

# Reviews

*La americanización de la modernidad*  
(The Americanization of Modernity)  
Bolívar Echeverría, compiler  
CISAN-UNAM/Ediciones Era  
Mexico City, 307 pp.

## THE MODERNITY OF THE BARBARIANS

Whether as an obligatory intellectual exercise or as a methodological tool for academic tasks, reviewing this book becomes a disturbing journey that leads us from discussion to commotion, from philosophical questioning to cinematic narration, passing through psychoanalysis, feminism and art.

Analyzed from the standpoint of multiple fields of study, this polyphonic examination delves into an undesirable specificity of that historical category we call modernity: its Americanization.

The playful counterpoint of the first section allows Bolívar Echeverría and Ignacio Díaz de la Serna to summarize two aspects of that Americanization: “American hubris” and the “historical singularity” of the emergence of the United States.

In just a few strokes, Echeverría puts forward the conceptualization and genealogy of capitalist modernity: it is a civilizing project that reconstructs human life and its world by updating it and developing its technical possibilities. Born at the dawn of the Late Middle Ages, by the seventeenth century, the European and American branches went their separate ways, only to meet up again finally in the nineteenth century.

A civilizing project, yes; but one which from its very origins contained the clash between what Echeverría calls the “‘natural form’ of human life and its world” and the “form of value.” By the time the two branches of capitalist modernity re-converge, the former had been subsumed in the latter, giving rise to the era of “productive capital,” of “production for production’s sake,” the era of “progressism” in harmonious symbiosis with “present-ism,” in which the monstrous imposition of “mercantile value... leads to



the suicide of human beings and nature being plowed under.”

This is what the American hubris consists of: “making the natural artificial” or “making the artificial natural.” As Echeverría says, it is exactly “the most characteristic and determinant of all the transformations that capitalist modernity undergoes with its ‘Americanization,’” whose maximum expression is summarized in the triumph of use value, which reigns on all levels and in all spheres of reality, and which

Echeverría exemplifies with refreshing humor citing the “Give me more!” of the porn industry. Use is the *telos* of the American Dream and the American Way of Life. To me, dear lay reader, a devastating confirmation.

Díaz de la Serna seems to be saying to us, “Come along! Let’s look at the underbelly of the beast” when he summarizes the events that forged the United States’ independence, made it evolve and gave it purpose.

Eighteen days sufficed for Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence, alone, consulting no book or opinion, inspired by John Locke. This capital document in the development of modernity includes in its preamble two outstanding principles: “that all men are created equal,” and “that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This *jus naturalism* justifies the inevitable social order and its congenital need for a government with the consent of the governed, committed to them, which is sufficient reason to abolish it if it does not comply with their wishes.

In Díaz de la Serna’s opinion it is a declaration that justifies the free will of the newborn nation and appeals to the concert of nations. This point was used to enlist Louis XVI’s decisive aid, achieve the political organization that chose the road of the division of powers and to write the Constitution ratified in 1788.

Díaz de la Serna leaves us with an acute observation: the singularity of the birth of the United States of America resides in its originality, its lack of precedents and because “to a great extent, it shows the way forward for modernity.”

The second part deals with culture. In the first essay, Eduardo Subirats states that U.S. and global academic systems are faced with a borderline situation in which “semiotic formalism” and cultural studies have replaced not only the great twentieth-century currents of thought, but also aesthetic theory and literary criticism. A colonization of thinking that includes Latin America: “The simultaneously semiotic and geo-political conversion strategies” are demonstrated in the conversion of the Latin American intelligentsia into “magical-realist entertainment with the guardianship of the cultural industry”; into a canon reduced to the “trademark of the real-marvelous”; and into the academic subservience that practices multiculturalism, hybrid-cultures and gender studies. A flagrant suppression of “the aesthetic subject” and “the re-forging of a new world order without memories, without gods and without being.”

Make no mistake, says Carlos Monsiváis, Americanization is “a psychological and sociological process that deposits in U.S. culture the traits and qualities of modernity.” Being modern, then, consists of a “growing taste for the habits and mythologies over that hill or behind the *migra* [immigration officers].” And although today everything is Americanized—and “everything” is the planet—for Monsiváis, this idea is exaggerated because it underestimates the “interaction with the cultures of the rest of the world” and, in a way, denies what is already experienced day to day. Don’t American television series promote a broadening of criteria? Has American marketing imposed itself onto politics?

Rafael Pérez Gay reviews the anatomy of the most highly disseminated temptation in modernity: living in the only place “where anyone could do something new if he/she wanted to.” Participating in the American Dream fed by “one more of the many genocides of modern history”; being part of the people of “Manifest Destiny,” a conviction that is intact despite the War of Succession, which showed all by itself that the United States came onto the scene of history in the post-historic phase.

And what about the Americanization of modernity in science and the economy? Manuel Peimbert responds about the former. The genuine Americanization of science lies in the universalization of the method for stimulating it: evaluation based on the number of publications, the num-

ber of quotes, and the irremediable domination of English as the *lingua franca* of the sciences.

For his part, Rolando Cordera reviews the economic viewpoint that the United States applied in Latin America in the midst of the bi-polar Cold War period. In the end, it made Americanization emerge as the only alternative, masked as “globalization,” which, in this author’s opinion, continued despite the crises of the late twentieth century. To demonstrate this, he goes into the obscene case of Mexico.

Roberto Castro Rodríguez and Marta Lamas explore the Americanization of psychoanalysis and feminism. Castro reviews the reception of Freudian theories in the United States, added to the thesis of state structure as an expression of the absence of the father. In his view, no one was more forceful than Freud “in considerations about this state of spoliation in which individuals live in the U.S. capitalist system,” above all when, in the American world, psychoanalysis is only applied to “subjects susceptible to readapting to the laws of the market.” Once again, the socio-economic system is above the individual.

The gender perspective arose in the United States in the late 1950s and U.S. feminist academics were its greatest promoters. Lamas describes its greatest deficiency: leaving to one side sexual difference, forgetting that “the place of women and men in human society is not exclusively a product of the meaning their activities acquire through concrete social interactions, but also of what they are biologically and psychically.”

The book concludes with three discourses about art: one about U.S. visual arts that Jorge Juanes exemplifies with pop art, a current that breaks with “the dream of aureate art” and acts to dissolve the consumer society. A second article by Raquel Serur reviews Coetzee in the book’s most perturbing essay; and a final contribution from José Marquina deals with cinema, saying that “it is so young that in fact, in and of itself, it is one of the elements that make up modernity.”

*La americanización de la modernidad* is undoubtedly a read that from beginning to end wavers between disturbing and uneasy, between humor and the surprise caused by the fertile, multi-formed universe of knowledge that reminds us of Arab wisdom: we men look more like our times than like our parents.

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