

## **Eurocentrism and the Philosophy of Liberation**

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In this paper I consider a problem that has plagued various versions of the philosophy of liberation.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, proponents of the philosophy of liberation generally counsel that various forms of liberation in at least the Americas requires that we should fight Eurocentrism and resist the ontology and conceptual framework of Europe. On the other hand, most of the work done in this tradition relies heavily on the terminology and theoretical apparatus of various strands of European philosophy. The apparent disconnect between the aims and methods (or if you like, the theory and practice) has given rise to a criticism I call *The Eurocentrism Problem*.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I argue that the Eurocentrism Problem has not received an adequate reply. Until it has, there is reason to be skeptical about the philosophy of liberation as it currently exists. However, a reply can be made — though it requires we fundamentally change how the philosophy of liberation is conceived of and how it is developed.

In section 1, I consider the motivations and implications of the Eurocentrism criticism. In section 2, I take up and criticize an important reply to it and offer a blueprint for an alternative conception of the philosophy of liberation. In the final sections I consider objections and replies

### 1. The Eurocentrism Problem

The Eurocentrism Problem has several facets that we can group under the headings of dialectical, contextual, pedagogical, and practical issues. In what follows, I give a brief characterization of each of these facets of the Eurocentrism Problem.

The most obvious worry is that because the philosophy of liberation is pursued in the terminology and categories of European philosophers, it re-inscribes the Eurocentrism that it

struggles against. If one thinks, as Enrique Dussel and others have maintained, that European categories and concepts have played a crucial role in the historical<sup>3</sup> and contemporary<sup>4</sup> domination of the Americas, a philosophy of liberation that relies on those categories will seem a sham. Genuine liberation— economic, cultural, sexual, and so on— appears compromised when such liberation is framed in terms of the conceptual system that is bound up with the very systems of domination it is supposed to overcome. This is the dialectical facet of the Eurocentrism Problem.

The Eurocentrism Problem also has a contextual facet whose recognition requires some familiarity with historical currents in Latin American thought. A long-standing apparent vice of Latin American philosophers and educated elites has been a preoccupation with foreign, especially European intellectual and cultural production. The roots of the phenomenon are varied, but largely tied to the history of colonization in Latin America. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the seminal works in the history of Latin American philosophy are calls to produce autochthonous philosophical programs, a philosophy responsive to local conditions and problems.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent to which the philosophy of liberation is perceived to rely on European philosophical discourse, it raises several difficulties unique to this context. By those who are antecedently convinced of the value of Latin American thought, or more minimally, the need to do philosophy in autochthonous terms, the philosophy of liberation can appear to be a regressive philosophical movement, another incarnation of the long sequence of European movements that were enthusiastically embraced, and then ignominiously abandoned by Latin American philosophers.<sup>6</sup> It thus perpetuates a disappointing dependency on foreign cultural production, augmenting the threat that what original cultural production there is in Latin America will be co-

opted by foreign cultural systems.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, even if the philosophy of liberation is recognized as sufficiently original, its reliance on European philosophical categories may be taken to imply— however unintentionally— that Latin American concepts, theories, vocabulary, are insufficient to the task of liberation.

The perceived Europhilia that purportedly infects the philosophy of liberation is also troubling external to the Latin American philosophical context. *From the perspective of the mainline of the European tradition*, the most prevalent forms of the philosophy of liberation appear to be recastings of Levinas and Marx, and to a lesser extent, Hegel and Heidegger. The possibility that any philosophical contribution made by the philosophy of liberation could be original, genuine, and valuable is threatened by the simple (and misleading) observation that the work is merely derivative. If it is derivative, so the logic goes, then there is little point in spending the time reading the texts, training students, and encouraging research and implementation of its ideas. And, since the Latin American region has limited international status as a site for innovative philosophical production, there is little reason to give work from that region— especially work derivative of European masters— the benefit of the doubt.<sup>8</sup> In sum, since Latin America's philosophical contributions have little role in the global economy of ideas, anything that smacks of dependency on foreign— especially European— philosophical movements will ultimately work against the success of the philosophy of liberation.

A third facet of the problem is pedagogical. Again, some background is in order. As Guillermo Hurtado has noted, the study of philosophy in a third world country can and perhaps should generate serious reflection on the conditions that are required to pay the salaries of philosophers in the third world.<sup>9</sup> Concerns such as these can make philosophical approaches concerned with the primacy of *praxis* especially attractive in this context. It is thus no surprise

that social and political philosophy are to many strands of philosophy in Latin American what metaphysics and epistemology have been for much of the European and Anglo-American philosophical traditions. Since the philosophy of liberation has always emphasized the priority of praxis it may appear to be a natural fit for philosophical concerns in Latin America. To some extent, this is an advantage of the philosophy of liberation, but here again the Eurocentrism Problem introduces particular challenges.

Because of its varied upstream influences, contemporary the philosophy of liberation bristles with exceptionally thick terminological challenges for the uninitiated.<sup>10</sup> Among students of philosophy, the cost of admission to the philosophy of liberation is, minimally, substantial background in the thought of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French and German thinkers. Though this has its own costs in the United States, this concern has an especially sharp bite in Latin America, where the time and resources required to study philosophy are a luxury that few can afford. If satisfactory engagement with the philosophy of liberation requires that one master another intellectual tradition *first* this seems to raise at least two problems. First, awareness of the need to master a foreign tradition first may serve as a deterrent to the study of the philosophy of liberation. Some will be deterred for reasons having to do with the contextual issues I raised above. Others will be deterred by the time and resource cost of mastering a foreign tradition before studying the philosophy of liberation. Second, when students are *not* deterred by these factors, there may be a tendency to be drawn to the philosophy of liberation without adequate prior preparation. The resultant level of poor scholarship is liable to disadvantage the development of the philosophy of liberation in both the short and long runs.<sup>11</sup> Thus, part of the concern motivating objections about the Eurocentrism Problem seem grounded in pedagogical concerns.

A final aspect of the Eurocentrism problem concerns the implementation of the philosophy of liberation. The most influential forms of the philosophy of liberation take practical philosophy to be first philosophy.<sup>12</sup> However, one might reasonably worry that academic theorizing that maintains that “Liberation is not a phenomenal, intrasystemic action; liberation is the praxis that subverts the phenomenological order and pierces it to let in a metaphysical transcendence, which is the plenary critique of the established, fixed, normalized, crystallized, dead”<sup>13</sup> will be ill-suited to convince the very people it aims at liberating— the poor, the oppressed, and other groups not likely to have much formal education. The abstract discourse of the philosophy of liberation may seem ill-suited to achieving the practical aims of the theory.<sup>14</sup>

To summarize, the Eurocentrism Problem has at least four aspects to it: dialectical, contextual, pedagogical, and practical. Individually and collectively, these issues weigh against a philosophy of liberation couched in a heavily Eurocentric discourse.

## 2. Co-determination, wide philosophy of liberation, and Eurocentrisms

Among philosophers of liberation, Enrique Dussel is both the most prominent and perhaps the most vulnerable to the charge of Eurocentrism.<sup>15</sup> His work is heavily indebted to the philosophical apparatus of various European philosophers. However, focusing on Dussel raises a number of distinct challenges. First, his philosophical corpus is immense. Given its complexity and variety over time, criticisms that may hold true of one period of his work do not always hold true of a different period of his work.<sup>16</sup> Second, though much of his work has appeared in translation, significant portions of it remain untranslated or otherwise inaccessible. So, this discussion will necessarily be constrained by some of these limitations. Still, there is good

scholarship on and by Dussel that is now widely available, and it provides adequate resources to evaluate some lines of response to the Eurocentrism Problem.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most effective response to the Eurocentrism Problem is the one offered by Eduardo Mendieta. Consider the reply he offers in *The Underside of Modernity*:

A frequent criticism against Dussel is that he is not really developing a Latin American liberation philosophy because he remains as fixated on European philosophical discourses as the most naïve Eurocentrist. This criticism is not only unfounded, but also blind to the dialectic of ideas. It is unfounded because Dussel has pursued one of the most extensive analyses of Latin American autochthonous critical and emancipatory thinking . . . . His histories of the church, theology, and philosophy in Latin America are compendiums and encyclopedias of occluded and forgotten popular knowledge. His histories are always histories from the “underside,” from the side of the oppressed. This criticism, furthermore, is blind to the dialectic of ideas by pretending that there has not been a co-determination of both center and periphery. Latin America is as much what it is and what is not in the eyes of European thinkers (think of Hegel and Marx), as Europe is what it is and is not in the eyes of Caliban the savage, the primitive.<sup>18</sup>

Though Mendieta’s response goes some distance towards answering the Eurocentrism Problem, I do not think it is sufficient. While Dussel’s histories may be compendiums of occluded and forgotten popular knowledge, the main thrust of the Eurocentrism criticism is not directed at his histories. Rather, the target of the criticism is against his “systematic” philosophical work, work that is not primarily historical or theological in orientation but instead seek to advance the main lines of contemporary *philosophy* of liberation. This is not meant to disregard the historical features of the more systematic texts. However, I take it that there is a useful distinction to be had between Dussel’s more historically-oriented works on church and

theology, to which Mendieta appeals, and Dussel's more theoretical works, on behalf of which Mendieta mentions the historical works.<sup>19</sup>

What is more, Dussel himself appears to reject a key assumption in Mendieta's defense of him. In a telling passage, Dussel discusses the relationship of his work in philosophy, theology, and in the history of the church, arguing that "I have always written works on these three discursive, epistemological fields, but I have always exercised great caution not to confuse them or even treat them in the same work."<sup>20</sup> He goes on to explicitly caution against moving from one of his discourses to another. Thus, to the extent to which we accept Dussel's division of his own work, it is no defense of his philosophical works to cite his histories of the church or his theological works. Therefore, if the Eurocentrism criticism against Dussel's systematically philosophical works is as unfounded as Mendieta suggests, it cannot be unfounded because his historical works are encyclopedias of non-European knowledge. The point might even be put this way: Dussel's philosophical work should be more like his historical work, more frequently filled with the concepts and ideas of Latin America.

Regarding Mendieta's second response, that this criticism of Dussel is blind to the co-determination of both center and periphery, the issue is more complicated. Let us grant the idea that the center and periphery are co-determining. Here I may grant too much, especially given the slipperiness of concepts like 'the center' and 'the periphery' in Dussel's work.<sup>21</sup> If it ultimately makes sense to speak of center and periphery, will only be because we are careful to specify center and periphery of *what*. In Dussel's early work, it is the center and periphery of "political space."<sup>22</sup> Later, he more explicitly adopts the language of Wallerstein's discussion of world systems.<sup>23</sup>

Note, however, that the fact of the codetermination of the center and the periphery does not, by itself, rescue Dussel from criticism. Though it does go some distance to resolving the standard concerns captured by the dialectical facet of the problem, the Eurocentrism critic might instead argue a point about the *comparative* benefits of a philosophy of liberation that is less indebted or co-determined by the European center. Rather than, for example, attempting to deploy the ontology of the center for the ends of the periphery, it may be more dialectically beneficial for a philosophy of liberation to develop local categories, ideas, and labels. Given the inescapable facts of history and context, this project will necessarily be partly defined by aspects of the center. However, the degree to which it is so determined is less, and therefore, perhaps more appropriate for a philosophy of liberation. At the very least, it promises greater independence from both potential and actual conceptual colonization or co-optation by European philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

So, the critic might well concede that center and periphery are co-determining in a way that is reproduced in the dialectic of ideas, but argue that what is at stake is the degree to which the periphery does its part in determining the center. And, I take it, that the most powerful version of the objection just is that there is— or ought to be— a better way for the periphery to do its codetermination of the center. Thus, it is not an adequate answer to *this* criticism to say that there has been or will continue to be co-determination of the center.

Here, I think philosophers of liberation have more they can say. The point of appropriating European discourse is to reconfigure the dominant categories to show what they hide, presume, and exclude. There are at least two models of how this appropriation might go. Call the models *narrow* and *wide*. On the narrow model, philosophers of liberation do as I have described: they use the concepts and discourse of the center, but reconfigure them to reveal what



is sometimes called the “underside” of these categories and their implementation, that is, the otherwise hidden histories of who is excluded, marginalized, or oppressed by various conceptual and social arrangements. On the wide model, the categories of the center are reconfigured and undermined (as in the narrow model) but where possible, also supplemented with terms, categories, and discourses from various local or “peripheral” sources.<sup>25</sup> Even if most philosophers of liberation sign on to the wide model— which they should— the dialectical concern of the Eurocentrism Problem remains, though now as a complaint that most philosophers of liberation are failing to be wide enough. So, no matter how many times you meet with the indigenous, poor, oppressed, or peripheral peoples of Latin America, if your theoretical work does comparatively little to systematically rely on their categories in the fight against oppression, it will fail to count as a suitably wide philosophy of liberation.

A further difficulty for the codetermination reply is that at least the contextual and pedagogical aspects of the problem remain. Even if a less Eurocentric discourse of liberation brings no dialectical advantage, or even if it brings some dialectical disadvantage to the philosophy of liberation, the historical context of Latin American Eurocentrism will provide grounds to criticize contemporary the philosophy of liberation. Recognizing co-determination does little to discourage the marginalization of the philosophy of liberation internally and externally to Latin America. Indeed, highlighting the fact of co-determination— if indeed it is a fact— may strike the ears of particularly cynical critics as merely another attempt to justify Eurocentrism, or perhaps only slightly more charitably, as a piece of false consciousness. Similarly, recognition that ideas, even the ideas espoused by one’s favorite form of the philosophy of liberation, are tied to the co-determination of Europe and Latin America will not reduce the deleterious pedagogical consequences of the philosophy of liberation. Recognition of

the co-determination point might make the requisite prefatory studies of French and German philosophy seem more appealing to some students, but some of that charm will surely wane when it becomes clear that the direction of apparent influence in those European traditions does not tend to favor the Latin American side of the codetermination equation.<sup>26</sup>

I do think there are resources for the philosophy of liberation to respond to the practical issue (that is, the concern that a Eurocentric discourse will impede the implementation of liberationist practices). The key here is to distinguish the theory and practice of the philosophy of liberation. For praxis-oriented theories such as the philosophy of liberation, this is, I think, a complicated issue whose adequate resolution would take us far a field. However, given the acceptability of some division between the abstract theoretical work of philosophers and the practical implementation of philosophical aims by activists, the jargon of the former need not grossly impede the activities of the latter. Though some interaction of interests is, of course, to be expected, we need not suppose that those who are “on the ground” struggling for freedom from various forms of oppression will need to speak in terms of “the praxis that subverts the phenomenological order and pierces it to let in a metaphysical transcendence”— even if that is precisely what they are doing.<sup>27</sup>

I have been speaking as though there continues to be such a codetermination between the periphery and center. Strictly speaking, Mendieta’s point was that there *was* a codetermination. But if Mendieta’s claim is just that the history of codetermination is enough to justify the attempt to provide “genuinely” Latin American philosophy by re-deploying the historical center’s categories, then it is even more puzzling why the current influence of strands of French and German philosophy in the philosophy of liberation is at all appropriate. Though both France and Germany have played greater and lesser roles in the history of Latin America, 20<sup>th</sup> century

“Continental” philosophy is a strange choice for a co-determinant, given that the overwhelming bulk of colonial and oppressive histories in Latin America were either Scholastic, or in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, liberal and then positivist. It simply is not clear what benefit there is to using discourses only loosely connected— if at all— to these traditions.

The focus on 20<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy is especially puzzling when considering its relevance to contemporary systems of oppression. The co-determination response is legitimate, inasmuch as it can be, to the extent that it has correctly identified the center and the role it plays is the codetermination of ideas, concepts, and so on in the periphery. However, a very plausible case can be made for the United States being the cultural and economic center of the contemporary world order. At least since the end of the Second World War Europe’s influence in the determination of culture and ideas has been significantly diminished, whatever remains of its political influence. As Pierre Bourdieu recently argued,

There is, on the one hand, a Europe autonomous from the dominant economic and political forces and capable, as such, of playing a political role on a world scale. On the other, there is the Europe bound by a kind of customs union to the United States and condemned, as a result, to a fate similar to that of Canada, that is to say, to be gradually dispossessed of any economic and cultural independence from the dominant power. In fact, truly European Europe functions as a decoy, concealing the Euro-American Europe that is on the horizon and which it fosters by winning over the support of those who expect of Europe the very opposite of what it is doing and of what it is becoming.<sup>28</sup>

This is not to deny a real cultural, economic, and political power in Europe. Rather, the point is that Europe’s cultural influence has greatly diminished, and that much of the influence it retains is dependent on (that is, informed by) U.S. culture. In contrast, the cultural power of the United

States is increasingly independent of contemporary Europe (and, of course, its 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical movements).

These are disputable claims, to be sure. But if they are right, the point about the codetermination of periphery and center seems to render Mendieta's point irrelevant— or at least damaging to the cause of contemporary the philosophy of liberation. It is irrelevant if it turns out that the favored European discourses of contemporary the philosophy of liberation play little or no role in the current codetermination of the center and periphery's dialectic of ideas. It is damaging if having some role in the contemporary dialectic of ideas and the economies of culture, politics, and finance is a prerequisite to being an appropriate condition for a project of liberation. If one aims to liberate the oppressed from a conceptual, economic, and cultural order whose center is the United States, the concepts and discourse of late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French and German philosophy appear rather remote from this dialectic; or more minimally, they are not central elements in this process of codetermination.<sup>29</sup>

The talk of centers and peripheries suggests a distinction between two senses of 'Eurocentrism'. One sense, a normative sense, is clearly objectionable. This is the sense in which, roughly, something is prejudicially or unreflectively pro-European. Another sense is not as obviously pejorative, something we might call descriptive, highlighting when something is focused on or centered on Europe. Given the project of undermining the categories and conceptual system of a European center, a suitably sophisticated philosophy of liberation might count as descriptively Eurocentric without being normatively Eurocentric. To the extent to which Mendieta's codetermination point is right, and to the extent that an effective philosophy of liberation must incorporate this fact by working to transform the central categories of the center

in a project of wide-philosophy of liberation, it seems difficult to make stick the charge of objectionable normative Eurocentrism.

Even so, the philosophy of liberation's descriptive Eurocentrism is objectionable precisely because it is focused on or centered on Europe, when it should be focused somewhere else.<sup>30</sup> If we take seriously the idea that Mendieta seems to suggest— that an effective philosophy of liberation will be in some deep way intertwined with the codetermination of ideas between center and periphery, and we concede that the United States is, in many cases, the site of various centers that the philosophy of liberation is concerned to struggle against, then it seems that what is needed is a (for lack of a better term) a U.S.-centric Philosophy of Liberation. In contrast to contemporary Eurocentric philosophy of liberation, this philosophy of liberation would involve the re-deployment of categories central to the various systems of oppression rooted in the hemispheric and global power of the United States and its primary economic, cultural, and political alliances.

Such a philosophy of liberation would, of course, retain the aim of securing liberation across the various contexts that are of concern to philosophers of liberation. And, this new philosophy of liberation's theoretical work would be heavily embedded in a project of subverting the central categories that are used to cloud our sensitivity to the corrosive effects of these oppressive systems. But, this philosophy of liberation would be shorn of its (descriptively) Eurocentric discourse, replaced with a U.S.-responsive discourse that is alive to the possibilities of reconfiguring it for the purpose of fighting oppression.<sup>31</sup>

A U.S.-centric philosophy of liberation does not already exist. To bring it into existence would require some important foundational work that is beyond the scope of this paper. What I can offer, however, is preliminary blueprint for that project.

As a first step, we need an account of U.S. power relations, and the way in which its conceptual schemes contribute to the occlusion of various oppressive political, economic, and social arrangements. Minimally, this would be an account of the language of rights, the public discourse of evangelical democracy, the purported importance of open markets, the significance of terrorism in domestic and foreign policy, and the commodification of culture and individual expression. To some extent, perhaps a large extent, we already have a critical discourse of the ontology of the U.S. The key move for a U.S.-centric philosophy of liberation, however, is the step that follows. The new philosophers of liberation would need to set about determining the most effective ways to recast these central categories. The aim would be to create an alternative theoretical discourse in the service of various projects of liberation. Crucially, though, this would be a discourse framed not in terms of centers and peripheries, totalities, alterities, and the like. Instead, it would be framed in the concepts of mainstream theoretical discourse in the U.S.

Here too, though, there are temptations to be avoided. There are, of course, a wide range of theoretical discourses in the United States, and some of them are informed by precisely the same intellectual traditions that gave rise to the Eurocentrism Problem for the philosophy of liberation. To the extent that these discourses *in fact* inform existing mechanisms of impression (as opposed to reflecting comparatively isolated academic commentary on them), then a certain degree of incorporation of this ontology is sensible. However, it is clear that the overwhelmingly influential discourse of U.S. power and its attendant conceptual scheme is far more heavily indebted to rational choice theory, Adam Smith, and conceptions of rights, than it is to Marx, Heidegger, and Levinas.

If we assume that jurisprudential and economic discourses provide the best models for the conceptual schemes that govern the systems of oppression centered in the U.S., then a U.S.-

centric philosophy of liberation will need to work through the reappropriation of these discourses. For example, consider that legal status plays a central role in how various populations are conceived and treated (e.g., “illegal aliens” and “illegal combatants”). The conceptual resources of the U.S. legal framework will provide the very tools that a new philosophy of liberation will rely on to combat various forms of oppression in at least these contexts. The traditional model of the philosophy of liberation has shown us one way to do this— philosophers elucidate the limits of the ontology presumed in the philosophical discourse (in this case, illegality), reveal the “underside” of those categories, and show how central categories can be recast in ways that recognize the humanity or legitimate rights or interest of the oppressed. For example, in domains where the status of “illegality” is determined by criminal law, the recasting of those categories will exploit the theoretical resources of the criminal law (chiefly retributivist and consequentialist formulations of justification). So, forms of oppression created by the implementation of U.S. categories of criminality will be reconstructed by appeal to, for example, the rights and just deserts of the victims, or the overall effects on the large numbers of disadvantaged peoples.

The presence of both retributivist and utilitarian discourse within legal discourse about the criminal law is telling in an important way. What it shows is that it would be unreasonable to expect that a U.S.-centric philosophy of liberation will have anything like a monistic or unified discourse. The same set of categories do not apply equally well across all contexts or networks of oppression because networks of oppression are oftentimes configured by a motley of normative concepts.<sup>32</sup> There will be domains in which one or another discourse is predominant. The language of rights and preference satisfaction will likely retain considerable pull in those domains most obviously structured by economic and political systems centered in the U.S.. But

oppression, even U.S.-centered oppression is hardly limited to these contexts and so in other contexts different discourses will be required. What that entails is that a U.S.-centric philosophy of liberation is unlikely to have a deep normative systematicity, apart from the unifying practical aim to uncover and eradicate systems of oppression.

Consequentialist reasoning will take a prominent role in recasting our understanding of the effects of economic systems of oppression for two reasons. First, it is notoriously difficult to show why national borders and other in-group/out-group biases have normative force internal to consequentialist considerations.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that comparatively greater regard (of which “special obligations” are an instance) for the needs and interests of those who stand in some relation of social proximity cannot be justified in consequentialist terms. Rather, it is to say that liberationist reasoning that comes in consequentialist form will already be structured in a way that at initially *disfavors* in-group bias and is resistant to disregard for the suffering of non-nationals. At least on a standard conception of consequentialist normative considerations, there is no reason to think that normative considerations stop at the edges of standardly conceived in-groups (families, communities, nations, genders, races, ethnic groups, etc.). A second reason why consequentialist reasoning will have special significance in contexts of economic oppression is that in many cases what is at stake are the lives of the poor, especially in the global South or the Third World. And, as Dussel has repeatedly reminded us— that is the vast majority of humanity.

These examples of how liberationist thought might be recast in U.S.-centric terms are obviously impoverished in a variety of ways, but a more systematic and developed version of this new philosophy of liberation will involve more expansive aims and discourses.

A new philosophy of liberation will be considerably better suited to achieving its ends than is the current form of philosophy of liberation. Minimally, it would avoid the Eurocentrism



Problem that plagues current influential forms of the philosophy of liberation. Of course, that it is U.S.-responsive is not meant to be a permanent or implastic feature of any philosophy of liberation. As suggested above, as the facts about the source of various oppressive regimes change, so too should the philosophy of liberation. And, we need not suppose that the chief source of oppressive arrangements is always nation states. Multinational, transnational, sub-national groups and social institutions can have significant power to oppress.

### 3. Some objections and replies

The very idea of a new, descriptively U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation, anchored in a careful re-writing of the language and concepts with currency in the United States will doubtlessly encounter resistance on the part of contemporary philosophers of liberation. Beyond the obvious and natural reluctance to dramatically change the character of an ongoing philosophical program, there are at least three obvious objections that merit reply.

One line of response to the proposal I have offered is to warn against a philosophy of liberation that is couched in the terms of “analytic philosophy” for it risks superficiality, depth, reflectiveness, etc. In a related context, Mario Sáenz has made remarks that are in keeping with this concern:

It is true that jargon may exclude others, and it often used precisely with that intention. We must be careful, however, in *not* doing in our relationship with the dominant analytic discourse in philosophy departments in the United States what Fourier tried to do when he scheduled an audience with the Czar of Russia to convince him of the virtues of socialism: We must not reduce discourse to a level of unthinking superficiality for the sake of a place at the table with those who have directed that philosophy be done without self-criticism.<sup>34</sup>

First, it is not obviously the case that a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation needs to be an “analytic” philosophy of liberation. It does seem fair to say that the discourse of analytic philosophy is more closely bound up in the conceptual currency of U.S. politics, economics, and culture than philosophy of liberation as it currently stands.<sup>35</sup> So, an “analytic” philosophy of liberation may make a certain amount of sense. However, a suitably U.S.-responsive philosophical discourse will be calibrated toward the foundations of U.S. political, economic, cultural, and conceptual hegemony. If that turns out to be recognizably analytic, fine— but it need not be. The point is to effectively fight oppression via a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation, not an analytic-responsive philosophy of liberation. And, if you accept the contention by Dussel, Mendieta, and other philosophers of liberation that this best done through a recasting of the center’s categories, then you should think it is time to recast the discourse of philosophy of liberation.

A second point of which we ought not need reminding is that even if there were an analytic philosophy of liberation, it need not be committed to any particular style, approach, methodology, or ontology. There is no one thing that is “analytic philosophy” any more than there is one thing that is “Continental philosophy.” Consequently, it would be sheer prejudice to suppose that only one and not the other can be superficial, profound, rigorous, or valuable. It is, I maintain, just as feasible to undertake “the praxis that subverts the phenomenological order and pierces it to let in a metaphysical transcendence” couched in broadly analytic terms as it is to undertake “a set of suitably normatively-informed practices that changes the way we think about categories of interaction with each other and the world, given the end of attaining a more ideal world” in broadly Continental terms.<sup>36</sup>

A second objection one might make to the proposal for a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation is that it has no advantage over a (descriptively) Eurocentric philosophy of liberation with respect to the contextual problem of Eurocentrism. As long as philosophy of liberation is foreign-oriented, it will garner considerable resistance because of features in the Latin American context. So, to the extent that the contextual aspect of the Eurocentrism Problem is genuine, it too is a problem for a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation.

Here my reply is less confident, though I think it can be sustained. First, I take it that the opposition to U.S. intellectual and cultural influence, while significant, does not run as culturally deep as concerns about Eurocentrism. Latin America and its cultural (including intellectual) products are so systematically and pervasively bound up by the European legacy of conquest and colonization that fears about Eurocentrism and its threat to local identity are ultimately inescapable in a way that concerns about the U.S.'s influence cannot (yet) be. Second, there are already important antecedents to the project of appropriation, transformation, and re-deployment of U.S. intellectual and cultural life.<sup>37</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that the existence of such a tradition might mitigate the skepticism that would greet a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation as opposed to a Eurocentric philosophy of liberation. Third, it is also relevant that the U.S. is becoming increasingly "Latin American" in a way that Europe is not. The obvious demographic changes, coupled with the simple fact that some of the best work in the philosophy of liberation is done by Latinos of both Latin American and U.S. origins, will necessarily make the fear of "outside" influence less pronounced than it might otherwise be if (as is now the case) scholars are demanding the incorporation of a (non-Latino) European discourse for liberation. Fourth, inasmuch as the codetermination and related points hold, what philosophers of liberation should want is to have a wide philosophy of liberation that is parasitic on the dominant

discourses. So, even if there is a generally justifiable fear of U.S.-centric theoretical discourses, the efficacy of such a discourse given the current geopolitical order should trump concerns about U.S.-centrism. At the same time, this exigency should not blind us to the risks inherent in developing a philosophy of liberation in the terms of any conceptual scheme implicated in oppressive conceptual, economic, and social arrangements.

A third objection one might direct at the U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation proposal is that it does nothing to remove the pedagogical dimensions of the Eurocentrism Problem. At best, it merely replaces the need to learn European philosophical discourses with the need to learn some other discourse. Since a problem replaced by another is little in the way of a solution, a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation gains us no ground against this aspect of the Eurocentrism Problem.

In reply, there are two points to be made. First, the categories of the chief conceptual systems in use in the U.S. (market capitalism, neo-liberal political philosophy, etc.) already have wide play throughout much of the world, including Latin America. Optimistically, this means that the proposed recasting of the liberationist project only eliminates a layer of jargon or intellectual apparatus, replanting it in concepts and ontologies that are already in existence in much of Latin America. Second, as noted above, part of the pedagogical aspect of the Eurocentrism Problem hinges on contextual features. If what I have said about the contextual benefits of a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation is true, then this will have benefits for the pedagogical aspects of the problem as well. Third and finally, it need not be the case that from the perspective of pedagogy a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation is obviously better than Eurocentric philosophy of liberation. All that is required to justify the switch from Eurocentric to U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation is that overall, a U.S.-responsive philosophy of

liberation does a better job of attaining the end of liberation. Given the acceptance of codetermination and related points, and given the shift in center, there is reason to think a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation would do just that.

#### 4. Desde el principio

The Eurocentrism Problem deserves to be taken seriously, for it is a charge that threatens many versions of the philosophy of liberation. If there is something objectionable about contemporary philosophy of liberation's reliance on European philosophy, it infects much of the philosophy of liberation as it is currently pursued.

That said, existing philosophers of liberation can offer a reply to at least the dialectical aspect of the Eurocentrism Problem. It seems reasonable to hold that any discourse— including discourses that are only tangentially related to the dialectic of ideas between considered centers and peripheries— can be used to formulate stringent critiques of various systems of oppression. Though there are surely complicated ethical and political issues in doing so, we need not deny that philosophy of liberation can be articulated and defended in any language, and within a wide range of borrowed *or* autochthonous ontologies. It is just not plausible to maintain that any idea will be corrupted in virtue of its terminological origins being traced back to Europe. Entire new philosophical vocabularies would have to be invented, which is neither necessary nor desirable. Moreover, to the extent that those newly invented vocabularies are rooted in Spanish, English, or any other European language, this too would seem to raise worries about the inescapability of conceptual oppression by Europe. Thus, if we accept Mendieta's point that there is a certain degree of codetermination of center and periphery that is inevitable and required by an effective

philosophy of liberation, then what is needed is not an entirely new vocabulary but only one that responsive and internal to the discourses of the center(s).

All philosophers are subject to a certain amount of intellectual inertia. We are trained in particular traditions and discourses, and we apply it to whatever contexts strike us as suitable. Too few of us stop to consider whether there are alternative discourses available, perhaps ones we are not ordinarily disposed to using, that might better suit our purposes. Something like this is at the root of the Eurocentrism Problem that contemporary Philosophy of Liberation faces. Contemporary philosophy of liberation is understandably Eurocentric, given the histories of the relevant figures.<sup>38</sup> This is not, in itself, problematic if we accept that (1) there is a certain malleability to language and (2) the sensible idea that one effective strategy of resistance is to reshape the familiar oppressive categories so that we become more sensitive to what they exclude, cover up, ignore, and presume. What makes the Eurocentrism Problem a genuine problem for philosophy of liberation are several things: the contextual and pedagogical aspects, of course, and primarily the issue of whether or not philosophy of liberation is *best* served by its Eurocentrism. If I am right, these things favor the transformation of the philosophical practice of philosophy of liberation so that it is more closely engaged with contemporary sources of oppressive discourse, concepts, and ontologies—namely, those of the U.S. I have called this a U.S.-responsive philosophy of liberation. But if and when the relevant center shifts, then so too should the discourse of philosophy of liberation. The point is to have a center(s)-responsive discourse, whatever that turns out to be, and not merely a discourse bound up in critiquing, recasting, and revealing problems with just or even primarily Europe.

If I am wrong about this, and if the Eurocentrism Problem is not really a problem for contemporary philosophy of liberation, then I think it is clear that philosophers of liberation still

need to offer a better account of the justification of their discourse, given their stated aims. Having said this, though, I should also note that I suspect Mendieta would ultimately agree. His defense of Dussel is clearly not meant to be a sustained defense but a reply to a certain unsophisticated version of the Eurocentrism Problem. But whether I am right or wrong about how philosophy of liberation should reply to the Eurocentrism criticism, a sustained and principled defense is precisely the thing that Dussel and other philosophers of liberation should offer their critics.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philosophy of liberation is a somewhat protean category. Broadly put, it takes as its central task nothing less than the liberation of all peoples (though especially the marginalized) from all forms of oppression. Important statements of it include Enrique D. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky, *Filosofía de la liberación* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), Arturo Andrés Roig, “The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America,” in *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1986), Horacio Cerutti Guldberg, *Filosofía De La Liberación Latinoamericana*, 2a ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992). Other influential philosophical works concerned with themes of liberation in Latin America include Francisco Miró Quesada, *Despertar Y Proyecto Del Filosofar Latinoamericano* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), Leopoldo Zea, *Dependencia Y Liberación En La Cultura Latinoamericana*, 1. ed. (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1974), Leopoldo Zea, *La Filosofía Americana Como Filosofía Sin Más*, [1. ed. (México, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1969), and Augusto Salazar Bondy, *Sentido Y Problema Del Pesamiento Filosófico Hispano-Americano*, trans. Donald Schmidt (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Center for Latin American Studies, 1969). On some accounts, relevant earlier versions of liberationist thought can be found in José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1971), Samuel Ramos, *El Perfil Del Hombre Y La Cultura En México* (México, D.F.: Imprenta Mundial, 1934), among other historical antecedents. For these more expansive accounts of liberationist philosophy see Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and Mario Sáenz, *The Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought: Latin American Historicism and the Phenomenology of Leopoldo Zea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999). For present purposes, I will focus on the Dussellian strand of the philosophy of liberation, which has been taken up by a number of scholars throughout the Americas, as exemplified by the collection edited by Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, *Thinking from the Underside of History : Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), and monographs such as Sáenz, *The Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought* and Michael D. Barber, *Ethical Hermeneutics : Rationality in Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).



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<sup>2</sup> Various formulations and suggestions of this criticism can be found in Cerutti Guldberg, *Filosofía De La Liberación Latinoamericana*, Ofelia Schutte, “Origin and Tendencies of the Philosophy of Liberation in Latin American Thought: A Critique of Dussel's Ethics,” *The Philosophical Forum* XXII, no. 3 (1991), and Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation*

<sup>3</sup> See Enrique D. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See Enrique D. Dussel, *Ética De La Liberación En La Edad De La Globalización Y La Exclusión*, 3. ed. (Madrid: Trotta, 2000), Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*

<sup>5</sup> See Juan Bautista Alberdi, “Ideas Para Un Curso De Filosofía Contemporánea,” *Latinoamerica: Cuadernos de Cultura Latinoamericana* 9 (1978 [1842]), Francisco Bilbao, “Iniciativa De La América: Idea De Un Congreso Federal De Las Republicas,” *Latinoamerica: Cuadernos de Cultura Latinoamericana* 3 (1978 [1856]), Andrés Bello, “Autonomía Cultural De América,” *Latinoamerica: Cuadernos de Cultura Latinoamericana* 11 (1978 [1848]) and a bit more recently Salazar Bondy, *Sentido Y Problema Del Pensamiento*

<sup>6</sup> The widespread Latin American adoption of Comtean and Spencerian positivism are the best examples of this phenomenon. Classic works discussing the influence of positivism in Latin American include Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin-American Mind* (Norman,: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), Leopoldo Zea, *Positivism in Mexico* (Austin,: University of Texas Press, 1974), and Ricaurte Soler, *El Positivismo Argentino : Pensamiento Filosófico Y Sociológico* (Buenos Aires,: Paídos, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> For an especially vivid version of the problems and complexities with cultural co-optation, see Gomez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the particular and peculiar linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers that work against the study of philosophy originally written in Spanish, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). For an examination of some related issues, see Eduardo Mendieta, “Is There Latin American Philosophy?,” *Philosophy Today* 43 (Supp) (1999).

<sup>9</sup> See Guillermo Hurtado, “¿Tiene Sentido Una Filosofía Hispanoamericana?,” *La Jornada Semanal*, 22 de Diciembre 1996. Unsurprisingly, in some countries there has been a retreat away from the study of philosophy to more obviously “applied” fields. See Carlos Paladines, “¿Muere O Sobrevive La Filosofía En El Ecuador? Razones

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De Su Descrédito Y Propuestas Para Su Renacimiento,” in *Philosophy of Latin America*, ed. Guttorm Fløistad (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Dussel studied Europe and his work reflects this, which makes it more accessible to philosophers trained in the relevant European traditions than it does to philosophers who are not. It is therefore worth reminding ourselves that the propagation and development of the philosophy of liberation in the United States reflects this contingent history.

<sup>11</sup> I have made previously suggested a criticism along these lines in Manuel Vargas, “Review of Mario Sáenz’s *the Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought*,” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 00, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>12</sup> See Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, p. 188.

<sup>13</sup> Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>14</sup> For a version of this criticism, see Schutte, “Origins and Tendencies . . .” There, she remarks that Dussel’s “methodology is largely Hegelian and his texts are heavily populated by German and other foreign terms that no Latin American peasant or worker could understand without highly specialized training” (p. 294, n.35).

<sup>15</sup> For important attempts to critically engage with the various strands of the philosophy of liberation, including Dussel’s, see Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation* and Cerutti Guldberg, *Filosofía De La Liberación Latinoamericana*, Sáenz, *The Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought*, and the works collected in Alcoff and Mendieta, *Thinking from the Underside of History : Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation*.

<sup>16</sup> This is a point emphasized in Enrique D. Dussel, “Epilogue,” in *Thinking from the Underside of History*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 270-1. See also his response to Elina Vuola on pp. 284-6 in that same volume.

<sup>17</sup> See n.1.

<sup>18</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Underside of Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanity Books, 1996), p. xxvii, n. 5.

<sup>19</sup> For the latter, see works such as Dussel, *Ética De La Liberación En La Edad De La Globalización Y La Exclusión* and Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* In this group also more historical but philosophically-oriented texts such as Dussel, *Invention of the Americas* For instances of the latter, see works such as Enrique D. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)*, trans. Alan Neely, *Historia de la Iglesia en*

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*América Latina. 3rd ed. 1974.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) and Enrique D. Dussel, *The Church in Latin America, 1492-1992* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> “Epilogue” p. 270.

<sup>21</sup> For additional concerns about Dussel’s usage of this terminology, see Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation* p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> *Philosophy of Liberation*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see *Invention of the Americas* pp.9-10, as well as Saenz’s comments on the significance of Wallerstein for Dussel’s use of center/periphery in Mario Sáenz, “Dussel on Marx: Living Labor and the Materiality of Life,” in *Thinking from the Underside of History*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), esp. pp.230-231.

<sup>24</sup> Something like this seems to part of the motivation for a project of “mestizaje from below” as proposed by Mario Sáenz in *The Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought*, pp. 305-352.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton, 2000), esp. pp. 91-171.

<sup>26</sup> The apparent imbalance in direction of influence may be due in some part to a systematic failure of self-critical reflection in various European traditions on the ways in which they have been affected— or culpably failed to be responsive to— developments in Latin America and the Iberian peninsula. See Dussel *The Invention of the Americas*, pp. 63-90 and Sáenz *The Identity of Liberation in Latin American Thought*, pp. 117-154. Though also see Jorge J.E. Gracia *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, Ch.4, esp. p.86 for a discussion that takes a different tact.

<sup>27</sup> My thanks to Eduardo Mendieta for helping me see this point.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*, trans. Loïc Wacquant, *Contre-feux 2: Pour un mouvement social européen* (New York: The New Press, 2003) p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> In fairness, Dussel’s views on the nature of the center matter may have changed. Moreover, the shift of center that began after the end of World War II and accelerated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, may have only become complete, apparent, or totalizing since he wrote *Philosophy of Liberation*. I should also note that Schutte mistakenly cites Dussel as claiming the center is in North America. She quotes him as claiming that “peripheral peoples results from imperialism. Philosophically it is founded on North American ontology” (her emphasis) (“Origins and Tendencies . . .” p. 276). The original text, however, reads ‘North Atlantic’, not ‘North American’ which is

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consistent with the text's predominant focus on Europe. See Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* p. 71 and the diagram on p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> I also take it that avoiding the normative form of Eurocentrism only gets the philosopher of liberation so far. As we have seen, there are aspects of a purely descriptive Eurocentrism that take have normatively significant consequences in the context of the real world, as exemplified by the contextual and pedagogical aspects of the Eurocentrism Problem.

<sup>31</sup> In calling for the adoption of this strategy, I acknowledge the point that many have made (even in debates internal to the European philosophical scene) that given the socio-historical contexts of most professional academics, it is neither sensible nor even possible to get entirely "outside" of European-derived concepts and language. What is left for us to do is to adapt it to our ends, supplementing it and transforming it as our purposes demand. I remark on this further in section 4.

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this may simply be a fact of contemporary Western normative discourse in general. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 1-5.

<sup>33</sup> For a now classic instance of this sort of reasoning see Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972).

<sup>34</sup> Mario Sáenz, "On the Meaning of the Philosophy Liberation: Reply to My Critics," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2001), p. 89.

<sup>35</sup> For provocative discussions of the links between mainstream U.S. philosophical practices and U.S. domestic and geopolitical history — and in many cases, remarkable silences about them—, see John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the Mccarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 2001) and Jeff Paris, "After Rawls: Review of *John Rawls: Collected Papers*," *Social Theory and Practice* 28, no. 4 (2002).

<sup>36</sup> Though they sometimes serves as useful shorthands, I do not find talk of "analytic" and "Continental" philosophy to be especially helpful. Even a cursory study of the philosophical scene outside the Anglophone world (e.g., in Latin America) makes it clear that the analytic/Continental distinction is hardly exhaustive, decisive, or even especially illuminating. See, for example, Manuel Vargas, "Crossing the Borders of Philosophy: Some Thoughts on the 14th Interamerican Congress," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 99, no. 2 (2000). If anything, what these distinctions mark out are social groups of philosophers who are more likely to talk among

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themselves than with other groups. See also the discussion in Brian Leiter, “Introduction,” in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, José Vasconcelos’ use of theory underdetermination in the context of anthropology, biology, and race in José Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1926). I discuss this example in Manuel Vargas, “Lessons from the Philosophy of Race in Mexico,” *Philosophy Today* 44, no. SPEP Supplement 2000, vol. 26 (2000).

<sup>38</sup> See note 10.

<sup>39</sup> Thanks to Jeff Paris and Eduardo Mendieta for illuminating comments on a prior version of this paper. I am confident that I did not pay them nearly enough heed. My thanks also to the Mortimer Fleishhacker Endowment for Philosophy at the University of San Francisco and to the California Institute of Technology for financial support while I worked on this paper.

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