

JEAN FRANCO

THE
DECLINE & FALL
— OF THE —
LETTERED CITY

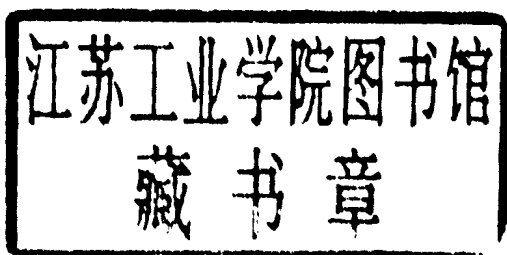
LATIN AMERICA IN THE COLD WAR



The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City

LATIN AMERICA IN THE COLD WAR

JEAN FRANCO



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For Alexis

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Introduction

This border place no longer exists.

MICHAEL HARDT AND ANTONIO NEGRI, *Empire*¹

In 1953 I sailed to Central America on a Dutch merchant ship that reached Santiago de Cuba a few days after the attack led by Fidel Castro on the Moncada barracks. We found the shops closed and the whole town in mourning. I was on my way to Guatemala and was living there when the Arbenz government was overthrown by a mercenary army subsidized by the United States. From one day to the next the city became a hostile territory—friends had taken refuge in embassies; there was no longer news on the radio, only marimba music; and at night the curfew confined us to the house. What I remember most vividly about that time was not the emptiness of defeat but the poet Alaíde Foppa de Solórzano reading her poems during the curfew, an experience that was to leave a trace in everything I have written, especially in this book. Literature is a protagonist in this drama of loss and dislocation not only because it articulated the utopian but also because it is implicated in its demise. That is why what began as a book on the Cold War and culture developed into an exploration of a postwar battlefield from which many of the old landmarks seem like ghostly remnants.

The United States staged its cultural interventions during the Cold War as a defense of freedom against censorship, while on an altogether different plane, in what was pitched as a war of “values,” the Soviet Union defended a realism in which the “real” was defined as class struggle and “peace” became a political tactic. As far as the

United States was concerned, there was a distinct advantage when the autonomy of art and the freedom of the artist could be pitted against programmatic realism. The appeal to Latin Americans dangled by front organizations, such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, was not only freedom but inclusion in “universal” culture, although this disguised a not-so-subtle attack on national, ethnic, and local cultures, which were denigrated as aberrant, as merely provincial, or as idiosyncratic. This gave the project a rather more frontally avowed intention than the aesthetic modernisms of Europe and the United States, the power of which, in Fredric Jameson’s words, “was, during the cold war and in the period of their North American canonization, displaced and invested in essentially anti-political forms of academic aestheticism.”² In Latin America, on the other hand, the literary high ground was claimed by “apolitical” writers, most of whom were outside the academy.

There are, therefore, significant differences between the withdrawal of the U.S. intelligentsia from “committed” art in the 1940s and the split that occurred in Latin America between the public commitment of writers and their writing. In the United States, modernism became institutionalized in the Cold War years, when the focus was on the “spiritual critique” of literature. In Latin America it was a time of acerbic polemics and debate as writers’ hitherto untested claims of commitment were challenged by publics whose imaginations were fired by armed struggle and revolution. All kinds of aesthetic and political projects now appeared possible—the aesthetic utopias of modernism and the historical avant-garde, the notion of pure art and pure literature, participatory theater, liberation from capitalism.

But the continent was also a battlefield of another kind as both the United States and the Soviet Union carried on covert activities to influence the hearts and minds of Latin Americans. Thus abstract universalism and freedom were values disseminated by CIA-funded journals against the universal teleology of revolution, behind which lurked the Soviet national project. As I suggest in the first two chapters, there is more to this than conspiracy theory. In the United States itself, the turn from public art to abstract expressionism, from a politicized avant-garde to a depoliticized avant-garde art, from realist to experimental writing (a turn that was never absolute or all-embracing), was based on claims for artistic autonomy.³ In Latin America, on the other hand, one serious effect of deploying art and literature in the

service of the great powers was a devaluation of literature itself and ultimately of writers' ethical claims. Cold War pragmatics overrode the very values that literature ostensibly espoused; at the same time, culture was being remapped and the prestige of writers undermined by the rapidly changing field invaded and structured by mass communications. Meanwhile, the "universal," defined as Western values, proved to be as counterfeit as the teleological assumptions that underwrote the universalism of the communist Left. Artistic freedom became subsumed under the tendentious "freedom" posited by the Cold War warriors while the ideal city of workers was annexed by the Soviet empire.

It can be argued that the Cold War in Latin America actually began with the Cuban revolution, although the 1954 intervention in Guatemala served as a prelude. The Cuban and the Nicaraguan revolutions appeared to spring organically from their own national past and appealed to the long-standing program of national liberation that would allow Latin American countries to develop their own style of modernization in liberated territories, freed from the taints of past corruption and materialism. A tradition of catholic anticapitalism wedded to a notion of "good" use value against evil exchange mobilized not only Che Guevara's nonmaterial incentives and Ernesto Cardenal's community of Solentiname but also the antimaterialism of the militant avant-garde movements. This was the period when conceptual artists were throwing money into the Seine and when Abbie Hoffman threw dollar bills into the New York Stock Exchange. "Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*," wrote Marx in an early essay, but in the 1960s it was money and exchange as such that came under suspicion, a suspicion that threaded politics with art and surfaced in literary texts, art happenings, and political movements from the Tupamaros to the Sendero Luminoso.⁴ The alternative community was imagined as the pure antithesis to the miseries of the real nation, to market-driven capitalism and bureaucratic communism alike. But the idealized austerity of the guerrilla and the idealized simplicity of the peasant could not be reconciled with the exuberance and excess of the aesthetic, nor with the status of the writer as hero. This would be the essence of the drama that unfolded not only in Cuba but also among insurgent groups throughout Latin America as literature became subordinated to warfare. The military metaphor of the avant-garde reached a limit when Cuba, in its self-appointed role as Third World

liberator, pressed supporters into service that was no longer metaphoric. The literary avant-garde could not be transformed into a vanguard for many reasons, not the least being a masculinist bias that brought about an exodus of gay writers from Cuba. In Chapter 3 I examine the often conflicting utopian projects that were tested by the *realpolitik* of siege economy and war.

Conspiracy theories that only take into account North American intervention can never account for a writer's disaffection from left-wing cultural politics, for that disaffection was in many cases a tacit rejection of the rigidity of Soviet-inspired aesthetics. As I argue in Chapter 2, socialist realism in Latin America always came up against realities of race, of underdevelopment and the legacy of colonialism that were not containable in its narrow structure. It was poetry rather than the realist novel that narrated Latin America's fragmented history as an epic adventure with the poet, not the politician, as prophet.

The extent of the conflict of competing universals can only be understood in the context of societies in which literature conferred status and relative independence on writers who were not only vociferous critics but had, in the 1960s, substantially redefined their traditional pedagogical role. Poets and novelists influenced the way literature was read, history understood, and language valued. Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Lezama Lima, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Augusto Roa Bastos, and José María Arguedas—the list could be longer—introduced theories of reading and understanding to elucidate not only their own work but also that of their forerunners and contemporaries. They created canons and produced a corpus of criticism that included essays, monographs, speeches, and journalism, that provided a serious evaluation of contemporary culture, and that revamped literary genealogy in a way that transgressed narrow national boundaries. In his essay on the new Latin American novel, Carlos Fuentes described the work of his contemporaries as a healthy break with the language of power.⁵ In *Don Quixote or the Critique of Reading*, he ascribed to Cervantes's novel a crucial role in the secularization of society, drawing parallels between Cervantes's time and his own: "As if he foresaw all the dirty tricks of servile literary naturalism, Cervantes destroys the illusion of literature as a mere copy of reality and creates a literary reality far more powerful and difficult to grapple with: the reality of a novel in its existence at all levels of the critique of reading."⁶ Mario Vargas Llosa described

literature as a permanent insurrection and the author as one who commits *deicide*.⁷ Julio Cortázar resurrected surrealism from the graveyard, while inserting theories of writing into his novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*).⁸ Borges's entire work is an allegory of reading. Octavio Paz not only reinterpreted the history of the avant-garde in Europe as a poetics of disenchantment but also wrote on a range of poetic theory, on Lévi-Strauss, and on Indian culture—the fruit of his years in Delhi, where he served as Mexican ambassador.⁹ Furthermore, a substantial group of writers—Miguel Angel Asturias, José María Arguedas, Augusto Roa Bastos, Darcy Ribeiro, and Alejo Carpentier—undertook ethnographic study as well as literary explorations into the linguistic and racial heterogeneity of the continent. The point I am making is that for two decades, writers were more important arbiters of taste, especially among the younger generation, than critics or academics and more important monitors of political correctness than politicians. The presence of students and young people at readings, in conferences and even mass meetings at which writers pronounced on politics, revolution, and literature—as a result of a growing upwardly mobile university population—brought into visibility social actors, many of them recent immigrants into the city, and a young generation of readers impatient for change. The physical presence of this public heightened the rhetoric of polarized Cold War politics.

Responding to these demographic changes, writers self-confidently instigated the public to read as “contemporaries of the rest of the world.” Indeed, the development of a critical consciousness was a political task. A plethora of little magazines debated Hegel, Gramsci, Fanon, and Sartre.¹⁰ But if “demystification,” “engagement,” and “liberation” were key words of the early 1960s, so was “modernization,” in which project art and literature became pioneers. Referring to the opening of the Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires in 1963, one journal commented that “the modern world is now available to everybody.”¹¹ To many writers this access to the modern world felt like a massive prison break out of the confining teleology that placed Latin American culture as well as its economic development “downstream” from the West.

That teleology had been reflected in the preface to Anderson Imbert's influential book *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* (*History of Spanish American Literature*), which was published in 1953 and in whose preface the author sorrowfully acknowledged that

“our contributions to international literature are minimal” (and this despite the success of Borges and the emergence onto the literary scene of Juan Rulfo and Juan Carlos Onetti). In his view, only a handful of Latin American writers could compare to those of Europe and among them there was not a single novelist. “In general,” he complained, “we are afflicted with improvisation, disorder, with the fragmentary and the impure.” No doubt bearing in mind Wellek and Warren’s definition of imaginative literature—“organization, personal expression, realization and exploitation of the medium, lack of practical purpose, and of course, fictionality”¹²—Anderson Imbert was dismayed at having to include what he termed “excess verbiage” (*farrago*) in his survey.¹³ Julio Cortázar’s fictional character Morelli in the novel *Rayuela*, on the other hand, makes no such apology. The past is past. He does not look to a history of Latin American culture that could only seem aberrant when judged against the criterion of European cultural history, but addresses himself to the future. Even though writers and painters “are on the margins of the superficial time of their generation,” he writes, “it is within another time frame where everything attains the condition of a figuration (*figura*), where everything can be evaluated as a sign and not as a theme for description, that they are exploring a form of writing that may appear alien or antagonistic to their contemporaries and to their history but that nevertheless includes these, explains them, and in the final analysis leads them toward a transcendence at the end of which is the human being.”¹⁴ For Morelli, writing is an allegorical and secular project whose goal is the fully human. More important, Cortázar moves literature into this other space where it cannot be considered “underdeveloped” and where it is out of the reach of either abstract universalism or crude referentiality.

This appeal to the transcendence of literature did not mean an abdication of moral leadership; on the contrary, the outsider status claimed by writers gave them a critical space, independent of the state. Thus Vargas Llosa, on receiving the Rómulo Gallegos prize from the Venezuelan government, declared that “literature is fire”; Cortázar participated in the Russell tribunals on human rights; and García Márquez used the Nobel prize ceremony to appeal for an end to Latin America’s solitude, an appeal that may seem ironic in the context of globalization. Such sweeping claims could be advanced because these writers enjoyed a transnational status, thanks to the trans-

lation of their novels. If I speak of these writers as if “they” formed a cohesive group (which of course they did not), it is only because I want to stress their reliance on the still valid romantic symbol of authorship beyond which was the great black oblivion. But though the writers of the 1960s considered themselves Latin Americans, they were for the most part firmly situated within their respective nations, and the autonomy of the literary work mirrored the ideal of the autonomous nation that was to be restored to the people from whom it had been confiscated.¹⁵

Nicola Miller argued with some justification that “Spanish American intellectuals defined themselves in terms set by the state, whether they supported or opposed it.”¹⁶ She tends to think that the influence of intellectuals has been exaggerated, but because she does not take literary texts into account, she misses the fact that fiction and poetry left their mark on political thinking—García Márquez’s Macondo only needed to be mentioned for people to understand that it was a fantasy of a liberated territory. Borges’s work has been a rich resource for sociologists, political scientists, and cultural critics, the best known example being Foucault’s gig on “The Chinese Encyclopedia” at the beginning of *The Order of Things*. Asturias’s Gaspar Ilóm, the protagonist of his novel *Men of Maize*, was adopted as a nickname by the *guerrilla*. Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista insurgents in the state of Chiapas quotes Eduardo Galeano and often refers to literary texts.

The prestige of literature derived, in part, from the alternative realities it represented. In the 1960s and 1970s, literature became the mirror in which the antithesis to the real state was reflected. In the writing of García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, and Roa Bastos we come upon different versions of this antistate in confrontation with the despotic and patriarchal state imagined as territory and male body. Roa Bastos’s novel *I, the Supreme*, with its lengthy account of the decay of the despotic body, the threat of the feminine, and the translation of life into history and body into language, is the most exhaustive exploration of the discursive limits of the patriarchal state whose integrity rests on exclusion, especially the exclusion of the mortal body that surreptitiously enacts its revenge. Though based on the rule of Dr. Francia in nineteenth-century Paraguay, the novel speaks to more recent military dictatorships that portrayed themselves as the cure for a “body” invaded by the virus and bacteria of communism.

In the 1960s, the nation-state was still the vehicle for development and modernization, in which enterprise literature had a considerable stake. In an essay on “the ‘boom’ novel and the Cold War,” Neil Larsen, after identifying the 1960s boom as a form of Latin American modernism, asked whether the elevation of modernism to a hegemonic position obeys, “if only indirectly, a Cold War political logic?”¹⁷ His answer is that the boom marked a political disengagement and a retreat from historical and social realism. Certainly the literary texts are often at odds with the more forthright public pronouncements of their authors. Yet I do not consider this a failure of political nerve nor a retreat; rather, I attribute it to the difference between reductionist public rhetoric and the complexity of fiction in which writers explored the foundering not only of national autonomy but also of the autonomy of the text. The political and the literary institution of the nation-state mirrored each other. In the chapters on “peripheral fantasies,” I argue that many novels of the boom not only track the power of certain fantasies (of liberation, of enterprise, of community) that politics and literature held in common but also come up against their limits. The always masculine protagonists of the boom novels, in their attempts to dream up an economically workable society freed from outside control, encounter the specter of the excluded (especially the feminine) as well as the unhappy consequences of identifying the human exclusively with the domination of nature. Yet to transcend these limits would have meant the collapse of their enterprise itself. The final chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* register the breakdown of the male fantasy in dramatic fashion with the invasion of ants, the death of Amaranta Úrsula, and the reduction of the Buendía enterprise to the solitary task of deciphering. Rather than a retreat from a revolutionary project that García Márquez never seems to have seriously entertained, the novel is the fantasy of a society based on kinship; Macondo aspires to be a “cold” society—to use Lévi-Strauss’s term for societies whose mechanisms are conservationist rather than geared to change. The change that comes from the outside is a degeneration.

For many writers of the boom generation, history was a cycle of failed experiments, for their novels reenact the inevitable foundering of those other booms—of rubber or coffee, of bananas or mining—that left a landscape marked by the monuments of failure. Despite their espousal of modernity they were as haunted as their predeces-

sors by the specter of anachronism, by the fact that they were thinking what others had done before them in Europe or North America. Where they differ from their predecessors is that now the costs as well as the achievements of modernity are apparent. For the Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti and the Colombian Álvaro Mutis (whose writing is discussed in Chapter 5), it is progress that is spectral, an unsustainable illusion that cannot even inspire belief. Their novels explore the breakdown of hegemony at the point where the subject himself is no longer able to believe in achievement as an ultimate good. Efforts at individual enterprise not only occur in the void, given the absence of an autonomous and truly independent nation, but more than anything they are staged at the moment when people no longer believe the fantasy of progress and development but act as if they do. Indeed, by grouping the three chapters on the novels of the boom under the rubric “peripheral fantasies,” I underscore the deep sense of alienation that comes from being off-center: the “marriage of nostalgia and hope” on the one hand and “the feeling of provincialism and isolation” on the other.¹⁸ Certainly the common *topoi* of the novels I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5—the burial of the unhonored dead, the passage into oblivion, and the foundering of individual enterprise—reflect both the desire of the periphery for recognition and the deep sense of futility at the inability to overcome the constitutive exclusion of Latin America from the universal. Onetti’s novels, in particular, register the collapse not only of development but also of the belief in development as the reigning economic ideology of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹

In this secular wasteland, popular culture increasingly came to promise a vigorous native regeneration as well as the possibility of a new kind of class and racial synthesis that magical realism salvaged from the grim realities of exploitation and discrimination. Although now little more than a commercial slogan, magical realism was deeply implicated in the racial question, codifying racial difference as magic and the marginalized indigenous both as remedy and poison. In Chapter 6, I trace the racial roots of magic, its deployment in the service of Latin American specificity (but dependent on the clichéd cartography that separates “rational” Europe from the nonrational rest), and finally, in a deterritorializing move, the capture of “magic” by Borges and Onetti in the service of the secular reenchantment of literature. Magic is here dislodged from its source in popular religion and

associated with the power to inspire unanchored belief. Borges becomes a key figure in the deterritorialization or abstraction that characterizes the postmodern.

Yet popular culture did succeed in breaching the walls of what Ángel Rama termed “the lettered city”; through this breach, indigenous languages and cultures entered into productive contact with lettered culture.²⁰ Describing this as “transculturation,” a term he adapted from the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, Rama argued that the writing of José María Arguedas, who was bilingual in Quechua and Spanish, exemplified the potentiality of a cultural counterpoint in which one culture did not dominate the other. As John Beverley rightly pointed out, “[t]he idea of transculturation expresses in both Ortiz and Rama a *fantasy* of class, gender and racial reconciliation.” However, fantasy cannot simply be dismissed but must be “traversed,” that is to say, worked through before it is suspended. Arguedas dramatically represents that breach of limits that García Márquez was unable to entertain. Brought up in the sierra and frequently left by his father in the care of indigenous villagers, he was unlike the Lima intelligentsia, bicultural and bilingual. He was also both an ethnographer and a writer of fiction. In a famous put-down, Cortázar labeled him as “provincial,” an astonishingly uncharitable judgment, no doubt inspired by the Peruvian author’s deep commitment to the culture of so-called traditional societies that offended Cortázar’s urban sensibilities. Yet curiously enough both Arguedas’s and Cortázar’s writing represents, albeit in very different ways, the “invasion” of the literary text by the “noise” from outside.

In Arguedas’s final novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (*The Fox Above and the Fox Below*), the narrative account of highland emigration to a coastal community industrialized by the fish meal industry is interrupted by Arguedas’s own comments on his impending suicide, on literary criticism, on his personal life, and on his childhood in the sierra. The novel thus enacts the sundering of literature from the project of modernization. Interestingly, his critic, Julio Cortázar in his *Libro de Manuel* (*A Manual for Manuel*) made a similar if even more radical break with genre boundaries. His novel is intersected with news flashes that give accounts of urban guerrilla activities and human rights violations and is backed up by speculations on literature, music, the news, and everyday life. Clearly the autonomy of the literary text on which the modernist project had been based and within

which national projects had been contained was by now irreparably damaged.

The reference to “cultural revolution” in the book’s third part is thus partly ironic, for radical change for most people came about not through armed struggle but from unanticipated changes, as media and the new information economy were consolidated at the height of a demographic explosion that transformed Latin America from a mainly peasant society to an urban society. Although these changes affected some parts of the continent more than others, the effects of mass culture disseminated by the media had a considerable impact on the intelligentsia, for whom the printed book was no longer the emblem of cultural literacy. In José Donoso’s novel *Curfew*, the death of the widow of a famous writer (Neruda) occurs at a moment when a new charismatic figure emerges—that of the popular singer—marking the fact that it was now mass culture that created celebrity. The printed book, once the instrument for acquiring cultural capital, now encountered powerful rivals in radio and television. This was especially true in times of economic crisis, as in Mexico in the mid-1980s, when the price of books became exorbitant, halting what Carlos Monsiváis and José Emilio Pacheco termed “democratization from below.” Along with Elena Poniatowska, these writers felt that the crisis was so acute as to call for civic action on behalf of the right to read.²² But this was only the beginning. In many parts of the continent, the Cold War turned into the “dirty war” on communism (broadly defined as any movement that hindered capitalist expansion), culminating in a “second Cold War”—a term used to describe the civil wars in Central America—and military repression in the Southern Cone²³ that were the overture to the global changes in power relations of the 1970s and 1980s.

The secular and republican project of nationhood, born of the Enlightenment and monumentalized in Latin American cities, was over. The city, once imagined as the *polis*, had long been an image of repression and confusion, either a panopticon surveyed by the all-seeing eye of a dictator as in the Guatemala City of Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *El señor presidente*, or as internally corrupted like the Lima of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Conversation in the Cathedral*. “Who fucked up Peru?” is the question asked by the novel, and the answer lies in a social body in which classes are bound together by a deadly network of favors and lies. Alongside this sense of disillusionment with the re-