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Interview with Mabel Moraña

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Interview with Mabel Moraña

You have defined modernity as a register of the historic rupture from which to think the present. Taking the historical, ethical, political and analytical complexity that modernity has in your intellectual project into account, we would like you to specify how you constructed the category of modernity and how it has evolved in your work.

The concept of modernity began by proposing a category that allowed for a critical approach of western culture and to the reach it had on the Latin-American periphery. Nevertheless, the issue now constitutes a space of reflection, perhaps too vast, that includes all of Latin-American history from its origins. This space includes economic and cultural forms. Even though the dispersion of the concept allows visualizing continuities in the history of the domination of Latin America, it also blurs the limits of the category.

Taking Latin America as a point of reflection, one can talk about a 'first modernity' that starts with the Spanish and Portuguese colonialist incursions in the 'New World'. The period begins with the cultural contacts that came with the conquest of new territories, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This 'first modernity', consolidated during the baroque era, prompts the integration of American cultures to the cultural repertoire of westernism. However, it invisibilized, to a great extent, the indigenous cultures that survived the devastating impact of European expansionism. Later, at the dawn of the formation of the new Republics, an enlightenment 'second modernity' can be identified. It derives from the Latin-American appropriation of the ideas of French encyclopedists and echoes the political, social and cultural changes that came with the French Revolution. These European imaginaries, often more adopted than adapted by Latin-American elites, push modernizing processes such as industrialization, urban centralization, communication and transport development and the creation of national

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markets and economies. These processes accompany the consolidation of the nation-state and characterize the passage from the 'modern' era to the 'contemporary' in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Different authors recognize different stages and modalities of the modernizing project and in the resulting 'modernities'. There has also been reflection on the finished, failed or shortened nature of the modernizing project, and on the feelings that accompany the social changes associated with the transition from traditional society to modern society: anxiety, grief, lawlessness, disenchantment, melancholy, nostalgia. In any case, I believe that what is important is to focus on the subject of modernity not only as a conceptual framework of a particular historical development but also as cultural paradigm. That is, to think of modernity as a group of material conditions that form a rupture, sometimes violent, with the traditional forms of life, results in a state of culture and thought that changes imaginaries, expectations and social behaviours.

In my opinion, the concept of modernity is fundamental to understand the mentalities, epistemologies, customs and values that emerge as a response to the models imposed on peripheral and dependent social spaces, from hegemonic centres in Europe and USA, in different periods. Even though the way with which schemas of the theory of dependence were applied to Latin America can be criticized, I think that it is worth keeping the idea that the criticism of modernity closely ties to the critical study of the colonialist matrix, in addition to the models of capitalist expansion that distributed the world and the geo-cultural spaces according to the interest of elites articulated to the great metropolis of the western world. In the world 'order' established this way, the old American colonies constituted areas of influence, spaces of dissemination or cultural experimentation, symbolic repositories, etc. These, from their de-centred – ex-centric – positions, enabled and legitimated the existence and rationality of the centres.

The objective of explorations on the baroque discourse, and various publications that I coordinated on these issues, was to analyze the link between colonialism and first modernity, as well as to analyze the emergence of forms of collective subjectivity that prepare the social and symbolic foundation that gives way to the emergence of the Latin-American subject. In those studies, I tried to question focuses that understand Latin-American cultural development as a mere replica of the European paradigms. Furthermore, I tried to show complex aspects, and without a doubt paradoxical, of the intricate network of appropriations of metropolitan models in native society. Later, articles collected as *Politics of Writing in Latin America*, I studied topics linked to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries regarding issues of nation/power in the discourse of the liberators and in the paradigmatic literary works, works in which the desired or imposed modernity reveals itself as a series of diverse contents that cover a spectrum that goes from false consciousness to abjection, from delirium to the spectral recurrences of the historic memory. In recent

books, I tried to concentrate on current theoretical developments, returning to topics of baroque/neo-baroque, modernity/postmodernity, colonialism/post-colonialism. Topics that allow modernity to be thought as a disruption, rupture or twist, in the context of what Mariátegui called 'the surviving colonialism' of Latin America. I am interested, especially, in modernity as a type of ghost that goes around the bourgeois world and its margins, giving an illusion of belonging to the symbolic and a historic space of 'civilization'. A type, as well, of utopian horizon for the sake of which authentic cultures, nature, the relegated sectors of society, the legacies of non-dominant traditions, the non-hegemonic languages, etc., continue to be sacrificed. All that create paths of resistance and permanent struggle in which the images of identity and otherness, which constitute the multiple faces of Latin America, are created and reconfigured.

I am interested in the modernity machine as a mechanism that constantly alternates between totalization and fragmentation, cultural monumentalization and loss of the aura, canonicity and transgression. However, it alternates not in a lucid or free way, but by responding to the reproductive needs of capital and of the transnational expansion of markets; markets where material and symbolic goods circulate according to quotas that escape the control of the dominated. In my latest publications, I have incorporated the issues of postmodernity more, especially to analyze the relevance of the concept for the Latin-American case and to pay attention to more recent literary and cultural developments. This is done by reviewing the bibliography that we get from diverse academic spaces, taking the history and specificity of our culture into account.

The debate on modernity/postmodernity is unthinkable without the contributions made from different latitudes. Nonetheless, I think that there are unavoidable Latin-American contributions, and in many cases pioneers in Latin America, that are indispensable for reflecting on these topics. To cite only three examples, I want to mention, first, the studies of Aníbal Quijano. He gave a turn to the interpretation of modernity by putting in the foreground, the idea of colonialism as the specific structuring of power that is perpetuated in the different stages of historical development in Latin America to the present. Also, the work of Enrique Dussel who has made fundamental contributions to the debates on westernism and transmodernity, and on the different ways of reading American history. Finally, the materialist philosophical approach of Bolívar Echeverría to the topic of modernity. This approach is superior in spectrum, originality and profoundness to many of the European theorizations with most circulation in Latinamericanism's transnational space. By the way, these contributions support themselves in a Latin-American reflection that starts with the native thought in the colony and extends throughout various centuries in our continent.

A thought on the (neo)colonial condition and modernities in Latin America, which cannot be ignored, has been formed, from the Inca Garcilasco,

Guamán Poma, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Juan de Espinosa Medrano, to Andrés Bello, José Carlos Mariátegui and Edmundo O'Gorman. Recently, the work of José Joaquín Brunner, Roberto Schwarz, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Angel Rama and Beatriz Sarlo, among many others, is essential to understand and redefine these topics. Finally, it is also necessary to incorporate the theoretical angle that derives from the use of concepts like miscegenation, transculturation, hybridity and heterogeneity, which allow the problem of modernity in relation to issues of race, cultural diversity and other variables that characterize the Latin-American case to be thought of with new light.

Under what conditions and how has the concept of power been redefined in your work and in relation to the area of studies of Latinamericanism? In particular, we would like you to reflect on the naming games – Cultural Studies, Latin-American Cultural Studies, studies of culture and power, etc.

My work on Latin-American culture and literature starts in the mid-1970s, when I became a part, as a researcher, of the 'Rómulo Gallegos' Center for Latin-American Studies in Caracas. Before, I had already published a book on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, written during the dictatorship in Uruguay. In it, the concepts of power and of repression were obviously central.

In Caracas, as in Mexico and various European capitals, a great number of intellectuals that were a part of the political-economic diaspora of those years came together, many exiled from the Southern Cone. Therefore, the concept of the interactions between power and knowledge was not a mere issue of theoretical interest for us. Rather, the concept was a real problem whose entity challenged all the critical and ideological parameters treated up until that moment.

The Latin-American situation presented, on the one hand, the triumphant Cuban Revolution and on the other extreme of the political spectrum, the terrible experience of the dictatorships. This situation forced critical work that found meaning in Latin-American cultural production. Work from an emancipatory, anti-imperialist agenda that aimed at a change in the profound structures in our society. From then on, the phenomena of cultural penetration, censorship and self-censorship, the definition of national cultures, the analysis of the discourses of power and the symbolic forms in which popular resistance was expressed, constituted a compact research agenda that drew together researchers who worked in and out of their own countries.

'Latinamericanism' was not perceived as a transnational company with its centres and peripheries, at least not as much as today (even though there were already glimpses of this). However, there was consciousness of the necessity of integrating experiences and resources, of discussing agendas and sharing projects. CELARG was precisely that, a place of encounter, a platform of inquiry and analysis, where great researchers like Domingo Miliani, Nelson Osorio, Carlos Rincón, Beatriz González-Stephan, Hugo Achúgar, and others,

worked. Studies about culture, which were based on a rich and complex Latin-American critical tradition, were founded on direct knowledge of the studied realities. Power and culture was without a doubt the core of the analysis that integrated the socio-historic tradition just like post-structuralism, semiotics, etc. In the same way, there was a profound orientation towards historiographic revision and critical innovation.

When Cultural Studies burst into the North American milieu in the 1980s, and from then on started to radiate towards the south, evidently, the memory of previous critical developments was present in Latin America. Also present was the confusion on verifying that the work done in previous decades was unknown, be it because of ignorance or theoretical arrogance. Thus, many culturalist proposals provoked resistance, being reminiscent of strategies of cultural penetration that have been present in all periods of Latin-American development. In many cases, Latin America has been produced as a construct that has little relation with real experience. Instead, it is presented as a space of desire and as a space that provides cultural, symbolic, etc. raw material to be processed in the centres of theoretical industrialization of the north.

That is why, from the start, the conceptual differences and alternative ways of naming the practice of Cultural Studies were established. In some cases, the ways of naming incorporate the Latin-American tradition and the heritage of a critical tradition. It is a tradition that begins with the lettered natives in the colony and extends to the central concepts of Antonio Cornejo Polar, Néstor García Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo, Angel Rama, Nelly Richard, Roberto Schwarz, Jesús Martín Barbero, Carlos Monsiváis and many others. In other cases, the distinction is more theoretical than historiographic and proposes on the one hand Cultural Studies in the Anglo-Saxon way and on the other hand cultural criticism. This indicates that the first would have an orientation inclined towards the social and the second more focused on studies on language, symbolic resources, etc.

In any case, I think that the issue of nomination is not fundamental. Rather, what is fundamental is the perception that in this distribution of the world, the field of the political, without mentioning the economic, has in many cases, been left out of consideration, like a land of nobody that resists the frequently *light* orientation of analyses that often excessively fragments the studied realities. Alternatively, Cultural Studies superimpose a theoretical overload, so heavy that behind it, the objects of study cannot be perceived and much less the assumed positions, the proposals and the alternatives. All this, without reducing in anyway the great contributions that Cultural Studies made to the field of humanities, of social sciences, of communications and anthropology, etc. Studies from Latin America will no longer be the same with these contributions, which does not impede that we have, in relation to these processes, a critical, self-critical, position. This starts by putting its foundations, its methodology and its legitimation discourse into question and

causing with it a very productive reaction at an intellectual and ideological level.

During the years that I directed the department of Hispanic Languages and Literature at the University of Pittsburgh, I organized various international congresses. These congresses took more than 80 of the best researchers to that university; researchers who were working at the time on Cultural Studies referring to Latin America. Those exchanges produced various books that examine the theoretical foundations of this practice, as well as the concrete contributions to regional studies and to the study of more inclusive topics like globalization, modernity, violence, mass culture, etc.

The Cultural Studies perspective has made valuable contributions to this field. Despite this, it is still necessary to reconstitute a political articulation, capable of including and coordinating the distinct agendas, subjects and programmes that cross Latin America and consequently the field of international Latinamericanism. Maybe it is not only necessary to analyze the current exhaustion of Cultural Studies but above all the alternatives that exist from the foundations that Cultural Studies themselves left; alternatives that exist to embark on a joint effort to reconstruct the political platforms of approaching society and culture.

It would seem that the re-definition of literature/power in the context of the modern thought requires a transformation in the ways we think of historicity. What place does this problematic have in your work?

Due to my own formation and trajectory, I have always been interested in the historic reading of texts, a reading where the relation of discourse/power, like Foucault understood it, is always thought of in relation to concrete historical developments. A reading where theorization is understood not as an abstraction of the historical, but as a philosophical incorporation and re-articulation. My studies on censored literature and culture, *Memorias de la generación fantasma* (1998); on baroque and coloniality, *Viaje al silencio*; on modernities in Latin America, *Políticas de la escritura en América Latina. De la colonia a la modernidad*, aim precisely at that articulation. More recently, in the work gathered in *Crítica impura* (2004), I think that this articulation continues to be one of the principal points in the interpretation that I offer for current debates, also, in the critical contributions that could have been made to the reading of those works, practices, etc. by the work included there. There are articles, nonetheless, that touch the problems linked to what we could call critical politics. In other words, they aim at reflections on the criteria that govern critical positions, debates, theories and on the ideological connotations of them.

Since my doctoral formation at the University of Minnesota, the relation between representation and ideology has been central to my work. Nevertheless, I think that it is fundamental that we incorporate new approaches to the classical

perspectives on the topic. This prevents the inertia of critical positions that could have been surpassed or should be, at least, submitted for revision. Recently, I have published a long essay on baroque/neo-baroque/ultra-baroque, studying theoretical aspects linked to the disruptive modernity of which I spoke earlier. The essay tries to think of fundamental contributions to what we could call the philosophy of baroque; this, in relation to Latin-American specificity, and the subject of coloniality.

I have been interested in seeing, for example, the effect that the theory of Walter Benjamin, Christinge Buci-Glucksmann and Gilles Deleuze could have on the interpretation of our appropriations and re-elaborations of the baroque. In addition, I am interested in confronting those contributions with the work of Bolívar Echeverría, Carlos Rincón and others, and with the production in the field of literature, visual arts, etc. I think that this is a way of exploring historicity with a new light; a way of interrogating the diachronic level, from the synchronicity that the criticism imposes to its material of study. This, by making ways of representation that go from the seventeenth century, in the case of the baroque, to current days, coexist within a same critical-philosophical discourse. I am interested, then, in history as a story that channels, dramatizes, but above all, makes the definition of subject agencies possible. Not, therefore, the official, lineal or supposedly progressive history; not the mere recuperation of facts, presented like 'truth'. Instead, in the transhistoric ways that organize the past in distinct manners, in distinct aesthetic keys. This, by appealing to diverse protocols of 'truth' that many times read the officialized narratives in the wrong way, as legacies left from the traditional national and continental histories. I am interested, then, in history more as a story than as History; like a memory and testimony of the past, but also like a repertoire that is appealable, plural, sometimes submerged, marginalized and belligerent.

In your work, the criticism of the postmodern is related to our capacity to understand a new hegemony that you characterize as post-colonial, post-western and post-historic. How did you get to this position? In addition, in debate with what ideas have you articulated it?

The characterization that the question alludes to has to do, above all, with the attempt to understand globalization – in some authors this coincides with the period of the postmodern condition – as other than an integrative and leveling articulation. Instead, mine is an attempt to understand it as the installation of new forms of global domination that surpass and at the same time continue pulling the remnants of coloniality and westernism. I think that it is fundamental to understand that the new instances that are lived at a transnational level, come with new forms of hegemony. They also come with new strategies of marginalization in peripheral areas like Latin America. It is not that marginalization disappears, but that there are new, and maybe more

perverse and effective forms of marginality. It is not that the relation between centre/periphery disappears, or is overcome by the globalizing leveling. Rather, it is that we now see a proliferation of the centres and peripheries, and a never before seen imbrication of everyone. It is not that the relation between North/South cannot be named because it implies a simplified and naïve geopolitical comprehension of a reality that resists the polarizing interpretations of some decades ago. It is necessary to find a way to continue talking of that unequal and violent relation. This, by using the most sophisticated language of our time, because that relation is a remnant of the selective and disruptive modernity that imposed itself in our Latin-American societies without acknowledgement of the real necessities of our populations, its customs, interests, etc.

The new times and the new theories have filled us with apparently radical or profoundly conciliatory terms, like that of multiculturalism, for example. Terms that invite us to enjoy diversity and not to name the profound conflicts that inhabit it. These conflicts express antagonistic agendas that must persist in their complaints, for the sake of social justice, and must not dissolve themselves in a warm harmony promoted from above. Difference, like Frederic Jameson warned a while ago, seems to have become the new identity of postmodernity. The theory of difference sounds good: pluralist, integrative, tolerant. But it is not only necessary to celebrate difference, but also denounce inequality.

The period of the 'post', that we are living, does not imply the happy overcoming of the conditions alluded to in its terms (postmodernity, post-colonialism, post-westernism, post-historicity, or even post-national, post-ideological). In my opinion, it implies the insertion of all those states and processes in a space/time in which the original condition and its results coexist: the process with its consequences, the project with its criticism or even with its failures and deviations. This is a figure similar to the 'fold' that Deleuze used to refer to the baroque: history folds onto itself to project itself once again from its own body outwards, from its present being to its past being towards its future being, and vice versa. Žižek, Laclau and Agamben, but also the work of Dussel, Quijano and Mignolo, help, from many different perspectives, to understand aspects of these processes that are in the scheme of economy and of neo-liberal culture. We see this also in the re-articulations and reinforcements of the political hegemony that are being registered at a transnational level and that affect the social and ecological balance of the planet. It is not that westernism or coloniality have been overcome happily, it is that they have been re-articulated from within, in a post that involves and recycles them in new forms. These forms assure their perpetuation while alerting us to the ongoing necessity of analysis and collective resistance.

And, in reference to the previous question, regarding the formation and crisis of subaltern studies and the institutionalization of

Cultural Studies in the USA and Latin America, what has your position been?

As is well known, my position regarding subaltern studies has always been critical for reasons that I quickly sketch in my article 'El boom del subalterno'. I think that the adoption of a flat and homogenizing category like subalternity is excessively simplistic, that it is used in contexts and levels too diverse and complex to accept that equalizing.

The concept of subaltern, with which Gramsci refers – in a necessarily euphemistic manner, given the conditions of production of his texts – to the oppressed sectors not articulated to the structures of political representation, can have critical utility in precise and well-defined contexts. However, it becomes a theoretical 'way out', especially within elaborations that ignore or choose to ignore Latin-American specificity and diversity. The problem with subalternism was not so much the critical-historiographic experimentation that it gave place to. The problem was the excessive theorization, in general wearily self-referential and self-celebratory, that destroyed the same bases that theory wanted, supposedly, to found. Nevertheless, it must be said that some investigators who used this concept, just as it appears re-elaborated in the work of theorists in India led by Ranajit Guha, obtained a high critical level. In many cases, this owes much less to the subalternist perspective than to the academic quality of these investigators. The high critical level was achieved when they used it as a platform for serious historiographic studies, supported with documentation and bibliographic scholarship.

But like I say, in too many cases, subaltern studies, like Cultural Studies in its own field of action, dedicated too much intellectual energy to talking about themselves. A colleague defined subalternity at one moment like the 'new toy' of a certain intellectual left in the USA, and was right, because in many cases, the notion of subalternity was like a wildcard that primarily served to articulate personal, or group, agendas marked by a notorious historical and political circumstantiality.

On the other hand, the notion of subaltern in Spanish has derogative connotations. These connotations do not appear to have been perceived completely, since the term, used originally to indicate subaltern positions within the military hierarchy, not only marks the superior position. It also suggests a lack of resistance to domination, a state of submission and resignation before that position.

Basically, I think that what happened was that the term tried, in an excessively obvious manner, to introduce a notion that appeared to be 'marketable' in the theoretical production and dissemination centres of the North. It was also an exportable product, and I think that many people perceived this issue since the beginning, and reacted against it. In other words, the problem was not, I repeat, the researchers who made use of that notion to advance their concrete contributions in their fields of study. The problem was of those who tried to theorize the other from a flat and reductive notion (that

subalternizes them!), without really contributing to the concrete work. It was never more than a theoretical overload, sometimes sterile and at the service of personal agendas. At least that is my opinion, which I truthfully do not wish to debate, since the issue at least for me, has ended. I think it would be a mistake to confuse this delimited tendency with Cultural Studies. These were and continue to be a more vast and plural experience of academic work.

An important moment in these new projects is precisely the relation between cultural agency and the political. In what way is this relation relevant when defining alternatives and intellectual strategies?

I think the recognition of the relation, which is always existent, between cultural agency and political agency is fundamental to our work. Cultural Studies arise from the members of the Birmingham School, whose project was to redefine that relation. They created the academic and theoretical conditions for the study of subjects linked to popular culture, to the culture of the English proletariat, to rituals, tastes, as well as the habits of the great sectors that massively participated in symbolic consumption: sectors whose imaginaries help mold 'the national', even though they are not always recognized as essential elements according to the dominant perspective of bourgeois humanism. In the US version of Cultural Studies that political-cultural preoccupation with the popular remains. It remains, even though much debilitated, with a populist twist that does not derive from any concrete political programme. In other cases, the political commitment of these studies is stronger and more productive. In those cases, the relation politics/culture is clear at a theoretical level as well as in actual studies.

In any event, there is no way, in my opinion, outside or within Cultural Studies, of thinking of culture detached from the political. In my opinion, in our current agendas, the relation culture/politics is the main articulation, especially now that it is necessary to reestablish the political's place. I think that today, there are signs of a strengthening social consciousness that understands the need of returning to a political-critical thought, capable of reviewing past discourses and recuperating a will for collective activation, to face the challenges of neoliberalism, globalization, that is, to face the presence of new hegemonic forms on a planetary level.

Latin-American Cultural Studies have proved to be a very heterogeneous and conflictive field yet they have undeniably contributed to redefining what we understand today as Latin America. To what extent and under what conditions can we talk about a transnational academic discourse? And, is this positive?

I think that the transnational academic discourse is positive and exists way before Cultural Studies appeared in the panorama. It exists as an effect of the migrations that took, for example, a great number of Spanish hispanists and

Latin Americans to the USA, in different waves: people who occupied professorships, founded publishers, contributed perspectives, concerns, experiences and first hand knowledge of the cultural realities of the Spanish-speaking world, which also happens in other disciplines. In a book that I edited recently titled *Ideologies of Hispanism*, a prominent group of Peninsularists and Latin Americanists analyze precisely the issues linked to the constitution of Hispanism as a field of study. As well as issues linked to the ideological conflicts that cross it from its foundation to the present; conflicts that have to do with the imposition of certain languages, with the marginalization of regional cultures, the subordination of cultures not dominated by centralist hegemonies, etc.

Now that the porosity of borders, massive migrations and the relativization of the concept of national culture are a fact, transnational academic discourse cannot do more than aid in the intercultural comprehension. It can aid in the elaboration of multiple perspectives in approaching cultural otherness and the hybridizations that result from the exchanges peculiar to a globalized world. Trans-nationalism should contribute to the integration of individuals, ideas, projects, as well as reduce the privilege of discourses produced among those with resources as opposed to others elaborated from more modest institutions and lacking in terms of materials and so on. In the same way, it should impede the reproduction of a discourse that conceives and interprets Latin America as if it were a laboratory product, a product that is looked at through a microscope (telescope, in some cases) and from which aseptic and distant conclusions are drawn. These conclusions are, on occasions, more at the service of personal interests than tied to a real plan of integration or of creation of egalitarian encounters and discussion platforms.

Likewise, Latin-American intellectuals must avoid, at all cost, the temptations and risks of the fundamentalism that legitimates only interpretations made from within Latin America. Without the contributions of foreign investigators, or of Latin Americans that reside outside of their countries of origin, there cannot be a real and integral advance in the understanding of our field. As many have said, a great deal of the Latinamericanist discourses were created from the outside, from a productive distance. The defensive attitude against discourses created outside of Latin America is understandable because of the long experience of cultural penetration. However, it also shows weaknesses, inability to dialogue. Some of the most important studies about Latin America have been elaborated by European investigators (François Perus, Martin Lienhard, Jacques Lenhard, William Rowe, John Kraniuskas, Gerald Martin, Marie Cécile Benassy-Berling, Bernard Lavallé, Neil Larsen and among others). One of the most important publishers, *La Colección Archivos*, whose headquarters was in France until a little while ago, is directed by the Italian Amos Segala, and is a brilliant example of transnational work on Latin-American literatures. Thus, there is no place for exclusivity or for defensive

provincialism. Instead, we should celebrate every contribution that, respecting the specificities of Latin-American culture, comes to enrich our work.

Much has been elaborated in the last few years concerning the concept of 'place of enunciation'. I believe that it is a fundamental notion that allows a better understanding of the processes of discursive production/reception that we are analyzing here. But I prefer to think of that expression as a concept that alludes principally – metaphorically – to the ideological locus. It is not an allusion to geographic place or to the contingent localization, maybe provisional, from which one speaks. I prefer to think of that expression as referring to the perspective (the discourse position) from which one chooses to observe and interrogate the object of study. This, without denying that sometimes the geographic or institutional place from which the discourses are issued, also helps to understand its content. This definition is, I think, more flexible and less defensive, but over all, more rigorous from the political point of view.

Is there a correlation between the crisis of Cultural Studies and its capacity to account for the formation and crisis of the popular? What form does popular take in your work?

We need to revision the popular or, in a more precise sense, the national-popular. I have been concerned with the popular as a concept that crosses the notion of national culture. This is a notion that I have worked on extensively, since my doctoral thesis, *Literatura y cultura nacional en Hispanoamérica* (1910–1940). There, I basically studied the phenomenon of populism and the forms in which this political experience, that was so important in Latin America, gives way to the elaboration of collective subjectivities, as well as to political agendas that sometimes interpellate and sometimes become accomplices of the dominant power.

Here, it is fundamental to work on the notion of hegemony, in its Gramscian version but also in later elaborations like that of Ernesto Laclau, which allowed for a rereading of the populist phenomenon. I mainly worked on the period of the reception of Marxism in Latin America, between the two wars, and the populist imaginaries in Peru, Argentina and Mexico, with application to essayist-literary discourses in those years. Today it is clear that those notions of popular, that made sense until the first half of the twentieth century, must be revised. The attempt by many authors to activate adjacent notions like multitude, for example, are significant, because they show the need to explore the massive stratum from which agendas, movements and fronts, that respond proactively to the dominant power, can be elaborated.

I think that the suggestion that there would be certain correlation between the crisis of Cultural Studies and the incapacity of these to account for what is popular is, to a certain extent, correct. It is, at least, productive for a self-critical reflection with respect to this. My other hypothesis, with respect to this, is that Cultural Studies spent too much time talking about themselves,

and its organic intellectuals, in redefining its own position, at moments in which the left platforms were staggering and it was necessary to redefine the place of discourse. Hypotheses aside, I think that the redefinition of popular is really a job that corresponds no longer just to Cultural Studies. It corresponds, above all, to philosophical thought and political thought – to partisan political activism.

Globalization has posed new challenges that make new discourses necessary to respond in an energetic, creative and realist way, from our diverse localizations. The regimen of flexible workforce, regional integrations, transnationalized circulation of financial capital, now molds our societies (precisely when what we recognized as the proletariat seems, in many places, to have been left without a voice). I think that because of this, it is urgent to rethink our categories and, among them, that of the popular. Today in Latin America, the focus of state politics, like that of mass culture, seems to be fundamentally on the middle class, in some cases on an impoverished middle and with limited access to higher education. A middle class which ‘participates’ in the social through a ‘citizenship for consumption’ that excludes or disregards critical-political thought. I think that it is fundamental that, from distinct forms of representation and cultural expression, the political be recovered, as a dimension of emancipation essential to our societies. It is also fundamental that the popular be thought of, through an analysis of our failures and our needs, from the bases of the national, but through an internationalist, expansive lense, that understands the current phenomena; phenomena that can mobilize citizens, ideas, agendas, problems across borders, and through classes, this last a category, which has fallen to disuse, even though we have not found a better way to refer to the social repercussions of inequality, hegemony, exploitation and social injustice.

Notes on interviewee

Mabel Moraña received her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Prior to joining the Washington University faculty in 2005, she taught at the University of Pittsburgh, where she also served as chair of the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures. Her many visiting appointments have taken her to such institutions as the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Harvard University, the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, and the University of California at Santa Cruz.