

“A Red Common-Wealth”

Eduardo Cadava

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1.

From Marx and Engels, “Theses on Feuerbach” (ca. 1845):

We shall, of course, not take the trouble to explain to our wise philosophers that the “liberation” of man is not advanced a single step by reducing philosophy, theology, substance and all the rubbish to “self-consciousness” and by liberating “man” from the domination of these phrases, which have never held him in thrall. Nor shall we explain to them that it is possible to achieve real liberation only in the real world and by real means, that slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and that, in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. “Liberation” is a historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the [level] of industry, com[merce], [agri]culture, [intercourse...]

2.

Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542):

I say truly that what these two expeditions did in terms of evil...if it were possible to express and understand so much evil, so many ravages, so many deaths, so many depopulations, and so many and such savage injustices, they would terrify present and future centuries and would fill a grand book to the brim, because these exceeded all past and present, both in the quantity and number of abominations that happened upon the peoples that were destroyed and the lands that became deserts, because all of them were infinite.

3.

From Walter Benjamin, “Review of Marcel Brion’s *Bartolomé de Las Casas: “Père des Indiens”* (1929):

It is very interesting to pursue the ways in which the economic necessity of a colonization that was not yet imperialist ... seeks its theoretical justification: America is an unclaimed good; subjugation is the precondition of the mission; it is the duty of Christianity to intervene against the Mexica’s human sacrifices. The theorist of state reason—who does not openly present himself as such—was the Court chronicler Sepulveda. The dispute that occurred between the two opponents in 1550 in Valladolid marks the highest point in the life and, unfortunately, the work of Las Casas as well. For no matter how close this man came into contact with reality, the result of his action remained entirely limited to Spain. After the dispute of Valladolid, Charles V issued decrees that abolished slavery, abolishing the so-called “encomienda,” the “patronage,” which was one of its most racist forms, etc. Yet the same or similar measures had already been enacted before, almost without any success.

4.

From Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (1928):

Mexican Embassy

Je ne passe jamais devant un fétiche de bois, un Bouddha doré, une idole mexicaine sans me dire: c’est peut-être le vrai dieu. [I never pass by a wooden fetish, a gilded Buddha, a Mexican idol without reflecting: perhaps it is the true God.]

—Charles Baudelaire

I dreamed I was a member of an exploring party in Mexico. After crossing a high, primeval jungle, we came upon a system of above-ground caves in the mountains. Here, a religious order had survived from the time of the first missionaries till now, its monks continuing the work of conversion among the natives. In an immense central grotto with a gothically pointed roof, Mass was celebrated according to the most ancient rites. We joined the ceremony and witnessed its climax: toward a wooden bust of God the Father, fixed high on a wall of the cave, a priest raised a Mexican fetish. At this, the divine head turned thrice in denial from right to left.

Underground Works

In a dream I saw a barren terrain. It was the marketplace of Weimar. Excavations were in progress. I, too, scraped about in the sand. There the spire of a church steeple emerged. Delighted, I thought to myself: a Mexican shrine from the time of pre-animism, from the Anaquivitzli. I awoke laughing. (Ana = vá; vi = vie; witz = Mexican church [!])

5.

Letter from Rosa Luxemburg to Sophie Liebknecht, 2 May 1917:

Only yesterday I read why the warblers are disappearing from Germany. Increasingly systematic forestry, gardening and agriculture are, step by step, destroying all nesting and breeding places: hollow trees, fallow land, thickets of shrubs, withered leaves on the garden ground. It pained me so when I read that. Not because of the song they sing for people, but rather it was the picture of the silent, irresistible extinction of these defenseless little creatures which hurt me to the point where I had to cry. It reminded me of a Russian book which I read while still in Zürich, a book by Professor Sieber about the ravage of the redskins in North America. In exactly the same way, step by step, they had been pursued from their land by civilized men and abandoned to perish silently and cruelly.

6.

From Karl Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks* (1879-1882):

D. Name des office d. Montezuma - Teuctli, war chief, als member d. Council of chiefs er manchmal genannt Tlatoani (= speaker). This office of a general military commander the highest known to the Aztecs, war sonst same als d. Haupt war-chief der Iroquois Confederacy. D. office machte seinen Träger ex officio member of the Council of chiefs. The title of Teuctli added als a sort of surname wie: Chichimeca-Teuctli, Pil-Teuctli etc. Bei Clavigero heisst: "The teuctli took precedency of all others in the Senate, both in the order of sitting and voting, and were permitted to have a servant behind them (der subsachem dr Iroquois) with a seat, which was esteemed a privilege of the highest honour." D. Spanish writers brauchen nie d. Wort "teuctli", verwandeln es in king für Montezuma u. dessen successors. Ixtlilxochitl, of mixed Tezcucan u. Spanish descent nennt d. head warchiefs of Mexico, Tezcuco u. Tlacopan nur "warchief" teuctli u. andrem Wort to indicate the tribe (teuctli = warchief = general). Obiger Ixtlilxochitl sagt, sprechend von der division of power zwischen d. 3 chiefs, when the confederacy was formed etc: "The king of Tezcuco was saluted [dch d. assembled chiefs der 3 tribes] by the title of Aculhua Teuctli, also by that of Chichimecatl Teuctli which his ancestors had worn and which was the mark of the empire [das Beiwort tribal designation]; Itzcoatl (Itzcoatl), his uncle, received the title of Culhua Teuctli, because he reigned over the Toltecs-Culhuas [war warchief of the Aztecs, when the confederacy was formed]; and Totoquihuatzin den of Tecpanuatl Teuctli, which had been the title of Azcaputzalco. Since that time their successors have received the same title."