

Carlos Alberto Sánchez: Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy

State University of New York Press, Albany, 2016, 161 pp,
ISBN 9781438459455

Andrea J. Pitts¹

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

At the most general level, *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy* by Carlos Alberto Sánchez is an analysis of *El Grupo Hiperión* [the Hyperion Group], a collective of Mexican intellectuals that developed a distinctive trajectory of existential thought between 1948 and 1952. Through extensive examinations of the writings of *los hiperiones* [the hyperions] such as Ricardo Guerra, Joaquín Sánchez MacGrégor, Jorge Portilla, Emilio Uranga, Luis Villoro, and Leopoldo Zea, Sánchez offers a series of rich philosophical discussions that delve into the meaning and significance of existentialism in mid-twentieth century Mexico. Such a book-length treatment of *El Grupo Hiperión* is certainly a welcomed addition to the growing body of Anglophone literature within Latin American Philosophy, specifically due to the contentful questions of human finitude, universality and particularity, the self-other relationship, and the range of other compelling questions raised through Sánchez' analysis of *El Grupo Hiperión*.

Importantly, Sánchez' *encuentro* [encounter] with Mexican existentialism is situated within the author's own agential position as a U.S. Latino philosopher. In this sense, his interpretive framing of *los hiperiones* is derived from the concerns of U.S. Latino/as and others "on the fringes of contemporary, postmodern or postcolonial, economic, political, cultural power" (p. 14). This framing of Sánchez' own locatedness within the U.S. as a Mexican–American, he states, has "always consisted in hanging on the dash that separates [his] family, traditions, and [his] last name from the culture and ideology that has nurtured [him] from birth," i.e., separating his *Mexicanidad* [Mexicanness] from his American identity (p. 14). As such, this book appears, in many ways, as a deeply personal series of reflections on the connection between the radical "otherness" articulated by *los hiperiones* in mid-

✉ Andrea J. Pitts
apitts5@uncc.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001, USA

twentieth century Mexico and the experiences of the author himself, as a Mexican–American philosopher living in the U.S.

The book is comprised of five chapters, each focusing on a specific series of philosophical debates relevantly linked to *El Grupo Hiperión*. The first three chapters examine the specificity of debates among *los hiperiones* in the 1940s and 1950s regarding themes such as: necessity and contingency in the human condition, the relationship between faith and reason, the philosophical tools of liberatory struggle, and the debate regarding whether philosophy should be the study of perennial or culturally/historically situated problems. The final two chapters bring the lessons of these debates among *los hiperiones* into dialogue with philosophical issues affecting contemporary U.S. Latino/a philosophers today. In the penultimate chapter, for example, Sánchez examines the status of a uniquely “American” philosophy, including the role and stakes of a distinctly American “philosophy of contingency” developed by Emilio Uranga (1921–1988). There, Sánchez closely examines Uranga’s 1952 *Análisis del ser del mexicano* to defend the claim that Western philosophy’s “denial of accidentality, or contingency—through the promotion of a false belief in permanence and immutability—justifies the self-certainty of Western culture, and simultaneously, the criteria for [its] dehumanization [of others]” (p. 106). Such an attempt at universalism, Sánchez argues, is a conception of philosophy that continues to impact marginalized scholars in the field today. The final chapter then sharpens Sánchez’ focus on the relationship between Mexican and U.S. philosophical discourses by drawing further lessons from *los hiperiones*. He then concludes the book by developing a phenomenological articulation of a potential pathway toward “liberatory Latino/a consciousness” (p. 135).

In what follows, I offer a few potential areas of analysis that readers new to the history of Mexican philosophy and Latina/o philosophy, and those more familiar with the debates may find of interest. I conclude by pointing to some potentially fruitful dialogical opportunities that may add some analytical layers to the analyses that Sánchez provides in the book.

First, for readers unfamiliar with the history of Latin American philosophy, Sánchez’ book will be an excellent introduction to the authors, sources, and debates of *El Grupo Hiperión*. In this vein, Sánchez meticulously outlines the writings of Uranga, Portilla, and Zea, among others, and describes the terms of existential philosophy for these writers, including the meaning of *Mexicanidad* and *la filosofía como compromiso* (“philosophy as commitment”). For example, Sánchez describes the analysis of *Mexicanidad* by *los hiperiones* as a “courageous project,” that, citing Uranga, sought to “bring about moral, social, and religious transformation” for the peoples and cultures of Mexico (p. 123). Additionally, Sánchez offers a robust reading of Zea’s writings on the nature of *commitment* as a metaphilosophical value. That is, as Sánchez states following Zea, “if it is to have value, philosophy must have a localized point of emergence, or a specified commitment, one rooted in a specific situation” (p. 73). Through such discussions of *Mexicanidad* and commitment, we can see the careful work that Sánchez develops to situate his own position as a Latino philosopher who similarly stands invested in radical transformation and existential rootedness.

Moreover, readers of Sánchez' earlier work, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla* (2012: 24–26), will note that the author takes a broader scope in his latest work. Sánchez' previous book focuses primarily on the writings of Jorge Portilla (1919–1963), a prominent member of *El Grupo Hiperión*. Sánchez' newest work extends this discussion of Portilla by taking on broader analytic themes within mid-twentieth century Mexican philosophical history. Notably, Sánchez also revisits some of the claims he made in the 2012 book, and revises his stance, in particular, on Portilla's views toward modernity and postmodernity. In this latest work, Sánchez argues that Portilla was not a “critic of modernity,” as he had suggested in his earlier work, but rather a defender of the stability of meaning and value within modernity and a critic of the imposing irrationalism and atheism that may emerge with the downfall of modernity (p. 50–53). The kind of reflective analysis offered in the book will thus provide readers a series of useful interpretive guideposts as they engage with the history of Mexican philosophy.

For historians of Mexico and Latin America, more generally, the book may appear less impactful. That is, Sánchez enacts a few oversights and overly-generous attributions that seem to potentially miss several rich layers of historical analysis. To clarify this concern, I will offer here a few examples. First, the socio-political context of Mexico during this period is somewhat underemphasized in Sánchez' text. While one of the major philosophical themes of the work is how philosophy can “bear on the crises of [a] particular situation that is the home of its philosophizing” (p. 86), Sánchez appears to spend little time concretely discussing the social, political, and economic conditions of Mexico during this period. Such an emphasis would have been tremendously helpful for elaborating specifically *which* “crises of liberation, transformation, and human flourishing” were impacting *los hiperiones* (pp. 86f.). For instance, early in the text, Sánchez notes that “The historical significance of Hyperion lies in the fact that its members embodied a new critical attitude toward self and circumstance brought about by the triumphs and failures of the Mexican Revolution of 1910” (p. 13). Yet Sánchez then spends little time discussing Mexican history, and thereby omits a great deal of historical detail about the events or stakes of the Mexican Revolution, the 1917 Constitution of Mexico, the Cristero Wars of the 1920s, the consolidation of state-sponsored indigenismo policies under Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, or either World War that were all (more or less) proximate precursors to the writings of *El Grupo Hiperión*.¹ Such historical detail would have been helpful to clarify the terms through which *los hiperiones* were undertaking their philosophical projects. Moreover, we can also find such details surfacing within the writings of *los hiperiones*, including a reference to the bombing of Nagasaki in Portilla's work (1966: 52), a book-length treatment of indigenismo by Villoro published in 1950, and writings on Porfirio Díaz and the Mexican Revolution by Zea (see 1952). As such, even a brief contextualizing discussion of the role of Mexico in WWII, the nation's shifting

¹ Sánchez does mention the Mexican Revolution in four places in the text, and two of those mentionings are made parenthetically (pp. 13, 14, 21, 66). The events of the Second World War are mentioned twice (pp. 50, 132).

policies impacting indigenous populations following the Revolution, or the philosophical significance of positivism prior to the Revolution would have aided readers in more richly interpreting the political, racial, and socio-economic stakes of the study of *lo mexicano* that Sánchez otherwise so carefully examines in the book.

We can, however, understand that there is a contentful philosophical debate regarding whether philosophy should be pursued as the study of abstract, ahistorical questions, or, as Tsenay Serequeberhan states: “Whether it knows it or not, philosophy, like the proverbial spider, always spins the thread of its web out of itself” (2013: 2). This debate is certainly treated throughout the book, and Sánchez carefully works out various positions on the debate within the writings of *los hiperiones*. For example, in the chapter titled “The Passion Dialectic: On Rootedness, Fervors, and Appropriations,” Sánchez states: “in the case of Mexican existentialism, a concern with the Mexican ‘situation’ or circumstance was ever-present” (p. 75). He thereby offers a reading of the ways in which Zea, Uranga, Portilla, José Gaos, and post-*Hiperión* writings by Guerra and Villoro each dealt with this question regarding the nature and value of philosophy.

With an emphasis on philosophical situatedness in mind, a second potentially helpful dialogical extension of the book would have been to engage more concretely with the philosophical precursors to the debates of *los hiperiones* within Latin America. This comes as a surprise, in fact, given that Sánchez mentions previous generations of Mexican philosophy in his 2012 book, including figures such as Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos of the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (2012: 206f.). In *Contingency and Commitment*, however, the author does not spend sufficient time setting up the previous generations of philosophers within Mexico or in the history of Latin American philosophy. Additionally, Sánchez appears to explain the emergence of Mexican existential philosophy as primarily a product of the study of French existentialism within Mexico during the 1940s (p. 15). While this may indeed be the case—i.e., that the naming of ‘existentialism’ in Mexico arose through the investigation of French existentialism by *El Grupo Hiperión*—this framing of the emergence of existentially relevant philosophical questions in Mexico seems to eclipse many important traditions of thought within Mexico and Latin America influencing these debates. Further contextualization would then indeed be very helpful for both Hispanophone and Anglophone students and researchers of the history of Latin American philosophy. With the availability of resources on Mexican precursors to *El Grupo Hiperión* and other Latin American philosophical currents such as the *Arielismo* of José Enrique Rodó or the various strands of vitalism, intuitionism, and anti-positivist writings that were circulating prior to the foundational work by *El Grupo Hiperión*, the book would have been strengthened through the provision of more contextualization about the philosophical scene within Latin America.

On this note, however, perhaps rather than describing these as omissions in Sánchez’ work, his readers can view his analysis of *El Grupo Hiperión* as an opening or invitation to begin developing these threads within the study of Latin American philosophy. Allow me to briefly illustrate one such possibility. Sánchez cites Uranga’s proposal for a “will to generosity” that surfaces as a philosophical rejoinder to *desgana*, or the unwillingness “to participate in the creation of meaning

or value” (p. 127). Consider here the interesting dialogue that is possible between the conception of *caridad* [charity] developed by Antonio Caso in his 1916 work titled *La existencia como economía y como caridad* and the 1949 essay by Uranga titled “Ensayo de una ontología del mexicano”. For Caso, *caridad* provides the condition for the creation of aesthetic and moral value in an otherwise materially-ordered and economically conservative world. Hence, Caso engages the writings of proto-existentialist European philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Leo Tolstoy to argue that “La caridad es acción ... La filosofía es imposible sin la caridad” [“Charity is action ... Philosophy is impossible without charity”] (1916: 106). Disinterested acts of giving, according to Caso, are thus the foundations of human moral and artistic existence.² Compare this to Sánchez’ reading of Uranga: “In generosity, philosophy is already an act of liberation. The philosopher’s generosity, in turn, plays itself out in acts of giving” (p. 128). Here we see two conceptions of disinterested forms of giving that shape the existential conditions for human being published roughly three decades of one another within the context of the intellectual scene of Mexico City.³ Also, given that we know that Uranga contributed an essay to the 1947 *Festschrift* in honor of Antonio Caso, and that Uranga was a student of Ramos, who himself had a complicated series of debates with Caso, such potential linkages *within* Mexican philosophical history would be fascinating to explore (Uranga 1947).⁴

The final series of points I raise here regarding Sánchez’ book is that of several “missed opportunities” in the text for contemporary readers of Latina/o philosophy. That is, for many of his Latina and feminist readers, Sánchez will appear to have overlooked the philosophical relevance of a vast amount of scholarship by Mexican–American and other Latina feminist authors who have written for the past three decades on themes of liberatory consciousness, alienation, and existential values and meanings that comprise *Latinidad*.⁵ One obvious author to engage on the topic of *Latinidad*, liberatory consciousness, and *mestizaje* (all themes that Sánchez addresses in the book) is Mexican–American author, Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942–2004). Consider that in Chapter 3 Sánchez develops the concept of *zozobra*, which is “a state of incessant swinging to-and-fro between possibilities of existence in which Mexicans, according to Uranga, find themselves” (p. 67). Sánchez also cites Uranga’s development of the Náhuatl term *nepantla*, meaning roughly, according to Sánchez, “an ambivalent middle-ground that is neither and both of its extremes” (p. 69). Lastly, he concludes the book by attributing this conception of *zozobra* to Latino/a identity and the significance of such ideas for “a liberatory

² For more on this theme in Caso’s work, see Krauze (1961) and Stehn (2013).

³ Also, it is important to note the Caso published two revised versions of this text in 1919 and in 1943.

⁴ Zea, Gaos, and Ramos also contributed to *Homenaje a Antonio Caso*.

⁵ Sánchez does cite Latina theorists Linda Martín Alcoff and Ofelia Schutte, but, unfortunately does not highlight their contributions to the study of gender and *Latinidad*. In addition to the two named Latina authors, it would have productive to see Sánchez engage Latina feminist writings such as those of Mariana Ortega who as has written on existential phenomenology and *Latinidad* (2001), Stephanie Rivera Berruz on the omission of Latina/os from academic philosophy (2014a, b), Natalie Cisneros on “alien” citizenship and conceptions of deviance affecting Latina/os (2013), or Elena Ruíz on Latina phenomenology and academic philosophy (2014).

Latino/a consciousness” (pp. 115, 135). Unfortunately, nowhere in his discussion of these themes does Sánchez cite Anzaldúa’s rich discussions of *nepantla*, *la conciencia de la mestiza* [mestiza consciousness], or her own descriptions of shifting “back and forth” between languages, texts, and states of existential awareness (see Anzaldúa 1987, 2002). This lack of engagement with Anzaldúa’s work is especially surprising given that *la conciencia de la mestiza* has been read as a form of liberatory consciousness for Latina/os since its initial publication in the 1980s.

In this vein, had Sánchez added even some of the many layers of analysis regarding sexual violence, heteronormativity, or embodied experiences of gender cited by Latina feminist authors, the book would have offered a much more expansive conception of liberation and existential awareness with respect to *Latinidad*. Without an emphasis on these areas of lived Latina/o experience, we end up losing, in particular, the significance of the intersection of racial and gender identities as a source of internal conflict and struggle. To clarify, consider a claim Sánchez makes regarding *zozobra*: “With the first mestizo comes the first internal duality, the first tension, and the first conflict of identity” (p. 67). Despite, perhaps, a misplaced emphasis on *firstness* in this passage, the wealth of literature on the figure of Malintzin/La Malinche, the enslaved Nahuatl woman who was “gifted” to Hernán Cortés and who became his translator during the conquest, would speak against the claim that mestizos represent the “first internal duality” of the Americas. As Chicana/o and Mexican theorists have debated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the role of Malintzin as a heroic woman of color or as a traitorous, “fallen woman” has been quite significant within Mexican and Chicana/o history. This tension points not to the “first mestizo” as the first figure of duality, but rather the agential framings, violence, and skilled negotiations of indigenous women during the conquest as potential figurations for sites of internal duality and conflicts of identity. As such, the lack of engagement with the literature on Malintzin or the role of indigenous women in Sánchez’ book marks a stark omission from his develop of a Latina/o liberatory consciousness. This appears as a pronounced omission in the book because it appears to overlook the prominent work by Chicana feminists who too have been grappling with concerns of internal duality and the task of situating their voices on the “thin edge of barbed wire” that comprises their Mexican–American identities (Anzaldúa 1987: 35).

Accordingly, for example, Chicana theorist Norma Alarcón proposes this prescient response to the debates over Malintzin in 1989:

[Malintzin] crosses over to a site where there is no ‘legitimated’ place for her in the conqueror’s new order. Crossings over by “choice” or by force become sporadic individual arrangements that do not necessarily change the status of Indian women or women of color, for example. The realization that the ‘invitation’ to cross over, when it is extended, does not ameliorate the lot of women of color in general has led, in the eighties, to a feminist literature by Chicanas and women of color which demonstrates that, despite some shared critical perspectives, boundaries exist and continue to exist. (1989: 86f.)

Note here the double-bind that is articulated through the figuration of Malintzin, i.e., either as a heroic agent or a tragic victim, women of color remain relegated to a space of difference that continues to marginalize, alienate, or falsely romanticize them. Thus, for readers of Latina feminism and women of color feminisms, a great deal of work has been done on the nature of liberatory struggle, and again, it would have been helpful to see Sánchez engage some of this work in *Contingency and Commitment*.

To conclude, readers will find in Sánchez' work a thorough articulation and expansion of the debates among *los hiperiones*, and a number of useful connections between these mid-century debates and the conditions faced by contemporary Latina/o philosophers. Most notably, Sánchez' arguments provide a compelling perspective on the continued significance of the history of Latin American philosophy, and the author develops a thoughtful and provocative existential framing of the conditions of lived experience for Latina/os in the U.S. Thus, while the book may leave some areas of analysis underemphasized, the overarching contributions of Sánchez' work will likely serve for many readers as an invitation to begin or to continue engaging the many complex debates within Latin American and U.S. Latina/o philosophy.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Mariana Ortega, Cynthia Paccacerqua, and Stephanie Rivera Berruz for their helpful comments during the writing of this review.

References

- Alarcón, N. (1989). Traductora, traditora: A paradigmatic figure of Chicana feminism. *Cultural Critique*, 13, 57–87.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1999 [1987]). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. (2002). Now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts. In G. E. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*. New York: Routledge.
- Caso, A. (1972 [1916]). *Obras completas III: La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*. Mexico City: UNAM Press.
- Cisneros, N. (2013). 'Alien' sexuality: Race, maternity, and citizenship. *Hypatia*, 28, 290–306.
- Krauze de Kolteniuk, R. (1985 [1961]). *La filosofía de Antonio Caso*. Mexico City: UNAM Press.
- Portilla, J. (1966). *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*. Mexico City: Ediciones Era, S.A.
- Rivera Berruz, S. (2014a). Extending into space: The materiality of language and the arrival of the Latina/o body. *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, 5(1), 23–41.
- Rivera Berruz, S. (2014b). Inhabiting philosophical space: Reflections from the reasonably suspicious. *Hypatia*, 29(1), 182–188.
- Ruíz, E. F. (2014). Spectral phenomenologies: Dwelling poetically in professional philosophy. *Hypatia*, 29, 196–204.
- Sánchez, C. A. (2012). *The suspension of seriousness: On the phenomenology of jorge portilla*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Serequeberhan, T. (2013). *The hermeneutics of African philosophy: Horizon and discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Stehn, A. (2013). From positivism to anti-positivism: Some notable continuities. In G. D. Gilson & I. W. Levinson (Eds.), *Latin American positivism: New historical and philosophical essays*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Uranga, E. (1947). *Antonio Caso y Emile Meyerson. Homenaje a Antonio Caso*. Mexico City: Editorial Stylo.

- Villoro, L. (1996 [1950]). *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultural Económica.
- Zea, L. (1952). *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano*. Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa y Obregón.