

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Naciones intelectuales. Las fundaciones de la modernidad literaria mexicana (1917-1959) by Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado

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Source: *Hispanófila*, No. 167 (ENERO 2013), pp. 105-107

Published by: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for its Department of Romance Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43808709>

Accessed: 11-11-2019 22:37 UTC

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lenguaje. Cualquier estudioso del periodo colonial, encontrará en *El discurso colonial en textos novohispanos: Espacio, cuerpo y poder* de Sergio Rivera-Ayala una informada e iluminadora lectura de un variado corpus de textos coloniales.

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Sánchez Prado, Ignacio M. *Naciones intelectuales. Las fundaciones de la modernidad literaria mexicana (1917-1959)*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2009. 321 pp.

If we have learned anything from Marx, Gramsci, and Stuart Hall, it's that few notions are as ideological as the conception of high culture as an autonomous, independent space disconnected from social, political, or economic reality. And yet one has to be careful with trivializing or condemning outright any *attempt* to create a cultural space of those characteristics. It's one thing to ignore or disguise the fact that any intellectual or artistic product is born within, and conditioned by, its social environment; it's quite another to work toward the creation of institutional structures – universities, *ateneos*, academies, but also disciplines, fields, schools of thought – that allow intellectuals, artists, professors, and students to discover and pursue their vocations with relative independence from the political and economic powers that be. (For Gramsci himself, after all, it was life in prison that paradoxically granted this kind of space.)

As we know, the cultural history of twentieth-century Mexico – the Mexico of the Institutionalized Revolution par excellence – is marked by a lively interest from the State in the development of a Mexican high culture; by the relatively tight relationship, and high level of overlap, between the national *intelligentsia* and the state apparatus; and, as Roderic Camp has shown, by persistent patterns of patronage and cooptation. And yet, as Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues in this fascinating and important book, Mexican cultural history also shows examples of successful collective and individual attempts to mobilize notions of national identity in order to wrest a measure of autonomy from the *padrinazgo* of the PRI – if not always institutionally, then at least intellectually. In the course of this study, Sánchez Prado not only corrects or nuances commonly held views of the relationship between Mexican intellectuals and the 70-year period of PRI hegemony, but also of the relationship of Mexican (and, by extension, Latin American) culture to the European metropolis (particularly the Spanish intellectual and literary tradition). In the process, he dislodges some of the most persistent conceptual paradigms, myths, and stereo-

types that continue to loom large in popular and scholarly visions of Mexican identity and intellectual history.

While most scholars have seen the relationship between the Mexican intelligentsia and the revolutionary state primarily in terms of cooptation and complicity, Sánchez Prado argues that groups of Mexican intellectuals in fact conceived of alternative visions of the nation as embodied in both its *pueblo* and its high-cultural production (the *naciones intelectuales* in the title). The relationship between these alternative visions of Mexican culture and those embraced and propagated by the revolutionary regime was not always free of tension, at times directly counter-hegemonic, and always complicated by intellectuals' desire for institutional legitimacy and "distinction" (in Bourdieu's sense). Sánchez Prado focuses on two key moments in Mexican intellectual history: first, the foundation, between 1917 and the late 1930s, of a "literary field," defined, following Bourdieu, as a relatively autonomous realm within the wider social fabric; and, second, the foundation and consolidation of a series of key cultural institutions in the 1940s and '50s. *Naciones intelectuales*, in other words, aims to investigate "los usos de la literatura en la producción de estrategias intelectuales contrahegemónicas y de narraciones culturales de nación distintas a las sustentadas por el Estado" (5).

The book's four chapters follow a chronological order. Chapter 1 covers the years following the Revolution, and the first attempts by intellectuals to create a measure of independence from the emerging revolutionary state. Chapter 2 is fully dedicated to Jorge Cuesta, whom Sánchez Prado helps recover as a crucial voice in a key moment of Mexican cultural history, focusing in particular on his *Antología de la poesía mexicana moderna* (1928) and the 1932 debate about national Mexican literature. Chapter 3 analyzes the consolidation of high-cultural institutions (El Colegio Nacional, El Colegio de México), and the emergence within them of the *hispanista* Alfonso Reyes as promoter and embodiment of an autonomous cultural field. This chapter also highlights the concurrent influence of Reyes' friend José Gaos, the most salient representative of the contingent of exiled intellectuals that landed in Mexico after the defeat of the Spanish Republic; for Sánchez Prado, Gaos's arrival is "el origen de la transformación más importante del pensamiento mexicano en el siglo xx" (178). The final chapter focuses on Gaos's disciples in the so-called Grupo Hiperión: Leopoldo Zea, but in particular Luis Villoro, whose work represents a careful, and valuable, *historicist* approach to the problem of national identity that allows for a break with existing notions of "el mexicano" and "lo mexicano." This chapter also traces the emergence of Octavio Paz as the hegemonic intellectual voice. While the influence of Villoro and his colleagues largely remained confined to academia, Paz's work "marca la consolidación de la literatura como un discurso operativo en la esfera pública" (225). And unlike the critical historicism of Villoro and the other *hiperiones*, which helped unsettle monolithic notions of Mexican identity,

Paz's reliance on myth did the opposite: "la noción del mexicano de Paz es sólo posible con el borramiento de los conflictos de clase, de raza, de género, que componen a una sociedad" (236). Paz's "fijación mitificadora," Sánchez Prado argues, has left a lamentable legacy whose influence continues to be hegemonic.

*Naciones intelectuales* is a thorough piece of original scholarship that provides a fresh and welcome reinterpretation of key institutional, intellectual, and philosophical developments in Mexico between the final phases of the Mexican Revolution and the late 1950s. The book is grounded in a solid knowledge of Mexican political, social and intellectual history, a thorough historicist approach, and a nimble command of contemporary Latin Americanism as well as contemporary Mexican Studies and Mexican intellectual production (including Monsiváis, Bartra, Villoro, Lomnitz, Escalante, and Aguilar Mora). Within contemporary Latin Americanism and Latin American Cultural Studies more generally, Sánchez Prado makes a convincing case for a renewed focus and appreciation of the *literary* as a distinctive discursive and institutional field, with a particular capacity for resistance and emancipation of a cultural, ideological or political nature. In the process, the author sheds new light on widely read texts, while also bringing to the fore other texts and debates that have not or barely received critical attention. The result is a significant revision of key moments in twentieth-century Mexican literary and intellectual history, from the avant-garde onward, through a careful reconstruction and analysis of the evolving institutional context. The combatively worded conclusion – which vindicates "la ahora perdida pista del Hiperión" as a source of "alternativas al persistente debate de la autenticidad" – does a brilliant job explaining the significance of this project within Mexico's political and cultural context today.

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Caso, Nicole. *Practicing Memory in Central American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 288 pp.

In *Practicing Memory*, Nicole Caso selects a variety of "mainstream" contemporary texts from Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras that employ historical fiction to cover what poet Humberto Ak'abal describes as "the mouth of silence" (2), that is, to speak out against pervasive silences and forced acceptances imposed by official history in the isthmus. Although the chosen works assume markedly different approaches as they each seek to interject their historical perspectives, their "regenerative effect" (3) be-