

CLASSICS REVISITED

José Aricó and the Question for Latin-American Marxism

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The relationship between intellectuals and politics is one of the biggest riddles of Latin America's cultural history. In the specific world of the left, intellectual and political practices have often travelled through intimately linked paths, difficult to discern even among one another. This powerful entanglement can be found, for example, in two foundational figures of Latin America's leftist traditions: Cuban José Martí, revolutionary, poet, and philosopher, and Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, author of the major questions around Latin American Marxism up to this day, from the pages of a journal, *Amauta* –at the same time a cultural device and a space for political organization. One can think of this mark as an invariant lingering along the 20th century, brought to us under a left-wing form that is, in fact, a heterogeneous ensemble of political and cultural contributions to Latin America's popular life.

Along this lengthy, sinuous path, one can place the interventions of José María Aricó, a relevant intellectual figure of Argentinean and Latin-American Marxism. He was born in the province of Córdoba, in 1931, and passed away in Buenos Aires,

in 1991. Aricó had an early initiation in political activity through the Argentinean Communist Party (henceforth PCA, its Spanish initials), during the 1940s. In this framework, he played an important role mobilizing the party's youth, among other organizational duties, having stood out as the person in charge of political training classes for workers. In contradistinction to other trajectories characteristic of figures of the so-called "New Left", his early days in Communism were not linked to the university, where he only transited as a student in short-lived, unsuccessful periods. His training is better represented by self-education over a lifetime entirely dedicated to politics from within the Marxist theoretical horizon.

Since his formative years, Aricó has been nothing but a Marxist, with all the unshakeable tenacity the term may have carried during the 1950s. The Marxist tradition finds him in a particular torsion, seeking, already at that time, to traverse some of its heterodox zones. He was introduced to the work of Antonio Gramsci –at the time, better known as an anti-fascist hero than for his specific theoretical contributions– and took part in the

translation of *Quaderni del carcere* under the guidance of Héctor Agosti. Via the Sardinian revolutionary, Agosti intended to inspire readings that would strengthen the PCA's views on both Argentinean national history and its own role in it.

Partially as a consequence of his encounter with Gramsci, but also of the winds of renovation brought about by the XX PCUS Conference and the Cuban Revolution – both temporally and geographically closer to him–, Aricó was part of a generational nucleus that began to establish a more fluid relationship with the different versions of Marxism that proliferated at the time beyond the hegemony of the Soviet Union. In parallel, strictly reading the Argentinean reality, he searches for less uncongenial and more productive approaches with the Peronista phenomenon, which had been undergoing an uncertain process of political radicalization since the overthrowing and exile of Perón, in 1955. In this context, and alongside other young members of the PCA (Juan Carlos Portantiero and Oscar del Barco, among others), he publishes the journal *Pasado y Presente*, in 1963. The publication was precisely intended to serve as a vehicle to introduce into the organization the theoretical and political debates that these youngsters considered as sealed. It was done, as its very name indicates, under the protection of Gramsci's figure and the heterodox potency of Italian Marxism in general. The initiative was not well received, and the editorial group ended up out of the party.

It is a paradoxical failure, for even though the aim of renewing discussions within the PCA was hindered by the expulsion, it had also initiated a great intellectual adventure that would be of paramount importance to Argentina, with equally great continental projection. *Pasado y Presente* functioned as a journal in two different periods, with nine issues between 1963 and 1965, and three issues in a second series, published in 1973. What is more, *Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente*, a collection of books that traversed the most heterodox angles of the Marxist tradition with its 98 titles, was published from 1968 until 1983, having contributed, in many occasions, with texts previously unpublished in Spanish. Aricó was the driving force behind this editorial undertaking. In the role of editor, he can also be associated with another important chapter in Latin America's left-wing publications: editorial Siglo Veintiuno, in which he started working from Buenos Aires during the early 1970s. Yet more crucially, he founds and addresses, during his exile in Mexico between 1976 and 1983, Biblioteca del Pensamiento Socialista, which enlarges in more than a hundred the amount of titles Aricó makes available to the Latin American reader –among them, a new edition of *Capital*, aimed at improving Wenceslao Roces' translation for Fondo de Cultura Económica, besides the Spanish edition of the *Grundrisse*.

Nevertheless, Aricó was not only an editor, transmitter, or translator. First, one can think precisely of translation as a conceptual model to name a theoretical operation that goes beyond the

transposition of texts from one language to the other. In this sense, following the footsteps of a tradition that dates back to Gramsci himself and the abovementioned Mariátegui, *translation* might designate a preoccupation on the production of an organic articulation between a critical universalistic vocation, characteristic of Marxism, and the historical singularity territorially outlined to which Latin-American reality is alluded. It is by virtue of this alchemy that it is possible to refer to Latin-American Marxism as a theoretically and politically productive concept, and not merely of Marxism in Latin America as the evidence of a series of historical misadventures. The starting point of Aricó's inquiry is fundamentally political and is interweaved around the limited influence of Marxism –and the socialist tradition in general– over the great milestones of Latin-American popular history. There is a *desencuentro* here, which somehow operates as the departing point that sets into motion, time and again, the question of the type of Marxism that should be built in order to come to terms with the history of Marxism and the popular movement, which are, most of the time, parallel roads in the region.

Therefore, Aricó's work –the abovementioned editions and his writing books and texts– can be thought of as the drawing of different comprehensive rehearsals of this *desencuentro*, always from the hypothesis that the issue cannot be Latin-American reality –reticent in its putative exotic nature to be captured by rigid schemas–, but a certain type of

Marxism that animated most of the left-wing currents in the region. The Marxism subjected to Aricó's criticism is precisely that which does not submerge itself in the specificity of the contradictions on the ground it analyses, but rather addresses it by means of deductive procedures that depart from the figuration of a theoretical scheme ready-made for application. The question emerges early in his reflections. Somehow, it is what seems to distinguish, in Aricó's pen, *Pasado y Presente's* mode of reading Marx and Marxism by contrast to the reading practiced by the PCA, to the extent that the journal gathered an important number of successive changes in the theoretical debates both within and outside Marxism, which appear to be connected with the unprejudiced vocation to comprehend a reality so evidently elusive to the party theses. This question, this preoccupation of rethinking Marxism, signaled since then his intellectual trajectory.

However, that search does not have a philological purpose, not even a historiographical one, even though there is both philology and history in the procedures from which he moves on. What we call *translation* indicates, as we said, a theoretical operation that summons texts and fragments located in different zones of Marxism, with the aim of providing answers to theoretical-political dilemmas instigated by reality. It functions, in this sense, as a kind of *detour*: to confront *current* problems by means of the exhumation of diverse resources that can help to face them, whether they be

past ways of dealing with similar problems or historical and conceptual tools that can be considered propitious to do so. If the problem is within Marxism –that is, in the modes in which Marxism was read in Latin America–, the solution is also there: it has to do with the decomposition of a narrative in order to replace it, with searching the elements that can turn Latin-American Marxism into a powerful emancipation narrative, careful with regional singularity, and not a formulaic imitation that has further implied dreadful outcomes.

Therefore, Aricó's world of editions and writings comes to terms with subjects as diverse as the theories of the party and of political organization, the problems of revolutions and national movements in peripheral countries, the forms of workers organization in the industrial terrain, the analysis of different aspects of Marx's oeuvre, the debates around the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution, the revisiting of a number of the socialist currents from Council Communism (*consejismo*) to Austro-Marxism, across Rosa Luxemburg, Bukharin, Kautsky, and Bernstein. As stated in each of these editorial interventions, one can guess the curiosity that emerges from the need to confront theoretical and political problems concerning the reality upon which one intends to intervene. Even though one cannot unravel each of these interventions here, it is worth noting that this is precisely a way of thinking the relation between intellectual and political practice, which also knows numerous other figures in Latin America: journal and edition as

spaces that afford the delineation of a political intervention that, at the same time, is a gesture of theoretical mediation vis-à-vis the always-rushed time of politics.

This gesture is perhaps more clearly visible in the Aricó of the years of Mexican exile. In this country, along with continuing and deepening the editorial practice, we find his most relevant texts: his inquiries on Mariátegui, the relationship of Marx with Latin América, on Argentinean Socialist Juan Bautista Justo, among other subjects. Here we find Aricó's major conceptual contributions to thinking the "Latin-American Marxism" coupling. It is then that the concern about a Marxism dissociated of popular political life encounters explanation in further theoretically elaborated hypotheses. Thus, we find Aricó concerned with the spots in which Marxism took the form of a philosophy of history that, conceived as a ready-made system, seemed to know in advance what subjects and processes would embody the revolution. Once again, the purport of the concern lies in the political effects of that theoretical construct. If that is the type of Marxism spread out in Latin America, it would hardly comprehend the specific, singular forms through which social contradictions emerge in the region, overdetermined by the thickness of multiple histories interwoven in each of these countries, and so it becomes hard to politically operate out of them. Thereby the *desencuentro*; and thereby, also, the intellectual task of thinking another form of Marxism -which is, at the same time, a political task.

As mentioned, if the problem is within Marxism, the solution is also there. What we find in Aricó's Mexican period is the intensification of a search in different zones of the Marxist tradition that serve as inputs to think a reconstruction of that tradition, so as to move away from those deterministic forms that have so heavily affected in its own isolation as theoretical and political trend in Latin America. Perhaps the big issue there is the aforementioned critique of the philosophy of history, for which Aricó's search was not only within Marxism, but in the entrails of Marx's texts. To the lapses celebrating progress and writing of a meaning of History that can be found in a number of Marx's texts, Aricó opposed the searches of the "late" Marx, who confronts realities of peripheral capitalism (especially Ireland and Russia) in order to protest against the interpretations of his own work as an Eurocentric philosophy of history, and put in place the possibility of revolution at the centre of his theory. That Marx is closely followed by Aricó in his exile years and is magisterially portrayed in the 1980 *Marx and Latin America*, in which the late Marx emerges as an antidote against the author's most schematic readings of *Capital* that dominated the region, and thereby, as the keystone for the reconstruction of the Marxist theoretical project in Latin America.

On the other hand, the major issue introduced in Aricó's exploration is that of Marxism's "political theory –in itself a critical issue of these times, discussed in Mexican soil as well as in the debates

known as "crisis of Marxism" in Italy and France. In a particular way, to come to term with this issue requires the aforementioned rupture, for only breaking free from the philosophy of history that sentences politics to the role of mere effect of a rationale originated elsewhere (i.e. in economy) is it possible to think of the specific dilemmas at this level. For Marxism, these are not minor issues, but rather questions of crucial relevance, such as the problems of the political subject, the organization, the State, or the forms of transition. A very interesting approach to this question can be read in *Nueve lecciones de economía y política en el marxismo*, a class taught by Aricó in 1977 in El Colegio de México. It delves deeper into the diverse figures of the tradition, pausing where that relation –between economy and politics–is conceived in its complexity, with no reductionisms and informed by a transformative concern. Naturally, Gramsci is one of its highlights, alongside –and very notably– Lenin's political cunning both as theoretician and as revolutionary. Other explorations along the same lines also correspond to that period, as in the texts on Mariátegui or the book on Juan B. Justo, always in the inquire lines revolving around the question of the modes of capturing Latin America's singularity from a Marxist perspective. And that political search took place outside Marxism as well, in a similarly classic exercise of Aricó's modes of working, yet renewed and particularly brave in this period. Thus, we find his editions of Marx Weber's *Political Writings* by Editorial Folios (in the collection "The Time of Politics" that Aricó himself

ran), but especially the Spanish edition of Carl Schmitt (*The Concept of the Political*, in 1984), in an operation of appropriation from the left (hence we might say they are operations outside Marxism but at its service) that knew some antecedents in Italy, and nevertheless was particularly challenging in the liberal-democratic climate that started to dominate the Latin American intellectual field early in the 1980s.

Since his return to Argentina, in 1983, his preoccupation has continued and gone deeper into the political theory sphere, always underpinned by the socialist tradition, whose possible concerns he amplified further and further. Within this frame, we did not stand aside the atmosphere of sovereignty of the political democracy problematic, with all the

strong liberal overtones that dominated it –although in his case, he never ceased to question, once again, everything that the inexhaustible tradition founded in Marx can contribute. Aricó died in 1991, in a significantly changed world that in some way had stopped to passionately listen to the words of the left universe which Aricó produced, translated, and disseminated with care. Yet, since no battle is lost forever, all struggle that persists in the stubbornness of imagining other possible worlds needs to inherit the most heterogeneous modes in which those very struggles have been fought in the past. Hence the significance, and the necessity, to continue reading and thinking José Aricó.

[Translated into English by Felipe Lagos Rojas]