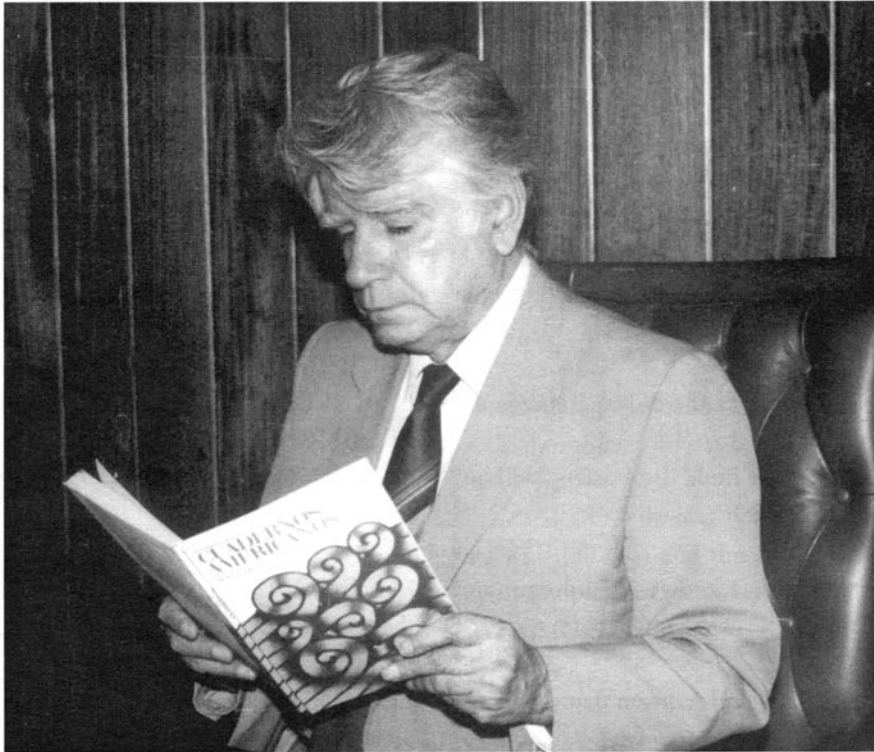


Leopoldo Zea

Universal Mexican Philosopher

Mario Magallón Anaya*



Photos courtesy of CCYDEL

Leopoldo Zea Aguilar was born in Mexico City, June 30, 1912. He spent his childhood during the upheavals of the revolutionary struggle and the first period after the Revolution. From his earliest youth he had to help support his family, and in 1933, he got a job as a messenger at the National Telegraph Company. From that time on, he began to write his first critical essays, contributing to the well known daily newspaper *El hombre libre* (The Free Man). Around the same time,

he renewed his studies, finishing junior high and high school, overcoming many difficulties, and went on to university. He studied law in the morning and philosophy and letters in the afternoon, working the night shift at the Telegraph Company. His first inclination was for letters; however, when he attended a course given by Samuel Ramos about Ortega y Gasset in 1939 and with the arrival of the Spanish exiles and particularly José Gaos, who would be Zea's mentor all his life, he leaned toward a vocation in philosophy.

In his studies, he followed Spanish, French and German masters, as well as Mexicans and Latin

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Americans: José Ortega y Gasset, José Gaos, Joaquín Xirau, Luis Recasens Siches; Descartes, Jean Paul Sartre; W.F. Hegel, W. Dilthey, Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, Eduardo García Maynez; and Simón Bolívar, Andrés Bello, Sarmiento, Alberdi, Echavarría, Martí, among many other Latin American thinkers. All these authors would allow him to construct an intercontextual and intercultural dialogue. In this way, his philosophical work was done from Latin America and, particularly in the Mexican historical-philosophical vein. He developed his national and regional vocation in the context of Western culture, but from an inclusive outlook that

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sought the liberation of all human beings. However, Leopoldo Zea would ponder and question systems of thought based on reason, particularly those of European origin that seemed to perpetuate cultural colonialism.

In the early 1940s, Zea published work in two magazines, *Cuadernos Americanos* (American Notebooks) and *Filosofía y Letras* (Philosophy and Letters), both put out by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). His prose was already essayistic, and he was beginning to be recognized for the depth of his ideas. His philosophical work would be an outstanding example of Latin American thought. In this same decade, he established fraternal relations with distinguished Latin American thinkers and philosophers like Francisco and José Luis Romero, from Argentina; Vaz Ferreira and Arturo Ardao, from Uruguay; Cruz Costa, from Brazil; Enrique Molina, from Chile; Guillermo Franco-vich, from Bolivia; Miró Quesada, from Peru; Benjamín Carrión, from Ecuador; Germán Arciniegas and Danilo Cruz, from Colombia; Mariano Picón

Salas, from Venezuela; Raúl Roa, from Cuba; and many others.

On the prompting of historian Silvio Zavala, distinguished Latin American historians and philosophers, among them Leopoldo Zea, joined together to carry out the research project called History of Ideas in Latin America, under the aegis of the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History. Zea would be in charge of that project for the rest of his life.

José Gaos saw in Zea a great deal of promise for philosophy. In an open letter to him, Gaos said that “he was condemned to writing the philosophy of Latin American history.” Under Gaos’s guidance, Zea wrote his master’s thesis on *Positivism in Mexico* in 1943, and his doctoral thesis that complemented this work, *Birth, Rise and Decline of Positivism*, in 1944.

One of the distinctive features of Zea’s philosophical thinking is that he followed an assumptive process, in dialogue with historical circumstances. The study of Mexico’s and Latin America’s past revealed to him the existence of the Latin American philosophical legacy. He considered that only peoples who have not assimilated their histories feel threatened by domination and colonialism because, he wrote, “history is not made up of just events, but of the consciousness we have about them.”

In 1944, he began his academic work at the Mexico College, where he taught introduction to philosophy, and at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters, where he replaced Antonio Caso in teaching the philosophy of history. In 1947, in the UNAM, he founded the Seminar on the History of Ideas in Latin America, which he would head up until his death. He was also the main promotor of Latin American studies at the UNAM and the founder of the Latin American Studies Coordinating and Dissemination Center and the School of Philosophy and Letters’ College of Latin American studies. With a profound vision of world events and a mature understanding of national and Latin American experience, Zea was able to link up Latin American thought in a context of “simply philosophy,” which constitutes a contribution to a way

of viewing universal philosophy and its relationship to Latin American philosophical production.

Zea dedicated himself to recovering the Latin American intellectual legacy and in 1949 published the book *Dos etapas del pensamiento en Hispanoamérica* (Two Stages of Thought in Latin America). In 1976, a corrected version of the same book appeared with the title *El pensamiento latinoamericano* (The Latin American Mind). Here, he was able to problemize and criticize the different colonial processes in our America, which can be seen in his first works: *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano* (Consciousness and Possibility of the Mexican) (1952), *América como conciencia* (America as Consciousness) (1953), *Filosofía como compromiso y otros ensayos* (Philosophy as Commitment and Other Essays) (1953) and *América en la Historia* (America in History) (1957).

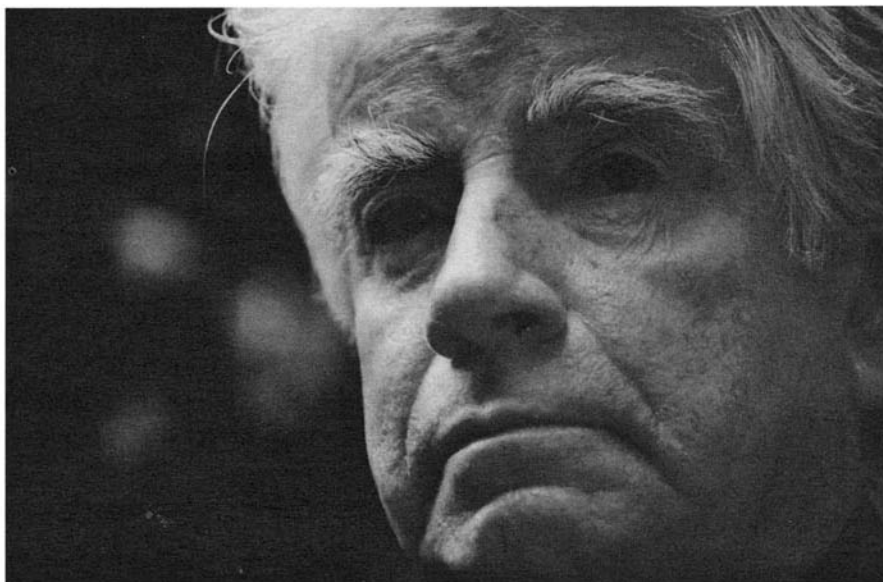
In 1952 his most important concern was studying the bases of the “philosophy of the Mexican and the American.” The same concern would then bring together the individuals who would become his disciples because later most of them would go into other fields of Mexican and Latin American philosophical research. Particularly outstanding among them were Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Luis Villoro, Ricardo Guerra and Joaquín Sánchez Macgregor. This group would call itself the *Hiperión*, meaning “between heaven and Earth.” From that time on, Zea’s philosophy’s influence in academic and non-academic work spread in Mexico and Latin America. He had many followers, outstanding among whom is the also recently deceased Abelardo Villegas.

Leopoldo Zea wrote untiringly about the process of political, economic and cultural globalization of the 1960s. Along these lines, in 1960 he published a *Metodología de la historia de las ideas en América Latina* (Methodology of the History of Ideas in Latin America), as well as *América en la historia* (America in History), *América Latina y el mundo* (Latin America and the World); and *Latinoamérica y el Tercer Mundo* (Latin America and the Third World) in 1963. The overall study of relations among men allowed him to introduce into his discourse terms like “first” and “third world” and

“developed and underdeveloped peoples”, which, for him, as a consequence, led to the classification of “men and under-men.” Zea recognized in this terminology undeniable forms of colonialism. At the end of the 1960s he published his thoughts that would be the predecessor of liberation philosophy, in *La filosofía latinoamericana como filosofía sin más* (Latin American Philosophy as Simply Philosophy) (1969), a book of philosophical anthropology conceived from the point of view of a being situated in Latin American history.

Outstanding texts of the 1970s were *La esencia de lo americano* (The Essence of What Is Latin American) (1971), *Dependencia y liberación de la cultura latinoamericana* (Dependence and Liberation of Latin American Culture) (1974), and his extraordinary books *Dialéctica de la conciencia americana* (Dialectics of Latin American Consciousness)¹ (1976) and *Filosofía de la historia americana* (Philosophy of the History of the Americas) (1976). In this period, important historical-cultural events took place in our America: the repercussions of liberation theologies, their commitment to the poor and the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua at the end of the 1970s. In the 1980s, Zea published *Latinoamérica en la encrucijada de su historia* (Latin America at the Crossroads of Its History) (1981) and *Filosofía de lo americano* (Philosophy of What Is American) (1983). With his text *Discurso desde la marginación y la barbarie* (Discourse from Marginalization and Barbarism) (1988), in accordance with Zea’s own words in an interview I did with him in 1989 for the University of Pennsylvania, I think that he closed the circle of his enormous philosophical opus. A great many of these books have been translated into different languages, including French, English, Russian, Italian, Rumanian, Polish and even Serb.

In the 1990s, Zea published works that were not as far-reaching nor did they have the impact of his previous work: *Descubrimiento e identidad latinoamericana* (Discovery and Latin American Identity) (1990) and *El regreso de las carabelas* (The Return of the Caravels) (1993). However, one work deserves specific mention: *Filosofar a la altura del hombre. Discrepar para comprender* (Philoso-



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phizing at the Level of Man. Disagreeing in Order to Understand), counterpoint to the ideas of our philosopher, which shows the broad strokes of his thinking and the critical reactions to his philosophical position over time on the part of different thinkers the world over.

It is important to point out that Leopoldo Zea also wrote innumerable articles for publication in specialized journals and that he has a vast body of work as a journalist in which he constantly insisted on inserting the region's philosophy and thinking in Western "universality." He also sought to organize a cultural policy that would make these ideas the driving force behind the struggle for the liberation of our America.

We can say that Leopoldo Zea's legacy exemplifies a way of doing philosophy in an open, problemizing dialogue with different philosophical positions, in opposition to any form of colonialism and domination of the nations oppressed by the imperial countries. Zea rejected any single model of philosophizing because each nation creates its own model from its own historical horizon. Zea

thought that philosophy emerges from concrete, historical human problems and that, therefore, totalizing, exclusionary "universal Eurocentric" truths should be critiqued, reformulated and implemented for the philosophical study of our reality, where philosophizing and philosophy acquired a creative and original character. In this way, Leopoldo Zea's philosophical method is a dialectical discourse between praxis and theory, between social reality, history and philosophy, between the tasks and the being of human beings in a historical moment.

His arduous work on the philosophical, social, political and cultural problems of Latin America has led Leopoldo Zea to be considered one of the most outstanding shapers of contemporary Latin American philosophical thought. For Latin America, his recent death, June 8, 2004, represents the loss of perhaps the thinker most concerned with defining its identity and being in the world. ■■

NOTES

¹ Zea uses the adjective "American" in his titles to refer to "Latin American." [Editor's Note.]