

TEXAS PAPERS ON LATIN AMERICA

Pre-publication working papers of the
Institute of Latin American Studies
University of Texas at Austin
ISSN 0892-3507

Presented at a special invited session on Language and Political
Economy at the American Anthropological Annual Meetings.

Organizers: Hy Van Luong and James Collins.
Philadelphia, PA., December 7, 1986.

Mexican Speech Play:
History and the Psychological Discourses of Power

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Paper No. 87-06

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If one spends time among Mexican descent working-class men of the lower socioeconomic level either in Mexico or the United States, it is quite likely that, subject to the cultural constraints of time and social context, one may eventually witness the display of expressive performances of speech play. These displays may generally be characterized as metaphorical, often sexually and scatologically charged, exchanges of ritualized insult. They carry various names, for example, albur, chingaderas, or puntadas.¹ For all its marked recurrence among Mexican working-class men, such expressive discourse has received almost no closely analytical ethnographic attention, and no one, as far as I know, has critically discussed these speech forms in relation to the class position of these men in the larger political economy. In another paper I offer an ethnographic discussion in these terms based on my fieldwork in southern Texas (Limón 1985).

To be sure, this sociolinguistic phenomenon has been noticed by two kinds of commentator. Various popular collections have taken account of such ritual insult, although usually not with a great deal of analytical, interpretive attention (Usandizaga y Mendoza 1972; Mondragón 1973; Morones 1977; Jiménez 1982). To the extent that they offer analysis, however, they often reveal the influence of a second kind of commentator, whom, in a relatively simple way, I shall designate as the Mexican social intellectual.

The purpose of this paper is not to investigate this kind of Mexican speech play ethnographically in itself; that, as I say, I have attempted

elsewhere. Rather, I want to examine certain critically Mexican intellectual discourses about such expressive discourses in an analytical interpretive language that will relate both types of discourse to the political economy in recent Mexican history. I bring to bear analytical language from Gramsci, mediated through Raymond Williams (1977), from Bourdieu (1977), and from Foucault (1980), on the discourse of two key Mexican social intellectuals, Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz. It is first necessary to establish the political-economic context for the emergence of these intellectual discourses.

Mexico: The Frozen Revolution

After the long night of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 offered the Mexican masses some glimmer of hope, although Mexico's full emergence into the clear light of social justice is still at issue. Certainly the immediate post-Revolutionary period between 1920 and 1940 was full of brighter promise, although soon darkened with socioeconomic relapses such as the hesitant character of land redistribution under Calles (Bazant 1977:174-176) and the persistence of right-wing cacique politics, corruption, and political assassination. This relapse signaled the emergence of a new set of elites replacing those of the Díaz regime. These men--Calles among them--were veterans of the Revolution, a Revolutionary Council, who dominated Mexican politics and began to lend it a conservative, self-serving function at some distance from the goals of the Revolution (Hansen 1971:156-163).

However, their domination was initially incomplete. The sluggish move toward full implementation of the Revolution took a decisive step forward with the election of Cárdenas to the presidency in 1934. Of

democratic opening by selecting as his successor a representative of the newly formed elite ruling circle, which had led the Revolution only to abandon its goals in favor of personal aggrandizement. In large part, Cárdenas made this concession to forestall the threat posed by this conservative sector and by what Hansen, after Huntington, has called the Praetorian tendency in Mexican politics. Through this concession Cárdenas hoped to keep the implementation of the Revolution in motion, but he paid too large a price. The process of democratization diminished considerably as these conservative elites expanded their personal power and political control through the PRI to the relative detriment of other social sectors--a situation that largely continues today. Even the initial Cárdenas effort to broaden the base of the PRI ultimately strengthened this conservative, self-serving rule. Hansen summarizes the entire process of redomination:

A significant portion of the coalition's charter members were now in a position to profit greatly from the emerging approach to growth. They owned much of the arable land and many revolutionary politicians and generals soon appeared as part of Mexico's new agricultural elite. . . . The politicos who have presided over Mexico since 1940 have viewed politics as a means of personal mobility, and strive not to level the postrevolutionary economic and social elites in Mexico but to join them.

If, momentarily, the peasants and urban labor provided a counterweight, eight years after Cárdenas left the presidency Alemán had suffocated what was left of the independent leadership of the labor movement and had imposed his own choice upon it.

Thereafter the coalition held labor and peasant under tight and effective control, and could implement a development strategy that often overlooked the interests of these groups even though they formed the mass base of the official party. (Hansen 1971: 168-169)

Mexican Speech Play: The Historical Emergence of Interpretation

The first clear interpretive statement on Mexican speech play appears in this political-economic context and as part of a larger Mexican intellectual concern in the post- Revolutionary period with the question of national identity or the meaning of lo mexicano (Mexicanness). Having rid themselves of a French positivist intellectual culture popular during the Porfiriato, young post-Revolutionary intellectuals sought to fill the void with a new definition. Some insisted on an indigenous-based cultural nationalism; others encouraged a synthesis of world and national culture. This synthesis, however, could not occur until Mexicans fully understood themselves as historical beings and dealt with alleged deficiencies in their national culture (Schmidt 1978:64-138).

The foremost expositor of this concern was Samuel Ramos, whose El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México (Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico) appeared in 1934, the year Cárdenas ascended to the presidency. It is in this influential book that we find a clear commentary on Mexican speech play in relation to Ramos's search for the meaning of lo mexicano. For Ramos, the Mexican could best be understood as a human being burdened by an inferiority complex--a concept taken from the psychoanalytical work of Alfred Adler. Like the child who feels inferior as a result of confrontation with the adult world, pre-Conquest indigenous

Mexico

at first found itself in the same relationship to the civilized world as that of the child to his parents. It entered Western history at a time when a mature civilization already prevailed, something which an infantile spirit can only half understand. This disadvantageous circumstance induced the sense of inferiority that was aggravated by Conquest, racial commingling, and even the disproportionate magnitude of nature. (Ramos 1962:56)

For Ramos this sense of inferiority continued into the present day, manifesting itself differently at different class levels. For example, the middle-class individual masks his sense of inferiority with dissimulation and exaggerated courtesy. He invents a positive fictitious ego to conceal inferiority. The working-class urban dweller presents a different face and expressive style, "suspicious of all gestures, movements, and words. He interprets everything as an offense." Because of this fear and suspicion, the Mexican working-class individual "quarrels constantly; he no longer awaits attack but steps forward in order to offend" (ibid.:66).² How the city dweller quarrels, attacks, and offends is not specified, but it would perhaps not be too different from the third social group that Ramos analyzes--the Mexican pelado, or lumpenproletariat, who

belongs to a most vile category of social fauna; he is a form of human rubbish from the great city. He is less than a proletarian in the economic hierarchy, and a primitive man in the intellectual one. Life from every quarter has been hostile to him and his reaction has been black resentment. He is an explosive being with whom relationship is dangerous, for the slightest

friction causes him to blow up. (Ibid.:59)

And here we come finally to our central concern, for the pelado's explosions are verbal and reiterate his theme of self-affirmation in crude and suggestive language. He has created a dialectic of his own, a diction which abounds in ordinary words, but he gives these words a new meaning. He is an animal whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others, making them believe that he is stronger than they and more determined. Such reactions are illusory retaliations against his real position in life which is a nullity. (Ibid.)

The pelado's language is "crude" in a particular symbolic way. His "terminology abounds in sexual allusions which reveal his phallic obsession; the sexual organ becomes symbolic of masculine force." The reproductive organs are a symbolic source of "not only one kind of potency, the sexual, but every kind of human power" as the pelado "tries to fill his void with the only suggestive force accessible to him: that of the male animal," and "so it is that this perception becomes abnormal; he imagines that the next man he encounters will be his enemy; he mistrusts all who approach him" (Ibid.:59-61).

Interpretation and Ideological Formation

Most scholarly commentators would agree that Ramos's book has been and continues to be highly influential. As Schmidt notes, it is "a work that has been of transcendent importance in the history of ideas and is read by all who enter Mexican studies" (1978:157). Perhaps of greater significance is the role traditionally held by Latin American intellectuals whose writings become well known to a literate, nonacademic public, hence my

term, "social intellectual." Certainly this was the case with Ramos as well as with Octavio Paz, whom we will consider later in this paper. Indeed, we might say that in Ramos's own times, he would have been read by his "middle class Mexican," who possessed "more intellectual gifts and resources than does the proletarian" (Ramos 1962:69).

I am not concerned here with the numerous methodological and conceptual problems in Ramos's commentary. These have been clearly noted by others such as Schmidt who also notes, however, that the book achieved an influence not encumbered by its obvious faults (1978:157-161). To what then can one attribute its clear social importance? For Schmidt the book (with all of its faults) attracted "scholarly interest because its philosophy of selfhood, linked to national identity, underscored a major preoccupation of the country's thinkers." This analysis may explain the scholarly impact of the book, but Schmidt raises another important social consideration:

While the Revolution contributed to the dismantling of positivism, it also generated a conflict between social values and a humanism that masked the resurgence of the ego threatened by the leveling tendencies of the masses. This partially explains why Ortega, the elitist philosopher par excellence, was a guiding spirit at this time. Thus in a sense Ramos and his group were creating a new aristocracy of thought. (Ibid.:161)

A further comparison beyond that to Ortega and Spain is needed, especially if we consider Spain's incipient crisis in 1934. Let us recall that Ramos's discourse appeared in 1934 as the Cárdenas regime was attempting to consolidate power on behalf of the masses, but always under

the threat of the conservative Revolutionary Coalition--the new aristocracy of politics and wealth. If the latter replaced Porfirio Díaz's ruling circles, a parallel relationship would occur simultaneously between the new Mexican pensadores and Díaz's científicos--the positivist circle. For the new political as well as for the new intellectual elites, the immediately necessary social/intellectual foil (and threat) was, ironically, the masses, especially at the precise historical moment when Cárdenas threatened to unleash that "abnormal," "suspicious," "aggressive," "crude" social sector. From a conservative perspective, a new social order needed to be imposed; it soon appeared, bringing an end to the Cárdenas period and the democratic moment. Through his discourse, Samuel Ramos may have assisted in this conservative restoration.

For pensadores like Ramos, the rebelliousness of the Mexican masses is metaphorized in their "crude and suggestive" language. It and they are to be understood and explained through a politically and intellectually homologous categorization. Whereas Ramos concedes that all Mexicans suffer from an inferiority complex, it is quite clear that he considers the Mexican lower classes least able to handle their "problem" in a socially "appropriate" manner. Their verbal "explosions" and "crude" concern with sexuality speak to a raw, unsublimated, and irrational demand for power, which implicitly calls for some form of social control. This the Revolutionary Council and the PRI were only too willing to do. And, as if to provide a discourse model for a society with the masses and their speech play under proper control, Ramos and his intellectual cohort offered their own too self-conscious sophisticated discourse whose "very sophistication accentuated the universal ideal, even fashionable in liberal Hispanic culture, while emphasizing the national context intensified by

the Revolution" (Schmidt 1978:161). Although Schmidt attributes the book's "detachment and irony of ultra-civilized introspection" to the "new era of western pessimism" (ibid.:161), we might also add that, as discourse, it provided a perfect linguistic/ideological alternative to the "crude," "explosive" language of the masses in the streets.

I have already mentioned the widespread influence of Ramos's book in Mexican intellectual and middle-class social life. It has certainly been influential; indeed, it has provided a central paradigm for other, lesser-known academic and popular commentaries on the Mexican national character. At least some of these have greatly refined, modified, and contextualized the basic psychoanalytical paradigm, although the fundamental interpretation remains the same. We do need, however, to examine another key text in this discourse genre by the best-known Mexican intellectual of our times.

If Ramos's study appeared at the onset of the new conservative rule in Mexico, another highly influential book appeared in that hegemony's mid-course toward the present moment. I am referring to Octavio Paz and his El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico), which appeared in abbreviated form in 1950, in a revised and expanded version in 1959, and in its English translation in 1961. Again, as its subtitle indicates, we find a continuing concern for the question of lo mexicano and the acknowledgment that Ramos's Perfil is "our first serious attempt at self-knowledge." Although it "suffers from a variety of limitations," Paz nevertheless takes Ramos's Perfil as "our only point of departure." He believes that "the majority of its observations are still valid" and, most significant--that "the central idea--that the Mexican hides himself when he expresses himself, that his words and gestures are

almost always masks--is as true as ever" (Paz 1961:160).

Paz also turns to the language of the Mexican (clearly the lower-class Mexican) for the symbolic key to understanding. His analytical conclusions sound familiar enough:

It is significant that masculine homosexuality is regarded with a certain indulgence insofar as the active agent is concerned. The passive agent is an abject, degraded being. This ambiguous conception is made very clear in the word games or battles--full of obscene allusions and double meanings--that are so popular in Mexico City. Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to swallow his opponent's jibes. These jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions; the loser is possessed, is violated, by the winner, and the spectators laugh and sneer at him. (Ibid.:30-40)

Later in the book, in his famous essay "The Sons of La Malinche," Paz returns to the theme of Mexican masculinity and speech play. The Mexican macho "is a humorist," but we quickly enter a world of violence as we learn that this macho "commits chingaderas,³ that is, unforeseen acts that produce confusion, horror, and destruction. He opens the world; in doing so, he rips and tears it, and this violence provokes a great sinister laugh. The humor of the macho is an act of revenge" (ibid.:81). Recalling Adler through Ramos, Paz briefly considers the theory of childhood resentment as the basis of this behavior. "Whatever may be the origin of these attitudes, the fact is that the essential attribute of the macho--power--almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding,

humiliating, annihilating" (ibid.:82).

The hegemony of the PRI and the conservative ruling elites was still intact as Paz's book appeared.

While PRI politicians continued to mouth pleasant-sounding revolutionary euphemisms, the little man had been shunted aside. The labor movement was not crushed, but it was intimidated. When in April 1950 Secretary of the Treasury Ramón Beteta exhorted the industrialists of Monterrey to keep their costs down so that Mexican industry could become competitive, he was, in effect, inviting them to keep wages depressed. When petroleum workers struck, army troops were dispatched to patrol the fields and fifty union leaders were dismissed from their posts. (Meyer and Sherman 1979:644-645)

The election of Ruiz Cortines to succeed Aléman did not improve matters much. As Ruiz Cortines prepared to leave the presidency in 1958, he conceded that "The Mexican masses had not benefited from the revolutionary process. Many of the revolutionary promises were yet to be fulfilled. Illness, ignorance, and poverty had not been overcome. The desired balance between economic development and social justice had tipped in favor of the former" (ibid.:649).

Throughout this decade of inequality and the continuing presence of the impoverished masses, the influential public voice of Octavio Paz, no doubt inadvertently, evoked the continuing spectre of a violent underclass--a mass man whose language tells us that he "rips and tears"; who "commits chingaderas unforeseen acts that produce confusion, horror, and destruction"; who, as his speech play reveals, has a large capacity for "wounding, humiliating, annihilating"; whose "humor" is "an act of revenge."

