

ESSAY

The Nineteenth Century in Mexico: A Critical Reading from Decolonial Thought

El siglo XIX en México. Una lectura crítica desde el pensamiento decolonial

Ou século XIX, não o México. Uma arena crítica do pensamento decolonial

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ABSTRACT

This essay emerges from the author's teaching practice, from which he reflects on his role as a subject with an indigenous past before the national discourses of Mexico's past. In this way, the writing has the purpose of discussing the construction of the national historical knowledge of the 19th century in correspondence with the needs of the indigenous communities. Decolonial thought is taken up again to demonstrate how the discourse of Mexico's historical past has made the political projects of indigenous communities invisible and at the same time promoted discrimination as peoples without memory. The author concludes his paper by reflecting that the task of the basic education teacher is to recognize, in the first place, education as a political act that enables students to break away from official knowledge and begin with the liberation of their past and present.

Resumen

El presente ensayo emerge desde la práctica docente del autor, del que reflexiona sobre su papel como sujeto con pasado indígena ante los discursos nacionales del pasado de México. De esta manera el escrito tiene la finalidad de discutir en torno a la construcción del conocimiento histórico nacional del siglo XIX en correspondencia con las necesidades de las comunidades indígenas. Se retoma el pensamiento decolonial para demostrar cómo el discurso del pasado histórico de México ha invisibilizado los proyectos políticos de las comunidades indígenas y a su vez promovido la discriminación en tanto pueblos sin memoria. El autor concluye su escrito reflexionando que la labor del profesor de educación básica es reconocer, en primer lugar, la educación como un acto político que posibilite a sus estudiantes la ruptura de conocimientos oficiales y comience con la liberación de su pasado y su presente.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. Author

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RESUMO

Este ensaio surge da prática docente do autor, a partir da qual reflete sobre seu papel como sujeito de passado indígena diante dos discursos nacionais do passado mexicano. Dessa forma, a escrita tem por objetivo discutir a construção do conhecimento histórico nacional do século XIX em correspondência com as necessidades das comunidades indígenas. O pensamento descolonial é retomado para demonstrar como o discurso do passado histórico do México invisibilizou os projetos políticos das comunidades indígenas e, por sua vez, promoveu a discriminação entre os povos sem memória. O autor conclui sua escrita refletindo que a tarefa do professor da educação básica é reconhecer, antes de tudo, a educação como um ato político que possibilita a seus alunos romper com o conhecimento oficial e partir da libertação de seu passado e presente.

Problematizing context of history teaching at the higher education level.

The task of the educator is to problematize the learners, the content that mediates them, and not to lecture about it, give it, extend it, deliver it, as if it were something already done, elaborated, finished, finished.

Paulo Freire

These brief lines emerged from a class directed to students of the Master's Degree in Humanities Teaching at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 151 Toluca. It seemed important to me to record my concerns because, like my students, I problematized my own knowledge about the history of my country, and consequently, I fractured the historical/political position that I had built years before during schooling. Thus, the subject of History and Literature of the 19th century in Mexico was the guiding axis that allowed me to dialogue again with that past that I assumed corresponded with everyone in the class; a past that I thought belonged to the Mexican population.

The relevant issue of the subject *History and Literature of the XIX century* was that the students of the Master's Degree in Humanities Teaching, understand in more detail the social, political and literary processes that allowed the conformation of the national project in the XIX century. According to the program of this master's degree, Basic Education teachers only generate teaching strategies based on the knowledge published in the free textbooks issued by the Ministry of Public Education. A knowledge reduced to its maximum expression that prevents the deepening of curricular contents. Hence the interest in offering teachers materials that would allow them to broaden the historical panorama of our country.

The subject of Mexico's independence, the project of liberals and conservatives of the national state and the beginnings of national literature were the main contents that needed to be deepened so that elementary school teachers would have better elements during the teaching of history. Hence, my work as a teacher of this subject was directed, in the first place, to search for basic bibliography that would offer students diverse views in the construction of historical knowledge, but also literary readings of the time. During the search and previous reading I began to think that the knowledge I had about my national past was insufficient not only to lead the class, but also to answer questions about my indigenous condition.

I asked myself what was the most important thing I should do as an indigenous teacher in the face of a subject that homogenized the past in every way. Not only from the historiographical publication, but also from literature and the arts. I began to notice a kind of cultural invasion (Freire, 1997 and Barbero, 2002) about the discourse of the national past. I felt I had to respond to these concerns mainly because many of my students belonged to families of indigenous origin. From the above, I believed it was necessary to recover Paulo Freire's thought as a pedagogical-methodological support to reflect and rethink official history from a decolonial position. With these two critical positions I tried to direct the understanding of our country's past with the idea of problematizing our present.

Thus, the objective of this essay is to demonstrate, based on my teaching experience, how the historiographical publications of the nineteenth century by both liberals and conservatives, as well as the curriculum of the Master's in Humanities Education, discriminate and hide at the same time the indigenous projects. Although the nature of the subject obliges us to delve deeper into national issues, at no time is it an invitation to rethink the role played by indigenous communities during the construction of independent Mexico. An issue that goes unnoticed when what is important in official history is to justify the actions taken by liberal politicians.

In this way, extending/emptying the official historical knowledge (Freire, 2010) to the students of the master's degree was not the didactic route used during the classes. I thought it necessary that the historiographic discourse of our country be questioned from the present close to our local histories and experiences. Thus, during the class we found pending issues that since the configuration of the National State are still detained. Such is the case of the historical situation of the native peoples and their place in the political project of the nineteenth century. Knowing in more detail the history of this period was the first step to be able to move towards the pedagogy of the question (Freire and Faundez, 2016) that constitutes in itself the practice of freedom.

Triggering questions such as: Did indigenous communities benefit from the liberal project? Do indigenous communities still have a better life today compared to the years of independent Mexico? What kind of explanations do we give to indigenous students during the teaching of the liberal project? These and other questions were posed to the master's students in order to engage in a discourse that would move their experiences as teachers of Basic Education. Long silences in the face of such questions allowed me to reflect on how the domination of the past has been exposed to the present day.

My political position regarding historically colonized peoples forced me to discuss the bibliography proposed by the study program from a decolonial perspective. Therefore, I must say that like the students, I also had moments of conflict regarding the relationships between apparently dissimilar events. I began to complexify (Morin, 2002) the knowledge of history in order to understand the situation that many, including myself, of indigenous roots have not (have not) been able to understand, precisely because of the confusion created by official history. Thus, teacher and student were in the same possibilities of transforming our historical reality. We were able to be part of history and its multiple interpretations (Florescano, 2014 and Iglesia, 2015). It is not enough to repeat the official knowledge of history if we do not question our oppression-laden present.

I asked myself what was the point of talking about the history of our country if there were already historians who represented the knowledge of our past through their books and lectures. I did not buy the idea of being the reproducer of the past as just a narrator and spectator of national history. I did not do so knowing that we teachers can transform the reality of our students towards a critical language (Huerta and McLaren, 2012). The main point of my intervention was to start from what was not known and then question it. In this way, I included Paulo Freire's Thought as a didactic methodology to break the present and look at it from the living pronunciation of each student's voice. Assuming this ontological position of transforming the world was a fundamental part that allowed us to rethink ourselves as historical subjects.

Thus, I joined the role of being another participant in the discussions generated in the class. The readings analyzed also caused me a cognitive conflict about how collective memory is constructed by the historian elite. I tried to assume the Problematizing Pedagogy (Freire, 2013) because I wanted to be part of a past that has been denied to us from the official history. The following quote largely summarizes this pedagogical stance: "no one educates anyone, no one educates himself, men educate each other with the mediation of the world" (Freire, 2013, p. 77). And the world is the word made question about where are the native peoples in the conformation of the national project? From this question arose other questions.

According to the program of the Master's Degree in Humanities Teaching, one of the main difficulties presented by Basic Education teachers is the limited knowledge they have about history. Teachers conduct their classes only with the basic information provided by textbooks, without going deeper into the fundamental events that explain the origin of our country as an independent nation (UPN, 2008). Knowing this, allowed me to reflect that in order to problematize this subject I needed not only knowledge, but a theoretical-political position to question the hegemony (McLaren, 1998) of the historical discourse. It was not an easy task; it required transforming my teaching practice towards a dialogic model of knowledge.

For this reason, decolonial thinking was a key element to discuss and reflect on the texts included in this subject. In addition to the contributions of Paulo Freire, this emerging thought contributes to a critical reading of the epistemological discourse of history. It assumes the coloniality of knowledge insofar as discourses and narratives follow the same logic of domination (Mignolo, 2003) that perpetuates the asymmetrical power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. Beyond the panorama of being independent since the XIX century, it is evident in our days, the configuration of hegemonic discourses that inferiorize indigenous knowledge as an invalid paradigm to understand the world. Nothing could be better than to hide and separate us from the public voice.

Thus, the decolonial position represents itself as an alternative discourse to the positivist and comprehensive epistemology, elaborated from the West. It attempts to give a historical-contextual sense to the countries of the South (De Sousa Santos, 2015), revaluing the millenary knowledge that since the conquest of Mexico was attempted to exterminate by exaggeratedly violent means (Franco, 2016). However, today indigenous peoples continue to resist through their cultural practices, religious rites, music and dress (Warman and Argueta, 1993). The Mexican independence period was a political-economic movement that contributed to the marginalization and exploitation of indigenous communities.

Decolonial thought, in its broadest sense, considers all educational practice as a political practice, whose actions involve interests related to a particular cultural project. In this case, it realizes *that the education offered in subordinate and historically oppressed contexts is mediated by the hegemonic control of knowledge*. For decolonial thought, the independence of the colonized countries happened at the organizational level, but there was no change in the political, cultural and educational practices of the population that today is called Mexico. On the contrary, the liberal project sank all hope of recovering the past of the indigenous peoples.

Likewise, decoloniality attacks the universalist position of generating a single route that validates the knowledge and forms of expression proper to a community. "Power is exercised from the point where scientific knowledge is traditionally located, assumed as valid, although in many cases not legitimate, and in which, consequently, whoever knows more, can know more." (Peñuela, 2009, p. 42). Thus, the diverse pasts that were shared from generation to generation, and which, in turn, helped to signify the world of a certain people, were left out of the valid. In this way, history, being a scientific discipline, contributes to the epistemological domination of the past.

Liberal politics took charge of exterminating millenarian conceptions and instead programmed, through its ideological State apparatuses (Althusser, 1988), such as the school, a discourse that automatically discriminated both local knowledge and the attitudinal behavior of the subjects. According to Barbero (2002) schools function (they still do) as spaces that devalue the popular and come to mean only the backward and the vulgar. In this way, the creation of national states allowed the emerging social position divided between political ideals and imagined communities (Anderson, 1993).

In order to unify two opposing pasts, Eurocentric discourses (Dussel, 2015) catalogued this millenary knowledge as the universal past of progress. That is, any culture, society or people that did not comply with Western patterns was considered backward. A meta-narrative that even with the so-called postmodernity (Lyotard, 2004), is still in force. For this reason, during the classes, the problematizing question revolved around the way in which two different histories of the Mexican national project were configured as a single history valid for all Mexicans.

Precisely, the universality of the past and with it, the conceptions of linear time, progress and civilization were one of the main "problems" that twentieth century intellectuals, such as Ignacio Ramirez, were faced with: What to do with the Indians? A question that was asked when the liberal project triumphed as the political route capable of dealing with a capitalist market economy that was consolidating worldwide

(Wallerstein, 2015). The answer to this question was the assimilation of the indigenous to any national project at the cost of eliminating their past, their culture, their representative image of a whole conception of the world (Barbero, 2002, Paz, 1989, Guerra, 2003).

In this way, the discourses of history took on a political purpose (Florescano, 2014) with the purpose of configuring a single image of being Mexican. The patriotic sentiment was the main part to generate a collective memory that remembered only the heroic events and characters that forged the Nation. It was the names of the streets; of the schools; of the public institutions that contributed to dictate a single historical discourse, the only valid one that allowed to add the entire population to the discourses of power (Monsiváis, 2018). The above is not touched upon in the official history, it would seem that the liberal project was the panacea for all the problems that afflicted our country since its independence.

It is not by chance that most school-age children have the same impressions of the past, even if it is not directly related to their cultural-historical journey. It is an alien past, distant not because of the spatial-temporal distance, but because of its contradictory character to the customs and traditions of the diverse cultural manifestations that exist in our country. I can assert that one of the main problems in the teaching of history does not lie in the didactics of this discipline, but in the execution of a knowledge that has little to do with the local past. It is a constructed past, falsified by the discourses of power.

From the moment of the liberal triumph, political issues were linked to the way of reconstructing the past. For this reason, the nineteenth century is considered the century of history (Aróstegui, 1995), since it was during this period that it was positioned as an epistemological activity. Hence, scientific research was accepted for its neutral, objective and universal character. Telling history was linked to the hegemonic discourses of positivism. Justifying power and its political implications from science was a strategy that allowed maintaining the dominant groups in the highest positions to direct the course of our country.

The construction of the nation "will require myths shared by all; a history of the genesis of the nation, of its founding heroes and its enemies, of the horrible past from which it has managed to free itself and of the grandiose future that awaits it" (Guerra, 2003, p. 197). (Guerra, 2003, p. 197). I asked the class who the enemies of the national project are; from my point of view, it is anyone who resists progress and individualism as a way of life. Everything points to the fact that the indigenous communities were and continue to be the main enemy of the national project now directed by neoliberalism.

The nineteenth century in Mexico is characterized as a period of both political-social and economic transition. It is to my understanding the period in which Mexican intellectuals had to confront each other to make decisions regarding the conformation of our country as an independent nation (Zavala, 2017). The official discourse of history then revolves around the resounding debate between liberals and conservatives. An endless struggle of philosophical, historical, literary and even religious positions. I do not deny that the above did not happen, but I question the universalist discourse that tries to homogenize a single past for all.

One of the great problems Mexico faced in the 19th century was to generate a project that would guide the course of its population. However, two fundamental things are still hidden. The first is that the popular masses and the indigenous communities had different projects regarding the formation of a republic or monarchy. Their interests revolved around the solution of the land problem; the validation of their ancestral past and the political inclusion of human rights that would allow them to respect their cultural heritage. However, in the official history they are included in the great discussion tinged by the two great currents: conservatives and liberals. Coincidentally, the indigenous people are considered as liberal Mexicans only in the official historical discourse due to political integration issues.

The second question has to do with the construction of historical knowledge. The linear and progressive history of a society fits perfectly with modern western thought. Rationalizing the past, through positivism as a valid method to make history, had as a consequence that a whole conception of the world built by the indigenous communities was positioned, from the time line, as the starting point towards modernity. That is to say, in order to build the project of nation (Independent Mexico), the indigenous cosmovision was placed as the remote past, and the main objective to overcome in order to achieve the so-called modernity.

Thus, decolonial thinking assumes that cultural and historical manifestations by communities do not represent backwardness, but remain part of a single worldview that many resist changing. The use of medicinal plants, types of social organization, clothing, food, is for the hegemonic discourse a synonym of backwardness, the obstacle of capitalism. For the emerging paradigm, it is simply a different and balanced way of life with nature (Dussel, 2010)

of which many have turned to see precisely because of its noble character with the world. It is a knowledge that is still current in the practice of my parents and grandparents; we are not in the past, we exist in the present.

However, the project of national conformation during this period denied the millenary past (Paz, 1989), excluding it precisely because of the contradictions that emerged in the light of the liberal thinking of the time. The two great models, both French and American, were chosen, without taking into account the great abysses between these two countries and our own. Thus, Echeverría's (2010) vision matches the social conditions that were present in Mexico since the nineteenth century: there is no deep Mexico, but many Mexico constituted through the various forms of life carried over from the conquest.

Coincidentally, the liberal current, originated in European contexts, is taken as the only solution that our country could have. Hence, Villoro (2018) also questioned this hegemonic discourse by being skeptical about the decisions made by the ruling group of the time. History classes in schools are told from the triumphant perspective of a group of men who believed in liberal ideas. However, "liberalism was infertile and produced nothing comparable to the pre-Columbian creations or those of New Spain: neither pyramids nor convents, nor cosmogonic myths nor poems by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz" (Paz, 1989, p. 26).

That is to say, liberalism, as one of the highest expressions of modern thought, was the fruit of French rationalism and the economic policies of the bourgeois class. Thus, the social transformation of independent Mexico revolved around the construction of rational laws and policies that could exercise control over the population. No longer indigenous, mestizos and Creoles, but citizens protected by a liberal constitution. The homogenization of the country emerged at the political-rational level, but did not penetrate the practices and ways of life of its people (Tenti, 1999). This is why Mexican liberalism did not have the expected impact on a diverse and emotionally religious Mexico.

From the above, it is reflected that conservatives and liberals had something in common. Defending the social and economic position of their leaders. Thus, any citizen who wanted to be accepted needed to join one of these two political positions. Being an Indian meant a double job, accommodating oneself to the practices and customs of a world foreign to one's own, and being convinced that school education was the only way out of poverty and discrimination (Ilich, 2011). Clear examples are the stories of Benito Juárez and Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, two characters who shone not only for their ideas, but also because they were the example of many Indians thirsty for progress and "civilization".

In the mid-nineteenth century, the inevitable path of institutionalization of history and literary letters began to be noticed. Belonging to the Lateran Academy, for example, meant being convinced of certain values and political ideals. The configuration of spaces demarcated by its leaders expressed the adaptation of a certain culture and the oblivion of another. Perhaps indigenous cultural exclusion was a consequence of an era convinced by liberal values and their promises of change and progress. However, it is worth mentioning that the literary production, despite liberal criticism, are important legacies that continue to leave their mark today.

Thus, the project of national conformation was also marked by the construction of a literary discourse capable of dealing with the inconsistencies of two superimposed pasts: the pre-Columbian era and the colonial era. Thus, characters emerged who combined history and literature, or the sword and the pen, to create narratives congruent with their political position. Conservatives concerned with maintaining the discourses inherited from Spain, and liberals occupied with constructing histories that could Mexicanize the nation (Martínez, 2018).

From there, our country saw the birth of works such as "El periquillo Sarniento", "El zarco", "Los bandidos de río frío", etc., which clamored to express the political situation of our country through literature. These types of works, besides bringing us closer to the political situation of our country in the 19th century, offer a type of discourse that is implicit in their content. The best way to believe in an independent country was in the intellectuals clinging to a hopeful political-economic model. Hence the work of "El Zarco" or "Clemencia", writings of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, had explicit moments that emphasized the liberal project as the possible way to solve the endemic problems of our country.

That is to say, the population defenseless by the violence generated by the plateros (bandits) had to make use of the laws (liberal idea) to obtain justice and put an end to insecurity. From a critical reading of this work, I can comment that, far from configuring a collective possibility, it allowed other forms of social organization

(indigenous and popular) were relegated to oblivion. The community discussions, the forms of sanction, their political agreements, such as "the machete law" or "community defense groups" were losing echo and legitimate value when they were in the hands of the liberal laws.

Indigenous thought demonstrates a type of community organization, whose agreements revolve around the roles they give to power (Gasché, 2008). Thus, each agreement is taken collectively with the sole purpose of repairing the damage that one person causes to others. In this way sovereignty, as Enrique Dussel mentions, is exercised from its population, as it should be.

In the face of the complex network of associations in which the life of individuals was woven, to which they were subject, and from which they received security, the State and the law of the sovereign will henceforth rise up as an institution-providence that guarantees the security of all. The State will now be the only juridical apparatus of social cohesion (Barbero, 2002, p. 97).

This quote expresses how popular values, and with it, their ways of doing politics were considered primitive practices. The liberal state came to usurp traditions and ways of life with the sole purpose of enforcing the laws because of their "neutral" and "egalitarian" character. The novel *El zarco* has many literary contributions, demarcated by the costumbrista current that extolled the Nation's own characteristics. However, from the decolonial position, this work legitimizes liberal thought through its narrative discourses, promotes the nationalization of a country full of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

On the other hand, in Western societies, laws (coming from liberal ideas) are directed to punishment as a synonym of correction (Foucault, 2007). The voice is not given in community, but the power of laws as the panacea to human problems is strengthened. In this way, literature and history were linked for a long time to strengthen the patriotic and nationalistic sense of Mexico. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century when literature acquired other, much more individual purposes and outside the political situation of the time. Hence, Martínez (2018) expressed quite lucidly the division of four cultural tones that characterized this century in its historical-literary dynamics.

Table 1 below shows, in a synthetic way, the division made by the author to understand the 19th century, specifically the liberal current. It can be noted that each period has the purpose of uniting the country with the so-called patriotic nationalism. The justification of this graduate program, in its second semester, revolved around the ignorance of the past in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would be necessary to rethink figures such as Lucas Alamán, Teresa de Mier, Riva Palacio, María de Bustamante, among others, and their main historical and literary works in order to rethink the collective memory of the national project. Once this has been achieved, what will happen next? Therefore, the inclusion of decolonial thought was the bridge that allowed the teaching of history from the oppressed peoples.

Table 1. Four different cultural tones of the 19th century

1810-1836	1836-1867	1867-1889	1889-1910
Combat or insurgent literature	First Mexican generation. Romanticism	Nationalist concord and new generation modernist. Renaissance: Romanticism	Modernism
The voice of the mestizo emerges, expressing the people and writing as he spoke. In the first two decades of independent life, patriotic themes, the first traits of local color and doctrinaire approaches were initiated.	The ideologues that define the two political positions and currents stand out: Liberals and Conservatives. A literature that expresses the national landscape and customs is attempted.	There is no violent substitution of ideas and cultural forms, but the maturation and strengthening of an old impulse. Literature, art, science and history are cultivated with unique industriousness and enthusiasm by liberals and conservatives alike.	French culture is considered the source par excellence. First literary and artistic movement in which Latin America has its own voice and no longer follows the Spanish current.

Source: Table prepared from the book *La expresión Nacional* (2018) by José Luis.

It seemed fundamental to me to include Paulo Freire's proposal with the reading of the world because in this way we were able to understand our position in the construction of knowledge. I can say that constructed learning was present in both parts, because in the act of problematizing the learners the teacher found himself equally, problematized (Freire, 2013). There were no answers, but rather the development of questions that

motivated to pronounce the world. Therefore, the content of this paper opens the possibility of continuing to think about our past as a symbol of personal and collective empowerment. The conflict is on the table, it will depend on each student how to continue the journey of epistemic doubt about the constructed yesterdays.

The educator, by problematizing, re-admires the problematic object through the admiration of the learners. This is the reason why the educator continues to learn, and the more humble the re-admiration he does, through the admiration of the learners, the more he will learn. (Freire, 2013, p. 94).

It seems to me that the above quote reveals the panorama experienced when authors such as Luis Villoro, Enrique Florescano, Carlos Monsiváis, Leslie Bethell, among others, were discussed. I reflected that it is not enough to know the history of our country if it is not questioned, if we do not ask about the current situation of all those involved. Beyond being a historical truth, these authors allowed to question the present from the local, historical and social position. Hence, the decolonial position allowed to look at the content from the power relations that are exercised when a single discourse of history is established.

The period of the formation of the National State in Mexico during the 19th century was a conflictive reality in which many social and political groups participated in order to guide the country towards progress. However, it is necessary to continue discussing the place that indigenous peoples occupy today in national projects. For this reason, feeling part of a specific history can be the beginning of questions that further detail the pending issues we have not only as a nation, but as independent peoples characterized by their own cultures and histories. I hope that these lines are one more incentive to resignify the historical horizon and see ourselves included in a past that happened and that continues to resist domination.

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