

Baroque, Hispanidad, Mestizaje

About national narratives and its cultural production

Interview with Jorge Luis Marzo, 9th / 12th of July 2009, Berlin

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July, 9th / Can you explain how and why Baroque could become such a supra sign / symbol for Hispanity?

Jorge: Baroque and Hispanity have the same relationship as a ventriloquist and a dummy. One speaks for the other, kidnapping any other kind of language. The tale we have been told is that one is nothing without the other. Because the whole thing is about controlling language and the ability to tell some stories instead of others, the main issue is about meanings. Everyone in history aimed at conveying their own meaning. Every ventriloquist has put a name on that: Hispanity (postcolonial Spain, postcolonial American Republics), Latin America (France), South America or Americas (USA), Iberoamerica (Spain). But all of them figured out that the dummy was always the same. A doll without language, silent, dumb, unable to express itself, that needed to be expressed by others. Baroque is the language created for that situation. It creates the illusion that the dummy has a strong personality but coopting the real expression. But we all know how loud and clear real and local languages may be expressed, even within the same linguistic structure imposed by Baroque. On the one hand, Spain has always identified Baroque as the glorious starting point of a cultural model based on universalism and ecumenism. Hispanic identity is based on culture, a sort of specific way to approach life and history, mostly confronted to Anglo-Saxon capitalism, allegedly based on techniques and industrialism. It has become its logo. "Mestizaje", as the main core of the positive and deterministic discourse of Hispanity, has always been related to the style which better channels its meaning: Baroque. On the other hand, after the independence of American Republics from Spain in the XIXth century, Baroque was always a tricky issue to deal with, since it represented the former colony but at the same time it was seen as the founding source of "mestizaje", which eventually became the most important alibi to construct most of the new nations, such as Mexico, as in Central America, in the Andean Countries, Brasil or Paraguay, for example.

Alice: What do we mean when talking about Baroque? Is it a style, or is it a method of administration?

Jorge: I am referring to a way of addressing social issues, a way of empowering, of defining a system, like an idea of the way a historical narration has been constructed.

In Spain nobody spoke about Baroque. Wölfflin, Burckhardt, Panofsky, the German and English historians began to ask: What is this strange thing that was happening between Renaissance and Enlightenment in southern countries? Wölfflin was the first one who described that issue in terms of Baroque. The Baroque definition comes from enlightened

intellectuals that somehow wanted to establish a new classical style, because there you had the style of the republic in France, because of the romantic national discourse in Germany, so all the southern countries inhabited this term. The Spanish reception of the Baroque came along when Cuba and the Philippines were finally lost in 1898, so the whole Spanish Empire disappeared.

Max: The Spanish discourse about Baroque is historically related to the breakup of the Spanish colonial system?

Jorge: Actually it came along. In 1898 when the US took over Spanish colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, there was this deep reflection among the intellectuals in Spain. We had an empire; we lost the empire, and now? How can we call the old times? So, some intellectuals conceived the idea of the Baroque not as a style but as a thing that could have several facets. . The idea of Baroque came along with two things: First, wars took Baroque all over the world; second, it was connected to economy. So, war and economy were the cart tracks of Baroque. But Baroque was also definitely the first national style in history. It came along with the Spanish empire. It was a kind of first global nationbranding.

Max: You describe Baroque as something that is posthumous to the epoch of nationbranding that is tried to be defined.

Jorge: Absolutely. The intellectuals in Germany and England at the end of the 18th century began to speak about the bad style. They didn't call it Baroque. The classic terms weren't appropriate and applied. It was totally out of reason, like an accumulation of things without any order. It was a negative reaction against Spain, against this feudal countries dominated by absolutism, religion, by insanity, by poorness, by poverty.

Andreas: By Catholicism.

Jorge: Exactly.

July, 9th / Can you tell us about the Leyenda Negra as a strategic instrument of other European forces, to delegitimize the colonial governance of Spain?

Jorge: Actually, thanks to la Leyenda Negra some intellectuals in Spain began to create a historical interpretation of the Conquista in order to counterbalance all the negative information channelled by the "enemies". Leyenda Negra was an effort made by France, Netherlands and England to depict a horrifying picture of Colonial Spain, which was mostly true, but nothing different from the activities of those countries in their own colonies. Europe has always used Spain as an alibi to misdirect the own responsibilities in the creation of modern exploitation, often under the charges of being little rationalistic in opposition to modern economic values created by the Netherlands or England. Because Spain used most of the Andean and Mexican gold and silver to finance its wars in Europe, all this money went to bankers in Genoa or Antwerp and then to the rest of Europe. That the money passed by Spain (Leyenda Rosa) is true but mostly because of a lack of a serious administration than what went away as loans and payrolls.

Max: You would say from the perspective of Wölfflin, Burckhardt, the idea of creating the Baroque was the idea to clean up their idea of Renaissance.?

Jorge: It was difficult for them as it is for us now, to create one single label for the whole matter and to reduce it to a style. You are confronted with a whole political cluster: the Jesuits, the Counter Reformation, the Habsburger economy structure... On the other side a coherent definition was necessary in the struggle for a new national narrative, not only for Spain, but for the whole European intellectual discourse.

Andreas: We understand, that Hispanity is also a historically heavy term, if we think of the Dia de la Hispanidad, the day when Columbus “discovered” America, which until nowadays is celebrated with military parades in Spain. I have read, that in former times, it was called the Dia de las Razas. Can you tell us more about the history of the term “Hispanidad” and the others you mentioned?

July, 9th Jorge: Because of the unified colonial system established by Spain, America was conceived as one. Spanish language was therefore the definite tool to establish this. Still today, Spanish politicians think the unity of “Hispanity” based on language: they called it “Spanish speaking community”. Most curiously, Colonial Spain was never really interested in suppressing non-Spanish languages, since it was a strategy to keep lower classes (Indians) out of administrative power and educational services. It was under the liberalism in recent independent countries that these policies of idiomatic unification were implemented. ... Hispanity is based on different moments of critical violence: First of all, it is connected to the Conquista, which undoubtedly was the deepest and cruelest cultural extermination in history before the XXth century. Baroque, consequently, was developed afterwards as a cultural smoke screen to hide this fact. A second moment was the fight for independence against Spain in the XIXth century, since the turbulences of many countries and the deep dependence from European and US markets finally produced a sort of approach to the former colony. As a matter of fact, many American countries began to use the word “Hispanidad” as a political weapon against the increasing US imperialistic trends. And the third notorious moment in the making of the term “Hispanity” is the loss of the last colonies at the end of the XIXth century to be handed over to the US (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines in 1898). These terrible wars acted as a trigger in Spanish intellectuals’ minds to start a process of critical approach of that that “once upon a time”. So the violent construction of “Hispanity” has always been a two-folded question consisting of the facts and the political interpretation of them.

Jorge: The first task of the intellectual nation builder is to speak about how to built up a narrative, then to speak about language. Who speaks for whom? Who defines words? The first idea of Hispanity was developed by Bolivar, because he had this imperialistic idea about what Latin-America had to be. He developed the idea of Hispanity, that was recovered by some intellectuals in 1898 when Spain lost the last colonies. French people in the middle of the XIXth century wanted to take over what used to be Spain as a main reference in Europe. They invented the word Latin-America, because they wanted to be present as Europeans. It is successful until today. And then the US developed the idea of South America. In the 30s and 40s they called it Pan-America because of the Second World War and they needed the airports in the Pacific to win the war. The last one is Ibero-America, one of the terms mostly

used today, which is an invention of Spain. This term was re-used and re-acted by Felipe González, the socialist prime minister in Spain between 1982 and 1996.

Alice: We should not leave out Mestizo-America.

July, 9th / Jorge: Cultural hegemony was exercised on many levels: Language; educational policies; political pyramidal structures with no kind of social mobility; direct repression; abuse of the concept “exceptionality” to describe art and cultural processes in order to promote the belief in an inner and “natural” way of living; the use of Catholic values and structures as potential social glue; paternalistic policies based on the idea of a nation as a “political family”, the use of ancient pre-Hispanic cultures as the ground of cultural myth. The idea of “Mestizaje” –even in the most racial terms, as José Vasconcelos showed in Mexico - has also been used to create social hegemony, to the point that now many Spanish embedded intellectuals claim that America is mestiza because of the same conditions Spain was in at the end of the Middle Ages, since it was an addition of Christian, Muslim and Hebrew societies. It is simply forgotten that Christians exterminated or expelled both Muslim and Jews between the XVth and the XVII century. The fact that many traces from those cultures still pervade in Spanish society must not conceal that they were murdered in a perfectly designed plan.

Jorge: Mestizo-America is an expression that some nationalist intellectuals, especially from Mexico and Peru in the 1940s, 1950s began to develop as a critic to this terms coming from Europe. In the XIXth century, many intellectuals from Mexico started to think about their culture as "Mestizaje". The narrative of it is very simple: the Spanish conquerors didn't bring their families to America. The English colonists went to North America with their families. They didn't need to have any relationship with the context or the environment at all. The Spanish were soldiers, gone by themselves without any kin. They had to have interference with Indian women. From this point on the tradition is based on the idea that the Spanish colonial rule was less racist than the others. Nobody speaks about rapes, about massive violation. But in South America, in Mexico and Peru these terms are reality for most of the people. They were born under certain circumstances as Spanish, Creoles, Indians, black people, Chinese people. If we see the narrative which is constructed upon this, we can join both terms again: Mestizaje and Baroque. Mestizaje was the result of the conquerors. The Baroque system, which is a system of representation, is like glue. Nothing can be outside the circle. It is a system of total representation and administration, in which everything is written down.

Alice: Max mentioned – according to your description above - , that in Bolivia “Mestizaje” is a very excluding term for the bourgeoisie white class.

Max: If you make a division between the mestizo population and the indigenous population, in Peru you may have 30 percent indigenous and 60 percent mestizos or more. In Bolivia you talk about 60 percent indigenous, and 30 percent mestizos. The mestizos are more urban and following modern standards in Hispanic ways. As we know, the definition of Mestizaje is completely hazy, like blurred. We know that Mestizaje could partly refer to indigenous people who just adopted urban ways of life etc. It is just a setting, which is based on racist classification, following strictly political economic interests. Our experience in Bolivia was that Baroque and Mestizaje is a mixture. Since the late 1970s the building of a new right-

wing national identity after the 1952s Bolivian revolution was very much based on the idea of Baroque-Mestizaje- at least in terms of art history. This Baroque-Mestizaje became a cultural background of creating an national identity parallel to the neoliberal restructuring of the Bolivian economy and state system. In the middle of the 1980s they produced a very reception of Baroque-Mestizaje, parallel to the neoliberal opening of the economy and getting it closer to the term of Baroque.

Jorge: Actually Baroque and Mestizaje are a sort of contradiction. Baroque is a colonial style, never acceptable by neo-republics. Mestizaje is the political legitimation to become a nation. Baroque-Mestizaje is a political strategy. I do not think we can speak openly about social classes in America, because then we should speak about social mobility. And because there is no social mobility at all in the most American countries, the term of mestizaje is so important. So this exercise is a political strategy to mix with people: Baroque is based on the same premises. And I guess in the 1980s the neoliberals were going for that - in Mexico for sure.

Andreas: How are these terms connected with the selfunderstanding of Spanish culture?

Jorge: The national narration of Spain is a narration of loss. There was a big empire in the 15th, 16th century. In the 17th century it went down until now, or until 1975. But the idea of culture is being retrieved from this decline of the empire. To save it from decline culture was kept out of society. This gap results from the ground force of Baroque – the dissociation of culture from society. What is the discourse to really being able to project this idea of culture dissociated from society? The idea of an exception, so present in Mexico, Chile and Argentina.

Andreas: Franco's ideology about Spain as exceptional, as having followed its "vocación imperial", as different from Europe – not modern, not part of progress. Hispanidad as a program to revitalize the golden century of the Empire, that unifies all Spanish speaking countries, was shared by Perón and Pinochet.

Jorge: Exactly, but how can we understand this idea of a gap between culture and society in the present? 82 percent of the cultural budget of the Spanish government is not part of the ministry of culture, it is in the ministry of foreign affairs. Culture is promoting an image of nation. In the 80s the Spanish government created the slogan: "Culture will create citizens." In other words, citizens are not the ones who create culture.

Alice: A kind of re-education program as we know it from Germany in the Cold War.

Jorge: Yes, but I was trying to talk about this gap between culture and social practices. In Spain culture is extremely based on foreign affairs, and diplomatic parameters. In the city council of Barcelona there is a poster with a big slogan which says: culture that creates culture. The idea is, that Spain creates culture just by itself, just by being what it is. Baroque is about this. Baroque doesn't need a social practice. It is by itself. It is essential.

Andreas: There is a narrative of continuity between the narration of the *Siglo de Oro* and the contemporary cultural understanding of oneself?

Jorge: I think these are two entangled situations. The gap between culture and society is the true continuity from the Baroque age until now. Tàpies was paid by the Ministry of Propaganda of Franco. Is Tàpies Franquist or not? Sure he was not. He deideologized himself to become part of the system. That is the problem.

Alice: Tàpies was part of the humanistic system of painting all over the world as a universal language, which was a part of the Cold War ideology. Perhaps we can trace it here to the universalism of the baroque age. Which sounds for us at first very exotique, but might make sense in the Spanish context.

July, 9th / We would like to ask you about the particular position Spain took in the religious world of late medieval Europe and how it was transfused to the Americas.

Jorge: In the XVth century, Spain was a mix of cultural and historical developments. The country had come from a 7 centuries long civil war against the Muslims, had expelled the Jews and had reunited the two most powerful kingdoms (Castille and Aragon) in a sort of single entity, forming the basis of a modern nation, the first one in Europe. At the beginning of the XVI, Spanish monarchy inherited the Habsburg Empire in the figure of Emperor Charles V, who boldly finished off some incipient forms of popular democracy. From that point on, Spain was devoted to counterattack Lutheran Reforms any place in Europe, fostering Counter Reformation by means of mercenary war and a religious politics of education and imagery born at the Vatican driven Council of Trent between 1545 and 1563. Those circumstances were rapidly exported to America. The long lasting tradition of war, religious intolerance and a deep feeling of being “chosen by God” to spread faith, mixed with the necessity to find resources and markets, marked the path Spain took in America. Most of the humanist debates which were central to the religious conflicts in Europe at that time, never found room in Spanish intelligentsia, except for some cases, as Erasmus, whose followers were always suspicious to Inquisition. Probably the most important impact was Machiavelli, with his theory of management of power, strongly affected the Conquerors mentality: the ability to (mis)use information as a central devise of power. This point is of the outmost importance. The management of information in relationship with the new vast amount of land and people was central to establish both the origin of modern capitalistic exploitation and modern cultural anthropology as a weapon to infiltrate the mentality of others. Accumulation of signs and data was the core of the new system, greatly enhanced by England and others in the XVIIIth and XIXth century. At the same time, Medieval Scholastic thought was profoundly embedded in Spanish intellectuals, specially the figure of St. Thomas. In St. Thomas books, the idea to create a sort of a “new and definite city of God” was essentially promoting a message of a new start for mankind.

The first encountered islands were the first glimpse to a new horizon based in pure faith, uncontaminated souls ready to be harvested. Something not quite understandable for the Catholic mind, used to clash militantly on other faiths. The fast extermination of local people happened to be the real thing, and it provoked a heavy impact on part of the Church. ... But besides that all along we can see the strong and true emphasis of missionaries when teaching the people about the new city of God, described as cleaned of contamination and so on. The driving concept was “goodness” (bondad): Indians lived in misery, but they were allowed to carry on with their customs and usages (usos y costumbres). The Baroque system is based on ethics. It is not practical. Culture is always more important than society. Culture

is allowed to be mobile, society is not. And the Church was the only institution that could handle it.

Max: Which role does the Bicentenario play in the nationbranding of Spain?

July, 9th / Jorge: The most striking thing is that Spanish Academy is still far from being interested in Postcolonial Studies. Spain is probably the only former European colonial country which has not developed yet a deep interpretation of its imperial past. There are very few art colleges or history departments dealing with these issues. There are several reasons for this situation: the increasing influence of Spain in American economies, which blurs critical perspectives; the traditional formalism of Spanish Academy which is transmitted by the idea that what happened in America is just a natural extension of Motherland; or the lack of a real exchange of professors, students and programs, beyond the fact that thousands of Latin-American highclass students attend Spanish universities.

Jorge: The Bicentenario does not play an important role in Spanish nationbranding. Some reflections about the colonial history will come up, if it is paid by the government. Probably there will be some shows, but there will be no interest. The official message will be a universalisation of the Spanish origins of South America. But everybody will forget the exercise of misdirections created by the national identity narratives in the XXth century. I am giving you a last example: Mexico. Go to the Anthropological Museum in the DF, which is the largest anthropological museum in the world. Look at all its exhibitions, the different departments and shows about the culture and the past of Mexico. Then go to the street and exactly the same people are right there. You understand the gap? It is the ethics of remembrance. The ethics of memory. On one hand, you are part of us, but in the museum. On the other, you are poor, and living your own culture.