

RICARDO BENZAQUEN DE ARAÚJO AND THE ENDLESS COMPLETION OF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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As we are reading, again and in some cases for the first time, the learned essays of our late colleague Ricardo Benzaquen, one opening gesture strikes us that permeates the almost four decades they cover and that, quite inevitably, conjures up his voice and his face. It is the reiterated expression of regret and embarrassment with which Ricardo apologized for focusing “only on one, rather marginal aspect” of a given topic, sometimes due to a “lamentable lack of time,” on other occasions for “private reasons that do not deserve to be mentioned” in the public sphere. He used such academic-sounding formulas in the most heartfelt, almost romantically naive fashion -- for nobody was more aware than him of the potentially “overwhelming complexity” hidden in any problem at stake and in any question raised by the dimension of intellectual history. Without a doubt, Ricardo was convinced, over and again, that more time to investigate and a greater erudition than his own (however hard this was to imagine) would have enabled him to produce more complete solutions and answers. This may also have been one of the reasons why, more frequently as his age was advancing, Ricardo refrained from casting his notoriously opulent and expert discussion remarks into written texts, and rather allowed editors to print them in the status of transcripts.

Trying to identify what may have been Ricardo Benzaquen’s specific intellectual style and achievement, I feel tempted to use the same apologetic language that had so much become part of his academic persona – although, probably different from Ricardo, I do know that having all the time on earth for a book-length analysis would not get me any closer to the fulfillment of the self-assigned task. To discover how much I converge with Ricardo in this urge to apologize for an impossibility of completion seemed surprising at

first, given the difference between our professional temperaments; but by now I am persuaded that any attempt of understanding him makes it necessary to confront, jointly, the more general problem that he had been facing for lifetime, without fully gauging its magnitude and seriousness, that is the very problem we can pinpoint and then unfold as the paradox of “endless completion” in the Benzaquen-specific brand of intellectual history. In other words: I propose to speak about how more knowledge produces more questions than answers and further intensifies our awareness of the distance that separates us from solving problems and from completing documentations.

(1)

Let us then start by describing Ricardo’s “world” in the phenomenological sense of the term, i.e. as a particular horizon and ontology through which he and others have experienced their environment. Above all, Ricardo’s world was a world of written and printed texts, much more dominantly and (for him) naturally than a world of things, of persons, and of events to which those texts were referring. For students and friends, he looked the most at home when his shortsighted eyes were so close to a page covered with characters that he had to move his head in order to follow the handwritten or printed words and lines. And this particular world also implies the anticipation of being infinite and impossible to cover by any scholarly effort (hence Ricardo’s apologies) -- not because it includes all different kinds of texts but, rather, because it consists of a specific genre whose ontology and vocation it is, in each individual case, to multiply the number of possible references to other texts.

This is the genre of texts that preserve, describe, and also extend the history of ideas, and at the same time the genre of texts that has become the central object and the product of the academic “Humanities and Arts” since the early nineteenth century; but it has also represented, starting several decades later, the written genealogy of the non-empirical “Social Sciences.” From the institutional angle of academic disciplines, the body of texts in question may therefore be labeled by the always-welcome predicate of

being “interdisciplinary” but, at least in Ricardo’s intellectual practice, it appeared as one -- and only one -- both intellectually homogeneous and ideologically centrifugal universe. Since a very young age, he must have acquired and accumulated a truly stunning knowledge of the, above all, German and French classics within this tradition. Max Weber, Georg Lukács, and Erwin Panofski had become Ricardo’s masters, together with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Fernand Braudel, and Lucien Febvre, with Hannah Arendt, Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt or, more eccentrically and significantly, Georg Simmel, as well as Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, François Furet, and Jacques Le Goff, but also Umberto Eco and Giorgio Agamben, Arthur Danto, Robert Darnton, and Hayden White. Ricardo was able to quote their central (and also their more marginal) works, almost literally, in every discussion, together with the more important texts by their predecessors and students.

This textual world of Ricardo’s had a rather diffuse center but no true limit, which confirms and explains the observation, made in a moving obituary by his student Joao Marcelo Ehlert Maia, that the word “enfim,” as an interjection, could never have a stronger effect in his language than that of a semicolon, ultimately postponing rather than concluding descriptions. And as if to underline in everyday life, somehow ironically, that his world had to be one of civilization and not of immediate realities, Ricardo unfailingly used the corresponding metaphorical distinction, discovered by Lévi-Strauss, between the “cooked” (“cuit”) and the “raw” (“cru”), when he was insisting, each time he visited a restaurant, that he wanted his meat “very well done” (“muito bem passado”).

While there seems to have been no single figure of decisive influence in Ricardo Benzaquen’s scholarly education, the chronological sequence of his texts, inaugurated 1977 by a beautiful essay on Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” and the origin of the State, in co-authorship with E.B.Viveiros de Castro, makes it quite easy to follow a linear process of intellectual growth. Most of his earlier contributions were well executed but narrowly focused reconstructions (or “explications de texte”) of historical documents and discourses, mainly from the right-wing tradition of Brazilian “Integralismo” between the 1930s and the 1950s. From the mid-1980s on, however, Ricardo began to display a

technique of reading individual, mainly Brazilian texts where the ever growing infinity of his larger textual world turned into the multi-layered substance of a complex process of contextualization. With ever increasing clarity he managed to use the inevitable endlessness of such contexts in order to produce the impression of potentially endless commentaries. From that time on, Ricardo's scholarly essays no longer had the status of interpretations identifying and describing finite meanings but that of running notes opening up the hermeneutic potential of individual texts.

In a final stage of rare (if not singular) mastery within the scholarly genre of commentary, Benzaquen's energy of complexification ended up touching even the classic texts that made up the body of his endless contexts. In his contribution to a 2007 debate among historians of architecture, for example, he showed how Georg Simmel's concept of "metropolis" did not only describe a cultural environment, typical of cities like Berlin or Paris in the 1920s, full of different traditions and inspirations that ended up producing a sensitivity of "choc" -- but also became the productively contrastive background for the understanding of places with an organic historical harmony that Simmel associated with Rome above all. Almost fifteen years earlier, I had already been perplexed when Ricardo reacted to my own thesis that the "tragedy of everyday life" was an existential motif bringing together several dimensions in Erich Auerbach's work, with a nuanced multiplication of connotations surrounding the concept of "tragedy" in the same historical situation. And the more the internal complexity of those context elements was growing, the less possible it became for Ricardo to ever bring an individual historical commentary to its conclusion.

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But what was the effect of this ever more specific and sophisticated technique of contextualization? In principle, the larger historical contexts that Ricardo managed to activate belonged to the body of European classics from the Humanities and from the Social Sciences, whereas the individual works to be unfolded were part of the Brazilian

intellectual tradition whose contours often became visible, for the first time, only thanks to Benzaquen's work. Highlighting, in each analysis, a large number of similarities and of differences between the individual texts in question and their not primarily South American contexts, Ricardo gave the Brazilian texts not only an unexpected complexity but also a new, rather cosmopolitan dignity. For readers familiar with his style, it is obvious that Ricardo's life-long concentration on the work of Gilberto Freyre, culminating in his 1994 monograph under the title "Guerra e Paz," which has long become a classic itself, yielded the most impressive illustrations of the efficiency inherent to what we may call the "Benzaquen method."

If Freyre's undeniable proximity to the Fascist horizon of ideas during the second quarter of the twentieth century, the time of the intellectual emergence of "Casa Grande e Senzala", had blocked for decades any fruitful national confrontation with this 1933 masterpiece about Brazil's cultural identity, Benzaquen's approach transcended the politically plausible one-sidedness in its reception and thus ignited a fresh fascination and respect of Freyre's thought that had the virtue of not bracketing its objectively problematic aspects. Nothing was more essential indeed for Ricardo's intellectual style: he never argued against one-sided positions with equally idiosyncratic counter-positions but beat them by a complexity and poly-perspectivism of his own, that is thanks to the historical contexts that he was able to evoke in their highest complexity.

The new view of Gilberto Freyre that Benzaquen had made possible also became the starting point for a growing gallery of individual portraits from the national tradition of ideas. A particularly beautiful essay published by Ricardo in 2000 developed the obvious comparison between "Casa Grande e Senzala" and Sergio Buarque's both competing and converging book "Raizes do Brasil" from 1936. But instead of taking sides, he pushed the contrast between Freyre's vision of Brazilian culture as a synthesis and Buarque's intuition of a precarious equilibrium between different traditions to a level of precision where the reading of both works gained from their difference. With a similar effect of redeeming them from all-too monochrome ways of understanding and from predictable political claims, Ricardo unearthed a discursive level of ethical commitment

in the writings of Lucio Costa, the mastermind behind the conception of Brasília, and discovered moments of melancholia and hesitation in the correspondence of Mário de Andrade, the emblematic modernist of Brazilian literary history. Finally, there is a considerable amount of published work and some solid biographical evidence that make us imagine that Ricardo was on his way towards a book about Joaquim Nabuco as the foundational figure of political modernism in Brazil, a figure also with whom he shared a productive ambiguity between cosmopolitanism and patriotism.

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Given the primarily textual ontology of Ricardo's world and the intellectual movements that happened to dominate in the academic world during his intellectual youth and adolescence, it is no wonder that he was impressed by such claims of principle as Jacques Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" and, even more so, by the neo-historicist reduction of "History" into a variety of textual genres and tonalities, that is by a movement beginning in the late 1970s which our memory still tends to associate, very closely, with the name of Hayden White and his landmark book "Metahistory." There are indeed a few – untypically long – publications in Ricardo's early work where he seems to have explored the potential of this implosion of -- or liberation from -- the norms of thinking and writing "History" as they had emerged around 1800 with the rise of the historical worldview in Western culture. But something in those texts by Benzaquen appears to have deviated from the then so strongly established conventions of Deconstruction and Neo-Historicism, something quite difficult to grasp – although the length of those essays may have been the symptom of a hesitation, on Ricardo's side, to embrace the new positions at stake.

I observe two relevant differences between Neo-Historicism and Ricardo's reaction to it, differences that probably occurred without any programmatic intention. In the first place, Ricardo did not stop, as it was typical for the neo-historical discourse, at a general leveling of all different genres and textual traditions in relation to the past. Rather, after

pointing to the limits of “scientific sobriety” and perhaps also of a Hegelian type of rationality, as they had controlled academic History in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he cautiously stated a preference for the tradition of literary Realism and for the possibilities of imagination in dealing with the past, a preference which, seen from our distance, appears similar to motifs in Georg Lukács’ early work. Secondly and above all, however, we can trace a fascination, throughout Ricardo’s work, for the repertoire of concepts and forms having to do with Subjectivity, a fascination that puts his intellectual style at an even greater distance from Neo-historicism and its search for “energies” that can be seen as undercutting the dimensions of the Subject.

To avoid misunderstandings: Ricardo Benzaquen never returned to (or got stuck in) the traditional genre of “historical biography.” Rather, he was searching for what we can describe as “effects of Subjectivity,” that is for textual tonalities like “tragedy” and “melancholia,” “authenticity” and “illusion,” “happiness,” “friendship” and “intensity” or, on a level closer to Brazilian national identity, “cordiality” as a personal style in social interaction. Likewise, it is remarkable to see how the names and, with them, the individual profiles of a number of favorite national authors never underwent a process of dissolution under Benzaquen’s technique of discursive contextualization. Precisely this, the somehow natural and seemingly effortless co-presence of both endless historical contexts and highly specific effects of Subjectivity, make up for what I experience as his unique intellectual style.

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But, faithful to what we can learn from Ricardo’s work, we should ask, again, for the specific contexts that made this style possible. One such context is quite evident and has already come up indeed. It is the explicit sympathy that Ricardo felt for the form of the intellectual essay, as Georg Lukács had cultivated it, above all, in his collection “The Soul and the Forms” from 1911. Like Lukács himself, we can suspect that Ricardo’s convergence between endless contexts and specific profiles of Subjectivity needed

freedom from logical and discursive constraints in order to become viable. Another possible context is much more uncertain but, I believe, interesting enough to be mentioned. For at least one long-standing and still productive cultural practice exists in which endless contextualization and specific effects of Subjectivity do come together. I am of course referring to the Talmud as an ever-growing collection of commentaries and instructions about Jewish life stemming from the Rabbinic tradition, a collection whose centrifugal complexity has permanently motivated and rejected all kinds of internal systematizations and external closures. At the same time, however, the Talmud has preserved, as effects of Subjectivity, the names of many individual Rabbis and, more astonishingly, certain tonalities and gestures that can be associated with them.

Now Ricardo's students, colleagues, and friends have always known about his Jewish family background – but it is not equally clear what exact role this background had played in his education. "Benzaquen," the family name that he was using in all kinds of everyday situations, goes back to the Sefardic Marrocan genealogy of his mother, whereas the name "Araújo" points to his father's (non-Jewish) Portuguese descent. It is possible that the emphasis given to the Sefardic name was meant to establish a matrilineal connection and tradition, as it belongs to Jewish life. But we should not make too much of it, especially those among us who can still remember the joy Ricardo drew from the self-ironic remark that he had inherited his Jewish humor from his non-Jewish father.

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Rather than giving in to a temptation, typical for the academic Humanities, of romanticizing and thus exaggerating the impact of Jewish heritage, Ricardo Benzaquen's heritage in this specific case, we should acknowledge it as just one obvious part within the endless intellectual complexity at whose origin it perhaps stood. This complexity also made Ricardo the most generous teacher and advisor because he was unable to keep his own interests separate from those of his students. The same

complexity, as I have tried to show, allowed for all kinds of paradoxical and yet livable connections in his existence: for endless contextualization and specific effects of Subjectivity; for a both Christian Portuguese and a Sefardic Marrocan descent; for the humor and style of a Jewish intellectual at a Catholic University; for a Brazilian patriotism without well-circumscribed political positions but with a cosmopolitan aura; and for a world made of texts that never ended up repressing personal charisma and individual charm.