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# *Part One*

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# 1

# THE MULTIVERSE OF LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY, *c.* 1920–*c.* 1970

## INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTS FOR IDENTITY

In the twentieth century the term 'identity' has been heavily worked to denote linkage between culture and society. Although the word keeps losing its edge, new generations periodically resharpen it. The term is so loose that one can apply it to anything from mankind at large[1] to a single person seeking self-knowledge via psychotherapy. Artists, poets, historians, anthropologists, philosophers and politicians entertain versions of identity even when not consciously in quest of it or not confident of the term's utility. This chapter will consider identity primarily with reference to national societies, to aggregations of national societies (Latin America), and to sub-national societies or groups. Two distinctions are important. First, identity, which implies linkage to or manifestation of collective conscience, is not the same as 'reality', a word widely used in Latin America to mean historical, socio-geographic factors that might be recognized as creating a circumambient reality. Both terms fluctuate between a descriptive, empirical meaning and a prospective or promissory one. 'Reality' may signify what 'really' exists or else, in a quasi-Hegelian sense, a 'higher' reality to be ascertained as a *sine qua non* for pursuit of the historic vocation of a people or nation (e.g., essays of interpretation of the 'Peruvian reality'). Identity is not 'national character' as diagnosed by detached socio-psychiatry but collective awareness of historic vocation. Reality starts with environment, identity with tacit self-recognition.

Identity, a human universal, assumed special accents with the rise of modern nations. Germany was a strategic case. As its leaders, thinkers, musicians and artists began to envision a German 'nation', they were

[1] See Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1944), Part II, ch. 6.



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driven to explore wellsprings of identity in ethnicity, folk culture and philosophic premises of history and religious faith. Germany has been called the first 'underdeveloped' country, implying that its advent on the world stage required not merely political *sagesse*, military prowess, and economic weight but affirmation of collective selfhood. Because England and France became (somewhat unwittingly) the first 'developed' countries as the industrial age dawned, their intelligentsias were more at home with political and economic matters than with the portentous metaphysical interests of Germans. In philosophizing, moreover, the English and French tended to conflate their national ideals with recipes for mankind at large. This produced a body of Enlightenment thought which in its more glib and self-serving aspects encountered head-on challenge from German romanticism. By the early nineteenth century this German rejoinder was a powerful solvent on mind and sensibility in England and France.

The lessons that the German analogy holds for Latin America and, more concretely, the ultimate influences of German ideas upon the region are examined later in the chapter. For the moment an illustration will show how present-day thinking on identity still falls under the shadow of the Enlightenment versus romanticism construction or, as in the case at hand, empiricism versus holism. In a collective work published in 1987, eight historians addressed the topic of colonial identity in the Atlantic world using six case studies (three of which were Brazil, Spanish America and the British Caribbean) to compare the formation of distinctive patterns in the period 1500 to 1800.[2] This comparative project required divorcing identity as 'self-definition and self-image' from the story of political independence and asking why some colonies had more 'success' at achieving psychological as well as political autonomy. The authors pursued their inquiry in a detached Anglo-empirical spirit rather than the empathic, holistic tradition of romanticism. The introductory chapter for example endorsed a quest for positive indicators of the 'process of identity formation' and cited such possible deterrents as the lack of printing presses in Brazil for three centuries or the absence of universities in the British West Indies until the 1950s. Identity is thus seen, as it was in the Enlightenment, as manipulable by technological and institutional innovation.

Scholars from the region itself had already addressed two of these cases

[2] Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden (eds.), *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, N.J., 1987).

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with different premises and purposes. Antônio Cândido, one of Brazil's foremost literary historians and critics, sees the absence of presses and gazettes in colonial Brazil not as inhibiting collective identity but as shaping it. Given an illiterate society, sacred oratory with its spoken word adapted to baroque arabesques and symbolism, was an ideal genre.[3] The Barbadian poet and historian Edward K. Brathwaite believes the distinctive spoken language of the present-day West Indies to be an emergent *nation language*, a form of 'total expression' that provides the keystone for regional identity. His colleagues at the School of Education, University of the West Indies, Brathwaite finds, have set out the grammar and syntax of the nation language but cannot connect it to literary expression. The whole school system, he holds, imposes a Victorian set of literary attitudes and responses that block creativity. The crux of the matter lies still deeper. The language issue lies not simply in lexicon, phonetics and subject matter but is rooted, Brathwaite argues, in the English capitulation since Chaucer to iambic pentameter. Caribbean life – the African legacy; the oral, communal expression of the people – is alien to the English language as parochially practised in England. 'The hurricane does not roar in pentameter.' Nor do the drums pulse to it. What the storm *does* roar in and what people *do* dance to – the young literati of the 1940s found out from their traditional calypsos – is a dactylic beat. This discovery provides academic nomenclature to legitimate everyday facts of life. Until then the disinherited must use the emergent nation language as a 'forced poetics' that perpetuates their culture while disguising self and personality. For literati and universities, one might venture, identity is not their invention but their belated recognition of social circumstance.[4]

The critical significance of language, or discourse, cannot receive central attention in this chapter.[5] Enough has been said, however, to suggest that the nature of our eight historians' concern with publication and universities (a reflection perhaps of modern academic anxiety) may not be wholly consistent with the understandings of this chapter. More germane to present purposes is the 'existential' commitment expressed as follows by W. H. Auden: 'In contrast to those philosophers who begin by considering the *objects* of human knowledge, essences and relations, the existential

[3] Antônio Cândido, 'Oswald viajante', in *Vários escritos* (São Paulo, 1970), pp. 51–6.

[4] Antônio Cândido, *Literatura e sociedade* (São Paulo, 1965), pp. 110–11; Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'English in the Caribbean', in L. A. Fiedler and H. A. Baker, Jr. (eds.), *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon* (Baltimore, Md., 1981), pp. 15–53, and *Roots* (Havana, 1986).

[5] For a general treatment, see Richard M. Morse, 'Language in America', in *New World Soundings* (Baltimore, Md., 1989), pp. 11–60.

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philosopher begins with man's immediate experience as a *subject*, i.e., as a being in *need*, an *interested* being whose existence is at stake.'[6] This 'existential' gambit is inviting, for it treats collective experience as a project or adventure. This informal inquiry can be launched in such a spirit, by placing Latin America alongside two other civilizations that confronted the industrial West in the nineteenth century – namely, Japan and Russia. This is not done in the empirical vein of meticulous 'comparative history' but simply to help sketch out a set of questions more useful for present purposes than the ones more frequently posed in academic circles.

Japan had for centuries acquired civilizational ways from the Chinese. Fruitful adaptation brought self-knowledge and, when the time came, an impressive capacity to select what was needed from the West with few confusions of purpose. The germ of Tokyo University was an institute of 'barbarian learning' designed to translate Western texts that seemed useful for the Japanese national project. This project was preceded by a scholarly movement to free Japan from the formalism and pedantry of the Chinese Confucian tradition (although not at the expense of the tradition itself) attended by evocations of Japanese spirit and esthetic. Such evocations have been likened to the quest by German romantics of the same period for an unbridled release of domestic tradition.[7]

In the case of Russia there had been longer direct exposure to the West than in Japan, notably via the construction of St Petersburg in 1703–12. As in Japan there was awareness of a domestic civilization that required decisions on what was to be 'protected'. The Russian generation of Slavophiles and Westernizers defined the dichotomy, with the former dreaming of an ideal pre-Petrine Russia and the latter of an ideal West. Westernizers complicated matters with their 'Russian rehash' of Western ideas, however, while Russian nationalists sent for study to Germany succumbed to a crypto-Francophilism more fanatical than even the chauvinism of the Parisian boulevards.[8] In any case the dialectic was established as clearly in Russia, allowing for clandestine cross-overs, as in Japan.

How Latin America fits into our summary comparison hinges on how the notion of an original culture is handled. The Japanese recognized a domestic culture to which exogenous elements were to be selectively

[6] Quoted in Mitzi Berger Hamovitch (ed.), *The Hound and Horn Letters* (Athens, Ga., 1982), p. xiv.
[7] See Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and its World, Two Centuries of Change* (Princeton, 1980), ch. 1.
[8] Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, trans. R. M. French, new ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960), ch. 1; Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 114–49.

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assimilated, while Russian nationalists envisioned recovery of pre-Petrine rural communalism and non-Western Christianity. Nineteenth-century Latin America, in contrast, was not a single nation, while its fragmented parts shared the culture and religion of the Iberian peninsula, by then a 'backward' region of Western Europe. For Russian critics the societies of England and France may have represented soulless atomism, but for modernizing elites in Latin America these European leaders were paragons. And, if such elites regarded their Ibero-Catholic heritage as déclassé, all the more so were the hundreds of Afro-American and Amerindian communities that were stigmatized by past or present bondage. Whatever opposed the progress of the urban, Europeanized world was to be effaced. Consider the military campaigns against 'natives' and backlanders under General Roca in Argentina and under the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz in Sonora and Yucatan and the Canudos war in Brazil. Even 'judicious sociologists' like Carlos Octavio Bunge and Alcides Arguedas were agreed that 'nothing could be expected of the degraded aboriginal people'.[9]

Japanese engagement with Western science and culture was controlled and methodical, as instanced by the institute for 'barbarian books', the 'learning missions' sent abroad in the 1870s to identify 'realistic' national models for selective emulation, and the temperate enthusiasm for European institutions and manners during the 1880s that led to a permissive if not uncritical 'new Japanism'. On the other hand, many Russians, whether Europeanizers or Slavophiles, felt after 1848 that socialism would never regenerate bourgeois 'equilibrium' in the West and that Russia's 'primitive' collectivism offered possibilities for direct transition to modern socialism. Latin American elites, in contrast, apart from intransigent conservative factions or occasional free spirits, were prepared neither to question the implications of Western technology, rationalization and imperialism nor to promote broad consensus on matters of national culture and tradition. In his early writings, the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea held that for Latin America the nineteenth century was in effect a 'lost century'.[10]

There were of course Latin Americans, individual pensadores and occasionally a national 'generation', who made signal contributions toward devising an agenda for their country or their continent. The point is that they were often adrift when it came to identifying *domestic* ingredients to be

[9] See José Luis Romero, *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (Buenos Aires, 1976), p. 311.
[10] See Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin-American Mind*, trans. J. H. Abbott and L. Dunham (Norman, Okla., 1963).

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appropriated and adapted. The classic example is Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (Argentina, 1811–88), whose reflections on the life and times of the Argentine caudillo Facundo in *Civilización y barbarie* (1845) seemed to pit liberal Europe as filtered through Buenos Aires against the 'barbarism' of the pampas.[11] Read searchingly, Sarmiento's essay goes well beyond this formula, especially when combined with the notes on his 1846–7 travels to Europe and the United States when he discovered Europeans themselves to be barbarous if compared to American frontiersmen. The general point, however, is that well-to-do classes throughout Latin America, including their 'enlightened' and reformist spokesmen, freely applied the term 'barbarian' not, as did the Japanese, to foreigners but to groups within their own countries who were assignably 'native': Indians, mestizos, Afro-Americans, or dirt farmers of Iberian descent.

The decisive rebuttal to Sarmiento came from José Martí (Cuba, 1853–95) who, if he did not excel Sarmiento in his gift for social portraiture, was a more adept analyst of social process and the exigencies of nationhood. In an incisive passage in 'Nuestra América' (1891) he challenged those who mistook the struggle between 'false erudition and Nature' as one between 'civilization and barbarity'.[12] 'The native halfbreed has conquered the exotic Creole . . . The natural man is good, and he respects and rewards superior intelligence as long as his humility is not turned against him.' The tyrants of Latin America climb to power by appealing to disdained native elements and fall by betraying them. 'Republics have paid with oppression for their inability to recognize the true elements of their countries, to derive from them the right kind of government, and to govern accordingly.' 'To govern well, one must see things as they are.'

Martí's contribution to defining the identity issue was to democratize it. Nationalism had taken hold in Latin America but without the romanticist implication of rootedness in the people. Until the early twentieth century, pensadores, essayists and historians seemed agreed that cultural questions were a province of diagnosis and prescription reserved for intellectuals. The idea that people at large were the bedrock of national identity was incongruous in default of sustained, pluricentric, multi-ideological popular movements such as had shaped political awareness

[11] Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants*, trans. Mrs Horace Mann (New York, 1961); and see Joseph T. Criscenti (ed.), *Sarmiento and his Argentina* (Boulder, Co., 1992) and Tulio Halperín Donghi et al. (eds.) *Sarmiento, Author of a Nation* (Berkeley, 1994).
[12] José Martí, *Our America*, Philip S. Foner (ed.) (New York, 1977), pp. 86–7.

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and political process in Western Europe, most significantly the Protestant Reformation and the proletarian revolution. Thinkers, theologians, ideologues and politicians might supply doctrine and tactics for these diversely composed movements, but their roots were in widespread feelings and aspiration. Save for its African population, the United States was settled by émigrés from the two 'revolutions', thus internalizing them. Latin America, however, resisted them. The mother countries barred Protestantism at the gates, along with its messages concerning modern individualism. Europe's later proletarian 'revolution', which took forms from government paternalism through a gamut of socialisms all the way to anarchism, syndicalism and terrorism, made only tentative incursions because of the limited scope of industrialization in Latin America, the lasting efficacy of elite 'conciliations', and a permanent reserve army of workers. However much the pensadores may have kept abreast of progressive thought in Europe, the people whom they claimed to 'think for' were blocked from forming coherent movements that might have given inspiration, definition and support to the critiques made by the intelligentsia.

The identity question therefore consists not entirely of a consensual act of portraiture by sensitive observers but also of a popular voice, featuring the disinherited, that pursues outlet in the generalized discourse of society. For two reasons the identity search came later in Latin America than in Western Europe and the modernizing world, achieving full momentum only in the twentieth century. First, it was only by the 1910s and 1920s that there occurred a conflation of intellectual and popular outlooks as exemplified in letters and visual arts in Mexico, modernist manifestoes in Brazil, socio-political dialogues in Peru, ethno-literary pronouncements in Haiti and diverse manifestations elsewhere. Secondly, with regard specifically to the pensadores, we have argued that their assurances of prior European identity were in the last century too problematic, and their confidence for sustaining critical exchange with ideologies of the industrial West too insecure, to favour a coming-to-terms with world currents. They acquiesced in regnant prescriptions for 'progress' and ruefully confessed their domestic retardation. Here again the early twentieth century was a renovative moment. For suddenly the vanguard voices of Europe, attuned to earlier prophetic cries of the Baudelaires and Nietzsches, were raised in cacophonous condemnation (or even condemnatory exaltation) of the rationalist, scientistic and menacingly dehumanizing premises of the Western enterprise.

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In Europe vanguardism, or modernism[13] had antecedents as an attitude both critical and celebratory of 'modernization'. One might call modernism a cognitive assault on the contradictions of modernity. In its golden age (1910–30) modernism, particularly from its Parisian arena, finally made its impact on Latin America, but not in a merely tutorial role. For Europe now experienced the crisis of nerve associated with technification, commodification, alienation and rampant violence as these found expression in Marxian contradictions, Spenglerian decadence, Freudian invasions of the subconscious, and of course, industrialism and the First World War. This seeming collapse of evolutionary assumptions gave Latin Americans leverage for dismissing presumed determinisms of their past and for inventing a new 'reality' and a new future. Europe now offered pathologies and not simply models. Disenchantment at the centre gave grounds for rehabilitation at the rim. Latin America had to produce its own Rousseaus and Herders at the same time that it was keeping up with the Picassos and Joyces.

Over the years many have claimed that Latin American high culture was derivative from metropolitan sources in the nineteenth century and suddenly responsive to indigenous or *indigenista* leads after 1920. Almost the reverse is true. What made the Latin American *prise de conscience* of the 1920s possible was not the artists' and intellectuals' stubborn appropriation of 'native' subject matter but their bold acrobatics to retain intellectual footing amid the disintegration of Western rationales and received understandings. With the centre now unstrung, views from the periphery earned respect. Alejo Carpentier (1904–80) was to discover the world as polycentric and Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) to find that it has no centre at all. As the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes puts it, 'the Western writer can be central only in recognizing that today he is ex-centric, and the Latin American writer only in recognizing that his eccentricity is today centered in a world without cultural axes.'[14]

A newspaper article of 1925 by José Carlos Mariátegui, 'Is There a Hispanic American Thought?', illustrates how his generation had begun to dissolve the polarities of intellectual life on the 'periphery'.[15] During three and a half years of exile in Italy (1919–23), Mariátegui directly

[13] I use 'modernism' in the European, North American (and Brazilian) meaning to designate twentieth-century vanguardism, not the Spanish American *modernismo* that was akin to symbolism and Parnassianism.

[14] Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, 6th ed. (Mexico, D.F., 1980), p. 32.

[15] José Carlos Mariátegui, '¿Existe un pensamiento hispano-americano?' in *Temas de nuestra América*, 2nd ed. (Lima, 1970), pp. 22–6.

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experienced both the decadence and the promise of Europe. Here he found Marxist analysis of social and economic domination an eye-opener and learned to admire how modernism, especially surrealism, could shatter the solid bourgeois world into absurd fragments. It was to a degree the modernist impulse that led him to extract Marxism itself from positivist armature giving its scientific message mythic force, translating its categories into praxis and relativizing its pretension to universal evolutionism.

In 1925 Mariátegui sensed that his query about Hispanic American thought was germinating in the 'nerve centers of the continent', although he felt that the true question was whether there existed a *characteristically* Hispanic American thought. He chided the Argentine socialist Alfredo Palacios, who had proclaimed the hour at hand for 'radical emancipation' from European culture. Europe had been the lodestar, wrote Palacios, but the Great War showed its culture to contain the seeds of its own decay. Palacios, Mariátegui felt, had led youthful tropical temperaments to exaggerate the prospects for Latin American thought. It was a tonic, he said, to call 'our America' the future cradle of civilization or to proclaim, as José Vasconcelos had in his motto for the National University of Mexico, that: 'Through my race the spirit will speak.' But it was an error to predict the imminent demise of European hegemony. The West was in crisis but far from collapse; Europe was not, 'as is absurdly said, exhausted and paralytic'. 'Our America' continued importing ideas, books, machines and fashions. Capitalist civilization was dying, not Europe. Greco-Roman civilization had long since perished, but Europe went on. Who could deny, Mariátegui asked, that the society of the future was being shaped in Europe or that the finest artists and thinkers of the age were European? He therefore acknowledged a French or German thought but not yet a Hispanic American one, which instead was a 'rhapsody' of European motifs. One might in the countries of the Río de la Plata speak of a spirit of 'Latinity', but it awoke no recognition from autocthonous peoples of the continent.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an inventory of trends and genres but to review and selectively illustrate various tactics, whether deliberate or unwitting, for establishing recognition of shared identity. An impressionistic glance from the 1920s to the 1960s suggests three distinctive categories of expression or analysis that carry forward the lines of inquiry set forth by Mariátegui, presented here as modernism, the 'neo-naturalist' novel in conjunction with the 'identity' essay, and phi-

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