristotelian physics, so did the dramatist confront the bourgeois theatre: *Aristotelian* equates with *bourgeois*. The same argument is pressed further in *Mother Courage*, whose eponymous protagonist is constructed by the events of the Thirty Years' War. The three-sided living room characteristic of bourgeois drama has been replaced by the military camp, in the immediate vicinity of the battlefield. Similarly dispensed with is the notion of identity, as an individual possession, defined in terms of the family, of love and money. Individuation, by implication, is not the product of human nature but of a social system and, as such, is totally artificial.

10. Michel Foucault: discourse in itself

The work of Michel Foucault is a topic well-chosen to draw *De qué hablamos* to a close. To begin with, it was Foucault who displaced Althusser as the basic point

of reference for a Left that was reconfiguring itself in the 1970s and '80s, and as such, an obvious challenge to those who, like Rodríguez, continued to nurture the legacy of Althusserianism. There was, moreover, no gainsaying the fact of Foucault's erudition, notwithstanding his rather crude anti-Marxism, nor the originality of his project. In essence, the author of *The Order of Things* set out to trace the process whereby 'Man', hitherto invisible, emerged as an object of knowledge in the human sciences, before its disappearance in a post-modernity; also, in subsequent texts, the relationship between power and knowledge; and, finally, how the disciplines had been used as forms of social control through social institutions. Rodríguez, we have seen, was similarly concerned to track the emergence of the bourgeois subject, against the backdrop of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, its classic formulation in the 'Enlightenment', and its final disintegration under global capital. The overlap between the two research programmes was clearly considerable and too obvious to be ignored, at least as far as Rodríguez was concerned. The 'Foucault effect' was a phenomenon to be met head-on and meet it head-on is what the Spaniard proceeded to do.

Foucault never read Rodríguez's work, but Rodríguez was a careful reader of the Frenchman's, which he summarized in the following terms: we live in a world of signs; language is all that exists; there are no genders or norms; cultural identities are mere linguistic constructs; everything can mix with everything else because language is an arbitrary form; repetitions and differences appear and disappear in a blink of the eye. A more radical construction of forms of subjectivity was hard to imagine, unless, of course, you were a Marxist of the Althusserian ilk, for whom Foucault remains, for all his revolutionary panache, a historian still attached at root to the old metaphysical subject/system relation and, to compound his sins, a historian with a penchant for the subject. Rodríguez charts the Foucauldian trajectory with unerring precision, from the disciplinary societies to societies of control, and finally to governmentality. Initially, it is the subject that is subjected to exterior repression, through the family, law and order, the panopticon, and so on. But by the end of the 1970s, the perspective has been inverted: now the inside is socialized by imposing itself on an outside. We are born free –such is our human nature– and then we are differentiated by social mechanisms. Happily, for Foucault, all this coincided with developments in neo-liberal capitalism, thanks to which, his argument ran, an authentic freedom had become a possibility: we could all now become 'entrepreneurs of the self', to the obvious delight of Berkeley and Chicago, where Foucault was received with open arms. Unfortunately – and herein is to be found the nub of Rodríguez's critique – Foucault never explains why we pass from one social formation to another and has nothing of any consequence to say about objective historical processes; we pass from one 'episteme' to another seemingly by simply negotiating changes in language or, alternatively, through the evolution of power towards governmentality; we set off from the free subject to arrive at the free subject. When viewed in the light of what followed Foucault's death, it all appears perfectly squalid, and Rodríguez will have none of it.

II. Conclusion

Doubtless much work remains to be done if the legacy of Rodríguez is to be recovered for the benefit of a younger generation of Marxist theoreticians. My translations, *Theory and History* and *State, Stage, Language*, have been out of print for a few years and urgently need to be made available again. As we have seen, Rodríguez included the Introduction to *Teoría e historia* in the present volume and used the occasion of its reproduction to make corrections and amendments. I, in turn, have used the occasion of the present translation to correct and improve upon my translation of 2002. There is also a need for a translation of *La literatura del pobre* (1994, 2001), arguably the best written of Rodríguez's works and, therefore, the most accessible, its only disadvantage being, from the standpoint of an Anglophone public, that it focuses upon a relatively unfamiliar body of Spanish literature. These translations will be the basis for forthcoming commentaries on Rodríguez, which will need to extend their range to include the essays on Rousseau and Montaigne and the books on Mallarmé and Heidegger, which remain to be assessed.

In his later years, Juan Carlos often spoke to me of a couple of manuscripts on which he was working, dealing, respectively, with Góngora and Freud. I expressed a particular interest in the Freud work, with an eye to my colleague's reception in the Anglophone academy. (So far as I recall, he attributed the delay in publishing to obstacles encountered in his reading of Freud's letters to Fliess.) Hence, my joy at the recent appearance of the inedited manuscript, under the title *Freud: la escritura, la literatura (inconsciente ideológico e inconsciente libidinal)* (2022), published by Akal. Our thanks go to Juan Antonio Hernández García for supervising the editorial process and to José Luis Moreno Pestaña for providing an Introduction. This work also stands urgently in need of translation. Exactly what light it throws upon the relation between the ideological and libidinal unconscious remains to be seen. My initial impression is that the emphasis upon 'Freud' limits discussion of the broader historical dimension of the relation, which is strange, given Rodríguez's emphasis upon a 'radical historicity'. While in *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo* Rodríguez duly emphasizes the 'baroque' regression to feudal relations, he spurns the opportunity to theorize Quevedo's manifestly 'anal' obsession (with sin and corruption) along similarly regressive lines. The libidinal dimension of the ideological unconscious in earlier, pre-modern social formations obviously requires further investigation.

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