Postmodern Theory and Cultural Criticism in Spanish America and Brazil  
*Ileana Rodríguez*

The debates on postmodernism and cultural studies in Latin America are inextricably intertwined. A review of the anthologies on the subject reveals that the same scholars that are invited to write about the former appear on the lists of the invited for the latter.1 All of them are presented as constituting a turning point in the domain of Latin American studies, a scission that marks a move away from “the political” and the strictly literary to “the theoretical” and the politics of democracy and consumption. This is a group of scholars that has undertaken the task of rethinking the continent at the moment neoliberal politics become dominant and leftist utopian projects dwindle. Most of them were contemporaries of the debates on “liberation” and “leftist utopias” and actively participated in them, but reconsidered their position as a result of the events that were hitting all of us hard in the face. In this regard, the postmodernism debate in Latin America is also a post-left utopian debate, the debate on disenchantment (Norbert Lechner). This is a moment where thinking about human agency and labor as possibilities for transforming the referent is foreclosed and the criticism of commodity production disarticulated. Actually, postmodernism is what is left after culture has totally encroached upon nature and the sphere of commodity production (manifested as ubiquitous consumption) has left no residual zones of nature and of being where culture can still be critical and exert pressure over nature (Fredric Jameson). This new face of capitalism also brings an opacity to the national as a political space that manifests itself in a profound refurbishing of the nature and function of the state and the transformations of the meaning of dependency (Jesús Martín Barbero).

What brings all these intellectuals together is the necessity to critically reassess the particularities of the Latin American modern (and hence the “postmodern”) and, by extension, of modernist and modernizing impulses. Their work denotes urgency and in some cases zest in reexamining all the artifacts and technologies that constitute the new popular and populist cultural regimes as they drift away from letters and literacy and move closer to the visual in cinema and television, as well as to the new politics of democracy, consensus, and consumption. This is a serious probing and critical examination of the set of structures, articulations, and themes that the project of modernization brings to the constitution of all kinds of continental narratives, an examination that produces a series of adjectives that qualify the term modern and mark its difference with and adjustments to the model. Peripheral, deficit-ridden, alternative, were terms that pointed to the drastic modifications and differentiation of the cultural ontologies of Latin America with respect to European or North American cultures of the modern. This was done at the moment neoliberalism and the new technologies of mass media made this examination and adjustment imperative. The unabated drift toward consumption gave them cogency. Many were the angles covered and there is no way of doing justice in this short chapter to the wealth of knowledge this discussion brought to the Latin American domain. Therefore I will limit myself to offer a review of the main trends and proposals and a critical assessment of them. With that purpose in mind I offer a bird’s-eye review of the subject and concentrate on three categories of analysis: hybridity, heterogeneity, and the popular. I also touch on the discussion of the transition from high to mass culture, from letters and literacy to the televisual, and from the city of
letters to the city of signs, which I believe summarizes the main points of the postmodernism debate in Latin America.

Let me start with the obvious, the claim that postmodernism is primarily European and North American, a concept fabricated in well-developed capitalist societies to indicate a reflection on knowledge production and the effects of technology on it (Jean-François Lyotard); an interest in a historical and theoretical evaluation of the production of culture under high capitalism (Jameson), and/or the examination of the stylistics of “postmodern texts” (Linda Hutcheon). The prefix “post” indicates both the saturation and intensification in the reorganization or disorganization of the modern. In theoretical terms, it refers to the waning of use value and the saturation of the world with value, an unprecedented acculturation of nature (Walter Benjamin’s aesthetization of reality; Raymond Williams’s new sensibility structure) that alters the functions of knowledge, narrative, and the subject; to the collapse of the cultural and the economic into itself and the erasure of the former distinction of base/superstructure, which implies that in the current stage of capitalism, capitalism itself generates its own superstructures and compels us to speak of culture in business terms if not in those of political economy (Jameson, Lyotard). The development of these ideas constitutes the discourse of the postmodern.

When the aforementioned are taken as general statements on the development of capitalism and its logic there is no contention or divide, there is no disagreement between Western and Latin American scholars. Norbert Lechner, for instance, tells us that “we could not interpret the national reality without recurring to the explicative categories of capitalism” (Herlinghaus and Walter: 197) because Latin American internal dynamism is conditioned by the capitalist logic, although we must recognize the sui generis character of its reality. So, it is acknowledged that we all live in a capitalist world, inside it, but that we all occupy dissimilar positions and the difference resides in the disparities these positions create. Consequently, the postmodernism debate in Latin America will take on the analysis of the specificities of this “post” in the continent, always considering it axiomatic that:

In all fields of culture ... the important modern cultural syntheses are first produced in the North and descend later to us, via a process in which they are “received” and appropriated according to local codes of reception. This is how it has happened with sociology, pop art, rock music, film, data processing, models of the university, neo-liberalism, the most recent medicines, armaments, and, in the long run, with our very incorporation of modernity (José Joaquín Brunner) and postmodernity. (Beverley, Oviedo, and Aaron: 52).

This double condition as “receivers” and “appropriators” constitutes the fulcrum of difference, the spot from whence Latin American scholars will establish the conditions of possibility of difference and their knowledge regimes, and where they will propose the categories of the hybrid, the heterogeneous, and the popular as pertinent clarifications, contributions, and adjustments. This is also the site where discrepancies as to whether Latin American scholars stand in a relation of dependence, subordination, and subalternity with respect to scholars situated at the center will be played out.
The Latin American modern is specifically diverse and consequently the postmodern is as well. Thus, if the term “post” were to have any validity, it could solely be as a reflection on the proper conditions of possibility of the “post,” a fact that explains that theoretically, postmodernism presents a variety of analyses and tendencies. In one of its many definitions “post” is the uncomfortable and disoriented sense that comes along the epochal changes marked by the dissemination and contamination of meaning (Nelly Richard), a way of taking the temperature of the age without proper instruments and in a situation of insecurity in which there is even doubt as to whether there is an “age,” “vision,” “system,” or postmodern condition (Jameson). In conclusion, postmodernism is basically historical, decisively contradictory, and unavoidably political (Hutcheon). It is an internally conflicted concept and, for Jameson, it goes beyond the dialectics of essence and appearance, the Freudian model of the latent and manifest, the existential model of the authenticity and inauthenticity that are closely related to alienation and disalienation, the opposition between signifier and signified. For Richard, the concept signals a fracture at the heart of the ideas and ideologies that regulated Western modernity and the heterogeneization of all its signs, senses, and sensibilities that respond to the sacramization of univocal meanings. It is the shift from the macro- to the micro-social, the abandonment of certainties, and the instatement of the politics of doubt within. It is also the disembodying of the social-real that is transformed into a mass media artifice through the image, and the loss of historical density. Reviewing the literature on the subject, one has the uncanny impression that the saturation of the system spreads throughout the whole universe of meaning and geographies and that it is multiply faceted depending on the borders it reaches when.

The point of departure for Latin American scholars is first and foremost a reflection on the nature and character of the modern; second on the contents and nature of the post; and third on the new technologies of cultural production focusing on the power and reach of mass media. Brunner explains it clearly:

At this time when a confusing fog of “posts” ... hovers over modernity, it becomes necessary to recover the specific character of modernization in Latin America. Here ... the malaise in culture does not, could not, spring from the exhaustion of modernity ... It arises from exasperation with modernity, with its infinitely ambiguous effects, with its inevitable intentionalism, with its distortions, and with the problems that it bequeaths for the future of the region. (Beverley et al.: 53)

For Herman Herlinghaus and Monica Walter, the new thinking about modernity ... erupts within the foundation of a theory established by the impact of difference. It is about a movement of reflection and cultural analysis with obvious affinities to postmodern thought ... “Peripheral modernity” is an open notion; it implies methodologies of research that are located by means of a new transdisciplinarity of “nomad sciences,” in the strategic spaces that are open in between the sociology of culture, the studies of
communication, the new anthropology, a “cultural politology” and a field of literary studies that have stopped conceiving culture from the canon of literature itself. (15; my translation)

The rich reflections on the merging of knowledge and technologies and its effects is left untouched, as is the relationship between knowledge and power that impinges upon the privileges of the states to the point of driving a wedge between economic power and politics that so much concerned Lyotard. An allusion to how computerized knowledge is operative and tailored to fit the new channels, how it travels through the same conduits as money, and gradually assumes the form of commodity exchange with the result of radically modifying the nature of the institutions of learning, is likewise absent in this discussion.

Judging by the material included in the volumes dealing with the postmodern debate in (and from) Latin America and taking postmodernism to be a new stage in the development of capitalism, we can distinguish two discussions: one on cultural production -- Nestor García Canclini, Jesús Martín Barbero, Beatriz Sarlo, Nelly Richard, Roberto Schwartz, Silviano Santiago, Renato Ortíz, and Raul Antelo are some of its representatives; another on democracy, consensus, and the new social movements -- José Joaquín Bruner, Norberto Lechner, Martin Hopenhaym, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Luis Tapia, Xavier Albó, Aníbal Quijano, Fernando Calderón, Stuart Hall, and Ralph Premdas are some of the scholars working on this aspect of the debate. The discussion on cultural production focuses on the nature of culture and examines the move toward populist aesthetics, and the point at which the dividing line between high, popular, mass, and industrial culture blurs. The most productive concept here is hybridity. The discussion on democracy, consensus, and the new social movements focuses on the nature of Latin American citizenry, their ways of life, and nature of governance. The central and most generative concept here is that of heterogeneity. Both, hybridity and heterogeneity are closely intertwined with the popular and up to a certain point, predicated on it.

For cultural critics, the point of departure is the notion of high culture they debunk by moving from letters and literacy to the visual cultures of simulacra. The work produced by the Brazilian school demarcates these positions with accuracy. Their line of argumentation takes the prefix “post” to stand either for an examination of the “ideas out of place” (Schwartz); for a shift from the culture of politics to the cultures of multiculturalism and consumption (Santiago); or for the understanding of mundialización (Ortiz). In the rest of the continent, “post” means a synthesis (Canclini), a saturation that demands a reflection (Richard, Sarlo); a radical veering from letters to images and from the politics of representation to the politics of recognition (Barbero, Monsivais); a post-labor and disenchanted society (López, Lechner) “Post” also seems to create a space to debate how disciplines perceived themselves and the gaze that organized their protocols, and how institutions promoted ideas of culture and identity, which were copied verbatim from other realities. The floating categories of the “residual,” or of conversion and adaptation are, also, some of the central notions that always present in the debate of the “post” in the Latin American domain.

What is, then, the nature of the Latin American modern? It is marked by a series of adjectives that underpin its specificity as a deviation from the model, as true deprivations or lacks. Thus Latin American modernity is deemed incomplete, unfinished,
alternative, peripheral, deficit-ridden, a modernity that does not measure up, is not the same as the model, and the model is Western European and North American (Bruner, Calderón). Nonetheless, like all of its synonyms, periphery

is nothing but a notion of search, given that it signals the departure as much from the geographical descriptive reference as from the functional notion within the frame of dependency. It means that “periphery” is loaded with complex meaning; it is the experimental metaphor of a perspective from which a specific and heterogeneous modernity and hardly classifiable is experienced and problematized ... We experience in it virtual denotative inexactitude, that is in its terminological provisional character nothing short of a strategic resource that helps question the academicist prejudices and to reorganize the whole field of interrogations over a transdisciplinary base. (Herlinghaus and Walter: 23; my translation)

The general theoretical strategy of the social scientists (primarily the Chilean school) is thus to reposition the continent in reference to (a) a model of which Latin America is an infelicitous copy and to which it will never measure up; (b) the lacks, which are many; and (c) the nature of Latin American modernity -- and, by assumption, of Latin America historical identity -- through the concept of heterogeneity. The general theoretical strategy of cultural critics is to (a) acknowledge the limitations of the culture of letters and (b) analyze the conditions imposed by the culture of the televisual. Hybridity is the term used to capture the “essence” of this new cultural production.

“Post” is not, then, a concept that travels easily; it is rather a somewhat perturbing concept because it reveals two obstacles: (a) that we do not know how to think modernity within modernity; and (b) that we do not believe for a single moment that we have gone beyond modernity. The central idea of a ruptural “beyond” is transformed in Latin America into the question of adjustments, adaptations or translations and modifications of the original.

In this regard we must acknowledge a difference. The postmodernist debate in Latin America does not partake in the feeling of the end of history, or the end of all times and ideologies that characterizes the debate at the center. It is rather a pretext for revisiting the history of continental ideas and institutions to understand how totalities have constructed an image, vision, or identity of the continent that is not quite in tune with its realities. It is a proposal for looking at Latin American for what it is. In this sense, postmodernism in Latin America drives a wedge between present and past ideological imaginaries of the modern and becomes a critical approach to the history of ideas, a mise en abyme of the great local narratives. The best articulated position in this regard is Martin Hopehhayn, who posits that postmodernism is a discourse that presents itself as

a sane antidote to the excessively ethnocentric, rationalist, and mechanist tendencies of modern society. If that is the case, postmodernism could be thought of as an internal movement of modernity itself, a critique that modernity puts into effect in order to exorcise its entropy. But, in fact, postmodernism frequently acquires very different pretensions and functions: In effect, it transforms itself
into an ideology, disguising its normative judgments as descriptions, and ends up seeing what it wants to see. The ideologization of postmodern discourse may be glimpsed when one focuses on the service that it lends to the political-cultural offensive of the market economy. (Beverley et al.: 98).

We would be quite remiss to ignore that the market economy is the master narrative underlying the postmodern debate on both sides of the divide. Yet peripheries experience quite a different relation to that domain. The effects of this market economy on Latin America constitute the context of the debate, as does also, the transition from revolutionary to new social movements and “democracy,” all of which are new elements that establish a radical distinction between the postmodern in the center and in the periphery. Both Fernando Calderón and Aníbal Quijano, for instance, point out this divergence when establishing the rift between the colonial elites and the people. Calderón considers that the most genuine Latin American contribution to the modernist impulse “was the intellectual elaboration of revolutionary nationalism and of national popular, or populist movements,” and cites Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre and Lombardo Toledano as two of his paradigmatic examples (Beverley et al.: 57). This naturally does not take us back to Lyotard, but to discussions on particulars and universals undertaken by postcolonial and subaltern studies -- also part and parcel of the postmodern debate? From these perspectives, postmodernism has a liberating effect in the re-formation of disciplines, and for stating continental ideas anew. This would account for the perceived cathartic effect in the social sciences, and the celebratory tone in the work of cultural critics.

Two of the main concepts that frame the postmodernist discussion in Latin America are hybridity and heterogeneity. Hybridity organizes the cultural field and heterogeneity the field of social sciences. Other interesting themes that I will not address in this chapter are the post-political and post-work societies (Beatriz Sarlo, María Milagros López). The post-political speaks about politics as virtual simulation or simulacra that representation that simulates an object whose original has never existed. Po- work refers to the organization of societies in post-Taylorist, post-Fordist environments and addresses the changes in the nature of labor. Here I will limit myself first to the concept of hybridity and will follow with a discussion of heterogeneity.

The concept of hybridity relates to a discussion on how a change in economic policies, coupled with and supported by a change of technologies (the new industrial revolution), deeply affect the production of knowledge and bring liberal ideologies to the edge -- individualism, emancipation, expansion, innovation. Nestor García Canclini, the scholar responsible for coining the term, analyzed two fields of knowledge, anthropology and sociology, to pinpoint their limitations. Anthropology’s limitation was to solely take notice of the micro-communal and to defend the ‘traditional’; sociology’s was to take notice solely of the macro-social and defend the modern. Traditional and modern became two of the large signatures that organized the new discussion on the regimes of knowledge in Latin America that, in turn brought about the central discussion on the modern -- modernism, modernist, modernization.
These reflections were not called postmodern. There was a severe reticence to use that rubric for it was considered unfit for the Latin American domain. The favorite term used to refer to these new debates on culture was cultural criticism or cultural analysis. However, the truth is that if hybrid -- the new concept Canclini proposed to organize the understanding of the cultural regimes throughout the continent -- was to become hegemonic -- as in fact it did -- the articulation of local and foreign knowledges and debates was unavoidably part of it. As so it was later reiterated in the works resulting from both the social sciences and the humanities. Clearly, Lyotard had already spoken about the consequential changes in the condition of knowledge production and their effects on the social and coined the term postmodern, and Jameson was to use the same rubric to speak about the direct impact of the “new era” on artistic production. Canclini’s reflections on these changes were simply a way of partaking of a discussion on knowledge production, articulation, and circulation under the present conditions in Latin America -- postmodern or not. Many papers have been written on and debated on the concept of hybridity and have related it to the concept of heterogeneity and mestizaje. I have offered many answers addressing the misunderstandings of the term. My purpose is not rehash this concept in detail, but rather to use it as a hinge to document a shift in the perception of culture, society, and subjects.

Hybrid is Canclini’s synthetic concept of speaking about the effects of the new technologies in the production of culture in Latin America. I see in this concept three very productive moments: (1) the benefits it draws from the crossover connotations with all kinds of experimentation with products in the hard sciences, particularly in biology, where hybrid stands for a new and often better product -- Canclini’s defense of Antonio Cornejo Polar’s criticism of hybridity for considering it unproductive, like a mule, to which Cornejo counterposes his own concept of heterogeneity runs along these lines; (2) the relation it maintains with the concept of mestizaje, which serves it as a mistaken referent for in fact, hybrid is a concept of a different kind -- in truth, hybrid renders mestizaje obsolete by taking the analogy of mixtures away from the biological into the cultural-social, disengaging it from their adherence to the racial (traditional), and relocating into the ethnic (cultural); and (3) the overlap with other types of use of the hybrid that circulate in postcolonial studies, thus engaging Canclini with a larger cultural polemic worldwide.

Actually, contrary to the ideas that hybrid is a liminal condition, beyond knowledge and representation because it is always on the edge, always flipping over from one component to the other and oscillating in the in-betweenness it stands for (after Homi Bhabha), “a material whose existence exhibits the dual affirmation of a substance and its lack of identity, that which is in the interstices, which profiles itself in a zone of shadow, which escapes … repetition” (Beverley et al: 77), Canclini believes “the hybrid is almost never indeterminate” (Beverley et al.: 79). It is, on the contrary, a way of stabilizing a cultural condition. Hybridity is precisely a construct to negotiate that cultural condition, an identity, if you will. Hybrid is neither traditional, nor modern entirely -- but “post.” Invoking the concept of hybrid for cultures as the effect of cultural crossings, Canclini however comes to the conclusion that (a) these crossings have been intensified and attributes their speed to paradigm shifts, and the multiplicity of meanings; and (b) accepts that a progressive intensification of hybridity could potentially disorganize the field of culture and of knowledge and make the defense of this position untenable.
In the United States it is inevitable after Homi Bhabha to read the hybrid as that condition of in-betweenness, a positionality that is always affirming and escaping its otherness. This is not so for Canclini, for whom hybrid is a theoretical wager to negotiate an identity, a condition which is either/and, and in this sense, becomes related to heterogeneity. It posits a neither/nor that becomes something, as in neither modern nor postmodern in Latin America. What is most important is the double move to stabilize and destabilize a condition of culture simultaneously as a way not so much of escaping Western norms as much as of trying to grasp what is particular and unique to a locality. This double articulation bears a relation with the unbearable, a notion relevant to our discussion for two reasons, (1) because it is in dialogue with the discussions on globalization and (2) because it can also be related to studies developed within the lacanian psychoanalytical paradigm -- much in fashion today. Samir Amin considers the processes of globalization to be unbearable in that the reorganization of labor results in intolerable duress to people and turns the politics of organization into politics of resentment, leading to chaos and terrorism. And in psychoanalytic theory, unbearable relates to the notion of “limitless consumption” and choice. The sense of a limitless world places the subject in a situation similar to psychosis, for like in psychosis, criteria disappears in limitless consumption, rendering choice not only the organizing principle of postmodern or globalized societies but also that of the formation of a psychotic personality (Renata Salecl).7

Nonetheless, hybridity is a historical bet. Canclini believes it obeys historical logics such as in the combination of pre-Columbian and colonial traditions, of modern and postmodern epistemes, of lettered and visual cultures. Social institutions, museums, politics bear out the validity and credibility of this concept and legitimize these processes of cross-cultural communication and understanding that freeze meaning in time. Furthermore, hybridity carries a theory of the subject and its agency, given that it is the local subject who reorganizes cultural objects in different fields and it is the convergence of personal rituals and objective social systems what cements the category of the hybrid in time. Therefore, “we don’t understand the hybrid if we only look at it as complete dissemination, rather than as something that is also ordered, that is experienced as classified or as in need of classification in order to contain the dissolution of the signifieds” (Beverley et al.: 81).

Thus far I have spoken about Canclini’s relevant position in the debate on the transition that, for the sake of this chapter, I have called from the modern to the postmodern -- a somewhat passé discussion, already displaced by the debate on globalization, a much more accepted rubric worldwide. Now, a brief comment on “the political” is in order. Indeed, the most shocking aspect of Hybrid Cultures was precisely its scission with politics, as we knew it, a scission that became symptomatic of the new cultural horizon. In a field that had been so deeply politicized, Canclini located the analysis of culture in the post-political or neopolitical, “post” not in the sense of politics as simulacra, after Sarlo, but in the sense that the political had to be redefined, relegated, or bracketed. This was a much bigger challenge, one that still stands. It seemed that cultural criticism like theory could actually do without politics. But given that Canclini’s Hybrid Cultures was produced right at the moment of the implementation of the neoliberal policies in Latin America, his direct disregard of politics was symptomatic of
the new age. The unraveling of “the political” was a task that the social scientists had to address.

Hybridity is a concept that moves in between the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and culture; heterogeneity is a concept that criss-crosses the domains of sociology and politics. If hybridity represents a consensus over the new televisual, populist cultures, then heterogeneity rests on the system of a differential and segmented participation produced by the market. Heterogeneity, according to Brunner, originates in a radical revision of the concept of culture put forward by CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin America), a concept predicated on development. CEPAL’s notion of culture is eclectic and overemphasizes development and adaptation. It allows for tracing the distinction between formal and substantive rationality, although the rationality it espouses “makes implicit a comprehensive concept of efficiency in the administration of resources and opportunities” (Beverley et al., 1995: 37). For CEPAL, modernization is the “internalization of rational norms” (ibid.). The centerpiece of this model is individual or social creative modernization, that is, “the stylization of a political process of the search for social efficiency” (ibid.), one that presupposes a modern type of creativity.

Brunner analyzes CEPAL’s document to expose two fallacies, rationalism and adaptation. Rationalism, because there is more than one type of rationality -- developmental, political, technocratic, bureaucratic, and market rationalities -- and these rationalities are acquired through teaching, transference, and experience. “In culture, these rationalities imprint cognitive styles, define values, introduce habits, and stimulate varied personality structures. Therefore, there are no ‘rational norms’ that can be so outside of their context” (Beverley et al: 38). Adaptation is a fallacy in that these learning situations are diverse. In Latin America it is impossible to “‘adapt’ models of behavior, an aspirations capable of shaping demands from the most advanced capitalist centers, and, at the same time, to do this ‘creatively’ according to our ‘specific histories, indigenous resources and possibilities’.” Furthermore, Brunner pinpoints an aporia: since Latin America is not culturally autonomous, how could it be creatively so? What differentiates Latin America is a cultural heterogeneity that overturns CEPAL’s paradigm for the social sciences, a paradigm entirely modern, developmentalist, and predicated on homogeneity.

Having said that, the question for us now is, how is heterogeneity defined? Heterogeneity is neither a superimposition of historical and cultural identities nor sedimentation, but a situation that has not reached a complete synthesis.

Cultural heterogeneity … refers to a double phenomenon: (1) of segmentation and segmented participation in this global market of messages and symbols whose underlying grammar is North American hegemony over the imaginary of a great part of humanity … (2) of differential participation according to local codes of reception, group and individual, in the incessant movement of the circuits of transmission that extend from advertising to pedagogy. (Beverley et al.: 41)
difference, gradation and degradation, unequal access, and therefore visions that are regulated according to degrees of consumption. How, in view of this difference, can the social reach consensus? Secularization points to a sequential and progressive disengagement with tradition, normativity, and legitimation. Markets play a great role in this process of dissolution because they organize ideas, desires, seductions and, ultimately, the process of secularization. Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín Barbero study the formation of the popular-public-abject as the powerful effect of the cultural market on the masses. Based on the heterogeneous nature that characterizes the identity of Latin America we must conclude that the principles of social integration are so scarce that “it would appear no system of society should be able to function” (Beverley et al.: 47) in Latin America. The result is authoritarian forms of governing -- be they considered from the viewpoint of “the political” or “the economic.” Here we are directly confronted with the force and power of the model. Modernity, coupled with the heterogeneity it produces, presents itself as a terminal condition for Latin America, and although not all schools of thought are of this nature, other more hopeful perspectives are rendered inoperative and unviable under the present conditions of globalized capitalism. For instance, in the works of Xavier Albó and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, the Bolivian school presents alternative and more hopeful models of heterogeneity grounded on indigenous perspectives and the proposal of incorporating indigenous epistemes into the analytical models, but these models are also foreclosed.

The cancellation of more optimistic grounds includes, also, Norbert Lechner’s faith in democracy and secularization, although his work is argued within the modern epistemes. Lechner is of the opinion that secularization could benefit democracy by producing a climate of civil tolerance and liberating the social from its commitments to ethical, political, and religious absolutes:

there is a criticism of the idea of complete subjects, an abandonment of the “master narratives,” a conversion of time into a continuous present, a reduction of politics to an exchange of material and symbolic goods ... The “disenchantment” of and with power in Latin America ... passes through a dis-dramatization of power: a reduction of its symbolic-expressive aspects and an increase in the instrumental capacities of its gestation; loss of ideological aura in favor of the practical interests of actors, which are lost and found in the political market. (Beverley et al.: 48)

For Lechner, then, postmodernism has a liberating effect in the organization of politics in Latin America. Consensus, democracy, governability, and the market are the variables social scientist to discuss “the political.” Cultural critics, in the meantime, examine the power of images and the extrapolation of aesthetics and entertainment as the cultural that has become, also, the site of ”the political.”

It is noteworthy how the reorganization of the social, understood as governability and administration, coupled with the new concepts of populist cultures and the agency put forth by new social movements, replace the idea of modernity as development as well as the concepts of the state and nation by highlighting the reconfiguration of the social networks of authority and power. Society is reorganized around a different type of productivity, or rather, around dominant forms of consumption. Heterogeneity thus
names the reorganization of domination around the market rather than around the state and constitutes a proposal for reformattting all the social institutions and their functions.

Brunner also takes issue with the organization of culture put forth by Latin American letters and argues the transition from the city of letters to the city of signs -- from Macondoamerica to Tamaramerica. This transition shifts the attention from books to signs; from elites to markets; and from utopian ideas to competitive pragmatism. It seems evident that the pragmatic turn is supported by libidinal economies of all kinds, from melancholia to euphoria, accepted as the new structures of sensibility brought about by the disruptive forces of consumption. The wager now is to consider if the culture of consumption produces democracy in debilitating racist and elitist traditions; if this also implies the tacit acceptance of the curtailing of state action and its repressive agency implicit in the weakening of elite power. Do we find here implicit the idea that the neoliberal state is better than the welfare state because it accelerates modernization and democratization?

Brunner’s critical approach to culture is harsh and, to a certain point, unfounded. He is of the opinion that Latin American cultures have not expressed an order -- neither of nation, nor of class, religion, or of any other type; that they reflect contradictory and heterogeneous processes in the constitution of a belated modernity, constructed under the accelerated conditions of the internationalization of symbolic markets globally. Actually, Latin American cultural production has always expressed an order in terms of class, gender and ethnicity, an order that can and does serve Brunner to ground his own concept of heterogeneity. All the critical examinations of the histories of literature and high culture have amply demonstrated this fact that is perhaps not so self-evident to an affiliate of a different discipline.

There is no point, however, in denying that what is always in question in Latin American high culture is the tension between difference and normativity and a certain willfulness about thinking modernization as a question of ideas -- at least this is so when examined from the vantage point of the social sciences. All this conceded, Brunner’s purpose in criticizing high culture is to take the discussion to the arena of markets, and it is in this point that the social and cultural sciences become conversant. Brunner argues that to think culture solely as a symbolic product is a fallacy, for “La cultura es un universo de sentidos que no se comunica ni existe independientemente de su modo de producción, de circulación de recepción, consumo o reconocimiento” (Culture is a universe of meaning that does not communicate nor exists independently of its mode of production, circulation of reception, consumption or recognition) (Herlinghaus and Walter: 53). The corollary is a proposal: the reformattting of all cultural institutions -- mass media, training schools, universities -- to the end of being market competitive, to follow the logic of supply and demand. It is axiomatic that modern culture cannot do without markets. Hence the idea of competitiveness, pragmatism, and creativity: cultural institutions must work in tandem with the political, administrative, and economic system; they must collaborate in this enterprise rather than being centers of intellectual criticism. How felicitous it is, then, that political pragmatism is turning Latin American populations puritanical by the force of needs and of competing markets. So the old cultural paradigm, elitist and indifferent to the societal, is substituted for a “new” paradigm that becomes a very close relative to CEPAL’s.
True, empirically considered, Latin America cultural contexts are underdeveloped, illiterate, suffer from infrastructural deficits, manifest a disparity between the cultivated and the oral that produces alienation, and, in the area of books and letters, are characterized by the scarcity of publics. Nonetheless, to think the possibilities of creating integrated spaces and communication networks around common themes, styles, semantic structures, and perceptions of value is chimerical in view of Brunner’s own definition of Latin America as heterogeneous, a condition that curtails all promises of consensus. There is hope that the new culture will dissolve the “great intellectuals” and become a vehicle for the integration of the masses, with their shared experiences within a common matrix provided by schooling, communication, television, consumption, and the necessity to live connected to the city of signs, sharing the same experiences and the same signfieds whose value continues to be diverse.

It is evident that the assessment of the Latin American modern is not only a reflection on the epistemes of modernity but also a reflection on the politics of modernity (neo- or post) that I will examine further through the concept of the popular. It is, also, a critical probing of neoliberalism and a demonstration of the difficulties of shifting paradigms. The propensity to think the future as a mental product, as an ideological utopia has been foreclosed. Postmodernist new utopias are once more obsessed with and traumatized by the model; it is, again, developmentalist and market-oriented.

The third important concept of the postmodern debate concerns the urban popular public. We can understand this concept via a reformulation of heterogeneity. In fact, heterogeneity brings the social and literary sciences together in one crucial point, the place of subordination. Actually, the flipside of the transition from elite to mass culture is an increasing concern with the popular–subaltern. In literary-cultural criticism, Antonio Cornejo Polar has already used the term heterogeneity to organize the disparity between oral and written cultures that besieges the entire Peruvian literary regimes. For Brunner, we understand, heterogeneity is the catchword to pinpoint, in CEPAL’s concept of culture, the discrepancy between instrumental and formal reason, and communicative or substantive reason. But what are the contents of the heterogeneous and how can cultural institutions and their productivity relate to this concept and work in tandem with other social institutions? Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín Barbero can provide answers to this question in their elaboration of the popular and public in relation to the state and the institutions of culture. The popular-public is for me the place of the heterogeneous.

Monsiváis thematizes the popular by defining its articulations with the public, urban, and mass cultures. Popular is conceived as that which is constituted by exclusion, configured thanks to the sedimentation of traditions, and marked by a subordinated relation with authority. The popular is that which is a copy of the dominant classes, something made of fragments, stitched together through mediations of all types, and defined as fetid, ragged, ugly, and abject.

The definition of the popular as a position of subordination and psychological subjection and reduction betrays the uncertain relation of the popular to the state and translates in the popular a sense of impotence or insignificance, a historical or personal experience dominated by the sense of destiny or fatality. The feeling of the urban popular is of subalternity, anachronism, and stasis. Although the popular is constituted via
migration from the rural to the urban, there is a persistence of rural cultural and regional traditional elements in its constitution. Examples of these residues are a nonlinear vision of order and progress, the maintenance and reproduction of oral cultural and traditional medical knowledge and technical assimilation. The popular subject is presented as a victim of mass media, male chauvinistic and sexually repressive; s/he is a limited subject that becomes an easy prey to the hierarchical and authoritarian function of knowledge, and blindly obeys authority and its excesses. Popular culture is the culture of necessity, woven through repression and corruption and pointing toward a more ample and radical type of urbanity than that which is recognized as public.

After this drastic definition of the popular, Monsiváis offers abundant examples of the heterogeneous, contradictory, and often aporetic contents of the popular in Mexican culture. He does so by examining the urban popular from the moment of independence through its multiple metamorphosis to the present, when indigenous influences wane and the popular is transformed into a tourist incitation, a national style that celebrates and mystifies slums to commercialize them.

Once the people are in the streets, the popular becomes public and is the object of close scrutiny and repression because their demographic impulse becomes the place of horror and the abject. Meanwhile, the popular tries to survive and to constitute a space for itself, a space generated by the operative modes of the city-capital in response to subjection. This is the type of agency Monsivais classifies as the popular. In this space, the popular, urban, and mass cultures measure the irrationality and voracity of capitalism.

As an addendum to the notion of the popular, Monsiváis offers an examination of the influence and power of the mass media over it. For Monsiváis and Martín Barbero, the experience of the nation passes through the media circuit and is articulated by it. The services it renders to the nation are doubly articulated and are often contradictory. For instance, the media designs the same national sensibility that it later destroys; reproduces and obliterates the traditional simultaneously by always aligning itself with the commercialization of values and the repressive uses of modernity; builds a type of national class-consciousness that evaporates easily or is exchanged for a consumer avidity, a fabric of dreams, that modernizes and unifies speech, introduces themes and modes of representation corresponding to North American models, and proposes virtuality as a healthy alternative to “the political.” Thus, mass media is stylistically committed to the ratification of styles of life, maintains a relationship to traditions, and sustains old technologies that reinforce respect of the family, private property, and the state. The urban poor do not have access to a critical vision of national identity and thus its ambition is to become a body of consumers instead of proletarians.

Stylistically, the media proceeds through lines of least resistance and what it says becomes public faith. Emotionally, it constitutes itself as the ideological and sentimental national school for the popular, interpellates it, produces fantasies, and becomes the ultimate or unique alternative for them. For instance, the perception of women and the feminine is provided by television, photography, and radio soap operas where women are portrayed as absolute victims in submission.

The real shortcoming of the media is that it covers the sense of national unity for the poor with an ideology transmitted visually and verbally, enhancing and broadening a hegemonic function that rationalizes direct repression to manage the threat they represent as degrading hordes, or popular stain. Moreover, mass media accepts modernity without
its risks and privileges, validates markets and cultural industries, deforms the beliefs and ideologies it divulges, broadcasts neutralized news, breaks parochial schemes, and destroys traditions. Mass culture becomes real, making people experience their lives in accordance with industrial models, and covers all spaces with the industries of “free time.” Mass-media culture feeds the anti-intellectualism of the popular and promotes a defensive attitude and limitation that encourages an a-critical devotion to all forms of real or assumed knowledge in this sector, feeds lay devotions to sports, and nourishes hidden passions in the treatment of horror and crime. These mediations constitute a sense of community in which individuals feel solidarity through an elemental catharsis provided by the aesthetic of shock and the morbid.

Jesús Martín Barbero, alongside Fernando Calderón, discusses the popular via Latin American populism of the 1930s and considers that populist regimes organize power through the articulation of the masses and the state. The state responds to the visibility of the masses nationalizing them and constituting a national social subject with them (Herlinghaus and Walter: 87). In the case of populist regimes in Latin America, the popular is a dense space of interactions and reappropriations, the site of the movement of mestizaje enacted in films like El Chacotero sentimental. The popular constitutes a pressured space, crossed over by the processes and logics of an economic and symbolic market in which the standardization of production and the uniformation of gestures demands a constant struggle against entropy; a periodic renovation of the differentiation patterns.

In conclusion, after reading the critiques of modernism and mass media as parts of the debate on postmodernity in Latin America one is left with the following certainties. The large majority of Latin American scholars analyze Latin America from the perspective of its lacks. Latin America suffers from a terminal condition that consists in never reaching up to the “real” modern and is therefore always being defined at best by its mixtures. This is the effect of its colonial and postcolonial condition. Here is where the postmodern and postcolonial debates criss-cross each other, the difference between them being that the postcolonial debate truly wants to find alternative modes of thinking and of being. However, since postcolonial models and impulses are provided by indigenous cultures, their arguments, élan, and desires are imperiled by the same global-capitalist factors that besiege those cultures and traditions. In addition to which, very few critics of the modern will accept the existence of “the indigenous” as different and distinct from the hybrid and the heterogeneous.

The paradox of postmodern analysis lies in the recognition that if there is an agency, a local idiosyncrasy, an identity properly speaking, it is constantly positioned and repositioned in the mixtures -- hybrid or heterogeneous -- which could be also the self-same place of the popular -- public or abject. This is at least the way I read Brunner’s prognosis that he works in analogy with Macondo, a rain that falls on Latin American heterogeneous popular-public: The poverty that is trained in the evening schools; the expectations that become separated from experience; the slow degradation of autochthonous cultures of indigenous basis; drugs that configure the new map where the center of production is the south and of consumption the north; utopian violence that runs through its last luminous path; the televisual melodrama inviting us to its games of
recognition; signs that dance without stopping while identities make and remake themselves, comprising us as the changing subjects of Latin American modernity (Herlinghaus and Walter).

As stated above, the direction of this logic is the problematization of consensus, creativity, and writing. Consensus because the heterogeneous condition of the social is intercepted by several gradations of information and access to goods and therefore agreement on any issue becomes problematic. This leads in the direction of dictatorships whose project is a forced concurrence. Creativity, because the questions have already been posed elsewhere and the answers must fit the resultant model. Latin American intellectuals are thus always checkmated: their creativity always predicated on what has already been created. This underscores a fill-in-the-blank condition, since the pressing theoretical questions have already been formulated elsewhere. Creativity is thus reduced to quantitative analysis, of providing the numerical figures that serve as funereal evidence of their peripheral in-deficit domains. Numbers perpetually underscore lacks, and scholar’s projects and projections are always a priori flawed. They never measure up. And, last but not least, writing because the republic of letters has proposed a telluric concept of culture in which the mysterious and intangible is what constitutes the main traits of Latin with regard to their own data and projections, social scientists are in the same position of literati, right in the middle of the crack between ideas and social contexts, both always out of step.

**Notes**


3 One of the key players in the postmodernism debate is Jean-François Lyotard, because he refers to the momentous changes in the system of knowledge production that, in my view, constitutes an indirect substratum for the discussion of culture. Another is Fredric Jameson, because he outlines several of the conditions for properly thinking the postmodern. And last but not least Linda Hutcheon, because she refers directly to artistic production. In each of these three writers, the point of departure is the modern era they
see as either having come to an end or having undergone a logical metamorphosis that radically alters its features to the point of making it unknowable or unrepresentable by ordinary means -- hence, horror. This result is shocking not simply because it appears unmanageable, but also because it implies an intensification of the logic of late capitalism. Lyotard examines this intensification in the terrain of knowledge, narrative, and subjective production; Jameson in the nature/culture divide; and Hutcheon in the parodial nature of artistic production. They all roughly coincide with a definition of the postmodern, but I privilege Jameson’s analysis because it brings history to bear on the question. For them, in the postmodern era, narratives, great heroes, dangers, and events lose their function, and doubt, pessimism, and lack of hope set in. The system’s logic is optimal performance and the only real and true narratives are efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability. With regard to subjects, they are interpellated by a gamut of non-dialogical, highly unstable, and relative narratives, marked by their imaginary character. The new subject lives in the intersection of language particles and their games, in a total relativity and heterogeneity, within “clouds of sociability” managed by the decision-making powers according to input/output matrices. The economic discourse is thus the master narrative that organizes the system and its meaning. The ideological task of postmodernism is the coordination of new forms of practices and social and mental habits with the new forms of economic production and organization; and the production of people capable of functioning in a logic of optimal performance, in a world that would give us more than mere postmodernist theory. With respect to reaching consensus on meaning, justice, and truth, technology is of no use, however much postmodern knowledge refines our sensibility to difference and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Thus for Lyotard, “post” is the moment in which the discourse on modernity, predicated on the hegemony of scientific discourse and the prestige of the great metanarratives of legitimation, breaks. The effect is a drastic change in the conditions of knowledge, narrative, and subject production and consumption.

For Hutcheon modernity is marked by the hegemony of the scientific discourse, with its faith in positivist empiricism and objectivism, a faith in knowledge and its possibilities. Modernity believed in progress and entrusted technology with the production of a better world for all. Developmental utopias were essentially democratic in character. Art, the highest expression of the spirit and illustrated reason, was to contribute to the triumph over chaos and unreason. In contrast, postmodernism is usually associated with a negative rhetoric, expressed as discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, anti-totalization. Nonetheless, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges. Actually it is a historical parody in that it rethinks modernism and marks the site of the struggle for the emergence of something new. Its properties are the mixtures of genres, times, voices, styles, the promotion of heterogeneity, and the rethinking of and reworking the forms and contents of the past. Postmodernism could also be considered as anti-modern in that it is unstable, provisional, characterized by the absence of universals, and its positioning against the eternal, empiric, rationalist, and humanist. In this regard, it challenges humanism when it interrogates the notion of consensus by acknowledging difference. Consensus becomes an illusion or the inner logic of homogeneity. Yet the question for Hutcheon is if it is really possible to think that by contradicting and dramatizing, postmodernism can provoke change from within, or
rethink and question the bases of Western modes of thinking such as liberal humanism. Is postmodernism a writing -- as-experience-of-limits? Postmodernism challenges the institutions, from the media to the university, from museums to theater; raises the questions of boundaries and margins of social and artistic conventions; and asserts that borders have become fluid. It forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality and hence the loss of the modernist unique. The three main registers of discourse -- the literary-historical, the theological-philosophical; the popular-cultural -- are all challenged, as so are the concepts of subjective consciousness and continuity. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity.


5 ex]

no deja de ser noción de búsqueda, y que señala la despedida tanto de la referencia geográfica descriptiva, como de la noción funcional en el marco de la dependencia. Quiere decir que “periferia” se ha cargado de sentidos complejos; es la metáfora experimental de una perspectiva desde la cual se experimenta y se problematiza una modernidad específicamente heterogénea y difícilmente clasificable ... Vemos en su virtual “inexactitud” denotativa, es decir, su provisoriedad terminológica, nada menos que un recurso estratégico que ayuda a cuestionar prejuicios academicistas y a reorganizar todo un campo de interrotagiones sobre una base trasdisciplinaria. (Herlinghaus and Walter: 23)

]exx)(please give a translation] IT IS BETTER TO USE A NATIVE SPEAKER FOR THIS TRANSLATION.
