

# Decolonizing the Mind and Authentic Self-Creation *a la* Jorge Portilla

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Can a person from Latin America be a Catholic, or a feminist, or a democratic socialist in an *authentic* way? These identities come from Europe, and given the colonial history of Latin America, it seems reasonable to think that decolonizing the Latin American mind is a condition for its authenticity. Further, it seems reasonable to think that decolonization itself requires extirpating ideas and identities originating from the colonizers, especially those used to establish the colonial order. Thus, it seems that Latin Americans cannot adopt such identities; authentic decolonization demands otherwise. In this paper I argue that the thought of twentieth century Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla provides a persuasive account of the nature of authentic self-creation that allows for a kind of decolonization that makes it conceptually possible for Latin Americans to be Catholics, feminists, or democratic socialists in an authentic fashion. That is, authentic decolonization of the mind, I argue, need not involve a blanket rejection of identities originating from the colonizers; instead, it can be understood as a particular kind of authentic self-creation: one that is appropriately sensitive to the colonial history of the identities freely chosen by the agent.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I sketch an answer to questions like: can someone from Latin America be a Catholic, a feminist, or a democratic socialist, in an *authentic* way? It may appear that the answer is straightforward: “*of course*; people from Latin America can authentically adopt these identities, just like anyone else.” This natural answer is a bit facile, however. One’s historical particularities play a central role in one’s abilities to adopt identities. The three identities highlighted – ‘Catholic’, ‘feminist’, and ‘democratic socialist’ – are all imported from Europe. This fact matters. Social reality in Latin America has been significantly shaped by European colonization. In fact, during the colonization period the Catholic identity, for example, played a central role in the process of cementing an oppressive power structure that systematically privileged Europeans and their descendants over native Americans and their descendants. These considerations make it initially reasonable to think that a condition for authenticity, for Latin Americans, is precisely that they remove the yoke of their colonial past; that is,

it seems reasonable to think that decolonization of the Latin American mind is a condition for its authenticity. Further, decolonization itself seems to require extirpating ideas and identities originating from the colonizers, especially those used to establish the colonial order.<sup>1</sup>

This raises important questions. To what extent is the Latin American mind a fruit of its colonial genesis? What elements of the Latin American mind are inauthentic internalizations of roles infused or projected onto them by the colonizers? How can a Latin American mind be successfully decolonized? How do the projects of authenticity and decolonization relate? As a Latin American myself, I find these questions both fascinating and existentially pressing. Adequately answering them is an enormous project; my goal here is merely to argue that the thought of Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla provides important theoretical tools to make advances in answering these kinds of questions. I argue that Portilla's notion of authentic self-creation allows for a kind of decolonization that makes it conceptually possible for Latin Americans to be Catholics, feminists, or democratic socialists *authentically*. That is, authentic decolonization of the mind, I argue, need not involve a blanket rejection of identities originating from the colonizers; instead, it can be understood as a particular kind of authentic self-creation: one that is appropriately sensitive to the colonial history of the identities freely chosen by the agent.

Here is the plan. In section one, I present a standard strategy for understanding the nature of decolonization. This strategy helps situate the account of decolonization I sketch in section two.

## **Section One: Decolonizing the Latin American Mind**

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<sup>1</sup> This thought is in several respects analogous to one of Simone de Beauvoir's main claims in her important work *The Second Sex* (2010). The claim is that for women to be authentic they must do away with their status as Other, projected onto them by men. Authenticity requires that women assert their subjectivity and demand recognition and reciprocity from men, which would in effect do away with their status as Other and reclaim their status as Subject.

There is a substantial body of literature engaging in topics like decoloniality, decolonizing knowledge, or decolonizing the mind. Authors writing on these topics engage in interrelated but often distinct projects.<sup>2</sup> My goal here is not to survey this complex body of literature, but to isolate a standard way of understanding decolonization and its conceptual connection to authenticity.

This standard strategy for understanding decolonization I label the ‘building-anew’ strategy. This strategy stresses both the need to extirpate ideas originating from the colonizers and the need to rebuild the Latin American mind anew from its own sources. The latter element of this strategy is central to the project of this paper.

### 1.1 The Building-Anew Strategy

Anibal Quijano, a theoretical founder of ‘decoloniality’ as a critical concept, is a proponent of the building-anew strategy. Quijano (2007) distinguishes between ‘colonialism’ (*colonialismo*), as state-driven economic and political domination, from ‘coloniality’ (*colonialidad*), as a pervasive *colonial order* that generates ways of representing the world and ways of being-in-the-world that justify and perpetuate structures of domination between different races or ethnicities: whites/Europeans as naturally superior and thus entitled to greater positions of wealth and power than non-whites/non-Europeans (2007: 171f).<sup>3</sup> A major triumph of the colonial order, Quijano notes, is the colonization of the imagination and ways of representing the world of the colonized (2007: 169); coloniality is established when the colonized *internalize* the colonial order. Coloniality involves, for example, the *aspiration* of the colonized to *improve themselves* by becoming *whiter/more European* (2007: 171f). As Frantz

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<sup>2</sup> Some of writers see themselves and their work as natural extensions of the complex and multi-layered philosophy of liberation movement (see Maldonado-Torres 2007 and 2008; Dussel 2014; and Bartholomew 2020). Others are influenced by, and see themselves as responding to, intellectual currents coming from Critical Theory and Habermas in particular (Mignolo 2011a and 2011b, Bartholomew 2018). Other authors see themselves as engaging in a particular topic within politics (Mills 2015), sociology (Waghid, and Hibbert 2018; Muckherjee 2022) or cultural anthropology (Clammer 2008); and more.

<sup>3</sup> See also Quijano 2000, especially 542f.

Fanon poignantly notes: “However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (1986: 12).

For Quijano, part of the success of coloniality relies on an epistemically pernicious element: the colonial order makes a claim to being *total* or an exhaustive representation of the way the world truly is (2007: 173f). Non-European cultures, and their ways of representing or being-in-the-world, are included in the colonial order as less developed, or less civilized, ways of representing or being-in-the-world whose culmination and maturation is the European culture. This claim to totality is epistemically pernicious partly because it makes the colonial order *invisible* to those that inhabit it (ibid). This is so because dissenting opinions are not permitted any legitimacy; they are, in an epistemically real sense, *beyond* the total representation of the world and as such *unintelligible*.<sup>4</sup> At best, these seemingly dissenting opinions are themselves represented in the colonial order as mere clumsy thoughts of inferior minds stuck in under-developed or under-civilized conditions.

As Quijano sees it, then, essential to the success of *decoloniality* is undergoing a kind of epistemic decoloniality. This epistemic decoloniality involves: i) the rejection of categories used in the epistemic framework of the colonial order; and ii) the creation of new epistemologies, or new rationalities and new productions of knowledge, originating *from outside* the epistemic framework of the colonial order (2007: 176f). Authentic decolonization of the Latin American mind, then, requires that it be constructed from epistemic sources *other-than* those operating within the representation of the world in the colonial order.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Enrique Dussel in his classic *Filosofía de la Liberación* makes a similar point over a decade earlier (1977: 1.1.4.1).

<sup>5</sup> Quijano’s views are quite influential. Several scholars are engaging with his works (for example, Saldívar 2007, Espinosa 2015, Gandarilla Salgado, Garcia-Bravo and Benzi 2021, and Carreño Medina 2018). Other prominent thinkers endorse versions of the building-anew strategy that are similar to, and often explicitly influenced by, Quijano’s version (for example, Dussel 2014, Mignolo 2011a and 2011b, Bartholomew 2020, Escobar 2007, and Grosfoguel 2007).

## 1.2 Modest Building-Anew Strategy

In several respects, Quijano's picture is radical. *All* ideas or categories originating from within the colonial order are to be seen with suspicion by Latin Americans. Quijano's conception of decolonization leaves little conceptual room for Latin Americans to be Catholic, feminist, or democratic socialist *authentically*; at best, Latin Americans must construct analogue versions of these identities from non-European sources.<sup>6</sup>

The literature also includes a more modest versions of the building-anew strategy. We encounter this strategy, for example, in Sánchez's article on Uranga's *Análisis del ser del Mexicano* (2019). Sánchez argues that Uranga's *Análisis* should be read as an attempt to decolonize Mexican philosophy. Sánchez hints at what decolonization amounts to: "to decolonize philosophy" is in part "to rip it from its colonial roots and build it up again from one's ground" (2019: 65). Sánchez sees Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga as doing precisely this. Uranga abandons some Eurocentric philosophical categories and returns to the pre-Columbian notion of *nepantla* (in-betweenness) to ground the ontology of the Mexican, or the Mexican way-of-being.

Uranga's attempt to decolonize Mexican philosophy is grounded in a modest version of the building-anew strategy. This is so because Uranga does not reject all ideas originating from Europe to carve his philosophical account of the mode of being Mexican. In fact, Uranga, like Sánchez himself, is comfortable using some of the theoretical tools and methods developed by existentialist phenomenologists like Heidegger. That is, Uranga and Sánchez seem to think that Mexican

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<sup>6</sup> Quijano suggests how this positive construction of identities might be attainable. It must begin, he insists, by destroying or undermining the epistemic claim to totality inherent in the colonial order. He suggests that such an epistemic claim can be undermined only by abandoning the Enlightenment's notion of rationality as universality and by engaging in a multicultural dialogue between competing notions of rationality that do not make a claim to totality or universality. He writes "epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings... Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnics should be taken as universal rationality," (2007: 177).

philosophy can be *authentic* and *adequately decolonized* even when it permits and actively deploys some philosophical currents originating in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The account of decolonization I sketch in the next section is a version of a modest building-anew strategy more akin to that of Sánchez and Uranga than that of Quijano.

## Section Two: Jorge Portilla and Decolonization

### 2.1 Portilla and Authentic Self-Creation

Portilla thinks that there is an important sense in which human freedom creates value<sup>8</sup> in the world. As he sees it, value presents itself to human consciousness in its “pure ideality” and demands its realization in “the objective realm of lived experiences” (F 18/MS 129); put differently, “value solicits its realization;” and, in fact, the mere act of grasping a given value is in part “the fulfillment of that demand” to be realized (ibid). Grasping a value and recognizing the value’s demand for its

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<sup>7</sup> Sánchez notes that part of what makes Uranga’s work an exercise in *decolonizing* Mexican philosophy is that it abandons the European “metanarrative” of true philosophy as “pure and abstract universality” (2019: 64). Sánchez also insists that Uranga’s work is *authentic* Mexican philosophy: “In a broad sense, the *Análisis* is a philosophical consideration of a way of life *from the point of view* of that life, not from an anonymous view from nowhere, and, as such, the clearest example of *authentic Mexican philosophy*” (ibid, emphasis added). For Sánchez, then, Mexican philosophy can be *authentically decolonized* even when it permits and actively employs philosophical methodologies originating from Europe, like existentialist phenomenology.

<sup>8</sup> What exactly ‘value’ amounts to for Portilla is a controversial matter. Sometimes Portilla sounds like a Platonist by describing value in “its pure ideality” which is contrasted with “the world of reality” (F 18/MS 129). Other times he explicitly describes value as a kind of Kantian idea that is “simply a direction and limit of my transcendence” (F 33/MS 142). Portilla’s commitment to existentialist phenomenology leads him to understand ontological questions about the nature of value as secondary to, and dependent upon, a phenomenological description of value as it presents itself to human consciousness in daily life: “What matters is to find out the way in which a value manifests itself in spontaneous consciousness, independently from its ontological or metaphysical quality... it interests us little to know whether values are entities that float beyond being... Such problems can only emerge with regard to philosophical reflection directed toward such entities” (F 31/MS 140); instead: “What interests us is to clarify the way in which value gives itself in daily life, before any speculation about its essence, its hierarchy, or its polarity” (F 31-2/MS 140). Using this methodology, it can be noted that value presents itself to human consciousness in two different ways: i) value as “constitutive elements of the things themselves” like “The coolness of water or the delicate flavor of a fruit” which do not require freedom to support them in existence (F 36/MS 144); and ii) value as a demand upon one’s freedom for its realization in the realm of lived experience, like “Justice” as “justice that is to be realized in the community” (F 32/MS 141). It is this latter way in which value presents itself to human consciousness that matters most for Portilla, and that matters most for this paper.

realization is a condition for the central movement of authentic freedom. Authentic freedom is the act of creating value as “an intimate movement of loyalty and commitment” and an “affirmation” towards value and its demands (F 19/MS 129); this creative act is “pure spontaneity” in which “I am alone with myself before the value” (ibid).

For Portilla, then, authentic freedom is manifested in creating values in the world. Free acts that create value are also, in an important sense, acts of self-constitution or self-creation.<sup>9</sup> Portilla insists “value can also appear as a demand, as a need to fill a void in the very center of my existence. It appears then as a norm of my self-constitution, as the perpetually elusive and evanescent indication of what *my* being ought to be” (F 32/MS 141). For Portilla, to say that value is a norm for self-creation is not to say that in creating value the agent can herself *become* a value, but rather the value is a “guide” or “direction and limit” for the agent’s “valued self-constitution” and as such a value “is but the ideal unity of all my actions geared towards” the value (F 33/MS 142). Thus, in freely choosing to create a value, the agent commits to the value and its demands, and, further, the agent creates herself as a value-creating self.

Additionally, this kind of self-creation unifies the self across time. Portilla writes: “when I give an adequate response to the demand for actualization inherent to the value, I tacitly commit myself to a behavior, I mortgage my future behavior... I make a pledge with myself in order to maintain a value within existence” in the future (F 19/MS 129). Put differently, in affirming a value and its demands an agent thereby commits herself to its actualization for some future time and thereby commits herself to being the kind of value-creating self that continues creating this value for this future time.

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<sup>9</sup> Portilla tends to use the term ‘self-constitution’ (*autoconstitución*) with more frequency; but at least on one occasion (F 34/MS 142) he uses it synonymously with ‘self-creation’ (*autocreación*). I use these terms interchangeably.

In sum, for Portilla authentic freedom is manifested in creating values in the world, and in creating values an agent also creates herself as a value-creating self. Authentic freedom is commitment to a value and in committing to a value an agent commits herself to a future continuation of the creation of this value and to herself as a unified-across-time value-creating self.

## 2.2 Liberation

Decolonization is a kind of liberation – a liberation from the yoke of the colonial past. For Portilla, a central role of philosophical inquiry is to make explicit or present to consciousness what is tacit or concealed in order to *liberate* the mind from it. Portilla writes: “Philosophy, to the extent that it is a ‘logos’ on humankind, performs an educating and a liberating function. Through it, what is concealed and tacit becomes present and explicit, and something can be transformed by its enlightened action” (F 16/MS 126-7).

Portilla uses the following example to illustrate the liberating function of philosophy:

I cannot be the same person before and after knowing that, in a sense, the designation ‘petit bourgeois’ applies to me. The word situates me; it creates me like a ‘fiat’ pronounced by others which makes me emerge before myself with a new appearance that I barely recognize...

But, just as the word integrates me into a whole that overwhelms and alienates me, it can also put me at that ideal distance from myself that is freedom... it allows me to adopt different attitudes in relation to myself, and it hands me over to my own decision: it allows me to choose, with full consciousness... in a direction opposite to that of psychological habit, tradition, class interest, and so on, the truth sets me free. (F 16/MS 127)

Philosophical inquiry can help a person understand and bring to consciousness aspects of identities or ways of relating to the world, like being a *petite bourgeoise*, that have not previously been transparent or fully conscious to the agent herself. In bringing these tacit or opaque identities to consciousness, philosophical inquiry helps an agent liberate herself by allowing her “to adopt different attitudes in



relation” to herself, or different ways of authentically creating herself.<sup>10</sup> I call these ‘internal acts of liberation.’

### **2.3 Authentic Decolonization *a la* Portilla**

My suggestion is that Portilla’s thought enables us to understand authentic decolonization as a particular kind of internal act of liberation. Philosophical inquiry can allow Latin Americans to come to recognize in themselves identities, or aspects of some of their identities, as internalizations or products of the colonial order. In coming to see a particular identity, say that of being Catholic, as the product of colonization, this self-understanding can overwhelm and alienate the agent from herself, and “it can also put [her] at that ideal distance from [herself] that is freedom” and thereby “hand [her] over to [her] own decision” to “adopt different attitudes in relation to [herself]” (ibid). Being appropriately sensitive to the colonial origin of one’s identities “sets [one] free” to authentically construct oneself anew from one’s own sources. Importantly, *one’s own sources* are nothing other than expressions of one’s authentic freedom. Authentic decolonization demands internal acts of liberation which permit authentic self-creation but need not demand abandonment of all identities or ideas originating from the colonizers.

### **2.4 Objections and Replies**

Before concluding, I would like to briefly address two potential objections. One can be articulated from Quijano’s perspective and the other from Sánchez’s.

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<sup>10</sup> For Portilla internal acts of liberation “are possibilities of freedom... that do not require the creation of a new real order of the world but that are free variations of attitude within pure interiority” (F 62-3/MS 168). These internal acts, “the free variations of my subjectivity, the changes of attitudes in pure interiority – some of which can be characterized as *liberations* and that produce a concomitant change in the appearance of the world” (F 63/MS 169, emphasis added). These internal acts of liberation are thus themselves acts of authentic self-creation.

One objection is that my proposal fails to come to terms with the epistemic claim to *totality* inherent in the colonial order. To recognize a particular identity, say being Catholic, as originating from the colonial order is not merely to understand its genesis from which it can be cleanly separated. Instead, the *very meaning* of identities originating from within the colonial order are inexorably intertwined within the *epistemic framework* of the colonial order; they cannot be neatly separated from it. Accepting those identities is akin to a previously enslaved person accepting the servile morality used by their enslavers to justify slavery.<sup>11</sup> Given this, the only *authentic* response for Latin Americans is to abandon those identities and to build new identities from other sources.

I have no space to do justice to an objection of this magnitude. I just want to flag it and to point out that Portilla himself, as I read him, is committed to a conception of freedom as a kind of transcendence that commits him to deny important assumptions undergirding this objection. For Portilla, authentic freedom has the capacity to transcend the limitations imposed by the circumstances in which the agent finds herself.<sup>12</sup> Without defending the claim, I suggest that part of this transcendence capacity of freedom requires the agent's ability to grasp a given value in a way that is not exhausted by the particular social contexts in which the value has been previously realized. Put differently, for an agent to be able to truly transcend the limits of her circumstances, and to be authentically free *a la* Portilla, the agent's grasp of the value in its 'pure ideality' must include grasping possible ways of realizing the value in *new* social arrangements. If so, the *intelligibility* of a given value is not exhausted solely by its previous social context, including its previous *colonial* social context. As

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<sup>11</sup> Audre Lorde's famous warning that "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" resonates well with this objection (1984: 110-113). There is something to this warning. That is, there are some colonizer's tools that will never undo the colonial order (say, the idea that what is white/European is superior by default or simply because it is white/European). The main point of this paper is to provide some reasons for thinking that not all tools used by the colonizers are on a par; some of these tools can be used outside of the colonial order.

<sup>12</sup> Portilla writes, for example: "Humans are beings of such a nature that, even if by their corporality they participate in the way of being of things, they are capable of transcending them... Humans are capable of setting goals that can go beyond their own situation and the present state of the world, taken as a whole. By virtue of the form of his or her being itself, a human, each human, is beyond him- or herself and his or her physical boundaries, beyond his or her body and situation" (F 60/MS 166).

I read Portilla, that is part of what it is to say that in acts of authentic freedom “I am alone with myself before the value” (F 19/MS 129). If so, the values constitutive of identities, like being Catholic, can in principle be separated from social frameworks in which they are realized.

The second objection comes from Sánchez’s interesting book on Portilla (2012). Sánchez notes that Portilla’s account of subjectivity, and freedom, rests upon an Enlightenment notion of rationality as a human capacity to attain universality and a kind of objectivity that transcends the circumstances of the historical agent (2012: 92ff). Sánchez sees this conception of rationality with skepticism and notes that it was used by the colonizers to establish the colonial order. Sánchez thus dismisses Portilla’s accounts of subjectivity and freedom as ultimately expressions of the colonized imagination of Portilla himself (2012: 109-110). This worry naturally extends to my account of decoloniality built on Portilla’s thought.

I cannot do justice to this objection here, but I would like to gesture towards a response. It does seem like Portilla uncritically relied upon some theoretical tools originating from the colonizers in his philosophizing. However, this need not be a sufficient ground for rejecting the fruits of his philosophizing in the name of authenticity and decolonization. Instead, my suggestion is that Portilla himself could have applied the account of decolonization presented here not only to social identities like being Catholic or feminist but to the very theoretical machinery he is deploying in philosophizing. Put differently, Portilla could have come to be appropriately sensitive to the fact that the notion of rationality he was employing itself originated from the colonizers,<sup>13</sup> and this realization would put him at “that ideal distance from [himself] that is freedom” to choose whether to endorse that conception of rationality in his philosophizing. If the account works for social identities, it can work for theoretical tools too. If so, Portilla could have freely and *authentically* accepted both social identities

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, this notion of rationality was used by the colonizers to establish the colonial order (see Castro-Gómez 2010).

like being Catholic and feminist and theoretical tools like the Enlightenment notion of rationality.<sup>14</sup>

The same holds for contemporary Latin American thinkers.

## Conclusion

Can a person from Latin America be a Catholic, a feminist, or a democratic socialist authentically? Given the history of European colonialization, it may seem that authenticity demands that Latin Americans abandon these, and all other, identities originating from the colonizers. In this paper, I have provided some reasons for thinking that this initial appearance need not be correct. Relying on the thought of Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla, I have sketched an account of decolonization as authentic self-creation that permits, at least in principle, that Latin Americans adopt identities originating from Europe *authentically*.

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<sup>14</sup>There is something peculiar about this response that I want to highlight: namely, it presupposes the very account of decolonization it uses to decolonize the mind of the theorizer building the account of decolonization. That seems problematic, but I want to suggest it need not be. A comparison to a response to Hume's problem of induction can help here. Hume notoriously argued that inductive reasoning is unwarranted because it must presuppose the very thing it is trying to prove, namely that the future will resemble the past. An interesting reply to Hume is to provide an *inductive argument* for the epistemic validity of inductive reasoning. That is, it is reasonable to think that the future will resemble the past because in the past the future has resembled the past. This response will, of course, not convince Hume, for this inductive argument for the epistemic validity of inductive reasoning presupposes what it is trying to prove, namely the epistemic validity of inductive reasoning; and that was Hume's original criticism. However, this need not be a problem *for the proponent* of the reasonableness of inductive reasoning herself. Likewise, I want to suggest, utilizing an account of decolonization to decolonize the theoretical tools used to build the account of decolonization need not be a problem *for the proponent* of this decolonization account, even if it does not move those that find the account problematic.

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