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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713432282>

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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2008

To cite this Article Stoll, David(2008)'Creating moral authority in Latin American studies: John Beverley's 'Neoconservative turn' and priesthood',*Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*,17:3,349 — 356

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13569320802544278

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569320802544278>

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CREATING MORAL AUTHORITY IN LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES: JOHN BEVERLEY'S 'NEOCONSERVATIVE TURN' AND PRIESTHOOD

If there is an axiom in Latin American studies, it is that scholars should serve the people. The popular struggle is how we used to put it, before gender and ethnic consciousness pluralized everything. But claiming to represent popular interests is still an obvious way to obtain legitimacy in Latin American studies, and many of our debates revolve around how best to do it. Siding with the people against the assembled forces of neoliberalism might seem risky, but not in the US academy for those of us who know how to tap the conscience of wealthy foundations and universities. Because of the mushrooming demand for Spanish instruction, Latin American literature is a rare field in the humanities with a healthy job market for new PhDs. There is also a wider boom in Latin American studies due to the rapid growth of the Spanish-speaking population. But while this is a prosperous era for Latin America scholars in the United States, it is not a complacent one. Many of us feel that the country that has welcomed our expertise, and that is fattening our retirement accounts, is the country most responsible for Latin America's tribulations. We have climbed into the belly of the beast, we have found it rather comfortable there, but we are acutely aware of our privileged position. Gayatri Spivak condensed our uneasy opportunism into four words when she asked her famous question: 'can the subaltern speak?'¹ Spivak's answer was no, the subaltern cannot speak free of the mediating elites who translate his/her voice, but the question gave rise to an academic industry organized around the subaltern. For the job of interpreting for the voiceless, as Emil Volek has noted, there have been many volunteers.²

This is the milieu in which John Beverley, a founder of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group, has detected a 'neoconservative turn' in literary and cultural criticism. Beverley defines neoconservatism as the defense of 'values embedded in Western Civilization and in the academic disciplines – a hierarchy essentially grounded in the Enlightenment paradigm,' which obliges traditional intellectuals to defend universal standards. To illustrate how neoconservatism has arrived in our midst, in particular among scholars who identify with the left, Beverley selects three theorists who disagree with his argument that Latin American literature is hopelessly bourgeois and that Latin America scholars of literature and culture should reorganize their profession around the subaltern voice. The first is the Guatemalan novelist and critic Mario Roberto Morales, who studied under Beverley at the University of Pittsburgh. According to Morales, Beverley and his fellow subalternists in the US academy have

reduced the rich hybridity of Latin American culture to self-serving slogans. Another theorist whom Beverley identifies with the neoconservative turn, Mabel Moraña, also parted company with him at Pittsburgh. Moraña argues that a relentless focus on the Other can turn into Orientalism in reverse, inverting rather than subverting the mindtrap of dualism. Beverley's third alleged neoconservative, Beatriz Sarlo, has criticized the pseudo-authenticity of the subaltern voice and argues that privileging it can undermine responsible scholarship.³

It might sound as if Morales, Moraña and Sarlo are merely cautioning against formulaic thinking, of the kind to be found on both the left and right as revisionists bicker with apologists and as we sweep up the broken glass left behind by heroes like Che Guevara and Milton Friedman. But the arguments of Morales, Moraña, and Sarlo are taking them outside the left as Beverley defines it. Their distrust of the subaltern voice as a source of legitimacy, their disillusionment with armed struggle, their defense of the civic-republican intellectual – all signify a turn toward neoconservatism in Beverley's estimation (as does their dim view of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, who continue to anchor how Beverley defines the left). Just why would Morales, Moraña, and Sarlo gravitate to neoconservatism? The reason, Beverley ventures, is that they are loyal to an intelligentsia in crisis, that would like to recapture cultural authority from commercial mass culture and from new social movements that ignore their leadership.

Oddly, Beverley's portrayal of Morales, Moraña, and Sarlo as library-bound white intellectuals policing the boundaries of the field sounds like many of us in Latin American studies, including himself. It was almost a generation ago that James Petras and Morris Morley issued their rude assessment, that Latin Americanists are institutional intellectuals who yearn to be organic intellectuals.⁴ 'Although we move with the better classes,' runs the ditty, 'our hearts are always with the masses.' Given the stigma attached to the neoconservative label, is Beverley projecting contradictions that we all face onto his critics in order to excommunicate them? If some of us question the subaltern voice as presented by John Beverley, are we really becoming neoconservatives? Isn't this a rather narrow choice for scholars who pride ourselves on being attentive to nuances?

Behind Beverley's thinking I sense the unexamined issue of moral economy – of how we deploy unspoken assumptions in order to claim moral authority. By invoking moral economy, I am not confining myself to James Scott's analysis of how peasants use their own distinct morality to resist capitalism. Instead, I am referring to how different factions in Latin American studies use symbolic exchange (e.g., theoretical debates and politicking in the Latin American Studies Association) to compete with each other for moral authority and professional advancement. Why would we need moral authority? Because we take political and moral stands that cannot be fully justified by our expertise, such as defending the Cuban revolution or condemning US border controls. Consider my contribution to the debate over subaltern voice – a comparison between the 1982 testimonio of Nobel peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú and the recollections of her relatives and neighbours. The contrasting versions plus the documentary record showed that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was not the eye-witness account that it claimed to be.⁵ Given that Menchú is an important symbol for indigenous people and the left, what gave me the right to dig into her story, publish embarrassing discrepancies, and take the risk that she would be ridiculed as an impostor?

Moral authority requires a license from an ultimate source that is difficult or impossible to question. It must be axiomatic, so self-evident that it does not require rational proof. If we were social scientists in the mid-twentieth century, the very act of doing the science of society might suffice. Our research might not provide any immediate benefit to the particular people we study, but just by contributing to science, still widely viewed as sacrosanct 50 years ago, we could assume that our knowledge would ultimately benefit humanity. There are still scholars who put credence in the science of society, as there are scholars who find their moral foundation in God, country or civilization, but they are not numerous and vocal in Latin American studies. Hence our most obvious source of moral authority is to identify our scholarship with 'the people,' which in practice means identifying our scholarship with a subset of the population who we define as victims.

Solidarity with victims is an old instrument in the Judaeo-Christian orchestra that has been playing louder as religion and science lose authority. Identifying with victims can be phrased in different ways. You can identify with a subjugated ethnic group and presumed nationality such as the Mayas of Mesoamerica. Or with a political movement such as the Sandinistas that arguably represents a larger population such as Nicaraguans. But such presumptions are not just a power-move by academics. Ever since the Enlightenment undermined the traditional source of authority in God and kingship, even states must claim to represent the people. So the question is not merely whether to derive authority from the people; it is how that authority is to be derived. Some interpretations of the Enlightenment have led to brittle orthodoxies and others have not. A despotic version of the Enlightenment culminated in Stalin, Hitler and Mao, who claimed to derive their authority from the people and who killed anyone who disagreed. The social democratic version of the Enlightenment is multivocal, with as many investigators as possible talking to as many people as possible, comparing the results and remaining open to changing their mind.

As we work up our experiences into a source of authority, social researchers typically generalize from the particular individuals that we know, turning them into evidence about wider populations. For example, my contacts with several hundred Guatemalans – mainly men between the ages of 20 and 70 – enabled me to generalize about the experiences of a hundred thousand people in four towns. But the generalizations did not stop there. Even though my two books on the Guatemalan violence included the usual disclaimers, the centrality of the area I studied in the guerrilla movement and the lack of comparative studies meant that my research became a statement about wider populations. Such inflations are almost unavoidable. Researchers who were upset with my portrayal of peasant neutralism were deriving their sense of the Guatemalan people from their immersion in other samples of the population.

Now for another question. Once you have identified a particular set of victims as your source of moral authority, and once you have decided that your fundamental task is to listen to them, exactly who ends up doing the talking? In practice, the new source of moral authority is not the most helpless victim that you can imagine – a child dying of malnutrition, a pregnant 15 year-old without anyone to help her, or a massacre survivor who can barely speak Spanish. Such people are so focused on the rudiments of survival that they do not have the caloric intake required for the possibilities of identity, resistance and transformation that attract a crowd in Latin American studies. For visions of transformation, you need to move upward in the social structure, to people

whose lives are less shoulder-to-the-wheel, because it is only they who have the maneuvering room, education and linguistic skills required to impress an international audience. In the fascinating case of Rigoberta Menchú, she presented herself as a survivor of the most brutal exploitation on coastal plantations, but this was not her actual life. Instead, she was a slightly privileged scholarship girl in Catholic boarding schools. Before she told her story to the world, she joined the household of Samuel Ruiz, the liberation theology bishop of Chiapas, Mexico. So while victims of oppression may be a source of moral authority, how this authority-generating contraption operates is through substitutions, in which a succession of intermediaries appropriates the precious gift of the right to be heard and passes it on to the next. Thus Rigoberta derives her authority from the fact that Mayan peasants have been badly treated for centuries and that four members of her family died at the hands of Guatemalan security forces. Ever since, activists and intellectuals have derived moral authority from Rigoberta's vision of the Mayas, as have Guatemalan governments and international institutions who give her honorary doctoral degrees.

Another way of illustrating the chain of substitutions is to look at who excoriated my analysis of Rigoberta's career. One reason 30 US publishers turned down my manuscript was that they feared a backlash from Native Americans. When I was finally able to publish, the response from Native American intellectuals in the US was near silence. They stood outside the chain of substitutions transmitting moral authority from victims of the Guatemalan security forces through Rigoberta to the intellectuals pushing her testimonio. They had their own source of moral authority. There was also surprisingly little heard from Mayan intellectuals in Guatemala – they too stood outside the chain of substitutions because they had their own source of moral authority – themselves. The most upset with my book were non-indigenous intellectuals in Guatemala and the United States – the ones who depended most heavily on a particular victim and her version of events.

The machinery for producing moral authority that I am describing is not confined to Latin American studies. Identity has become a versatile way of analyzing how people define themselves in opposition to each other, as well as defining who qualifies for victimhood and who does not. But most identities are no more fixed than cultures: they are transitory stereotypes and simplifications of far more complicated realities; everyone has multiple identities, to some of which we give more importance than others; and we are constantly revising our identities. So which identities are most important, how many of us agree on which are most important, just how important are they?

Such questions are inescapable because claiming a victimized identity has become a trump card and virtually all interest groups now attempt to do so. In many different situations, we attribute more authority to someone who has suffered in the flesh than to someone who has merely studied suffering and, as an activist or professional, derives authority from it. But because we perceive suffering to be so powerful, it is easy to exploit in order to shut down discussion. In Latin American studies, once you hook up identity politics with the critique of social science as inherently biased and colonialist, the typical result is reductionism – reducing unwelcome evidence to the reactionary intentions of the person raising it.

Thus when I published a wealth of new information on the destruction of Rigoberta's family and village, showing how the Nobel laureate had changed her 1982 story to meet the needs of a guerrilla organization, the response from Rigoberta and

her defenders was that I was a racist. I was parroting the Guatemalan army's version of events, imposing my voice on hers and seeking to discredit, not just Rigoberta, but all victims of the violence. In hindsight, I had placed everyone – Rigoberta, myself and my colleagues – in a bind. My findings were awkward because my colleagues and I have been deriving our moral authority from the people we study – in particular, the ones that we define as victims. If victims are our source of moral authority, and if Rigoberta represents those victims, must we not defer to her version of the truth? For many in Latin American studies, the answer to this question was yes. Like my colleagues, I had obtained my license from victims of the violence whom Rigoberta was widely presumed to represent. When I contradicted her, she yanked my license. The only way many of my colleagues could stay on the side of the angels was to reject my research as a manifestation of Western colonialism.

Obviously, this is a licensing procedure with limitations. One is that the merits of what a speaker is saying matter less than his or her identity. This would come as no surprise to Adam Kuper, the social anthropologist who argues that American cultural anthropology made the fatal mistake of deifying the native voice. Presuming the moral superiority of the native voice is what Kuper calls 'the white man's new burden, which [is] to give a privileged hearing to the muted voices of the downtrodden, to speak for the oppressed.' You know you are in the presence of the white man's new burden when you simultaneously hear: (a) denial of the possibility of objective knowledge along with (b) a firm moral tone.⁶ The underlying problem is that deriving a moral narrative from a society like Guatemala requires selectivity on the part of the beholder. You have to decide what is important and what is not so important. You have to decide to whom you are going to listen. The narrower the range of people to whom you listen, the more selective you are, the easier it will be to come back with a simple, clear idea of who deserves support. The wider the range of people to whom you listen, the harder it will be to maintain an unquestioning attitude toward any part of the political spectrum.

The decisions that we make, about who deserves a hearing and who doesn't, can mean a lot to the people we want to support. One example of how seeking moral authority in the oppressed can backfire against the intended beneficiaries is academic celebration of Zapatismo. There is no more appealing symbol of indigenous resistance than the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas: it includes the Mayas and their millennial culture, their protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the pipe-smoking sage who has explained: 'The Marcos everyone knows is something made up that reflects many aspirations. It has nothing to do with the person behind the mask. But I can assure you there is someone behind the mask. Marcos is a homosexual, a Jew, a Bosnian, a Palestinian, all the minorities.' Millions of activists in the anti-corporate globalization movement have been inspired by Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas. Yet the uprising had enormous costs for the Mayas. The Mexican Army occupied the region and violence escalated, pitting indigenous people against each other with lethal results.

The majority of scholars still seem to give the Subcomandante the benefit of the doubt, but some have reported the discrepancies between his rhetoric and how the movement actually developed.⁷ Like all insurgents, Marcos claimed that the 1994 uprising was an inevitable response to increasing exploitation. On close examination, he turned out to be leading a schism from a broader peasant movement that was

turning against armed struggle as he conceived it. Marcos was also leading a schism from the church of the poor led by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the man who had invited Marcos' organization to Chiapas and lived to regret it.⁸ But the symbolism of the Zapatista insurrection was so appealing to the international left that Marcos and his masked columns marching with guns became the yardstick by which to measure political worth.

One sign of just how debatable Marcos' leadership was – and he was always the leader of the uprising despite the disarming modesty of his subcomandante rank – were his sudden changes of rhetoric and objective. Judging from internal documents, the rebels who seized San Cristobal de las Casas on 1 January 1994 had sworn to uphold the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism. Television captured images of Mayan troops running through the streets of San Cristobal shouting 'Viva Marxismo-Leninismo!' and displaying the hammer and sickle. Marcos had led them to believe that they would spark parallel uprisings, march on Mexico City, and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. But the Zapatistas' first public declaration, on 1 January, was couched in the hallowed populist nationalism of the Mexican revolution – a language that appealed to a far wider spectrum. Only after months of interaction with journalists and human rights activists did the Subcomandante begin to 'talk Indian,' in the demands for indigenous autonomy that have since characterized what is left of the movement.

How to describe this performance? According to Pedro Pitarch, an anthropologist who has worked in Chiapas since the 1970s, and to whom I am indebted for this analysis, the man behind the mask was also a ventriloquist. The militaristic, gun-wielding image of indigenous resistance that Marcos fashioned was like a ventriloquist's dummy. The proclamations that he authored in the name of his indigenous constituency were a series of rhetorical transformations that were far more successful in impressing an international audience than achieving what his peasant supporters wanted.⁹ To bring the analogy back to the manufacture of academic ideas rather than of uprisings, the theorist becomes a ventriloquist, the idealized subaltern becomes the ventriloquist's dummy, and the dummy expresses the latest fashions in academic discourse. The resulting discourse advances the career of the theorist but not the people whose moral authority is being invoked.

Thus Zapatismo brings us back to the question that launched a thousand doctoral theses, 'can the subaltern speak?' As millions of Mexican Indians move to urban areas and the US in search of income and modernity, academics attracted to the idealizations characteristic of subaltern studies have decided that what indigenous peasants need is political autonomy, fair trade, agro-ecology and of course their indigenous identity, with which we expect them to resist the tide of industrialism and globalization. Just who decided that indigenous identity is so important? Not the many indigenous people who are profoundly ambivalent about their indigenous identity – not so differently from the many whites and blacks, ladinos and gringos, Spaniards and Germans who feel ambivalent about their identities as such and who would prefer to prioritize their identity as human beings.

Once we scrutinize the moral projections that turned Rigoberta Menchú, the Mayas and Zapatismo into academic enterprises, the choice that John Beverley gives us, between his own defense of the subaltern voice and his critics' supposed turn to neoconservatism, looks doctrinaire. In my opinion, we will obtain a broader perspective on the possibilities before us if we look at how we derive our moral mandate to do Latin

American studies. Given that the only plausible source of moral authority for most of us is our identification with ‘the people’ or a victimized fraction thereof, how are we defining that all-important category and deriving our authority from it? If we define ourselves as liberals – in the epistemological sense of liberal arts, not necessarily laissez-faire economics – then we must trust in the marketplace of ideas, which has rewarded many charlatans and often fails to work to our liking. If we define ourselves as revolutionaries, we will have to exclude certain categories of persons who do not meet revolutionary expectations, and excluding them is going to require a very strong state.

This choice can also be understood in terms of two competing conceptions of area studies. The first is that area studies should be open to anyone who comes to the field with questions. It should be an arena where anyone can test assumptions and learn to think about an area at a more sophisticated level. Under this conception, area studies should have little to prove except its value in challenging stereotypic thinking. This was the intention of the founders of area studies, but it is not without problems. Does anyone include representatives of the US military whose contingencies include intervening in Latin American countries? In the 1980s a meeting of the Latin American Studies Association was rocked by acrimony when members opened the conference programme and discovered a recruiting ad from the US Central Intelligence Agency. The second and competing conception of area studies is the one that originated in Marxism and is now identified with identity politics and subaltern studies. It is that Latin American studies must be committed to the liberation of the oppressed. Judging from past experience, that will require identifying opponents as oppressors and either ignoring them or shutting them up.

In this essay I have argued that the questions facing Latin Americanists require us to take moral positions. To take such positions, we require claims to moral authority which can no longer be grounded in established religion or Western science. Instead, we must obtain our moral authority from identification with victims, but what that means in practice depends on how we define the arena of possible victims and who has the right to be heard. If our answer is that everyone has the right to be heard, we are back to the liberal marketplace of ideas and its assumption that individuals who are free to learn and argue will tend to choose constructive ideas over harmful ones, truth over falsehood. If our answer is anything less than everyone, then Latin Americanists are on the road to turning ourselves into a priesthood of true believers, in which our function as scholars is to protect ourselves and our audience from apologists for social evil.

Notes

- 1 Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 271–313.
- 2 Volek, Emil. 2002. *Latin America Writes Back*. New York: Routledge.
- 3 Beverley, John. 2008. The Neoconservative Turn in Latin American Literary and Cultural Criticism. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 17(1): 65–83.
- 4 Petras, James and Morris Morley. 1990. The Metamorphosis of Latin America’s Intellectuals. In *US Hegemony Under Siege: Class, Politics and Development in Latin America*, edited by James Petras and Morris Morley. London: Verso Books, 271–313.

- 5 Burgos, Elisabeth, ed. 1983. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. London: Verso. David Stoll. 1999. *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- 6 Kuper, Adam. 1999. *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 7 Legorreta Díaz, Maria del Carmen. 1999. La autonomía como reivindicación indígena? *Revista: Leviatán* (Madrid) 76: 139–59. Hernández Castillo, Rosalva Aída. 2001. Between Civil Disobedience and Silent Rejection: Differing Responses by Mam Peasants to the Zapatista Rebellion. *Latin American Perspectives* 28(2): 98–119. Leyva Solano, Xóchitl. 2001. Regional, Communal, and Organizational Transformations in Las Cañadas. *Latin American Perspectives* 28(2): 20–44. Moksnes, Heidi. 2004. Factionalism and Counterinsurgency in Chiapas: Contextualizing the Acteal Massacre. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 76: 109–117. Van der Haar, Gemma. 2004. The Zapatista Uprising and the Struggle for Indigenous Autonomy. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 76: 99–108. Laura Castellanos. Learning, Surviving: Marcos After the Rupture. 2008. NACLA Report on the Americas, May/June, 34–39.
- 8 Krauze, Enrique. 1999. *Chiapas: The Indians' Prophet*. New York Review of Books, 16 December.
- 9 Pitarch, Pedro. 2004. The Zapatistas and the art of ventriloquism. *Journal of Human Rights* 3(3): 291–312. According to Pitarch, Marcos was adept at 'giving one's voice distinct intonations and altering it in such a way that it appears to emanate from a different source. In other words, subcomandante Marcos projected his own interests and political strategies, making them appear, through some simple stylistic tricks and commonplace themes, as if they came from the indigenous population of Chiapas.' 'Within a very short time, this pastiche language came to be understood as a true "Indian" language and . . . began to be imitated by many. It could be heard amongst Mexican pro-Zapatistas, international visitors, journalists, and even began to spread amongst congressmen, senators and government workers. Even the Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo, began to speak in "Indian" in his speeches to indigenous people. Marcos' Indian language was so particular and so difficult to imitate that, even on the very rare occasions that the Zapatista leaders of indigenous origin did speak in public or were interviewed, their words ended up being . . . somewhat disappointing and not particularly – or sufficiently – "Indian".'

David Stoll teaches anthropology at Middlebury College. His books include *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, and *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Recently he has been doing research on Ixil Maya migration to the United States.
