
What We Talk About When We Talk About Marxism: Juan Carlos Rodríguez, Althusser, and the Ideological Unconscious

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A whole superstructure of different and specifically formed feelings, illusions, modes of thought and views of life arises on the basis of the different forms of property, of the social conditions of existence. The whole class creates and forms these out of its material foundations and corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives these feelings, etc. through tradition and upbringing, may well imagine they form the real determinants and the starting-point of his activity.¹

Juan Carlos Rodríguez, author of the recently published De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo, first came to prominence in the mid 1970s, following the appearance of his Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica (1975), a work that, as indicated by its subtitle, charts the origins of the “first bourgeois literatures of the sixteenth century,” specifically in the case of Spain but also with an eye to parallel situations elsewhere, notably in England. A seminal text of Althusserian inspiration, Teoría e historia argued the existence, politically, of a single structure: a public/private dialectic created by the impact of bourgeois relations upon their feudal counterpart, ultimately favorable to capitalist development but characterized, increasingly throughout the sixteenth century, by the dominance of a resurgent aristocracy. This first work was followed, after a period of seeming quiescence, “off-set by the lecture notes, which circulated in all directions,”² by La norma literaria (1984, 2001), which brought together a collection of essays ranging widely over Marxist theory, Western philosophy, the ideology of linguistics (“from Saussure to Chomsky”), Enlightenment dramaturgy (“Arbiter Scene/Arbiter State”), and a broad spectrum of individual writers, including Mallarmé, Raymond Chandler, Bram Stoker, Borges, and many others of Spanish extraction.³ At this point, Rodríguez entered the most productive
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phase of his career, with major works on Lorca (1994) and Cervantes (2003) and several that consolidated his earlier investigations, notably La poesía, la música y el silencio (1994) and La literatura del pobre (1994, 2001), interspersed with monographs on Brecht (1998), Althusser (2002, 2003), Heidegger (2011), Borges (2012), and aspects of popular culture (2003) including the tango (1982, 1996) and the cinema (2005). He may reasonably lay claim to being the best theoretician of literature, even surpassing the achievements of Pierre Macherey, to have emerged from the Rue d’Ulm, which inevitably raises the question as to why his work should be virtually unknown to the Anglophone world.

Given the hostile and ill-informed reception frequently accorded to Althusser’s own ideas, it was never likely that a work such as Teoría e historia, which announced itself in classically Althusserian terms, as constituting a “break,” would be understood or welcomed any more readily. That said, a number of other, complicating factors combined to render the Spaniard’s situation particularly problematic. Principal among these was the need for his texts to be mediated through the discipline of Hispanism, whose British branch was particularly inert, within a less than distinguished academy, which determined that by the time the relevant translations appeared, those scholars in English, Cultural Studies, and History who might at one time have been expected to take an interest in the Spaniard’s work had long since pronounced on the “fall” of Structural Marxism, repented of their former sins, or were even busy denying their prior allegiance to Althusserianism. And doubtless the suspicion also lingered among the more Protestant-minded that little store was to be set by any writer affiliated with a Catholic culture traditionally disparaged for its “difference,” which is to say, less politely, for its barbarism and backwardness.

The Marxists among these same Anglophiles should have known better. Did not Marx himself notoriously warn that history progresses by its dark side? Which would explain why Spain’s very marginality should have lent Rodríguez a singular advantage when it came to theorizing the history of the subject. For what this marginality translates into, within the context of a long transition (from feudalism to capitalism), is the continuing dominance within Spain of a feudal ideological matrix, based on the opposition between the lord (Lord) and the serf (servant). Set furthermore within the context of a cosmic opposition between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, this matrix visibly excludes the (free) subject, beloved of bourgeois ideology. In its protoform, it is true, the bourgeois individual will materialize early in Spain — notably through the Petrarchan lyric — or so at least we will see Rodríguez claim, and an alternative Subject/subject matrix will begin to take shape around him. But the period of bourgeois ascendance will prove only too brief — politically, its reversal is signalled by the defeat of the comunero rebellion — with far-reaching consequences for the development of Absolutism in Spain. A resurgent, and what will prove to be enduring, feudalism explains how it came about that “freedom” and “democracy” were still for Spaniards something of a historical novelty, achieved in defiance of fascism, when,
with the onset of the recent economic crisis, such “liberties” were rudely snatched from them or, perhaps, more accurately, emerged in their true colours. In Rodríguez’s own words:

Pues si se sabía de sobra lo que podía hacer el partido único con nosotros, se dejaba completamente de lado lo que podía hacer el capitalismo único con nosotros y con la mundialización global: sencillamente lo que le diera la gana (como efectivamente está ocurriendo todos los días).7

For if it was clear enough what the single party could do with us, absolutely no account was taken of what a single capitalism could do, in the context of globalization: simply whatever it wished (as in effect is happening on a daily basis).

The effect, in the case of Rodríguez, was to focus intensely a theoretical mind already sensitized to the lessons of its own national history. The contrast could scarcely be more marked with the situation in Britain and the States. Here, safely cocooned within a relatively benign liberal democracy, even theoreticians of the Left — we will be considering some test cases — unconsciously assumed the “freedom of the individual” (together with the empiricism that was its ideological infrastructure) as a non-transcendable horizon and, by the same token, took as their theoretical starting point the task of reconciling “agency” and “structure.”

It remains in what follows to lend some substance to our claims, which are here stated in broad outline. We will adopt a somewhat oblique approach to De qué hablamos, through the critical “interlude” directed against Roy Bhaskar and his school of Critical Realism.

Subjects in History

The first thing to strike one about the Bhaskerian interlude is the petulance, even brutality of the language used to characterize a philosophical school that, at least by its own reckoning, boasts a close affinity with Marxism and socialism.8 Critical Realism amounts to a “tomadura de pelo” (a mickey-take), also “otra caricatura del marxismo” (one more caricature of Marxism).9 The second is its partiality: Rodríguez analyzes only one section of a single work of Bhaskar’s, The Possibility of Naturalism (1979), which compares Utilitarianism, Weber, and Durkheim with Marx, and even then limits his discussion to the ontological status of the individual/society dichotomy upon which the comparison allegedly rests. “[M]eter a Marx ahí es hundirlo, es no entender nada” (To insert Marxism there is to sink it, to not understand anything), Rodríguez writes.10 Why? For the simple reason that, as Marx explains in the Grundrisse, contrary to what is implied by the theory of the social contract and, Rodríguez would add, Bhaskar’s Critical Realism, individuals are historical constructs of a determinate set of social relations, which are always relations of exploitation (“lo
que a Bhaskar ni se le pasa por la cabeza” [something that never occurs to Bhaskar].

The Althusserian is emphatic: the dichotomy between individual and society “se diluye por completo en Marx” (is completely diluted in Marx). To think from a Marxist standpoint, his argument runs, is to reject any notion that the individual exists prior to its social configuration, under pain of remaining captive, at the level of the ideological unconscious, to bourgeois categories that are mistaken for ontological realities. In a footnote, Rodríguez will further claim that Bhaskar’s view of the Marxist concept of ideology, through the contrast it draws between the latter and scientific truth, constitutes a series of commonplaces of the kind to be found in “cualquier manual de ‘positivismo racionalista’” (any manual of “rationalist positivism”).

Now, in one fundamental respect at least Rodríguez’s exposition of Bhaskar’s work is quite inaccurate. For contrary to what is implied throughout, the Critical Realist consistently argues that, far from preceding society, the individual must follow it. Thus: “[I]f society is always already made, then any concrete human praxis, or, if you like, act of objectivation can only modify it; and the totality of such acts sustain or change it.” And it is hard to understand how the Spaniard, who is normally an attentive reader, missed an order of priorities that is consistently hammered home. Thus: “...society pre-exists the individual” and “all activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms.” Spontaneous acts have as their necessary condition the pre-existence of a social form by means of which they are generated. Confirmation is found in the fact that — and here Bhaskar is surely echoing the opening pages of Marx’s Grundrisse — speech requires (social) language. To conclude, there is a dialectical nuance that Rodríguez is simply not grasping: “society is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, conscious production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, that is society.”

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the Spaniard’s reading of Critical Realism on this account. True, his preoccupation with the pre-existence of the individual is misleading, at least as far as Bhaskar is concerned, but he has every right to be concerned, from his own standpoint, about the philosopher’s insistence on the “ontological gulf” that separates “people” from “society,” for what that gulf blocks is any understanding of the ideological unconscious, as theorized by Rodríguez. To remind ourselves: “I want to distinguish sharply,” Bhaskar writes,

between the genesis of human actions, lying in the reasons, intentions, and plans of people, on the one hand, and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities on the other; and hence between the domains of the psychological and the social sciences.

Bhaskar, we have seen, certainly accepts that the unconscious is operative in the reproduction of conditions of production. But the ontological hiatus upon which
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he otherwise insists cuts psychology off from the social, thereby confirming our suspicions that the unconscious he has in mind is of the Freudian, libidinal variety. Nor is the situation solved by reference to the mediation of transindividual mechanisms through (discrete) individualities. To think within such categorial parameters, as the Spaniard correctly intuits, is to remain captive to the dominant bourgeois ideological unconscious, which perforce departs from the opposition between structure and agency.

Marxism’s point of departure, by way of contrast, is the social formation, articulated on the basis of a mode of production, the latter characterized (according to Althusserianism) by its distinctive economic, political, and ideological instances, each assigned its function by the historical matrix of the structure as a whole. The articulation of these instances, internalized by social individualities, be they masters, slaves, lords, serfs, subjects, and so on, defines all possible practices and gives them a determinate class-based character. The ideological unconscious, understood within this problematic, may be defined as the matrix effect of the social formation, secreted “originally” through the relations of production but “subsequently” legitimated and (consciously?) formalized through the State Ideological Apparatus. Its modus operandi is that of a humus or magma that always already pervades a social formation, in the light of which Rodríguez was surely right to anticipate that the attempt by Critical Realism to locate Marxism within the individual/society framework could only lead, sooner rather than later, to a celebration of the “freedom of the individual” and to the marginalization of the key Marxist concept of exploitation. There is nothing to suggest that the Spaniard has familiarized himself with Bhaskar’s subsequent work, but presumably its turn toward a new age spiritualism would hardly come to him as a surprise.\

Rodríguez’s own position, it should be said, is not without its problems. For if, as he insists, individuals are always already pre-determined by an ideological unconscious, it remains a key question, of considerable practical and political interest, as to how these same individuals can possibly come to understand, never mind resist, the forces that oppress them. Rodríguez, to be sure, is careful to qualify the reach of ideological determination: “Por supuesto, esto no quiere decir que uno/a no pueda romper con su propio inconsciente ideológico, haciéndose consciente de su situación y de la estructura real en la que se inscribe (consciente al menos hasta cierto punto)” (Of course, this does not mean that one cannot break with one’s own ideological unconscious, by becoming conscious of one’s situation and of the real structure in which one is inscribed [conscious at least to a certain extent]). But that says little to those critics who have legitimately pointed, firstly, to the absence from Althusser “of any reference to the history of strategic thinking on the Marxist Left — from the Second International to the Bolshevik tradition” and, secondly, to an unresolved tension within Althusserianism between functionalism and voluntarism. These are by no means minor considerations, and before we proceed to substantiate the
theoretical basis of Rodríguez’s work, we will regress, in terms of our review of De qué hablamos, to weigh the consequences for politics, and in particular for Spanish politics, of the all-encompassing notion of an ideological unconscious.

“Spain is Different”

The problem facing Marxists, according to Rodríguez, is that the infrastructure of exploitation is so refracted under capitalism as to blind its victims to the reality of their oppression: the extraction of the social surplus, it bears repeating, takes place indirectly, at the economic level, through the buying and selling of lives.22 Particularly afflicted in this regard has been the Spanish Communist Party, notwithstanding the prestige it accrued traditionally as the major oppositional force to fascism. What the SCP failed to see in the post-Franco decades, because it considered it “exterior” to its concerns, was the internationalization of monopoly capitalism, materialized in the financial structures of power and concentrated quintessentially in the presence of the American embassy. “De ahí que la izquierda marxista apenas hablara de la realidad económica que envolvía al franquismo. Sólo se hablaba de como acabar políticamente con el franquismo y de establecer el ‘después de Franco, qué’” (Which explains why the Marxist Left hardly spoke of the economic reality that enveloped Francoism. The only talk was of how to finish off Francoism politically and of how to foreground the question “And after Franco, what?”).23 Sustaining such a discourse was the Stalinist allegiance to the notion of “socialism in one country,” the equivalent tactically of fighting on the enemy’s territory. In effect, the SCP fell into the trap of thinking in terms of an authentic internal isolation. And with predictable results: principally, the Party found itself gradually drawn into a singularly debased brand of liberal politics and, for its own part, affiliating ever more closely to a reformism that would eventually lead to its own eclipse. To explore this process in further detail, Rodríguez turned to the work of the Greek Marxist, Nicos Poulantzas.

Published in 1978 and now neglected, along with the rest of Poulantzas’ work (”otra cuestión de enigmas” [one more enigma among others]), State, Power, Socialism furnishes an effective prism through which to view the political processes in evidence in post-Franco Spain.24 In direct reversal of earlier work, in which he had emphasized the monolithic power of State hegemony, in this work Poulantzas specifically includes popular struggles within the domain of the state and its relevant apparatuses. According to Rodríguez, this additional complexity was achieved at a price, namely the marginalization of class exploitation. The Greek’s covert design was to bypass the Leninist image of dual power, otherwise the opposition between the bourgeois state and the party laying siege to it.25 His fear was that the associated narrative, which spoke of the fall of the fortress-state, masked what in all likelihood would ensue, namely the suppression of democratic liberties. Eventually, it would transpire, even the soviets would be absorbed into the party, which accordingly would be identified with the state. While never suggesting that Lenin and Gramsci were anything other
than embryonic Stalinists, Poulantzas had seemingly become distrustful of the power of the masses, and preferred to focus instead upon contradictions internal to the state, understood in terms of the correlation of forces within Parliament and Ideological State Apparatuses.

Now this is all very well, except that, according to Rodríguez, Poulantzas is forgetting one crucial factor, namely that, in the case of Western democracies, the matrix effect of the social formation determines that the state in question is thoroughly capitalist. And what was true of the political instance was equally true at the level of its ideological counterpart, whose central tenet — “I am born free” — was inscribed in every interstice of the social edifice. Indeed, so pervasive was this tenet that, after the death of Franco, liberal ideologues successfully cast the SCP as the “enemy of freedom.” How could it be otherwise, the prevailing rhetoric ran, given the Party’s role as a totalitarian satellite of the USSR? What more was one to expect of what remained a relic of the civil war? For when all was said and done, was not Eurocommunism still communism? And however much the Party surrendered in political terms, notably through the Moncloa Pact, the more vulnerable to this caricature it appeared to be.

But it was not simply the orthodox CP that was under threat — we are still summarizing Rodríguez’s account — but Marxism itself. The message that the market is fundamentally exploitative needed to be silenced, if, that is, capitalist restructuring was to take effect. And silenced it was. Of course, a few figures continued to offer resistance, notably Althusser and his followers, Manuel Sacristán in Spain, some Anglophone historians, such as Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, Perry Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and, in America, Paul Sweeney and Paul Baran, not to mention the odd cultural critic, such as Raymond Williams. But by the mid-1980s it was all over, and some of these same individuals had surrendered to the illusion that it was possible to operate through the capitalist state, even as the latter was being overrun by neoliberalism. Not that parties such as Labour in Britain or the Socialist Workers Party in Spain cared: both were in any case soon abandoning any pretence to be fighting for socialism. And finally the fall of the USSR completely sealed the fate of social democracy in general, so much so that even postmodernism, with its deconstructions and linguistic play, trembled to its roots. “Ahora no hacía falta más que decir sí al neoliberalismo establecido” (There was now no other option but to accept an established neo-liberalism). And at this point a terrible truth emerged: capitalism’s capacity to regulate itself was conditional upon its fear of the oppressed; once this fear had dissipated, it felt free to run riot, which is exactly what it proceeded to do.

The Ideological Unconscious

The second section of De qué hablamos reproduces the Introduction to Teoría e historia, which spells out in detail what Rodríguez understands by the “ideological...
unconscious.” As should be immediately apparent, the text is deeply indebted for its own theoretical framework to Althusser and to the latter’s focus upon the “mode of production,” understood as a “structure in dominance,” consisting of its economic, political, and ideological levels or “instances.” The primacy or “determinacy” of the economic, to briefly remind ourselves, is refracted, “in the last instance,” through the matrix effect of the “social formation” as a whole, in which one of the other instances may otherwise be “dominant.” The “relative autonomy” of each instance manifests itself in the form of a transitive or “linear” causality, overdetermined by the intransitive effectivity of the whole. Important though such concepts are for the Spaniard, even more so is, firstly, the Althusserian insistence upon the need to break with the bourgeois subject/object paradigm and, secondly, the notion that ideology constitutes a system of representations that are “secreted” by the prevailing relations of production and legitimized in the Ideological State Apparatus.

While these and other such formulations had the immediate effect of undercutting the notion of a consciousness transparent to itself, much remained to be worked out: the lived relation between individuals and their world, Althusser had argued somewhat confusingly, “only appears as ‘conscious’ on condition that it is unconscious, in the same way [it] only seems to be simple on condition that it is complex, that it is not a simple relation but a relation between relations, a second degree relation.”27 To compound the mystification, Althusser had also begun to flirt with Lacanian psychoanalysis, whose category of the libidinal unconscious, along with its associated concepts, was far more developed than its Marxist ideological equivalent, and, once introduced into Marxism, began to corrode the latter’s indigenous categories from within.28

Upon all of this, the work of Rodríguez represents a significant advance. To begin with, while Althusser had emphasized the unconsciousness of ideology, it fell to the Spaniard to formulate theoretically the substantive notion of an ideological unconscious, an innovation achieved through his focus upon the invention of the proto-form of the bourgeois subject, through which, in the struggle against feudalism, the bound serf turned into a proletarian “free” to sell his/her labour power.

La noción de sujeto (y toda la problemática ahí inscrita) es radicalmente histórica... porque se segrega directamente (y exclusivamente) desde la matriz misma del inconsciente ideológico burgués: el “siervo” no puede ser jamás “sujeto” etc. Pero por ello también los planteamientos teóricos derivados desde esa misma ideología burguesa nunca podrían aceptar que su propio inconsciente de base sea una cuestión ideológica (o sea: histórica), sino que considerará siempre que los sentimientos y la lógica propia de tal “inconsciente” constituyen la verdad misma de la realidad física humana, su propia transparencia.29

The notion of the subject (and the whole problematic inscribed therein)
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is radically historical... because it is secreted directly (and exclusively) from the very matrix of the bourgeois ideological unconscious: the “serf” cannot ever be a “subject,” etc. Nor, for the same reason, would bourgeois ideology ever be able to accept that its own unconscious is itself, at root, an ideological, therefore historical, matter; on the contrary, its claim will always be that the sentiments and logic special to this “unconscious” constitute the very truth of physical, human reality, its very transparency.

The ideological unconscious in question sustains, among other things, the modern notion of literature, understood as the “inner truth” or creative intimacy of an interiorized individual, be this an “author” who, by definition, is able freely to express him/herself in “his” or “her” work, or a “reader” who, similarly, is free to interpret a work as s/he sees fit. The object undergoes a corresponding liberation: from a signature (of its Lord), it is transformed into a literal thing, exposed to the gaze of the subject. To appreciate fully the force of such cultural transformations, it suffices to draw a contrast with the feudal scribe who “comments” upon the only “books” known to feudalism, namely the Bible and the Book of the World, an activity subject to all manner of interpretive norms and constraints and, in consequence, potentially precarious to life and limb. The bulk of the population was saved from such concerns by the fact that it was maintained in a state of illiteracy.

The message is clear: the Spaniard will have no truck with the Althusserian notion of a universalized subject of ideology and will, more broadly, take his distance from Althusser’s alleged ahistoricism and philosophism. The “serf” and “subject,” according to his view, are to be understood as simply the privileged categories or notions through which is objectified the basic functioning or internal operation of, say, the feudal or bourgeois matrices. It would be a grave error, Rodríguez argues, to confuse the categories with the functioning: the distinction, a crucial one, is that between what a social formation says it is and what it actually is. Each ideological matrix attributes to its relevant categories the character of essential, unalterable realities that determine the way in which people understand themselves and so live their lives. The ideological matrix, so defined, simply reproduces, at its own level, the basic class contradiction that constitutes a particular set of social relations. The importance that Rodríguez attributes to the latter is what distinguishes him from some of his fellow Althusserians, in whom attention shifts from the matrix effect of the whole social formation to its corresponding Ideological State Apparatuses. And with radical consequences, against which Rodríguez warns: “si la ‘escuela’ es un Aparato Estatal no es ella la que ‘crea’ la ideología, sino, en todo caso, y únicamente, la que la materializa y reproduce” (while admittedly the “school” is a State Apparatus, it is not what “creates” ideology, but, at best, only what materializes and reproduces it).30 The Spaniard elaborates:
la dialéctica inscrita en los textos literarios (la que los produce como tales, su lógica interna) es la plasmación de un inconsciente ideológico que no ‘nace’ en la Escuela, sino directamente en el interior de las relaciones sociales mismas y desde ellas únicamente se segrega, etc.\(^{31}\)

[T]he dialectic inscribed in literary texts (what produces them as such, their internal logic) is the expression of an ideological unconscious that is not “born” in the school, but directly within the actual social relations and is secreted only from them.

There is, allegedly, an unmistakable whiff of Weberian “institutional sociologism” about the converse claim, namely that it is the material institution (the Protestant church) that creates ideology (the Protestant religion).\(^{32}\) At this point let us return to Teoría e historia in order to pursue the details of Rodríguez’s argument.

**Private versus Public**

Spanish Absolutism, according to Teoría e historia, is characterized by the co-existence of two conflicting sets of social relations, the first associated with a feudal aristocracy and the second with an emergent bourgeoisie, whose equally conflictual ideologies, respectively those of substantialism or organicism, on one hand, and animism, on the other, determine the nature of cultural (re)production. These sets combine, according to Rodríguez, in a single structure, a public/private dialectic, that, while ultimately favorable to capitalist development is, as indicated above, characterized increasingly throughout the sixteenth century by a resurgent feudalism. The dialectic translates, in Althusserian terms, into the dominance of a relatively autonomous political instance, determined at the primary level by economic forces struggling to impose the logic of their own development within the private sphere but thwarted at the level of the state.

What is it, Rodríguez will ask, that causes the relations of “service” (between serf and lord) to pass over into another, radically different set of relations, involving those between subjects? His answer is categorical: “Obviamente: la aparición de una nueva fuerza social, la burguesía, no sólo como ‘clase,’ sino como comportadora de un específico modo de producción (el ‘capitalismo,’ aquí en su primera fase ‘mercantilista,’ etc.) radicalmente opuesto al modo de producción feudal” (Obviously, the appearance of a new social force, the bourgeoisie, not only as a “class” but as the bearer of a specific mode of production [“capitalism,” here in its first “mercantilist” phase, etc.] radically opposed to the feudal mode of production).\(^{33}\) It is important in this context, the Spaniard will argue, not to get carried away by one’s enthusiasms. The battle between the feudal aristocracy and the emergent bourgeoisie is one thing, that between conflicting sets of social relations, another. The problem with the former is that it invites the personification of classes, specifically in the form of a transcendental or Hegelian subject. Social relations, by way of contrast, cannot be thought within the category of the subject. As far as these are concerned, the only
important question relates to whether, and in what circumstances, the final exit from feudalism was achieved, whether through the cities, as in Italy in the fourteenth century, or the Absolutist State.

To substantiate his argument, Rodríguez draws upon the *Epístolas familiares* (translated as *The Golden Letters*) of Fray Antonio de Guevara, as they relate to the rebellion of the *comuneros*. Guevara’s text, the Spaniard argues, demonstrates irrefutably that it mattered very little precisely which individuals, whether noble or otherwise, were the ones to undertake the defense of “liberties,” to resist taxation, to reject the hierarchy of “bloods,” to question the existence of “lords,” and so on. What mattered was the attempt at implementation of bourgeois relations in their first mercantilist phase, towards which both contending parties, the “State” and the “cities,” contributed in their different ways.

Por eso Guevara (como Carlos V, en cierto sentido) al actuar contra los “excesos” burgueses, lo hace ya desde la estructura del “nivel público” que... atraviesa de arriba abajo sus escritos y su actividad personal en general. Un “nivel público” impuesto a partir de la necesidad de “coexistir” tanto con la organización nobiliaria — “dominante” — como con las apetencias insalvables del horizonte burgués, mercantil.34

For this reason, when he came to oppose bourgeois “excesses,” Guevara (like Charles V, in a manner of speaking) justifies his actions in terms of a “public level,” a concept that... suffuses his writings and personal behaviour in general, from top to bottom. A “public level” imposed in response to the need to “coexist” both with the (dominant) signeurial organization and with the inassuageable demands of the mercantilist bourgeoisie.

Cashing in the details of his analysis theoretically, Rodríguez nuances the concentration of two competing sets of social relations. Although the product of the impact of bourgeois relations upon the feudal organization, the state, we learn, does not represent them to the same degree or in the same way: rather, “tiende irremisiblemente — incluso por su mera existencia — a ‘servir’ infraestructuralmente a [las relaciones sociales burguesas] aunque ‘superestructuralmente’ sus aparatos se vean dominados por la nobleza” (it tends unavoidably — through its mere existence — to “serve” bourgeois relations of production infrastructurally, although “superstructurally” its apparatuses are dominated by the nobility).35 The fact that some of its apparatuses are ideological returns us to the question of how the public/private dialectic is played out ideologically.

While in Althusserian terms the State cannot “create” ideologies — that is by definition the task of the ideological instance — it does exert a transitive effectivity over them, both thematically and functionally. Bourgeois relations, it was suggested
above, secrete a very specific ideology, animism, which gives rise to the creation of new art forms, notably the new Petrarchan lyric, the theater, the picaresque, the “dialogue,” the novel, and so on. These forms, unsurprisingly, will embrace the public/private dialectic to its fullest extent, relishing in the existence of its two autonomous spaces. But only for a relatively brief period, say to 1530. The same forms will survive under absolutism only to the extent that they are filled with a substantialist content. Substantialism, by way of contrast to animism, will “assume” the same dialectic reluctantly, through the pressure of bourgeois relations exerted at the infrastructural level. At the same time, it must also “deny” the autonomy of both spheres, “en tanto que sigue suponiendo como única verdad existente la escritura unitaria (‘totalizadora,’ ‘homogeneizante’) de los signos de Dios sobre todas las cosas” (insofar as it continues to presuppose as the only existing truth a unitary [“totalizing,” “homogenizing”] writing, that of God’s signs over all other things). We will be exploring the dynamics of these processes more fully below.

Critiquing the British Marxists

The essence of Rodríguez’s Althusserian “break” is now clear. (R)ejected, on the evidence of his critique of Bhaskar and Poulantzas, is an ideological matrix, of bourgeois extraction, that, in the form of the subject/object binary or variations thereof, has corroded Marxism from within. The Spaniard would presumably accept, again in classically Althusserian fashion, the need constantly to repeat this same “break” in an ongoing battle to keep this insidious, unconscious influence at bay. Still, from his own standpoint, the crucial move had been made, and at the very start of his career. Henceforth, there could be no gainsaying the need for Marxism in the ongoing struggle against fascism; the only task that remained was to discover exactly what this entailed and to take one’s distance from those contemporary scholars whose career trajectories had taken, and would increasingly take, a rather different course.

In Teoría e historia, Rodríguez was already weighing the centrality of the subject to the work of an influential British group of Marxist historians. For E. P. Thompson, ideology consists of “ideas” (“political,” “religious,” or “scientific”), for Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, the self-consciousness of a class. But more significant than what divides them, from the Althusserian perspective, was what they had in common, namely the view of ideology as the “contents” of human reason, whether understood individually or collectively. After also reviewing the contribution of Christopher Hill, which he reads along the same lines, Rodriguez further elaborates:

La creencia en una verdad básica del sujeto humano, a la que se llamaría “psicología” y la ignorancia, por tanto, de la existencia de un nivel ideológico y determinante propio de cada tipo de relaciones de clase, ha ahí lo que revela siempre en última instancia la presencia del empirismo
incluso bajo anunciados — como ocurre en este caso — francamente izquierdistas (economicistas, progresivistas/mercantilizantes, o como quiera llamárselos).38

The belief in a basic truth of the human subject, otherwise in what might be called “psychology,” and the consequent failure to recognize the existence of an ideological level, which determines class relations of every kind: such is what always, in the last instance, betrays the presence of empiricism, even in the guise of statements that — as in the present instance — are blatantly Left-leaning in the economistic, progressivist or mercantilizing sense, or whatever you want to call it.

In contrast to this earlier treatment of the British historians, Rodríguez will pause only briefly in De qué hablamos, in a footnote reference, to critique the work of Terry Eagleton, whose take on Althusser, Criticism and Ideology, appeared in 1976, several years after Teoría e historia. Eagleton, allegedly, “no se enteró de la problemática althusseriana” (understood nothing about the Althusserian problematic); and while, admittedly, his Ideology: An Introduction (1991) is more nuanced, it still betrays the author’s same “inane” empiricism.39 Rodríguez does not go into further detail, but it might be worth pausing, within the present context, to consider more closely those moments in Ideology when the British Marxist flirts with but fails to grasp the notion of the ideological unconscious.

“Ideology,” Eagleton writes, summarizing Althusser,

is not primarily a matter of “ideas”; it is a structure which imposes itself without necessarily having to pass through consciousness at all. Viewed psychologically, it is less a system of articulated doctrines than a set of images, symbols and occasionally concepts which we “live” at an unconscious level.40

While admitting the importance of Althusser’s account — it represents a “major breakthrough” — Eagleton quickly proceeds to emphasize its limitations, specifically in relation to Althusser’s insistence that a subject’s ideas are a matter of its material actions, themselves inserted in material practices governed by material rituals as part of a material ideological apparatus. “One does not abolish consciousness,” Eagleton comments, “simply by an hypnotic repetition of the word ‘material.’”41 True, except Althusser’s text has more to recommend it than Eagleton is leading us to believe, insofar as it addresses the existence of distinct “modalities” “all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter.”42 This surely called for further discussion of materialism, in terms of matter’s emergent properties.

At such a moment as this, one is reminded of Michael Sprinker’s suggestion with respect to Eagleton’s writings, namely that, for all their stylistic elegance, “a fine
rhetorical flourish is used [too frequently] to mask a logical equivocation or finesse a theoretical difficulty."43 The effect is, allegedly, to leave one vaguely dissatisfied, wishing for a less virtuoso performance and more hardheaded, systematic engagement with the argumentative structures of the texts discussed."44 If one had any doubts on this score, these are quickly dispelled when, after critiquing Althusser over the issue of materiality, Eagleton castigates the Frenchman for, he claims, unduly inflating the very concept of ideology. “It becomes,” he summarizes,

identical with lived experience; but whether all lived experience can usefully be described as ideological is surely dubious. Expanded in this way, the concept threatens to lose all precise political reference. If loving God is ideological, then so, presumably, is loving Gorgonzola.45

Now, it is always very important in this kind of situation to get one’s facts straight, to choose one’s examples carefully and to keep one’s clowning under control, and Eagleton has sinned on all these counts. To begin with, Althusser, at least as I read him, is not identifying ideology with lived experience but saying that lived experience is pervaded by ideology, either directly, through the mechanisms of the ISA or indirectly and unconsciously, through the matrix effect of the whole social formation. The highly individual preference for Gorgonzola cheese, according to this argument, does not prevent that preference being, at the same time, ideologically inflected for class. Indeed, as I should not have to remind Eagleton, working-class mothers habitually viewed Gorgonzola cheese as their one “luxury,” a taste for which they shared with their “betters.”

What may appear at first glance to be a minor aberration is anything but, as transpires from Eagleton’s response to Pierre Bourdieu’s suggestion that “ideology” compares unfavorably with his own, corresponding notion of “doxa.” Specifically targeting Althusser, Bourdieu suggests that many things that Marxists call ideology operate according to very obscure processes. The Frenchman continues:

Such mechanisms are unconscious. They are accepted and that is something very powerful, which is not grasped, in my view, in the traditional definition of ideology as representation, as false consciousness. I think that Marxism, in fact, remains a sort of Cartesian philosophy, in which you have a conscious agent who is the scholar, the learned person, and others who don’t have access to consciousness. We have spoken too much about consciousness, too much in terms of representation. The social world doesn’t work in terms of consciousness; it works in terms of practices, mechanisms, and so forth. By using doxa we accept many things without knowing them, and that is what is called ideology.46
He goes on to elaborate on the “invisible pressure” of “symbolic domination” that makes escape from it difficult.\(^{47}\) Now these statements clearly called for a fierce rebuttal, not only in defense of Marxism but also of Althusserianism, whose views on ideology they traduce. But by this stage of his career, Eagleton is not up to this kind of battle. “At the same time that you were developing these theories,” he meekly points out, “the Marxist tradition itself in the work of Althusser, whatever its limits, was trying to shift the concept of ideology on to a much less conscious, and much more practical, institutional place, which in a way comes close perhaps to your own position.”\(^{48}\) A reference in Eagleton’s recently published *The Event of Literature* to “what might be called the social unconscious,” identified with the “the historical and ideological forces which shape [a text] to its roots,” further confirms the presence of an absence — that of a thoroughly worked out and rigorously theorized notion of the ideological unconscious — that has always lain at the centre of Eagleton’s work.\(^{49}\)

**The Case of the Baroque**

In the second section of *De qué hablamos* Rodríguez resumes the critique of period concepts already initiated in *Teoría e historia* with respect to the “Renaissance,” but in the present context directed against the “Baroque.”\(^{50}\) From his own perspective the latter is yet one more embodiment of the Hegelian Moving Spirit, wedged somewhere between the “Renaissance” and the “Enlightenment,” albeit with a Kantian overlay. “Evidentemente se trata de una historia prefabricada ad hoc por las burguesías capitalistas y triunfantes contra el feudalismo, pero sin duda una especie de fábrica que nos ha surtido de productos de mucho provecho y de engaños evidentes” (Clearly, what we have here is a fabricated narrative, constructed along ad hoc lines by triumphant, capitalist bourgeoisies and targeted at feudalism; as a model it was admittedly productive, albeit of evident falsehoods).\(^{51}\) The problem to be resolved is one arising from the empiricist turn in hard sciences, namely: where does human freedom lie amidst so many fixed laws and causes? The solution was found in Kant’s Third Critique, whose free play of forms allegedly met all the necessary requirements. Rodríguez charts the relevant philosophical transformations, through the Husserlian project, the phenomenological tradition of Wölfflin, Worringer, Hauser, Wesbach, and so on; its Spanish manifestation in the hands of Ortega y Gasset and Emilio Orozco; and variations on the theme in Borges and Latin American “magical realism.” “Quiero decir, en suma, que la imagen abstrusa de un mismo Espíritu humano evolucionando a través de las épocas no ha existido jamás, excepto como imagen, del mismo modo que el lenguaje del yo no ha existido jamás...” (My point, in sum, is that the Human Spirit, as a single entity, evolving over the ages, has never existed other than as an abstruse image; and the same goes for the language of the subject).\(^{52}\)

Rodríguez will break with this bourgeois tradition to locate himself on a totally different terrain, that of a social formation, which, in the case of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, finds two modes of production engaged in a life-and-
death struggle. At the ideological level, as already intimated above, this struggle pits an emergent realism, which Rodríguez calls animism, after Bachelard and Hegel’s beautiful souls (but also in reference to Petrarch’s “anime belle de virtute amiche”), against substantialism or organicism, the ideology of the dominant feudalism. Animism prioritizes the proto-subject that, combined with the image of the literal life, gives rise to the “eye that sees the thing.” This new realism finds its classic literary form in the amorous poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega, but is subsequently the driving force behind the picaresque, in which poverty emerges no longer as a religious virtue but “una agobiante realidad social” (an oppressive social reality). Rodríguez expatiates:

[S]i aparece la vida literal y aparece el alma bella que impregna al cuerpo bello — cualquier cuerpo lo es, sólo por existir —, aparecen también los signos literales sustituyendo a las signaturas divinas. Y esto resulta decisivo, puesto que el intercambio de signos literales es clave en el mercado y en la vida y en el ámbito teórico.

If literal life makes an appearance, alongside the beautiful soul that impregnates the beautiful body — any body is beautiful by virtue of the fact that it exists — also making an appearance are the literal signs that replace divine signatures. And decisively so, in that the interchange of literal signs plays a crucial role in the market, as it does in life and the realm of theory.

Feudal substantialism, De qué hablamos further reminds us, is distinguished not by signs but by signatures, each of which bears the imprint of the Lord. Correspondingly the only life that feudalism knows is the allegorical, epitomized by Dante’s four exegetic levels, Saint Thomas’ reading of the Bible, and the noble legends and lives of saints. Sustaining the whole of this ideological structure is the opposition between the Lord/lord and the serf/servant, the latter bound to the land of his or her lord.

Outside Spain — at this point Rodríguez begins to expand upon his earlier argument — the die was cast: the impact of capitalism created Protestantism. Inside Spain, by way of contrast, a process of resacralization took hold. Olivares, it should be said, tried to put an end to the power of the nobles, but the latter, led by the Braganzas in Portugal, the Hijares in Aragon, and the Medina Sidonias in Andalusia, resisted. In reality, the good Duke asked for very little: only what was necessary to turn the Spanish Crown into a modern state, but even this proved too much. Similarly, in the private sphere, the triumph of the Counter-Reformation was complete, leading to the disappearance of life as a textual image, with the result that re-sacralization will linger on in Spain, “prácticamente hasta hoy” (practically until the present day). However, not all was lost, as Rodríguez concedes, with reference to the two great “baroque” poets, Luis de Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo.
Desnudo el joven, cuanto ya el vestido
    Océano ha bebido,
restituir le hace a las arenas;
    y al Sol lo extiende luego,
que lamiéndolo apenas
su dulce lengua de templado fuego,
    lento lo embiste, y con súave estilo
la menor onda chupa al menor hilo.57

Bare the youth, all that his clothing / of the Ocean has already drunk, / to the sand he returns; / and then he spread it out in the Sun, / which hardly licking it / its sweet tongue of temperate fire / slowly assails it, and in gentle fashion / the least ray sucks [dry] the least thread.

This, the opening section of Góngora’s Soledades, is referenced to confirm Rodríguez’s claim that animism archetypically begins with the nude, no longer operating as a signature to be read with reference to sin and corruption, but as a body that is transfused by the spirit, even as it exerts its own materializing force upon the latter. From the ensuing con-fusion, of body with spirit, arises the eminently Spinozist notion of the immanence of life, personified in the figure of the wandering (therefore goal-less) bare-footed pilgrim. Like all such protagonists, this one undergoes a series of unpredictable events or adventures, each one linked to the other by nothing more than the workings of chance. His is a poetic eye/I that delights in the sheer materiality of things, that interact and metamorphose with unaccustomed fluidity and freedom, as indeed do the signs that refer to them. For Góngora, Rodríguez deduces, life is single and inherently valuable — the feudal dualism of the two lives is no more. Yet it is at this level, that of the very texture of his verse, that the reality of ideological contradiction is most pronounced. In the case of the “baroque” poet, it transpires, we no longer bear witness to plain speech, of classic animist vintage, but to a textual fabric that, through its metaphoric density and syntactic convolutions, conspires to clothe the bare concept. The animist dialectic continues to dominate, to be sure, but is now compromised by an extraneous element, originating in the impact of organicism upon a Platonic infrastructure.

The substantialist soul also undertakes a journey but, in its case, of a pre-ordained kind, towards a place of stillness at the side of its Lord. Its final act will be to relinquish its corrupt body.

Alma a quien todo un dios prisión ha sido,
venas que humor a tanto fuego han dado,
médulas que han gloriosamente ardido,
su cuerpo dejarán, no su cuidado:
serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido,  
polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado.\textsuperscript{58}

A soul which has imprisoned a whole god / veins that have given fluid (fuel) to so much fire, / marrow that burned in glory, / will foresake their body, but not their passion; / will be ashes, but will retain their feeling, / will be dust but dust in love.

In this, the conclusion to one of Quevedo’s most famous sonnets — again the reference is Rodríguez’s — we have a text also torn apart by ideological contradiction, but in which the partiality in evidence in Góngora is reversed: what we have is a substantialist infrastructure impacted by animism. Perforce the poetic voice speaks, in terms resonant with feudal humoreal medicine, of the vanity of this world, also of the soul’s imprisonment, during the course of its allegorical sojourn, within a body rotten with sin. Yet the sonnet form is in itself a classic animist genre, which, thematically, knows only the language of erotics. The result, in the case of Quevedo, is a final paradox: a body that, while reduced to ashes, is still stirred by the force of love.

**Resisting the Ideological Unconscious**

While Rodríguez’s work was not sufficiently well known to command the attention of Anglophone Marxists, there could be no side-stepping that of Althusser, and, predictably, the reaction to it, when it came, was typically qualified and, in the case of Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), positively “rabid.”\textsuperscript{59} It is not my intention to replay the controversy thereby generated, but rather to foreground the continuing resistance to the ideological unconscious or, to be more exact (in the case of Althusser), the unconsciousness of ideology.\textsuperscript{60} To this end, I wish to return briefly to the Bhaskerian tradition critiqued by Rodríguez, with an eye to the chief theoretician of Bhaskerian brand of emergentist Marxism, namely Sean Creaven, and specifically to a recent article of his entitled “The ‘Two Marxisms’ Revisited.”\textsuperscript{61}

The two Marxisms to which Creaven refers in the title of his article are Lukács’s Humanist Marxism and Althusser’s Structural Marxism. Creaven rightly characterises the former in terms of the centrality it accords to human agency and thereby to consciousness.\textsuperscript{62} The only problem with such an emphasis, his argument further runs, is that it ignores the extent to which, in Marx, social structures are seen as shaping human consciousness.\textsuperscript{63} Creaven’s next move is rather predictable: Althusserianism, it is claimed, in effect inverts the Lukácsian emphasis, with the result that human agency is “totally subordinated to a system of social relations.”\textsuperscript{64} This leaves the field clear for an emergentist Marxism to theorize social change as “the open-ended resultant of a complex intersection of generative mechanisms — those of structure and agency.”\textsuperscript{65}

Now there is clearly much about emergentist Marxism, as described by Creaven, that merits very serious consideration, such as the “ontologically distinct status of
structure and agency,” the notion of “objective situational logics,” the causal efficacy of history “by virtue of the practices of the dead,” and so on. But there appears to be one aspect of traditional scholarship that this same Marxism fails to transcend, namely the agency/structure binary itself. This, as we saw, was precisely the issue over which Rodríguez took issue with Bhaskerian philosophy, and in the strongest terms. To these the letter of Althusser’s text lent immediate support:

For when you begin with man, you cannot avoid the idealist temptation of believing in the omnipotence of liberty or of creative labour — that is, you simply submit, in all “freedom,” to the omnipotence of the ruling bourgeois ideology, whose function is to mask and to impose, in the illusory shape of man’s power of freedom, another power, much more real and much more powerful, that of capitalism. If Marx does not start with man, if he refuses to derive society and history theoretically from the concept of man, it is in order to break with this mystification which only expresses an ideological relation of force, based on the capitalist production relation. Marx therefore starts out from the structural cause producing the effect of bourgeois ideology which maintains the illusion that you should start with man.

Structure and agency, by Althusser’s estimation, are not ontological entities but the ideological categories indispensable to the smooth functioning of a capitalist mode of production, which requires, if it is to reproduce itself effectively, that people imagine themselves to be “free subjects,” free to exploit and be exploited, and, just as importantly, to be conscious subjects, otherwise the notion of personal responsibility before the law and so on becomes meaningless. And it is at this point, where ideology enters into consideration, that Creaven’s exposition of Althusser starts to seriously unpick itself. Thus, paraphrasing the relevant text of Althusser’s For Marx, he writes: “From this perspective, humans necessarily have an imaginary relationship to the world, and an ideological consciousness of reality, in order that they perform their function of reproducing the structure of society through their actions.” As we have already had cause to observe, Althusser is saying something very different, indeed something that is diametrically opposed to what Creaven is claiming:

It is customary to suggest that ideology belongs to the region of “consciousness.” We must not be misled by this appellation which is still contaminated by the idealist problematic that preceded Marx. In truth, ideology has very little to do with “consciousness,” even supposing this term to have an unambiguous meaning. It is profoundly unconscious.

Once the slippage, from unconsciousness to consciousness, has occurred, Creaven
never looks back: the whole conceptual apparatus of Althusserianism, relating to social formations, instances, structural causality, and so on is stripped away in order to prioritize consciousness in its various guises: “ideological consciousness,” “self-conscious subjectivity,” “intentional human agency,” “a sense of self,” “reflection,” “abstraction,” and “self-conscious labor,” located within the framework of a transhistorical narrative centered upon the “unitary human subject.” Unfortunately, all this came at a price, namely the repression of an alternative narrative, one that relates the historical production of the conscious subject, itself conditional upon the theorization of an ideological unconsciousness or, as it will be alternatively configured, an ideological unconscious. And it is precisely that narrative, we have seen, that Rodríguez was concerned to promote.

Revisiting the Manifesto

Section III of De qué hablamos, entitled “El Manifiesto y el pensamiento marxista” (The Manifesto and Marxist Thought) centers in classically Althusserian terms on the “break” that, allegedly, separates the early Marx, who focused on the Hegelian image of an alienated human nature, from the mature Marx, characterized by his decentered view of history as a process without a subject. The effort required to make this transition, according to Rodríguez, explains the vehemence with which Marx critiqued Max Stirner, defender par excellence of the “free ego.” How otherwise, asks the Spaniard, was he to break out of the infernal circle of bourgeois theories that, their individual idiosyncracies notwithstanding, departed from the same assumption, namely that societies are to be understood in terms of the opposition between agency and structure?71

Within this framework of analysis, Rodríguez predictably follows Althusser in interpreting the Manifesto as a transitional text, between the early and late Marx, and as such torn between two corresponding narratives, one of which tells of how the productive forces outgrow the prevailing relations of production — Marx will even speak of the rebellion of the productive forces (!) — the other, of exploitation and revolutionary struggle centered around class conflict, the extraction of surplus value, and the need to raise the rate of profit. The preoccupation with the “means of production,” Rodríguez further argues, constitutes less an inversion of Hegel than a Kantian reading of Hegel.72 Mediated through an attachment to “expression,” it is this dual philosophical legacy, of Kant and Hegel, that explains the preference for a base/superstructure (form/matter) model. The latter constitutes at root a simple recasting of the traditional body/soul dichotomy and accordingly, together with its associated notion of an alienated human nature, gets short shrift from the Althusserian, not least of all in its refurbished postmodern, technological guise.

Si el desarrollo de la técnica es la clave de todo, como... se decía en La
sagrada familia y como dirían actualmente los teóricos postmodernos, entonces: ¿para qué hablar de la explotación de clases? ¿para qué hablar en el Manifiesto de “burgueses y proletarios”?73

If the development of technology is the key to everything, as... was claimed in The Holy Family and as postmodern theoreticians would also claim, then why bother talking about class exploitation? Why the need in the Manifesto to talk about “bourgeois and proletarians”?73

His reasoning is quite simple: viewed from this standpoint, capitalism is not going to fall through class conflict but because the productive forces have outgrown the productive relations. But that is not the only or the least danger of prioritizing the productive forces: to confuse the development of capitalism with the development of industrial technique is to fall victim to the notion of a neutral capitalism, which presages the claim that exploitation has disappeared from our post-capitalist age.

Given the importance he attributes to the class struggle, Rodríguez inevitably came to focus upon ideology and specifically upon the version of the “break” operative at this level, between ideology viewed as “false consciousness” and, alternatively, as an immense “humus,” thematized in its juridical, political, religious, artistic, and philosophical forms. The Spaniard naturally favored the latter. That said, he considered Marx to have erred in viewing ideology, so thematized, as a mere superstructure, sustained by the “conflict” between the forces and relations of production. “Lógicamente,” he writes, “esto es un desliz que venimos delimitando desde el principio” (Logically, this is a slip, to which we have been drawing attention from the outset), to counteract which he has developed his notion of an all-pervasive ideological unconscious.74

**Blow-Up**

While, as we have seen, Rodríguez countered from the outset (in Teoría e historia) the Althusserian principle that ideology is the discourse of the subject, it was not until a relatively later monograph, Althusser: Blow-up (2002), here reproduced as section IV of De qué hablamos, that the Spaniard explicitly targeted the interpellation of the subject, as formulated by Althusser. In his classic essay on “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus,” it will be recalled, Althusser illustrated his notion of interpellation through reference to the Scriptures and, specifically, to that passage in which Yahweh addresses Moses in the cloud.75 The example, according to Rodríguez, is misconceived on several accounts. “Digamos de entrada,” he writes, “que para Althusser el Otro es consistente, es pleno en sí mismo, mientras que en realidad la ideología es inconsistente y llena de contradicciones, es como la inconsistencia de un ‘otro’ cualquiera, o sea la inconsistencia de cualquier ‘yo’” (We insist at the outset that for Althusser the Other is consistent, is a self-contained fullness, whereas in reality ideology is inconsistent and full of contradictions, has the inconsistency of any
“other”, which is to say, the same inconsistency of any “I/ego”). But that is only the beginning: the confrontation between Yaweh and Moses is that between the master and his slave or, alternatively, between the feudal lord and his serf, and not that between the Subject and his subject. The Spaniard is emphatic: all practice may exist through and by virtue of ideology, but not all ideology exists through and for subjects. Finally, Althusser is guilty of implying the existence of a subject that exists prior to its insertion into a social formation.

And although Althusser knows that individuality is always subjected by the unconscious, he speaks (as was his wont) as if it (the individuality) existed prior to its subjection, as if in some way Moses already existed before being interpellated by his Lord. To put it another way: Althusser seems to think of historical individuality only as the subjection of a prior subject and not as “always already” constructed, even before being born, and of course before the imposition of the “proper name.” It is clear that nothing exists prior to this being “always already” constructed. Althusser often intuits the problem, only to end up distorting it, by diffusing it and blurring it. Something that logically presupposes an error of the gravest kind when it comes to conceptualizing the notion of what could be called the ideological unconscious.

Althusser’s failure in this respect continues to haunt his work, shadowing, for example, his discussion of the metaphor of the continent and the epistemological notion of discovery, contaminated as these are by an idealist residue: “Althusser ignora aquí, como es obvio, la interiorización capilar del capitalismo en la vida cotidiana de las masas” (Althusser pays no attention here, as is obvious, to the capillary interiorization of capitalism in the daily life of the masses). Symptomatically, from 1978, Althusser departs progressively from the notion of a “break,” and will even suppress the adjective “historical” — “como si el mundo de las ideas viviera colgado de
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las nubes y que la historia sólo funcionase en el mundo de lo terreno” (as if the world of ideas hung from the clouds, and history only functioned in the terrestrial domain below) — in an attempt to cast the opposition between materialism and idealism as a battle between two transhistorical tendencies, operating at the autonomous level of ideas. Rodríguez, for his part, not only holds fast to the notion of the break, but prosecutes it further. We here arrive at the very core of Rodríguez’s work and may perhaps be excused for quoting him further at length.

El pensamiento “desde la explotación” es ya otra cosa. Implica directamente que todo el inconsciente burgués que nos impregna es literalmente un inconsciente de vida. Si el marxismo supone una ruptura — y evidentemente la supone — supone una ruptura con toda la “otra” concepción de la vida. Marx no sólo rompió con Hegel (al que por otra parte no abandonó nunca) sino con todo el inconsciente ideológico burgués que le impregnaba — como nos impregna a todos — ya desde el principio (desde su nacimiento y desde el principio de su actividad democrática y/o crítica). Sin la ruptura de Marx con ese inconsciente ideológico de base no puede haber luego una ruptura con el inconsciente/consciente epistemológico, científico o como quiera llamársele.

Thinking from the standpoint of exploitation is something very different. It implies directly that the whole bourgeois unconscious with which we are impregnated is literally a living unconscious. If Marxism presupposes a break — as evidently it does — it presupposes a break with every “other” conception of life. Marx not only broke with Hegel (whom in certain respects he never abandoned); he broke with the whole bourgeois ideological unconscious that impregnated him — as it impregnates all of us — from the beginning (from his birth and his first democratic and/or critical activity). Without Marx’s initial break with this ideological unconscious, there can be no subsequent break with any form of unconscious/conscious-ness, epistemological, scientific or otherwise.

Brecht

While Rodríguez remains throughout resolutely opposed to those scholars committed to anything resembling a Lukácsian Marxism, it is in the final section of De qué hablamos, on “Brecht y el poder de la literatura” (Brecht and the Power of Literature), where he mounts his most sustained challenge. Thus, with Korsch and Lukács in mind, he writes:

Si el marxismo (incluido su carácter teórico), supone una lucha, una
ruptura con el inconsciente ideológico burgués, con su imaginario social basado en la explotación capitalista, ¿cómo podría ser el marxismo una prolongación de ese mismo inconsciente teórico burgués — que se basaba en esa misma explotación — sólo que superando sus insuficiencias?81

If Marxism (even in its theoretical form) presupposes a struggle, a break with the bourgeois ideological unconscious, with its social imaginary that was based on capitalist exploitation, how could Marxism be a mere prolongation of this same bourgeois theoretical unconscious — an unconscious that was based on the same exploitation? Were bourgeois insufficiencies all that needed to be surmounted?

The place of engagement was carefully selected: Bertold Brecht, it will be recalled, conducted a similar campaign, targeted at Lukács’s attachment to the positivist description of realism, to the neglect of the invisible bonds that constitute the real. The relevance of this position to Rodríguez’s own understanding of the ideological function should not be lost, and explains why the Spaniard privileges one of the dramatist’s lesser known texts, the Diálogo de fugitivos, which converges precisely upon the social construction, as opposed to the alienation, of individual identity.82 According to this text, individual identity is equivalent to a person’s value, conferred, among other things, by the possession of a passport. The Tall Man spells out the consequences for the the refugee:

Puede decirse que el hombre sólo es el titular mecánico de un pasaporte. Le ponen el pasaporte en el bolsillo interior tal como se mete un paquete de acciones en la caja de caudales que, en sí misma, carece totalmente de valor, pero contiene objetos valiosos.83

It could be said that an individual is only the mechanical holder of a passport. A passport is placed in his inside pocket just like a packet of shares in the cash box that, in itself, is totally without value, but that contains valuable objects.

Rodríguez is quick to close down what might otherwise seem to be an opportunity for Hegelians to impose their own agenda: “no se trata ni del fetichismo de la mercancía (eso supondría un después, una alienación), ni del fetichismo de los valores espirituales (Scheler, etc.) ni del “homo-economicus,” siempre simbolizado en Robinson, etc.” (it is not a question of commodity fetishism [which would presuppose an afterwards, an alienation], nor of the fetishism of spiritual values [Scheler, etc.], nor of “homo-economicus,” symbolized as always by Robinson Crusoe).84 What might seem to be a favoured territory for students of reification and commodification is anything but, at least according to the Spaniard’s reading:
Man is to the extent that he bears a value, otherwise, he is not. Brecht has learned well the first principle of Marxist historicity: never set off from man but from the social relations that construct him, that turn him into a being-with-a-value. In this way, the opposition between the individual and individuation loses its purchase. The individual is always already individualized, configured from top to toe by the social relations in which he inscribes himself and at the same time is inscribed.

At this point Brecht will allegedly distance himself from a Hegelian dialectic whose emphasis upon change and transformation he otherwise defends. The unity of opposites is an impossibility: while the exploiters need the exploited, the converse is not true, and it is to the reality of this fact that Brecht will attempt to alert his audience, through the theatrical device of distancing, vis-à-vis what is being enacted on the stage. In the words of Rodríguez:

El capitalismo no puede negar a los trabajadores, ya que vive de explotarlos, ya que necesita producirlos. De ahí que sea absurdo hablar de alienación de los trabajadores al hablar del distanciamiento brechtiano. Brecht no pretende desalienar a los trabajadores para convertirlos en hombres. Brecht pretende sólo que asuman su propia condición de seres construidos por el capitalismo.

Capitalism cannot negate workers insofar as it lives by exploiting them, insofar as it needs to produce them. Hence the absurdity of speaking of the alienation of workers in the context of the Brechtian estrangement effect. Brecht does not set out to dis-alienate workers so as to turn them into men. Brecht only proposes that they assume their actual condition as beings constructed by capitalism.

The Brechtian dialectic, as the Life of Galileo makes plain, takes a specific form: not either... or, but not against... but in favor of. Thus, not either the Church or scientific truth, but not against the Church but in favor of scientific truth.

Rodríguez’s claim, it should be emphasized, is not that Brecht’s theatre dramatizes the ideological unconscious, at least in any straightforward manner. In fact, as
the Spaniard readily concedes, Brecht himself does not explicitly make use of the term “ideology,” which he deeply distrusts, for its association (through Marx’s *The German Ideology*) with the concept of “false consciousness.” But Brecht does use the term “morality,” with which to refer to something that lies very close to Marxism’s mature notion of ideology, the latter understood as “ese magma inconsciente de lo ideológico [que] nos convierte históricamente en lo que somos” (the unconscious ideological magma that turns us historically into what we are). More importantly, for Rodríguez, Brecht addresses the crucial question of how this “morality” is “lived.” This, in turn, raises the issue of how the theatrical machine might be deployed as a vehicle of education, with an eye to breaking the hold of the dominant ideology. And that hold, it cannot be reiterated enough, operates at the level of a textual “gestus” — Brecht’s term — below that of ideas. For gestus Rodríguez reads the ideological unconscious. Thus: “El inconsciente ideológico en cada gesto diario es lo que trata de revelar el gestus teatral de Brecht” (What Brecht’s theatrical *gestus* attempts to reveal is the ideological unconscious [at work] in each daily gesture).

The role of the theater, then, as Brecht conceived it, was to *objectify* those hidden causal relations that determine behavior at the level of the real, which is not to be confused with empirical reality. Such a position accords closely with the Althusserian claim that the relations of production, however mediated through “psychology”, constitute a material reality, operative “out there.” Hence, Rodríguez is careful to specify:

> Y si uso el término de alienación lo hago sólo en su significado más literal del explotado que se siente feliz en su explotación. Es decir, la fetichización de un sistema que se interioriza, de una objetividad que se subjetiviza, de un inconsciente ideológico que se plasma en gestus vital y/o teatral, tal como lo percibió Brecht, y tal como lo podemos percibir hoy nosotros.

And if I use the term alienation, I do so only in its most literal sense, to refer to the exploited individual who feels happy in his exploitation. To refer, in other words, to the process of fetishization, whether this involves a system that is interiorized, an objectivity that is subjectivized, or an ideological unconscious that finds expression in vital and/or theatrical *gestus*, as Brecht perceived it, and as we can perceive it today.

From this position follows the importance of understanding the role of *distance*, of the kind referred to above, that separates the stage from the public. Brecht rejects the false distance of the bourgeois theater, which exists to confirm an identity — of the public with what is being represented — and to facilitate the recognition of what is unconsciously given. From the standpoint of the Brechtian theater, the subject is not prior to anything, nor is it an essence to which one can be restored through a process.
of Kantian estrangement. The task of the dramatist, rather, is to defamiliarize the subject’s subjection to the dominant social relations and, thereby, the process of its construction.

Las cosas — las relaciones sociales — son así y nos han hecho así, pero ¿podrían ser de otra manera y podríamos ser de otra manera? Si no entendemos la relación directa entre Distanciamiento y Proceso a la individuación no entenderemos apenas nada de los planteamientos de Brecht (y por supuesto, su radical ruptura con la distancia diderotiana o burguesa, que buscaba precisamente lo contrario: aceptar como algo natural la individuación burguesa a través del propio individuo, de la naturaleza humana, de la familia, del amor y del dinero, etc.). Toda esta serie de sobrentendidos inconscientes es lo que trata de borrar Brecht. La individuación y su sistema son algo tan social o tan artificial como cualquier otra cosa, y — como cualquier otra cosa histórica — se pueden cambiar y transformar.90

Things — social relations — are as they are, and as they have made us. But could they be other than they are, and could we be other than we are? If we do not understand the direct relation between estrangement and the process of individuation, we will hardly understand anything about Brecht’s presentations (and of course about his radical break with Diderotian or bourgeois estrangement, whose diametrically opposed goal was to present as something completely natural the bourgeois individuation in evidence in the individual, human nature, the family, love and money, and so on). This whole series of unconscious assumptions is precisely what Brecht is trying to erase. Individuation and its system are something as social or as artificial as any other thing, and — like any other historical thing — can be changed and transformed.

Conclusion

Readers steeped in the “post” discourses might think that the form taken by the conclusion to De qué hablamos, a discussion of Michel Foucault, would see the Althusserian making his peace with a writer who also radically questioned the notion of “Man.” But that, of course, would be a sign of having misunderstood the nature not only of Rodríguez’s whole project but also, by the Althusserian’s own reckoning, that of Foucault, which, the latter’s “anti-humanism” of the 70s notwithstanding, “siempre se movió dentro del planteamiento sujeto/sistema..., y siempre inclinándose hacia el sujeto hasta su desbordamiento final en la apología del neo-liberalismo y del yo libre” (always moved within the framework of the subject/system..., and always with a bias towards the subject, until its final over-flowing in the apologia for neoliberalism
Foucault, the Spaniard will insist, never transcended the boundaries of a critique of an Enlightenment tradition, whose chief deficiency was never to have scrutinized the figure of “Man” in the light of the “technologies of the subject.” Rodríguez elaborates: “El control de las vidas... permitiría por fin la creación de un yo libre asumiendo su propia vida y sus propios riesgos, aunque el riesgo implique, para Foucault, también una seguridad o gobernabilidad, en el propio autocontrol y en las relaciones con los otros” (The control over lives ... would finally permit the creation of the free subject, free to assume a life of its own and risks of its own, although risk always also implied, for Foucault, security or governmentality, with respect to oneself and in one’s relations with others).  

The attraction of the Foucauldian programme for liberal academics was that it allowed them to indulge their fantasies of absolute freedom. Gays and women, it transpired, were socially constructed. It was as if only the appearance had been retained from the classic essence/appearance dichotomy, on the basis that everything consists of arbitrary language, a puzzle of symbols and signs, an oscillation between repetition and difference, in which each is retained for an instant before being wiped clean. Except, of course, that in the midst of so much flux and instability, one thing was never questioned, namely the free subject. Rodríguez deduces: “y a partir de ahí la denuncia de las técnicas sistemáticas que se imponían sobre el cuerpo libre del yo libre” (and so on to the denunciation of the systematic technologies that are imposed on the free body of the free subject).  

The political consequences, as far as the Left was concerned, were catastrophic. Even Rorty, Rodríguez points out, could see the problem with Foucault and his followers: they simply had no political alternative to offer, even as an increasing economic insecurity played havoc with the everyday life of so many. Not that Rorty departed in any radical way from the otherwise all-pervasive view that society was a process of intersubjective communication, nor that he was in any position to ask what was, from the Althusserian perspective, the obvious question, namely: what was it that explained the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control and eventually to a neoliberal capitalism that offered the possibility of an authentic freedom? The answer, of course, was the evolution of the Human Spirit, to which, from Rodríguez’s perspective, there could be only one response: “Lastimosamente esto es lo mismo que no decir nada respecto a una perspectiva histórica real y objetiva” (Unfortunately, this is the same as not saying anything of interest from the standpoint of real, objective history). Rodríguez, it should be said, recognizes the Frenchman’s philosophical and historical contributions and the corrective function they have exerted. But for him the fact remains: the winning horse was always subjectivation. And this prepared the ground, by the end of ‘70s, after Foucault’s immersion in American life, for the promotion of the free subject, now converted into the entrepreneur of the self.

And what became of Marxists amidst all of this? Well, that has been the story traced
throughout this article. The desperate search began, among one-time adherents, to discover resources of hope within the best liberal tradition — “adelgazando al máximo su relación con el marxismo” (maximally reducing their ties to Marxism). Some found them in the construction of the free, democratic European Union, others in God and the classic themes of Good versus Evil. It was all very sad and, after the crisis of 2008, even grotesque. Rodríguez finds it difficult to resist mockery: “Donde están hoy todas aquellas tentativas más o menos fantasmagóricas acerca del bienestar social, los derechos del hombre, la democracia plena y la ciudadanía transnacional?” (Where are all those more or less phantasmagoric attempts to promote social well-being, the Rights of Man, full democracy, and transnational citizenship?) That is his right: he was one of the few to refuse to compromise with an inalienably exploitative capitalist system; to warn of the dangers of constructing a Marxism based on the “free subject”; and above all to theorize the difficulties involved not so much in changing the world as changing the prevailing ideological unconscious: “Así del ‘nacemos naturalmente libres,’ parece que no se libra nadie” (From the lemma ‘we are born naturally free,’ it seems that nobody is liberated). But then the inevitable question poses itself: what is to be done? The lesson that Rodríguez has to offer, from the standpoint of his historical research, is that one should never underestimate the force of social contradiction. He is also insistent, in typically Brechtian manner, that the power of instruction, as far as the writer is concerned, consists in his or her ability less to explore the innermost turmoils of the subject than to dramatize, by objectifying it, the ideological unconscious that determines the actions of each and every one of us.

Notes

6. At the anecdotal level, older British Hispanists will recall, at a time when Spain was still living under
the Franco regime, those slightly bizarre conversations in university common-rooms during which they were earnestly interrogated by their colleagues in English and French as to why Spain “had no philosophers to talk of and no novelists apart from Cervantes.” For Spanish writers, then, there has always been an initial barrier to the wider circulation of their work. *De qué hablamos* partially resolves this difficulty by tailoring its contents towards a wider readership — symptomatically Althusser and Brecht figure with particular prominence — but at the cost of ceasing to be strictly representative of its author’s work. Even judged on its own terms, one regrets the absence from *De qué hablamos* of extracts from *La norma* and the volumes on Lorca and Cervantes, although clearly, in these situations, issues of length are of prime consideration. Marxists will be the first to appreciate the relevance of marketing considerations in the world of publishing and will not be surprised to hear that several major English-language presses, including some on the Left, turned down translations of Rodríguez’s work on purely commercial grounds. Precisely what kind of audience was there for works, theoretical or otherwise, on a non-existent Spanish literature?

8. Rodríguez, *De qué hablamos* 46-51.
9. *De qué hablamos* 48-49.
10. *De qué hablamos* 49.
11. *ibid*.
12. *ibid*.
13. *De qué hablamos* 48n28
15. *ibid*.
17. *Possibility* 34-35.
18. *Possibility* 35.
20. *De qué hablamos* 50.
22. According to Rodríguez, this process was further obscured in more recent times by the arrival of the internet: our socio-vital relations are now so deeply rooted in our ideological unconscious “que no las percibimos” (that we do not perceive them) (*De qué hablamos* 10n3).
23. *De qué hablamos* 27.
24. *De qué hablamos* 32.
29. De qué hablamos 76.
30. De qué hablamos 87.
31. ibid.
32. ibid.
33. Rodríguez, Teoría e historia 129.
34. Teoría e historia 141.
35. Teoría e historia 147.
36. Teoría e historia 148.
37. Teoría e historia 379-91.
38. Teoría e historia 388.
39. De qué hablamos 175n12.
41. Eagleton, Ideology 149.
44. Sprinker, “After the Revolution” 574.
45. Ideology 149.
47. Eagleton, “Doxa” 270.
48. ibid.
50. See Teoría e historia 122 and following.
51. De qué hablamos 95.
52. De qué hablamos 100.
53. De qué hablamos 102.
54. ibid.
55. ibid.
56. For the purposes of exposition, I have conflated below the details of Rodríguez’s argument in De qué hablamos (95 and following) with those of Teoría e historia. For the latter, see Teoría e historia 94, 106-07, 122 and following.
59. Resch, Althusser 371.
63. “Revisited” 18.
64. “Revisited” 25.
65. “Revisited” 44.
66. “Revisited” 43.
68. “Revisited” 23, emphasis added.
69. *For Marx* 232-33.
70. “Revisited” 29.
71. Rodríguez, we have seen, and will see further, is equally unsparing in his criticism of Stirner’s modern-day counterparts.
72. *De qué hablamos* 141.
73. *De qué hablamos* 140.
74. *De qué hablamos* 149.
76. *De qué hablamos* 178.
77. ibid.
78. *De qué hablamos* 179, 181.
79. *De qué hablamos* 187, 188.
80. *De qué hablamos* 190.
81. *De qué hablamos* 268. A task still to be undertaken is the comparison between Rodríguez’s “Brecht” and Fredric Jameson’s *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), as part of a larger project dedicated to assessing the Hegelian “political unconscious” alongside its Althusserian “ideological equivalent.” For purely circumstantial reasons, Jameson has enjoyed the kind of coverage within the English-speaking academy denied to Rodríguez.
82. To the best of my knowledge, this work of Brecht’s is unavailable in any English translation.
84. *De qué hablamos* 282.
85. *De qué hablamos* 283.
86. *De qué hablamos* 289-90.
87. *De qué hablamos* 299-120.
88. *De qué hablamos* 299.
89. *De qué hablamos* 299.
90. *De qué hablamos* 300.
91. *De qué hablamos* 310.
92. ibid.
93. *De qué hablamos* 324.
94. *De qué hablamos* 330.
95. *De qué hablamos* 330.
96. ibid.
97. *De qué hablamos* 342.