

Surrealism and Post-Colonial Latin America
Introduction

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My painting is an act of decolonization (un acto de descolonización).

--Wifredo Lam

Nobel prize-winning poet Octavio Paz always admitted that “I write as if I were engaged in silent dialogue with [André] Breton.”¹ And, of course, he was hardly alone throughout Latin America in this regard, as several authors in this issue of our journal demonstrate. Among the paradigmatic artists from the Americas in the 1930s and ‘40s, Aimé Césaire, Wifredo Lam, and Diego Rivera—who was labeled a “para-surrealist painter from 1935-39” by Maurice Naudeau—along with Roberto Matta, Rufino Tamayo, Frida Kahlo, and Remedios Varo, collaborated extensively with Breton and the leading lights of the Surrealist movement.² Not surprisingly, then, intellectuals have often contended that among twentieth-century vanguard movements, Surrealism has had the deepest impact on the visual arts of Latin America. In making this observation, the signal point has been to treat Surrealism as an international discursive field that was shaped as much by artists from the Americas as by artists from Europe. Such a view, which prompted this issue of our journal, disallows the erroneous assumption that Surrealism was “essentially” a “European” language somehow “imposed” on easily manipulated Third World artists.

Some art historians have explained the trans-Atlantic resonance of the surrealist dialogue in light of how “conflicts within the post-colonial cultures of

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the continent presented fertile new pastures for the Surrealist explorer, who found in the ancient, the popular and the self-consciously political art of Latin America a visual language of opposition.... a validation of their own languages of rebellion.”³ Surreal signs of the latter solidarity, coupled with a dialogic interplay in the visual arts, were obviously much in evidence whenever revolutionary movements emerged in “nuestra América” during the height of opposition to neo-colonialism from the 1950s through the 1980s.

The large painting entitled *Tercer Mundo* (Third World) by Lam has long been displayed as a defining work in Cuba’s exemplary Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, a product of the Revolution in 1959, while Joan Miró designed the main poster promoting the Allende era establishment in 1970 of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Santiago, Chile; and Roberto Matta did the same for the new national collection of Museo de Arte de las Américas established by the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. These three images on behalf of national self-determination in Latin America, among many others, make clear just how much artists in the Americas recruited the visual discourses of Surrealism to articulate at least some of their counter-intuitive conceptions for a post-colonial order in the late twentieth century. For more on what is meant by the complicated and often misunderstood term “post-colonial,” we return to this topic in the final section of our introduction.

Surrealism’s Anti-Imperialist Manifesto

Revolutionary, anti-colonial deployments of surrealist discourses in Latin America are hardly inconsistent with the original intentions of the Surrealism movement in France, where opposition both to Western imperialism and nationalism in the West (though not to national self-determination by Western colonies) were boldly declared and then enacted throughout much of the last century. One of the founding statements of the surrealist movement on July 1, 1925—a public letter denouncing the French Ambassador to Japan, Paul Claudel—insisted on the unmitigated anti-imperialism of Surrealism while using almost incendiary rhetoric: We fervently hope that wars and colonial insurrection will annihilate this Western civilization whose vermin you protect in the East, and we appeal to this destruction as the state of affairs least unacceptable to the mind....We take this opportunity to dissociate ourselves publicly from all that is French, in action and in words. We assert that we find treason and all that can harm the security of the State one way or another much more reconcilable with Poetry....Catholicism, Greco-Roman classicism, we abandon you to your infamous sanctimoniousness....[W]e demand the dishonor of having treated you once and for all as a pedant and as a swine.⁴

Such implacable anti-imperialism remained perhaps the one constant ideological attribute of all the diverse and often competing strains of Surrealism as well as post-Surrealism that emerged with the splintering of the group into at least three different political factions during the early 1930s: those who were allied to the Soviet-based Comintern and the French Communist Party led by Louis Aragon; those who became aligned with the Trotskyists and the Fourth International led by André Breton; and those who became non-aligned socialists or anarchists like Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille. Anti-colonialism was thus one of the few common threads that precariously linked all of these disparate factions of Surrealism on both sides of the Atlantic.

After fleeing the impending Nazi occupation of France, André Breton and his coterie disembarked in Haiti in 1945. There Breton actually managed to help incite an insurgency that brought down a U.S.-backed dictator named Lescot. In an interview with the Haitian poet René Bélance, Breton made clear that:

Surrealism is allied with people of color, first because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism and white brigandage, as is well demonstrated by the public manifestos against the Moroccan War, against the colonial exhibition [in Paris], and so forth, and, secondly, because of the profound affinities between Surrealism and ‘primitive thought.’⁵

In a speech to young Haitians shortly thereafter, Breton then asserted the following:

It is therefore no accident, but a *sign of the times*, that the greatest impulses towards new paths for Surrealism have been furnished during the war that just ended, by my greatest friend of ‘color’—Aimé Césaire in poetry and Wifredo Lam in painting—and that I find myself at this moment among you in Haiti in preference to any other place in the world.⁶

All of this recalls Breton’s earlier collaboration in 1938 from Mexico in conjunction with the exiled Bolshevik leader Trotsky and the muralist Diego Rivera on the “Manifesto Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” which became a signal declaration for all non-Stalinist forces of the left in the war against fascism and a document of great resonance about *engagé art* throughout the Americas. The type of *socialist pluralism* sanctioned by Surrealism and promulgated by this statement flatly contradicted the Soviet doctrine of “socialist realism,” as when they stated that “[I]

rue art is unable *not* to be revolutionary....We believe that aesthetic, philosophical and political tendencies of the most varied sort can find common ground. Marxists can march here hand in hand with anarchists.”⁷ Favoring neither abstract, non-figurative images nor hard-edge figurative paintings, Breton and his contingent instead returned to the writings of Marx and Engels to call for the broadest possible range of visual languages in the service of both Surrealism and the Revolution. In a key essay prior to his joint manifesto with Trotsky and Rivera, Breton had already laid out some of the fundamental points of the movement in his text “Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism,” for the catalogue of the 1936 “International Surrealist Exhibition” in London. To quote Breton’s essay about a “liberation of the human spirit” in art:

Objective humor and *objective chance* may be considered as the two poles between which Surrealism will be able to flash a current of the highest tension.... An appeal to *automatism in all its forms* is our only chance of resolving, outside the economic plane, all those contradictions of principle that, since they existed before our present social regime was formed, are not likely to disappear with it.... We therefore reject as erroneous the conception of “socialist realism” which attempts to impose upon the artist the exclusive duty of describing proletarian misery and the struggle for liberation in which the proletariat is engaged. Moreover, this new doctrine is in flagrant contradiction with Marxist teaching: “The more the (political) opinions of the author remain hidden,” Engels wrote in April 1888 to Miss Harkness, “the better it is for the work of art.” Above all we expressly oppose the view that it is possible to create a work of art or even, properly considered, any useful work by expressing only the manifest content of an age. On the contrary, Surrealism proposes to express its latent content.⁸

Here, though, the question transforms into one about the pictorial logic of diverse visual forms generated by automatism, which guarantees the *authenticity* of the surrealist image according to the above claims. What is it about a surrealist work, especially given the almost bewildering range of images, objects, and visual discourses employed, that makes it surreal? This is an unavoidable question to address, since the art of Surrealism often overlaps or intersects with Fantastic Art, Metaphysical Painting, and Magical Realism.⁹ Contrary to what has been mistakenly contended, though, Surrealism has not simply been antithetical to these related

trends in Latin America and elsewhere, as Luis Castañeda rightly demonstrates in his article for this issue.

Surrealism's Pictorial Logic of Dream-work

A defining set of formal relationships marks off any image that is surrealist from those of other visual languages. Whether one has in mind the surrealist paintings of Lam, Roberto Matta, and Diego Rivera (at least in the late 1930s), or those of Rufino Tamayo, Frida Kahlo, and Remedios Varo, to name only a few, certain artistic modes for generating form are similar in all these divergent cases. The mode of artistic production inherent to the “collage aesthetic” of Surrealism revolves around a pictorial logic triggered by multiple uses of *condensation, displacement, and automatism*—all of which are fundamental to what Freud termed “Dream Work.” If we look at Lam’s *The Jungle*, these surrealist operations are clearly in evidence throughout the image. In this densely compacted, over life-size gouache painting from 1942-‘43, now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, there is a sustained use of displacement—as tobacco leaves are inexplicably sprouting from sugar cane, while human anatomical parts such as buttocks are unexpectedly coupled with animal forms like the horse’s tail along with geometric configurations that resemble Picassoid cyphers for animal heads. Ordinary domestic instruments like scissors are emerging from an outdoor setting of thick tropical terrain. Conversely, the tactic of condensation—whereby fragmented parts stand in for the whole body or entire object—is precisely what gives the display of displaced things there tenuous cohesion in this edgy painting, where tense, jarring conjunctures of formal fragments are the motor for spectator visual movement. As for the related iconography of *The Jungle*, it derives in large part from Santería, yet there is no mere illustration here of rituals simply transposed into paint pigment. In their key studies of this painting, Jasmine Alinder, Juan Martínez, and Gerardo Mosquero have all shown how there is a symbolic condensation at work as well. Thus the scissors in the painting are at once a reference to Ogún, a deity of central to Santería, even as the scissors also signify at the same time that “a break with colonial cultural was needed, that we had had enough of colonial domination” (see the interview with Lam in this issue).¹⁰

A controversy linked to Frida Kahlo’s locus in art history concerns whether and in what way her work relates to Surrealism. Yet such a controversy is generally based on a misconception easily undone by analyzing the pictorial logic of her images. Certainly, Kahlo chose to show her work in surrealist exhibitions and, in works like *Las dos Fridas*, she was unquestionably influenced by such Bretonian concepts as “communicating vessels” with dialectical counterpoints. Luis Castañeda convincingly demonstrates this in his article for this issue. Motivated by Kahlo’s

flippant declaration that she did not know she was a Surrealist “until Breton told her she was,” certain scholars have asserted that she was not a Surrealist because that was not her conscious intent.¹¹ Such a position, however, misses the key point: being a Surrealist was something caused by unconscious motives quite aside from the artist’s rational intentions. A more incisive question to ask would concern the distinctive pictorial logic of images like *Allá cuelga mi vestido, Nueva York* (There Hangs My Dress, New York) of 1933-‘34, a collage on masonite.

Here again, an artwork features an odd combination of outdoor landscape and indoor interior that are orchestrated by the dual tactics of condensation and displacement. Kahlo used two peculiar ways to estrange us from rational perception in keeping with one point perspective. First, the collage abounds with impossible locations and/or implausible uses for things, as when indoor toilets and sport trophies serve as outdoor clothes-line poles among buildings of wildly improbable dimensions—and all of this is based on what we can term displacement. Second, in Kahlo’s collage there are truncated classical columns and machine parts in disconcertingly fragmentary form, so that a part of a building or a piece of an object represents the whole entity—all of which reminds us of what Freud termed condensation. In fact these two pictorial operations so inherent to Surrealism are symptomatic compositional gambits of virtually every artwork that Kahlo ever did. Whether she intended to use the pictorial logic of Surrealism or just unconsciously acceded to it while painting intuitively, the fact remains that her work always had an elective affinity with this movement that was rightly diagnosed by Breton and others.¹²

Considering Kahlo’s work “essentially” Mexican hardly cancels out these points of connection. Such essentializing claims and nationalizing accusations remind us of an issue that has seldom been adequately addressed. Whenever the relationship of Surrealism to Latin American art is broached, there is normally a confused recourse to language about “nationalism” that emerges, so let us explore that issue to clarify the situation somewhat.

Aside from the interview with Wifredo Lam by Gerardo Mosquera, which appears here for the first time in an English translation, how do the other five authors included in this issue address the Latin American artworks produced in dialogue with the international discourses of Surrealism? A variety of vantage points are assumed that rightly heighten our critical sense of how complex the movement actually was; this is a notable move forward for the existing literature. In his essay on “Surrealism and National Identity in Mexico: Changing Perceptions, 1940-1968,” for example, Luis Castañeda considers the contemporary reception and long term legacy of the 1940 “International Surrealist Exhibition” in Mexico City, which was a

paradigmatic example of cultural politics turned into identity politics. The reception history of this exhibition articulates the vicissitudes of Mexican national identity as uneasily stretched between distinctively “authentic” or “indigenous” expressions of a local art. (More of course could be said about the various types of *indigenismo*, but that is an issue that remains to be pursued elsewhere.)

These tendencies anticipated, Castañeda contends, the surrealist language of the fantastic and the magical, on the one hand, and the inflection of Mexican art by “the joys of influence” of international modernisms, on the other. Castañeda attempts to show that “the exhibition as a whole rendered spatial the surrealist vision of Mexico, and the New World: ancient and modern temporalities coexisted with the real and the fantastic in a volatile site of fluid taxonomies.” By the late 1930s Mexico had in fact become an aesthetic and political icon for the exiled European avant-garde, so that the Mexico of Cárdenas was imbued with a “timeless and immanent revolutionary ethos” (according to Breton) and it was a “dynamic site of social and political transformation” (according to Trotsky). Simultaneously diverging from these projections yet also confirming their affective charge against the ongoing legacy of colonialism, the Peruvian poet César Moro argued in the introduction to the 1940 exhibit “that Surrealism could reconstitute the interrupted time of the pre-Columbian world that lived on, despite the colonial interlude, in places like Mexico and Peru.” In different ways, all of these strategies illuminate how intimately Surrealism was driven by the task of creative restitution in the name of recuperating and re-invigorating a suppressed indigenous history, both aesthetically and politically. Central to the one type of *indigenismo* discussed by Castañeda is, of course, the category that the surrealist aesthetic favors: the “fantastic.” Many Mexican artists had engaged with the language of the fantastic long before it ever arrived in Mexico, yet they did so without necessarily contributing to any cohesive or reductive sense of “essential” *Mexicanidad*, an aesthetically limited notion that was contested emphatically both by poet Octavio Paz and philosopher Leopold Zea.

No doubt, pre-Columbian art as a cultural model for contesting hackneyed expressions of Western art had become indicative of a kind of subversive “authenticity” then celebrated by leading surrealist figures. As Courtney Gilbert remarks in her essay on Guatemalan artist Carlos Mérida, a member of the School of Mexico City, the avowed anti-nationalist André Breton claimed that Mexico was “the surrealist place *par excellence*” when referring to both the national and natural history of this country. Hardly a statement that can be taken as self-evident, Breton’s declaration, in light of his own opposition to the essentializing language of fascism, presents us with several possible readings that are either historicizing or ahistorical. In avoiding such sweeping formulations, Mérida was motivated more by the quest to

navigate artistically the pre-colonial legacy of the Americas, in relation to European influences and contemporary national politics at a moment when post-revolutionary Mexico sought to establish an independent national identity in opposition to Eurocentrism.

In contrast to the Mexican artists grappling with nationalist aesthetics, Mérida cast a wider net than one solely in dialogue with previous Aztec and Mayan cultures. He contended that the pre-Columbian past should serve more as artistic inspiration than as an aesthetic model. A genuine modernism of the Americas would be one capable of synthesizing lessons from the European avant-garde without being subordinated to it. Thus, as Gilbert shows, artists like Mérida developed a “synthetic approach to Mexican art and Surrealism” that carved out “a unique space between the Mexican school and the international avant-garde” on behalf of an alternative or cosmopolitan modernism. The kind of approach used by Gilbert in turn questions the notion of any imperial Surrealism that supposedly re-colonized the world in the name of scandalous alternatives. Instead, she seeks to explore the surrealist language as a “dynamic system of exchange and collaboration between multiple locations around the world.”

Yet the problem of treating the “other” instrumentally in a project that charged art with the politics of subversion and agitation remains a central thing to be avoided by Surrealism. In his essay “1925—Montevideo in the Orient: Lautréamont’s Ascent Among Paris Surrealists,” Gabriel Montua shows why Lautréamont was used as “the quintessential symbol of Surrealism.” Serving their emphatic anti-French and anti-occidental thinking, the poet’s Uruguayan origin allowed Parisian Surrealists to claim him against their own nation, ironically mobilizing biography along with racial and cultural belonging in the name of the very movement that vehemently contested the premises of racial and cultural hierarchies. Equally ironic is the fact that the lack of photographs of the poet—until one was discovered in 1970—allowed Surrealists to “orientalize” the features of a man who instead of being “exotically dark and mysterious,” turned out to be fair-skinned. Furthermore, identifying Lautréamont with Maldoror, thus fusing fact and fiction, allowed representatives of the movement to see Lautréamont’s poetic critique of colonization as legitimized by someone who does not belong to the oppressor, and one who by extension created the opportunity to identify with people historically and culturally removed from the community of French colonizers.

On a different level, this kind of self-serving play with identity politics is mirrored in Lautréamont’s play with famous quotations. Commenting on his “cannibalizing” textual moves, the author claims that “plagiarism is necessary” and “implied in the idea of progress.” Montua shows that by inverting the order

of sentences and changing words, Lautréamont systematized “the wreckage of bourgeois literature.” As such, he contributed to a new alphabet poised to invert and challenge the short-circuiting narratives of the established order.

This type of pastiche and montage is related, albeit in a different register, to the work of the Argentine artist and poet Juan Batlle Planas. Indeed, Michael Wellen argues that Planas’ *Radiografía Paranoica* (1935-37) series offers “an entry point for viewing an artistic engagement with the Argentine daily news.” In the 1920s and ‘30s, popular culture in Buenos Aires created what has come to be called *saberes del pueblo*, a fusion of technical knowledge, abbreviated in the local media and belief systems based on occult practices and mythical beliefs. In what he termed “irrationalization,” Planas called upon his peculiar synthesis of science, popular psychology, mysticism, and Eastern philosophy, on the one hand, and, on the other, aesthetic practices celebrated by prominent surrealist artists, such as the paranoiac-critical method posited by Salvador Dalí. Fusing such heterogeneous discourses could, according to Planas, “dislodge the presumed authority of positivist science.” In fact, as Wellen notes, Planas used the language of science against itself, provoking insights into the irrational premises of a discourse that controlled and confined its subjects in the name of objective truth—and in the case of Argentina, in the name of the public good. Wellen also observes that in the early twentieth century “the diagnosis of hysteria served as pretext for families or the state to police Argentine women who were seen as too active or independent.” *Paranoid X-rays* articulated a larger social critique that contested medical invasions of body and mind, such as shock treatment and surgery, and as being harnessed to an oppressive political regime after the 1930 coup d’état of General Jose Felix Uriburu, which relied on unprecedented government-sponsored violence, censorship, and coercion. While critically mirroring tools of science that were by applied by political dictators, Planas’ work also explored the language of science as it was transposed in the *saberes del pueblo* (popular wisdom). The latter were an approximation of scientific discourses, particularly chemistry and physics, that were infused with the fantastic, as well as found in tropes of psychology, physiology, astronomy, and geography.

Finally, Irene Herner reminds us of just how much the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros was a seminal figure for the type of experimentation in the visual arts that had earlier been sanctioned by the Surrealists. In the case of Siqueiros, along with that of the Mexican muralists more generally, the issue of nationalism or national self-determination re-emerges yet again—all in relation to Surrealism.

Surrealism and The Taxonomy of Nationalisms

As a resolutely internationalist movement, Surrealism always supported

national self-determination by current or former colonies of the West, *but this movement never embraced the official nationalism of a nation-state and it only infrequently endorsed popular nationalisms*. In order to sketch more precisely the relationship of Surrealism to national self-determination, let us now consider the taxonomy of nationalisms provided in Benedict Anderson's classic study on the subject, *Imagined Communities*.

Many people assume that there is only one general type of nationalism. Yet to use this term seriously is to be confronted with a basic question: What definition of nationalism do you have in mind? Many scholars will talk of the "nationalism" of movements in the "Third World," whether social or artistic, without saying just what they mean by a term that they assume to be so self-evident. Yet any use of the term "nationalism" immediately obliges us to discuss *what type of nationalism* we actually mean, since there are several kinds.

In his discussion of Third World liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Samir Amin claimed, "nationalism cannot develop significantly today in the absence of a socialist content."¹³ Yet, it is precisely the militaristic nationalism of the U.S. and other Western European powers, like Great Britain and France, that is immediately invoked to protect "national security" by invading "developing" countries deemed "threatening," so as to deny their own national self-determination. So, how does one make sense of this broad gap in meaning that opens up within the word "nationalism"? Benedict Anderson has given us an invaluable set of distinctions in *Imagined Communities*.¹⁴ They are as follows:

First, there are *popular nationalisms* based in broad cultural practices, not race per se, particularly concerning competency in the use of unifying cultural languages of "the people." These popular forms of nationalism are not necessarily linked to an existing nation-state and *can be* quite egalitarian through the claim that the main issue is simply *equality among all nations or peoples*. This idea is a basic precept of many Third World Liberation movements combating Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. Such a view is also linked to a fundamental observation of Anderson, that "colonial states were typically *anti-nationalist*, and often violently so." The Mexican Mural Movement is a shining example of this type of "popular nationalism" that is always based in a vision of social justice for the popular classes. Discussions of class formation are central to it; thus every existing nation-state is assumed to be disunified, owing to class divisions and even ethnic diversity. There is no homogeneous "national family" possible according to this definition of nationalism.

But what of the claims that nationalism is always racist, even if one speaks of "popular nationalisms"? Anderson's response is that "nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations...outside of history." Moreover, he notes:

[One] is basically mistaken in arguing that racism and anti-Semitism derive from nationalism... The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation... Where racism developed outside Europe... it was always associated with European domination, for two converging reasons. First and foremost was the rise of official nationalism and colonial “Russification.”¹⁵

Second, there are *official nationalisms* that are always based in dreams of Empire and are often grounded in racial or ethnic hierarchies that permit some nations or peoples to invade other nations or peoples in order to create a “global harmony” or “civilization.” As Anderson has noted: “The key to situating *official nationalism*—the willed merger of nation and dynastic empire—is to remember that it developed *after* and *in reaction to*, the popular national movements.”¹⁶ Furthermore, he writes: “In almost every case, official nationalism concealed a discrepancy between nation and dynastic realm. Hence, a world-wide contradiction: Slovaks were to be Magyarized, Indians Anglicized, and Koreans Japanized.”¹⁷ Of course, there could easily be various combinations of Anderson’s two types, depending on state formations, class antagonisms or regional differences. In addition, the Marxist tradition has taken a rather complicated view of nationalisms vs. national self-determination. Nationalism is thus as sometimes good and other times bad: see E.J. Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870* (1990), or Horace B. Davis, *Nationalism and Marxism* (1967).

To speak—as we must in an essay about Surrealism (or Mexican Muralism)—of national self-determination in league with popular nationalisms and in opposition to the official nationalism of the nation-state entails a second set of distinctions involving colonialism, neo-colonialism, post-colonial theory, and imperialism. So, let us turn our attention to a brief discussion of them in order to frame the historical setting of Surrealism’s uncompromising commitment to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in relation to what has emerged more recently as “Post-Colonial Theory.”

Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Post-Colonial Theory

The modern sense of the term “post-colonial” was first used positively in the late 1970s by Palestinian author Edward Said—and authors from Latin America like Ernesto Laclau of Argentina—to refer to works by either earlier anti-colonial intellectuals such as C.L.R. James or Frantz Fanon from the Caribbean, or contemporary theorists like Samir Amin of Senegal and Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua. Edward Said praised “post-colonial theory” as a new way of confronting

the *afterlife or ongoing legacy of a defeated European colonialism*.¹⁸ Colonialism had been eradicated politically but not always economically in almost all parts of the world, so that a different form known as “Neo-colonialism” arose during the mid-20th century and it often continues on into the present.

Whereas the “old” types of colonialism involved *formal colonies*, Neo-colonialism has involved instead *informal colonies* or “client nation-states” whose status is not legally defined but rather economically determined. Formal colonies never had national self-determination politically and the colony’s leaders were selected by rulers in other nations—the Vice-Royal Leader of Mexico was chosen by the King of Spain; the National Leader of India was selected by the King or Queen of Great Britain. With the anti-colonial independence of nations like Mexico or India, the choice of the President of Mexico or the Prime Minister of India took place in national political elections held within those respective nations.

Yet economic independence for these former colonies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East did not immediately develop along with the new national political institutions in every independent nation or region. (There are now almost 200 independent nations in the world, whereas in 1900 there were only a couple of dozen.) Hence, the term “neo-colonialism” refers not to the political independence of a former colonial nation—which is undeniable—but rather to its relative lack of economic autonomy within a “post-colonial world order” at present. The current post-colonial world order is thus somewhere in between the old colonial system and the consolidation of a new world order in which all nations and peoples are not only politically sovereign, but also economically independent in ways now seen only in the West—the US, the UK, France, etc.—or in Asia—China, India, Japan. In terms of economics, two of the twelve largest post-colonial nations in the world—Brazil and Mexico, both from Latin America—are obviously not colonies. Yet Brazil and Mexico are often said to be entrapped by neo-colonial economic formations dominated by the West that are both part of the afterlife of colonialism, and yet also something radically new linked to corporate capitalism. The latter is a fundamentally anti-colonial phase of history at odds with the closed market systems of colonialism. When current leaders from Latin America, such as the Presidents of Brazil, Bolivia, and Venezuela, denounce imperialism—a synonym for “neo-colonial” hegemony—they are denouncing the lack of economic autonomy characteristic of “post-colonial” relations among the nations of the world at present.

What are the different phases of colonialism from Antiquity to the present and how does neo-colonialism both relate to yet diverge from these early phases of history?

“Colonialism” is a term that dates from classical Antiquity in Europe when Greek

“coloni,” Latin for “settlers or cultivators,” established overseas “colonias,” Latin for “settlements” or “farms,” of Greek culture during the 6th century B.C. in places like Syracuse, which is part of what we now call Italy. These first “colonies” were often in sites that had very small if any local populations from previous cultures. With the subsequent rise of the Empire of Rome, the word “colony” often meant an armed garrison in a conquered territory, such as Carthage in North Africa—or what is now Libya—or Constantinople, now Istanbul, in what is now Turkey. This first phase of “colonialism” involved the exacting of tribute by imperial forces from the regions being annexed by Rome. Colonial tribute, mainly of agricultural products, entailed extracting surplus goods from the colonies being subordinated to the Empire, along with demanding financial support for the Roman legions maintaining “order” in the region.

A second phase of colonialism, in the Spanish Empire from 1521 to 1821, encompassed a significantly different type of colonization in the “New World.” This phase of colonialism extended up to the end of the Second World War and even into the 1960s, when anti-colonial wars of national liberation led to the independence politically, though not necessarily economically, of most nations through Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This second phase of colonialism is inextricably linked to the rise of Western imperialism, even as imperialism has outlasted the old colonialism and now endures through the twin engines of neo-colonialism and corporate capitalism. By charting the rise of imperialism below, we can understand the transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism within the current “post-colonial world order.”

Imperialism and Neo-Colonialism in the Post-Colonial Present

The term “imperialism”—not the word “colonialism”—is currently being used by several elected leaders throughout Latin America to refer to the inequitable hemispheric relations of contemporary neo-colonialism, especially during the Bush Era. What does the term “imperialism” mean in Latin America? When was it first used and why is it still employed in key images about the world economic order at present?

To speak of imperialism, along with colonialism and neo-colonialism, is to speak of empires. There have been “empires,” a Latin term dating from before Christ, for over four thousand years in human history, extending from the Ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs and Imperial Rome, through the Spanish and British Empires, to that of the United States at present. All of these empires share certain features even as they are quite different in other respects.

First, all empires have enjoyed considerable military superiority over

neighboring states, which has allowed them to invade other regions or nations on behalf of so-called dynastic rights, a supposed religious mission, or “national security.” At present, the U.S., for example, has major military bases in over 60 different nations out of 200 worldwide. (This makes the *Pax Americana* considerably larger than either the *Pax Romana* or the *Pax Britannica*.) These bases have been used to invade numerous nations since 1945. Second, all empires have enjoyed major economic benefits as a consequence of the subordinate position into which all other countries are situated, either through suffering actual military invasion or by means of the on-going threat of it.¹⁹

There have been several different phases of imperialism in history, along with various types of power commanded by these empires over the last two millennia. In his classic study entitled *Imperialism: From the Colonial Age to the Present*, political economist Harry Magdoff summarized the two most over-arching types of imperialisms, those from before 1500 and those afterwards, as follows: “In former social systems [like Imperial Rome], the economic root of expansionism was the exaction of tribute: in effect, the appropriation of the surplus available... from militarily weaker societies. In the main, the earlier ‘imperialisms’ left the economic basis of conquered or dominated territories intact.”²⁰ After 1500, there was another, more modern form of imperialism that emerged with the Spanish, French, Portuguese and British Empires. It was this phase that was inherited and then reconfigured by the U.S. as a neo-colonial super power, especially in Latin America and the Middle East. The second or modern phase of imperialism, beginning in 1492 and culminating in the “Age of Empire” from 1875 to 1914 but with a notable afterlife into the present as neo-colonialism, required much more than the mere expropriation of surplus goods from colonies in the Americas or Asia.

To quote Magdoff on the second phase of modern imperialism (or neo-colonialism):

What was new in this mode of production [aligned to mercantile capitalism] was its inner necessity to produce and sell goods on an ever-enlarged scale. And because of this, the geographic spread of capitalist nations [whether England, France, the U.S., or Japan] resulted in the alteration of the economic base of the rest of the world in ways that would aid and abet the generation of ever-growing surplus within the home countries. In short, the economies and societies of the conquered or dominated areas [in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even in Europe (as with Ireland)] were transformed, adapted, and manipulated to serve as best they could the imperatives of capital ac-

cumulation at the center [of the Empire].²¹

Unlike the terms Empire and Imperial, which go back a thousand years, the word “imperialism” only originated in the late 1880s. Perhaps surprisingly, imperialism was not a term that appeared in the writings of Karl Marx (d. 1883), even though he was highly critical of both colonialism proper and of its economic linkage to capitalism. The first modern book about the topic and entitled simply *Imperialism* (1902), was published by J.A. Hobson, who was an apologist for the British Empire in unabashedly nationalistic terms. Only with V.I. Lenin’s famous critique *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Stage of Capitalism* (1916) was the term first used negatively to explain the origin of World War I, and by implication both the rise of fascism and the subsequent causes of the Second World War. Lenin did so by documenting the nationalistic competition among empires over key resources like oil or copper and by charting a disturbingly uneven development between different regions around the world that is structurally intrinsic to the logic of a monopoly capitalism based in the West.²²

Recent theories of imperialism, from Modernization Theory and Dependency Theory to those of World Systems Theory, have introduced many new concepts to explain this divisive fact of contemporary life.²³ But most of these theories, especially those originating in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, have agreed on one basic point: imperialism has outlasted colonialism in the formal sense, though not “informal colonies.” Yet imperialism has done so by depending upon many of the economic structures first instituted by colonialism concerning what is produced where—raw materials in the developing countries; high tech goods in the West—and to whose financial advantage—the Western-based corporations who often control subsoil rights for raw materials in the developing world and/or the technology necessary for processing them, while paying exceedingly low wages. Few have summed up better than did Sergio Ramírez of Nicaragua about how imperialism now functions less through military intervention, although the threat of US intervention is often there, than through neo-colonial structures of production and trade. As Ramírez noted, Central America realized early in the post-colonial era what its modest role in the new world economic order would be, namely, cheap desserts for the West: coffee, sugar, and bananas.²⁴

Opposition to imperialism in Latin America then encompasses much more than stopping military intervention in the region. Among other things, ending imperialism would entail restructuring the inequitable economic relations inherited from the colonial period, which countries like the U.S. and a few from Western Europe insist upon retaining. To end imperialism would thus involve going from

so-called “free trade” —mired as it is in the unequal exchange of neo-colonial economic relationships favoring the US and Europe—to “fair trade.” The latter would place the well-being of the majority in “*nuestra América*” above the private profits of a powerful minority beholden to neo-colonial formations and powered by contemporary corporate capitalism. It was in response to this contemporary predicament that “Post-Colonial Studies” definitively emerged as “a field of study” with two international conferences at the University of Essex in the U.K. in 1982 and 1984, led by “non-western” scholars like Ernesto Laclau of Argentina.

1 Octavio Paz, “André Breton: The Search for the Beginning” (1967), *On Poets and Others*, tran. Michael Schmidt (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 72.

2 Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (1944), tran. Richard Howard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 342. See also: Dawn Ades, “Rivera and Surrealism in Mexico, 1938-1940,” in *Diego Rivera: Art & Revolution* (Mexico City: INBA & Landucci Editores, 1999), 318.

3 Valerie Fraser and Oriana Baddeley, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Latin America* (London: Verso Press, 1989), 101-103.

4 Maxime Alexandre, Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, et.al., “An Open Letter M. Paul Claudel, French Ambassador to Japan” (Paris, July 1, 1925), reprinted in Maurice Nadeau, *op. cit.*, 238-239.

5 Réne Béance, “An Interview with André Breton”(1945), *What is Surrealism?* ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1978), 256.

6 André Breton, “A Speech to Young Haitian Poets” (1945), *What is Surrealism?*, 260.

7 André Breton, Leon Trotsky, and Diego Rivera, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938), in *Leon Trotsky on Art & literature*, ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 122-129. O.K. Werckmeister and Robin Greeley, among others, have insightfully discussed the period import of this manifesto. See most recently, for example: Robin Adèle Greeley, “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky, and Cárdenas’s Mexico,” in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCross (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 204-225.

8 André Breton, “Limits not Frontiers to Surrealism,” *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (New York: Praeger, 1971-1st edition 1936), 104-106.

9 Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El Surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1969).

10 See: Jasmine Alinder, “The Iconography of the African Diaspora,” in *Picturing Themselves: An Examination of 19th Century Photographs of Brazilian Slaves* (Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of New Mexico, 1994), 76-87; Gerardo Mosquera, “Modernidad y Afracánía: Wifredo Lam,” *Third Text* (Autumn 1992): 42-68; and Juan Martínez, “Afrocubans and National Identity: Modern Cuban Art: 1920s-1940s,” *Athanos*, No. XI (1992): 70-75.

11 Sarah Lowe, *Frida Kablo* (New York: Universe Books, 1991), 78.

12 For more on this, see: Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London:

Thames & Hudson, 1985).

13 Samir Amin, et. al., *Dynamics of Global Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review, 1982), 238.

14 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991-1st Ed. 1983).

15 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 149-150.

16 Anderson, 86.

17 Anderson, 110.

18 Edward Said, "Afterword," *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994-1st Ed. 1978).

19 "U.S. Military Bases & Empire," Editorial, *Monthly Review*, Vol. 53, No. 10 (March 2002): 1-14.

20 Harry Magdoff, *Imperialism: Form the Colonial Age to the Present* (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), 3.

21 Magdoff, 3.

22 E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987), 60.

23 V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917)(New York: International Publishers, 1939).

24 Sergio Ramírez, *Estás en Nicaragua* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1986).