

# Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century

*Relajo, Zozobra, and Other Frameworks  
for Understanding Our World*

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*For Tricia.*



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## Series Editor's Preface

The introductions we include in the World Philosophies series take a single thinker, theme, or text and provide a close reading of them. What defines the series is that these are likely to be people or traditions that you have not yet encountered in your study of philosophy. By choosing to include them you broaden your understanding of ideas about the self, knowledge, and the world around us. Each book presents unexplored pathways into the study of world philosophies. Instead of privileging a single philosophical approach as the basis of comparison, each book accommodates the many different dimensions of cross-cultural philosophizing. While the choice of terms used by the individual volumes may indeed carry a local inflection, they encourage critical thinking about philosophical plurality. Each book strikes a balance between locality and globality.

*Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century* is a fine illustration of recent philosophical work that departs from conventional survey models of world philosophies. Its author Carlos Alberto Sánchez invites the reader to explore our world by using concepts that have been developed and honed through the Mexican experience. Sánchez carefully guides the reader from an interruption of stasis (*relajo*) to an experience of simultaneous convergence and divergence (*nepantla*). Following upon the heels of such a concrete experience of in-betweenness, one would be inclined to test out the faculty of heart-knowing (*corazonadas*) in making meaning of our world of modern uncertainty. Deployed simultaneously by several people, an organic sense of community (*tik*) would develop. This in turn would enable community members to interpret their pictures of the world and adapt them to the feeling of anxiety (*zozobra*) that sets in due to the conflicting demands the world places on us.

—Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach

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# Introduction

## Mexican Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters

Not long ago, it would have been inconceivable to suggest that certain of our contemporary human crises would be better served if looked at through the lens of Mexican philosophy. It would have been inconceivable, *especially outside of Mexico*, because the conceptual resources that would make such analyses possible had not yet been sufficiently articulated in English, “philosophy’s modern-day *lingua franca*.”<sup>1</sup> Today there are translations of primary texts in Mexican philosophy, a growth in the secondary literature, a scholarly journal dedicated to it, and general-audience publications that could facilitate such interventions (see Further Reading). Thus, it is not beyond the realm of conceivability that Mexican philosophy could at any moment be pulled into the fray where different philosophical perspectives are deployed in the service of addressing some of our contemporary catastrophes. However, and despite the availability of resources, and while not inconceivable, the deployment of Mexican philosophy for this purpose would still be *extraordinary*. This extraordinariness points to the situation of Mexican philosophy outside of Mexico: it points to its marginalization and its struggle for legitimacy.

In this introductory chapter, I consider the state of Mexican philosophy *outside of Mexico*.<sup>2</sup> My very general aim is to make a case for the inclusion of Mexican philosophy into the register of global philosophical traditions or “world philosophies.”<sup>3</sup> I am motivated by an assumption that seems quite obvious to those of us that work on this tradition, namely, that Mexican philosophy *is not currently* counted among the many philosophical traditions we currently count.<sup>4</sup> I suspect

that this lack of inclusion is tied to a suspicion about its legitimacy—that is, it is not thought of as a “real” philosophical tradition.

I link legitimization to what the Argentine philosopher Francisco Romero called “normalization,” and propose that while Mexican philosophy has not yet achieved normalization *outside of Mexico* as, say, Chinese or Indian philosophy, both its history and the conceptual resources it offers sufficiently legitimate its inclusion as a tradition worth thinking about. In other words, recognizing that certain concepts and approaches belonging to Mexican philosophy uniquely contribute to a more inclusive and global conception of philosophy and the philosophical reveals its legitimacy and helps *normalize* the notion that certain of our contemporary human crises are better served when looked at through its lenses.

In pushing for Mexican philosophy’s inclusion into the global philosophical conversation, it will be necessary to highlight its salient features. These include a commitment to and dependence on circumstance, culture, and history, a unique philosophical vocabulary mined in the Mexican experience and, importantly, a historically informed *anti-European*ness. These features, especially the last, seem somewhat counterintuitive, as the European philosophical tradition has obviously influenced the very notion of a Mexican “philosophy.” To be clear, however, Mexican philosophy, while *anti-European*, is not non-Western, as it necessarily traffics in Western history; rather, what I mean is that it is “post-Western” in the sense that while a product of Western intervention in the “New World,” it does *not* find itself beholden to those criteria that the West has authorized as essential to capital-P “Philosophy”—in its methods, themes, and its vocabulary, it has, intentionally or not, clearly violated the dictates of that tradition.

Mexican philosophy’s post-Westernness, moreover, may also explain its struggle for legitimacy or normalcy. It may explain, that is, the “reasons” as to why it continues to exist as a marginal, and even invisible, tradition *outside Mexico*. To this end, I consider the process of normalization and the reasons why Mexican philosophy has not been normalized *outside of Mexico*, particularly in the English-speaking

world. Suggesting that entering this process is sufficient or enough to dislodge Mexican philosophy from the periphery, bringing it and its resources to light, I end by proposing that Mexican philosophy as tradition, as well as its figures, methods, and texts, can supplement, enrich, and broaden the scope and depth of our philosophical understanding and our philosophical curriculum.

## 1. A Post-Western Philosophical Tradition

Mexican philosophy is an accident of history. More specifically, Mexican philosophy is a byproduct of Western philosophy's role in the colonization of the Americas, a role that involved the rationalization, justification, and clarification of the conquest and the subjugation of indigenous peoples along with their ways of knowing. In this role, the philosophy of Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and so on meant to make sense of this "new" world, both for the conquerors and for the conquered. However, this project of "making sense" was not disembodied or simply intellectual.

Western philosophy was placed in the trenches, tasked with forming and instructing non-Western peoples into Western worldviews. There were consequences to this involvement. In the process of erasing and replacing indigenous knowledges (or ways of knowing original to the "new" world), Western philosophy was confiscated by those it sought to form and instruct. Recognizing it as a way to more easily communicate with their conquerors, it was appropriated for ends benefiting the "new" circumstance. Through such "contamination," Western philosophy lost its purity until what remained was but a hybrid, *nepantla*, philosophy that spoke from its own place and through its own experience about its own urgencies and needs. In the twentieth century, it would call itself "Mexican philosophy."

When scholars of Western philosophical history insist that Mexican philosophy is nothing but Western philosophy by another name, what they miss or ignore are the effects of its confiscation. They are then

forced to conclude that Mexican philosophy is but a redundancy and, ultimately, unremarkable. The same with scholars of *non*-Western philosophy for whom Mexican philosophy's relation with the West means that the latter is but a branch of the former's intellectual tree—in this case, Mexican philosophy is not “non-Western” but merely Western philosophy, pure and simple.

My claim is that Mexican philosophy is *not Western* in the sense of being but a branch of the Western philosophical tree, but also that it is *not non-Western* in the sense that it can be considered part of the “non-Western” philosophical tradition (like Indian or Chinese philosophy). I call it “post-Western.”

In calling Mexican philosophy post-Western, I signal its post-coloniality. That is, Mexican philosophy is post-Western for the simple reason that in its appropriations of the Western tradition, it seeks to go beyond its own inheritance while being true to its place. The philosopher Emilio Uranga (1949) articulates this idea best when he writes: “[Mexican philosophy] will make its own particular turn toward the universal, appropriating the European without apology, feeling in the European spirit something co-natural but simultaneously capable of being overcome” (241).

In fact, Uranga's own refusal to accept the European notion of “humanity” markedly illustrates Mexican philosophy's post-Westernness. Uranga writes:

*Any interpretation of the human as a substantial creature seems to us inhuman. At the origins of our history we suffered a devaluation for failing to assimilate ourselves to European “humanity.” In a similar spirit, today we reject that qualification and, thus, refuse to recognize as “human” any European construction that grounds human “dignity” in substantiality. (Uranga 2021, 109)*

With Uranga's rejection of “that qualification,” one involving a notion of humanity fully in line with European ideals about culture, race, faith, and so on,<sup>5</sup> Mexican philosophy takes a stand *against* the ideological currents of Western philosophy and returns to itself as

the proper adjudicating source of “dignity” and what it means to be human. This poses a challenge to the “arrogance” of the Western tradition (see Chapter 6). In challenging Western arrogance in this way, Mexican philosophy positions itself as post-Western, which also means that *it is both not Western but also not non-Western* (i.e., it is not specifically devoid of a Western influence, e.g., Aztec philosophy). In its indeterminacy, Mexican philosophy is “nepantla.”

What does this mean? By virtue of its character of indeterminacy—of neither this nor that, I consider Mexican philosophy as a “nepantla” philosophical tradition (“nepantla” is the subject of Chapter 3), which means that it occupies a philosophical and historical no-man’s land, a middle ground and *in-betweenness*, one where it moves across *multiple philosophical orientations* that both nourish and reject it as simultaneously familiar and alien to themselves. The consequences of this rejection are a silencing, denial, and marginalization that helps account for Mexican philosophy’s lack of recognition as a real philosophical option, especially *outside* of Mexico.

Recognition comes with normalization. What does normalization mean for Mexican philosophy? Normalization means, at the very least, that teaching it, writing about it, or promoting it in various ways will not be a risky practice; that one can still get tenure, promotion, and book contracts; moreover, that seeing it appear on conference programs or journal table of contents will not be cause for panic. For those of us currently working in this tradition, however, normalization also means that it is recognized as a significant contribution to the history of philosophy, understood generally as humanity’s historical love affair with wisdom. In any event, this is why *I* seek its normalization.

Some will counter that by normalization I actually mean something like approval or authorization by the philosophical establishment, something that would require a levelling or an erasure of whatever makes it different. And this is bad. After all, does not the marginality, nepantla, or post-Westernness of Mexican philosophy reflect a certain modern sensibility for heterogeneity and difference, one that gives it an edge that general acceptance would nullify? More damning still: Could

my desire for the normalization of Mexican philosophy simply be the manifestation of a deep-seated colonial anxiety about not being taken seriously myself?

My call for normalization is not about a levelling whereby Mexican philosophy can thereby measure up to established, Western, standards of what philosophy should be or what it should deal with. Rather, normalization is intimately related to more concrete concerns, namely, to contemporary demands for counterhegemonic philosophical interventions, multicultural representation in our syllabi, and inclusivity in our faculty. Moreover, normalcy is not a process of erasure whereby a philosophical tradition must relinquish its difference; it is a process of recognition, whereby that difference is allowed to participate in an ongoing, and global, philosophical drama.

## 2. A Definition

Mexican philosophy is “Mexican” in the straightforward sense that in its origins it is a reflection on Mexican reality, identity, and culture. In the twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> it sought to clarify the nature of Mexicanness, Mexican being, or what it meant to be Mexican (what philosophers called “lo mexicano”). In a more complicated sense, the “Mexican” in Mexican philosophy is meant to indicate its non-Europeanness, insisting, as Leopoldo Zea (2017) does, that “[o]ur situation is not that of the European bourgeoisie. Our philosophy, if it is to be responsible, does not make the same commitments that contemporary European philosophy does” (137). However, in framing itself as non-European it will not deny the European influence; colonialism has made this influence unavoidable. But in calling itself “Mexican” it means to confront it, to process it, to metabolize it, and thus to arrive at its own, postcolonial, post-Western identity. This means that while we can think of Mexican philosophy figuratively as a branch of Western philosophy’s family tree, it is a branch that, in neglect, has broken off, fallen to the ground, and now lays partly in its shadow, partly in the sun.

In being partly-in and partly-out, Mexican philosophy is hard to characterize. Again, it is obviously not non-Western like Africana, Islamic, Chinese, or Indian philosophy. However, it is also *not* non-Western like pre-Columbian philosophy, to which it is at least historically related.<sup>7</sup> That it resists these categorizations, however, does not mean that it should just be avoided. Its value lies precisely in its indeterminateness, in its *nepantla*.

We know what Mexican philosophy is *not*. We are now in a position to say what Mexican philosophy *is*. To this end, I offer two versions of a “working definition,” both of which are merely tentative approximations, open to revision, rejection, and reconsideration.

**Version 1:** “Mexican philosophy” refers to a nepantla philosophical tradition (neither Western nor non-Western, but in between) that values: (a) the formative or constitutive influence of history and circumstance, (b) cultural or spiritual particularity or difference, and (c), the epistemic priority of lived experience.<sup>8</sup>

**Version 2:** Mexican philosophy orients us to the immediacy of our circumstantial reality with concepts and methods that while gathered via reflections on the Mexican experience, tend toward an inclusivity that embraces a multitude of experiences, crises, and catastrophes, including, but especially, those of peoples at the periphery, the bottom (*los de abajo*), and the outside.

Either of these, version 1 or 2, is already a much broader, expansive, and inclusive definition of Mexican philosophy than what has been previously proposed, namely, as “a philosophy that reflects from Mexico and says something to Mexico” (Hurtado 2007, 10).<sup>9</sup> Or similarly, as a tradition about Mexicans and for Mexicans. In both of the current versions, this definition captures at least two of Mexican philosophy’s most salient features: first, place, as both as an epistemological and ontological priority, and second, difference as a hermeneutical starting point.

The question becomes how Mexican philosophy is any different than other philosophical traditions given that *place* and *difference* are likewise characteristic of other traditions or approaches. My hope

is to shed some light on this in this book. For now, we can say that Mexican philosophers appeal to a sort of intuition (or “corazonada,” this will be the theme of Chapter 4) that reveals a “character” or an “atmosphere” that differentiates it and which belongs only to Mexican philosophy when encountered in the reading of its texts or the thinking of its concepts. Jorge Portilla (2012) describes the experience as follows:

Just as the structures of the self are not reachable by direct intuition, it is probable that the essential structures of a national spirit are not either . . . with stolen glances and out of the corner of my eye . . . a character is accessible to me only . . . I cannot see “Frenchness” in a pure state as I see these trees on the other side of the street, but I can see it sideways, as a style, as an atmosphere that is not directly graspable, found in the characters and actions of a novel, in the treatise on civil war, or in the work of a philosopher. (127–8)

What these “stolen glances” reveal allow us to scaffold our definition earlier, both versions of which communicate a similar phenomenon and both of which can be easily taught.

### 3. Characteristics: Place or Circumstance

According to Leopoldo Zea (1912–2004), Samuel Ramos’ *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, published in 1934, signals the arrival of Mexican philosophy by elevating “Mexican culture as theme for philosophical interpretation” (1942, 63). Zea, a younger contemporary of Ramos, proclaims that with *Profile of Man* “philosophy descends from the world of ideal entities and toward the world of concrete entities such as Mexico, itself a symbol of men and women that live and die in its cities and in its mountains” (63). We can call this a “humbling” of (Western) philosophy, and it makes possible the emergence of a concrete Mexican philosophy. On earth, among the living and the dying, philosophy is given a new task, one demanded by concreteness itself. The task: “to go



to the history of [Mexican] culture and extricate from it themes for a new philosophical preoccupation” (63).

Of course, capital-P Philosophy will resist the *humbling*, what it interprets as *humiliation*. Debates will ensue about whether or not such a terrestrial philosophizing meets the Authoritative Standard of Philosophy—a Standard that demands that Philosophy remain immune to the urgencies of place, time, and biography so that it may unbiasedly pursue the sort of unqualified universality that applies to all, at all times, and in all places. Leaning on the standard, critics of Zea’s “circumstantialism”<sup>10</sup> will relegate his “humble” approach to the realms of nonphilosophy, for instance, to cultural or ethnic studies, literature, poetry, or, when generous, intellectual history. In Latin America more generally, the resistance comes from those who argue that in order to have a genuine Latin American philosophy, and by extension, a Mexican philosophy, there first needs to be a genuine Latin American/Mexican culture—an impossibility, so long as colonialism is still operative in Latin America (see, especially, Bondy 1968). For Zea, however, this is not a problem, because the possibility of a genuine culture appears as a first philosophical problem, and a genuine Latin American philosophical problem at that, thereby lending credence to the notion that Latin American philosophy is *philosophy*.

In posing and trying to solve the problem [as to whether or not there is a genuine culture], independently of whether or not the answer is in the affirmative or not, is to already do [Mexican] philosophy since it tries to answer, in an affirmative or negative way, a question belonging to [Mexico]. (Zea 1942, 64)

Moreover,

It is worth asking ourselves why it is that we cannot have a philosophy proper to ourselves, and the answer perhaps will be a philosophy proper to ourselves. (74)

Philosophy is thus understood as a grappling with questions that arise from the necessity to understand one’s concrete existence or

circumstance. Mexican philosophy is possible and original when it does this. Zea continues:

[W]e have a series of problems that are only given in our circumstance . . . that can only be resolved by us. The positing of such problems will not diminish the philosophical character of our philosophy, because philosophy tries to resolve problems posed to one in one's existence. The problems posed . . . will have to be specific to circumstance where one lives. (73)

This commitment to place, what here and elsewhere I call “circumstantialism,” is central to Mexican philosophy.

The Mexican circumstance (in Ortega y Gasset's (2000) sense of *Circum stantia*—“the mute things which stand all around us” (41)) necessarily includes the social and political reality of Mexico, the plight of its people, but especially its history—a history shaped by conquest, colonization, and imperialism, old and new. Less abstractly, however, the circumstance is the *space* and *time* that informs Mexican identity, allowing each person to *make sense* of the world from *that* particular place and given *that* particular history. Reflection on that circumstance constitutes the starting point for Mexican philosophy as defined in version 1 and 2 earlier (from this starting point, however, one can likewise speak to more general concerns which are less bounded and less determined by them). Thus, I insist, with Guillermo Hurtado (2007), that “[f]or Mexican philosophy to truly be Mexican it must take a reflection on its reality as its point of departure, or it must originate in it” (42).

#### 4. The Issue of Normalization

The Argentine philosopher Francisco Romero (1943) divided the history of philosophy in Latin America into three periods: the period of founding when philosophy began to be taken seriously; the period of normalization, wherein philosophy became an accepted academic discipline—this is a period of settling and expanding; and the period

of modernization, when Latin American philosophers could be said to have contributed to the philosophical conversation, in their own language, in significant ways.<sup>11</sup> Our concern here is with the second period. Romero notes that during a period of “normalcy” one finds that “more measured and more methodological work is everywhere undertaken” resulting in conference presentations, articles, and books which showcase a general love for philosophy, but also originality, distinctiveness, and daring in philosophical approaches (131). During this period, it is common for philosophy to enter the public sphere where it can be discussed, scrutinized, nurtured, or rejected.

Zea adopts Romero’s periodization and suggests that Mexican philosophers have indeed entered a period of normalization—of settling and expansion—by the early 1940s. At this time, there is a surge in philosophical publications, “as well as the formation of institutes and centers for philosophical studies” (Zea 1942, 63). Thus, Zea suggests that philosophy, in Mexico in particular, but in Latin America more generally, has entered a

stage of philosophical normalcy . . . a stage in which the exercise of philosophy is seen as an ordinary function of culture in the same way as other activities of a cultural nature. The philosopher is no longer seen as an extravagant that no one understands and comes to be a member of the culture of her country. A “*philosophical climate*” establishes itself. (63)

As we use it here, the concept of normalization barrows from both Romero and Zea and has two senses: the first sense refers to the normalization of philosophy in a determinate society or culture; the second sense refers to the normalization of a particular philosophical tradition in a culture in which philosophy itself is already normalized.<sup>12</sup> It is in the second sense of normalization that I have in mind when I talk about the normalization of Mexican philosophy *outside of Mexico*.

We can summarize normalization in the first sense as follows:

(1a) An acceptance of philosophy in the culture;

- (1b) An understanding of methodological commitments to philosophical approaches;
- (1c) Dissemination of philosophical production via publications, conferences, and institutes.

To these, we add:

- (1d) A conceptual archive.

These characteristics of normalization in turn point to:

- (1e) The establishment of a “philosophical climate” in which philosophy can flourish.

The presence of these characteristics means that philosophy as a practice and field of study, as something to which people may dedicate themselves in personal and professional ways, is not extraordinary, but common or normal. The established “climate” allows it and promotes it.

Normalization in the second sense refers to the normalization of a specific philosophical tradition in places where philosophy itself has already achieved normalization. In the second sense, the characteristics of normalization are:

- (2a) An acceptance of that particular philosophical tradition/ orientation in the culture;
- (2b) An understanding of that tradition’s methodological commitments;
- (2c) Its dissemination via publications, conferences, and institutes;
- (2d) The identification of a conceptual archive belonging to it.

These, in turn, point to:

- (2e) the existence of a “philosophical climate” in which that tradition is no longer ignored, marginalized, or rejected.

Mexican philosophy *in Mexico* enters a period of normalcy in the *first sense* in the late 1940s as a new generation adopts and deploys phenomenology, existentialism, and historicism in order to grapple with the problem of

Mexican identity—a project also known as “la filosofía de lo mexicano” (see Villegas 1979; Hurtado 2006; Sánchez 2016).<sup>13</sup> Nourished by the climate of philosophical acceptance in Latin America as a whole (1e), the “filosofía de lo mexicano” achieves normalcy in the first sense for a short period of time, before its overcoming by more *traditional* philosophical methodologies (namely, those of analytic philosophy and Marxist critical social theory, in particular). Mexican philosophers contribute widely to these traditions, and hence to philosophy itself, entering in this way a period of philosophical maturity (again, in the first sense). In Mexico, however, maturity leads to the almost total westernization of philosophy, to what Guillermo Hurtado calls “modernization”—a period where Mexican philosophers shed the “Mexican” label and commit to a philosophizing more in line with the universalizing pretensions of European and North American philosophy (Hurtado 2007). This period of maturity/modernization, however, sought to “cannibalize”<sup>14</sup> the previous period where *la filosofía de lo mexicano* had achieved normalcy, where Mexican philosophy *as* Mexican philosophy had found a footing. Today, Mexican philosophy *in Mexico*, as understood during its brief period of normalization, is making a return, although it is not yet normalized as it was in the middle of the twentieth century.

Our concern, however, is not with Mexican philosophy *in Mexico*, thus, in the first sense, but rather with Mexican philosophy as it is written, read, and taught *outside* of Mexico, thus with normalization in the second sense. Outside of Mexico, and especially in the United States, we find Mexican philosophy exiting its “founding” period and entering a process of normalization, one that *should* place it on pace for settling and expansion. The problem, however, as we will see in the next section, is that normalization seems difficult for reasons external to philosophy itself.

## 5. Obstacles to Normalization

What stands in the way of Mexican philosophy’s normalization in the second sense? More specifically, what could account for Mexican

philosophy's marginalization as a philosophical tradition outside of Mexico? One possible cause is a widespread unfamiliarity with the tradition and consequent unfamiliarity with the conceptual resources or methodologies it avails, some of which can supplement, even enrich, existing metaphysical, epistemological, or ontological accounts of human existence. However, it's one thing to marginalize a philosophical tradition or figure due to unfamiliarity; it is another thing entirely to marginalize these because of reasons foreign to philosophy itself.

We can point to at least three reasons that perpetuate the continual marginalization, or non-normalization, of Mexican philosophy outside of Mexico: (1) implicit bias; (2) a resistance to the notion that philosophy can be, in any way, "Mexican"; and (3) the assumption that due to colonial relations, Mexican philosophy is merely a bad imitation of European philosophy.

1. Implicit bias interferes with the normalization of Mexican philosophy in a very straightforward way: the assumption is that due to its history, geopolitical situation, and economic status, Mexico is not capable of producing philosophers, much less philosophy, comparable to those of more developed, industrialized, "first world" countries.<sup>15</sup> Based on this assumption, Mexican philosophers, when they make themselves known, are expected to be preoccupied solely with social and political issues—Enrique Dussel, Leopoldo Zea, and Luis Villoro are examples. The assumption is that other kinds of philosophers or philosophies fall outside the scope of the nation's intellectual desires or capabilities.
2. Doubt that philosophy can be, in any way, "Mexican" is a product of the view that philosophy is universal, a-temporal, and unbounded by nation, culture, ethnicity, language, or any other identifier. There are certainly many in the philosophical establishment that hold this view—again, if only implicitly. Jorge Gracia, for instance, one of the most significant advocates for Latin American philosophy in the United States in the second

part of the last century, saw it necessary to develop a new category for such philosophical approaches, calling it “ethnic philosophy.” Ethnic philosophies would be those that insist on identifying themselves in this, very *specific*, way, thus reserving the name “philosophy” to those approaches not encumbered by circumstance, history, or identity (Gracia 2003). This, I believe, flows from an ideological commitment to philosophy rooted in the belief that philosophy must be a “view from nowhere.” Because a *Mexican* philosophy is, by default, a “view from somewhere,” then it cannot be simply “philosophy.”

3. Mexican philosophy is just an unoriginal imitation of European philosophy, a repetition of a tradition brought in by conquerors and colonizers, and taught as a means to perpetuate the colony and justify the conquest. As we saw previously, this is partly true. Mexican philosophy is a byproduct of that history. This is a familiar critique also leveled against the possibility of a Latin American philosophy. Famously, the Peruvian philosopher Augusto Salazar Bondy (1925–74) suggested that the reality of colonialism, imperialism, and other capitalist intrusions into Latin America throughout its history have made it impossible for there to be anything like a “unique” or “genuine” Latin American thought. Any philosophy that has arisen in Latin America, he argues, is simply an echo or imitation of Europe. So long as those colonial and imperialistic relations exist, Latin American philosophy will continue to be but a bad imitation of European philosophy (Bondy 1968). Bondy writes that in the archive of Latin American philosophy there is a “correlative absence of original contributions, ideas and theses capable of being incorporated into the tradition of world thought. There is no . . . doctrine with significance and influence on the whole of universal thought” (39). Naturally (and logically), Bondy’s critique can be extended to Mexican philosophy. The critique will say that while philosophy has no doubt been practiced in Mexico, and that there have been Mexican philosophers, Mexico’s colonial

inheritance prevents it from articulating ideas and theses “capable of being incorporated into the tradition of world thought,” thus it is inauthentic to proclaim that there is a genuine or original, Mexican philosophy.

These are only three possible reasons. There may be many more. My point here is simply to touch on what, I believe, contributes to the marginalization of Mexican philosophy, grounding the challenges that this book takes up. Moreover, and while this list is not exhaustive, it indicates the existence of reasons for *not* attending to Mexican philosophy *outside* of Mexico.

Of course, we can challenge and overcome these “reasons” one by one. The first, by continuing the work of exposure; by exposing this tradition to the world outside of Mexico. The second, by highlighting its difference, one tied to Mexican philosophy’s post-Western, or nepantla character as this is reflected in its anti-universalizing commitments and its focus on its own concrete, immediate, social, and cultural realities. And the third, by insisting that the very act of trying to capture one’s reality with philosophical concepts, whether these concepts are organic to one’s reality or not, is already an authentic philosophical act; that while one’s thinking may be clouded by a thick colonial fog, by seeking answers to questions that matter to one’s existence one is already philosophizing, in spite of the fog.

The skepticism motivating the third point earlier is one that doubts that an “original” philosophy can ever come out of Mexico. Zea and Uranga, for instance, both respond to this by proposing that “originality,” in the sense of novelty, is not what matters; that what matters is originality in the sense of *origin*, so that when one articulates one’s difference, even if and when it comes out in the language of Western philosophy, it will still be *original* (Zea 1942; Uranga 2021).

Now, is all of this enough to convince philosophy professors to assign readings in Mexican philosophy or enough to lure graduate students to write theses and dissertations on themes, figures, or problems in this tradition? Is addressing these misconceptions enough to convince



the average person that philosophy can be “Mexican,” just as it can be Chinese, French, or Indian? I am certain that this is a good start. In addition, and at the very least, we can introduce it and spend time with some of its texts in our philosophy classes; requiring more effort, but equally as valuable, we can insert readings into our syllabi, making these inclusive of *all* traditions and reflective of the growing multiculturalism in our departments and in the global philosophical community.

## 6. For Our Syllabi

Mexican philosophy, as I define it here, has entered a period of normalization *outside of Mexico* in accordance with the second sense of normalization suggested earlier (2a–2e)—particularly in the United States. As I see it, it finds itself in an evolving process (represented by  $\Delta$ ) with the following characteristics:

- (3a $\Delta$ ) There is a *vague recognition* of Mexican philosophy in the culture;
- (3b $\Delta$ ) There is a *partial understanding* of its methodological commitments;
- (3c $\Delta$ ) There is a *growing list* of publications, conferences, and institutes;
- (3d $\Delta$ ) There is an *ongoing* identification of a conceptual archive belonging to it.

These characteristics show it to be on the way to normalization, which means that it will continue to be marginalized and face questions of legitimacy until we get to (2e), the *forming* of a “philosophical climate,” in which it will no longer be merely a broken branch of Western philosophy’s family tree, but considered in its difference as a valid and significant contribution to philosophy understood in a global, or international, sense. Getting there (to 2e), however, requires more than recognition, understanding, a list of concepts, or a growing bibliography. Establishing a philosophical climate, where intervening

on our catastrophes with Mexican philosophy is normalized, requires teaching and exposing it to others; it requires the kind of practical action that readers of this book will recognize.

We are called to make the case that Mexican philosophy is worth reading and worth studying by showing, in part, how it could benefit our current ways of understanding our world. Or, at least, our current ways of understanding philosophy in a more inclusive, global, or international sense. We could achieve this by focusing on  $4d\Delta$  and highlighting the concepts already available to us.

For the sake of illustration, consider a typical syllabus for an “Existentialism” course. This typical course will follow a standard script and lean heavily Eurocentric. As the following chart shows, in that course a unit on “existential anxiety” would spend some time on Heidegger and Sartre, probably bookend that with Kierkegaard and Camus, and stop there. A more inclusive, global, syllabus, one at the very least sensitive to the existence of the Mexican philosophical tradition, would include “zozobra” and the work of Emilio Uranga in this same unit (Table 0.1).

Similarly, other syllabi on other topics can also benefit from availing Mexican philosophy’s resources to a global audience: for instance, in a course on hermeneutics we can include Luis Villoro’s notion of “*figura del mundo*,” which refers to that set of basic beliefs that limit our understanding of difference, and at which Villoro arrives while reflecting on the impoverished interpretative frameworks that contributed to the dehumanization of the indigenous peoples of Mexico during the period of colonization (Chapter 6); to a course on epistemology we can likewise add Uranga’s notion of “corazonada,” which is a knowing which is affective and embodied (Chapter 4); and to a political or social philosophy course, we can add the indigenous notion of “tik,” a concept native to the Tojolab’al indigenous community of southern Mexico and which refers to a radical notion of community, or we-ness, where the I, or subjectivity, is a non-functional term (Chapter 5), and so on.

In this and other ways, our courses are better served with the inclusion of Mexican philosophy as a post-Western orientation. We must confront its marginalization and questions about its legitimacy,

**Table 0.1. Sample Syllabus Content for Existentialism Course © Carlos Alberto Sánchez**

Syllabus Unit	Eurocentric Focus	From Mexican Philosophy
Anxiety	Themes of Anxiety, Angst, Nausea, and so on	Zozobra
Existence	Themes: Being, Becoming, Being-in-the-world; figures such as Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, and so on	Nepantla; Emilio Uranga, Elsa Frost, Rosario Castellanos
Interpretation	Themes: hermeneutic circle, interpretive communities; figures: Augustine, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur	Figure of the world, arrogant reason; Luis Villoro, Carlos Pereda
Subjectivity	The crowd, the mass; Kierkegaard	Relajo; Portilla
Individualism and Community	Individualism, Perspectivism	Tik, circumstantialism, contemporary indigenous philosophies; Villoro, Portilla, Lenkensdorf
Traditions	French existentialism, German existentialism	Mexistentialism

issues rooted in ideological and structural obstacles that together with the nepantla nature of Mexican philosophy make it hard to decide how exactly to approach it, think about it, and teach it. For now, and with what there is we are exposed to core concepts in Mexican philosophy, or to ways in which Mexican philosophy invites us to engage our world in a more direct way, which are sufficiently robust and complex to at least diversify, if not enrich and broaden, our syllabi.

## 7. Mexican Philosophy *Inside* and *Outside* Mexico

Throughout this Introduction, I've referred to Mexican philosophy *outside of Mexico*. Why insist on a distinction between *inside* and

*outside*? The answer to this question is due, in part, to a phenomenon perceived by Mexican philosophers themselves, namely, that there is, in actuality, Mexican philosophy *inside* and *outside* Mexico. So far, I have held on to the inside-outside distinction strictly as a means to respect the Mexican experience of that phenomenon. However, because the central aim of this book is to show that Mexican philosophy is not just for or about Mexico I must abandon the inside-outside distinction. Although I will no longer employ that distinction, it is nonetheless instructive to consider the *motivations* for the split.

Now, the phenomenon in question manifests itself as the experience, one had by Mexican philosophers, of the way Mexican philosophy is read and interpreted by those of us *outside* of Mexico. What they see is this: as we work to normalize or legitimize Mexican philosophy in places where it is not yet normalized, for instance, in the United States, *our* tendency is to read it through a global lens. As I highlight in the definition given at the outset, Mexican philosophy *while born from a reflection on Mexican reality, lends itself to reflections into a multitude of experiences, crises, and catastrophes, including, but especially, those of peoples forgotten by the center, those who stand at the periphery and the outside*. Thus we deploy Mexican philosophy *outside* Mexico to make sense of many contemporary issues, especially those having to do with experiences with which it has previously dealt but which arise in *our own* circumstances. Thinking of Mexican philosophy in this way is thus to think of it as a global philosophical tradition.

We are thus seen as *reinterpreting* Mexican philosophy in this more inclusive, global, way, resisting the urge to imbue it with the sort of universality that would cover all experiences and all peoples at all times; we believe that this sort of arrogance is reserved for the European philosophical tradition (see Chapter 6).<sup>16</sup> Because it is neither Western nor non-Western, that is, because it is nepantla, it is uncommitted to any one hegemonic vision of the way philosophy ought to be or how it ought to be practiced. By “global,” we ultimately mean capable of adaption to and adoption in other parts of the world.

The phenomenon experienced by Mexican philosophers is perfectly articulated by the Mexican philosopher Guillermo Hurtado.

Published in *La Razón*, an online news and opinion magazine, Hurtado (2021) suggests that the category “Mexican philosophy” is a recent invention. That is, the growing published archive of *filosofía mexicana* in English translation has created the category “Mexican philosophy.” This category begins to show up in books, journal articles, conference proceedings, and so on, and involves not just Mexican philosophers talking about a “national philosophy,” but an international group of scholars interested in all aspects of the tradition. “National philosophies are no longer castles surrounded by walls. Today each national philosophy is immersed in an interchange, a communication, a transaction” (Hurtado 2021). In this context, we can “today speak of a Mexican Philosophy, understood as a category of an international philosophy” (Ibid.). Hurtado imagines Mexican philosophy, as written and thought about in English, to be of a distinct character from Mexican philosophy, as written and thought about in Spanish (as *filosofía mexicana*). While Hurtado does not specify what else about Mexican philosophy, as written in English, is distinct, the salient difference one can pick out is that it has crossed or transcended Mexico’s national borders, and hence, can now be deployed in the service of other concerns or other circumstances. Ultimately, even *filosofía mexicana* will have to reckon with Mexican philosophy as its other.

Thus, to speak of “Mexican philosophy” is to speak of “Mexican philosophy *outside of Mexico*,” or “Mexican philosophy in the US,” which refers to a more international, immigrant, philosophical tradition that is at once *filosofía mexicana* and also distinct from it due to the manner of its appropriation and the experiential positionality of its practitioners. It is this tradition that I am referring to when I speak of “Mexican philosophy.” It is this tradition that is not normalized *in the second sense*, sitting uncomfortably on the periphery, on the fringes, marginalized in academic philosophy both as a tradition and a field of study; it is this tradition which is ignored by both Western and non-Western philosophers; it is this tradition which is *nepantla*.

Tied to its growing archive outside Mexico, that is, to its “internationalization,” or globalization, Mexican philosophy must now contend with what it means for it to be “Mexican philosophy” and not merely *filosofía mexicana*. Again, this distinction holds that Mexican philosophy and *filosofía mexicana* are not identical. Hurtado (2021) writes: “The category of Mexican Philosophy allows us to conceive the conformation of a new hybrid philosophy, partly Mexican and partly American, of a theoretical practice that draws on the two traditions and has one foot in each of them.” This is Mexican philosophy breaking out of preestablished confines and adapting itself to circumstances that are not Mexican. Hurtado has in mind the work that we do here in the United States to understand, interpret, and teach Mexican philosophy, and the way in which we read it through our own lens, our own interpretive frameworks, and our own life experiences as non-Mexican Mexicans, but Americans or Mexican Americans.<sup>17</sup> The idea is that *filtered through* the “American” experience, *filosofía mexicana* reveals something of that experience and, in the process, becomes something else, what Hurtado properly recognizes as “Mexican philosophy.”

The “phenomenon” thus appears most clearly as subtle transformation of *filosofía mexicana* into Mexican philosophy. It is a transformation that is experienced and felt and so is sure to have existential consequences for Mexican philosophers themselves, who are forced to reckon with the sudden perceived distancing of their own tradition:

What consequences will the category of Mexican Philosophy have on *filosofía mexicana*? . . . Will Mexican Philosophy help *filosofía mexicana* gain new strength as it is reflected in the glossy exteriors of universities on the other side of the border? Does the category of Mexican Philosophy allow us to imagine the formation of a new bilingual and binational discipline? (Hurtado 2021)

The suggestion here is that Mexican philosophy as a “category” captures the sort of hybridity produced in reading *filosofía mexicana* in *another language*. For example, we can imagine reading Jorge

Portilla's reflections on *relajo* and the suspension of seriousness not only as a phenomenon specific to 1950s Mexico but as a phenomenon whose description explains and accounts for behaviors and attitudes in our own social and historical context, applicable to our lives, and both connected and disconnected from its origin (Chapter 1). In this case, one has deployed both Mexican philosophy and the concept of "relajo" to make sense of our immediate experience and in so doing hybridized the concept of *relajo* and internationalized Portilla. Hurtado asks what the consequences of this will be, if any. He envisions a renaissance in *filosofía mexicana*, an awakening to its potential, carried out by philosophers in Mexico motivated by those outside Mexico; he also envisions a refocusing on original texts, a return to the origins of Mexican philosophy in Spanish driven by the desire for accuracy in translation or interpretation; and he envisions the creation of an inter-American, bilingual, philosophical conversation that will finally dislodge Mexican philosophy from the peripheries of the global philosophical conversation. Lofty but realizable goals for a *normalized* Mexican philosophy. He thus asks Mexican philosophers in Mexico to consider rethinking their dogmas:

Perhaps it is time that we left behind two old dogmas of our culture: that of Mexican philosophy can only be done within the borders of Mexico and that Mexican philosophy can only be done in the Spanish language . . . let's not forget that Mexican philosophy has been written in several languages: it was written in Latin [during the colonial period], it has always been written in the original languages of the territory, such as Nahuatl, and now there is also in English [in the United States]. (Hurtado 2021)

In spite of the differences, Hurtado does not seek to divorce Mexican philosophy from *filosofía mexicana*. His provocations are merely an attempt to seduce Mexican philosophers into taking their own tradition more seriously. We could imagine that once Mexican philosophy—as a more global philosophical tradition—crosses the border back into Mexico, Mexican philosophers won't help but find in it the "alienated

majesty” of certain thoughts that Emerson (1993) suggests come back to haunt us when we fail to appreciate our own genius (19).

\* \* \*

So I think Hurtado is right, and it is time to get rid of the “two old dogmas” of Mexican philosophy, which also means ridding ourselves of the inside-outside distinction for good and speak from now on of Mexican philosophy without such qualifications.

Thought as a philosophical tradition that can be deployed globally, I thus propose the following characteristics for a normalized Mexican philosophy in the second sense discussed earlier, some of which are addendums to its definition (Versions 1 and 2 in Section 1):

- (i) It is *written* for an international audience;
- (ii) It is *filtered* through a non-Mexican experience;
- (iii) It is *demande*d by the reality of multiculturalism and/or, alternatively, by the hegemony of Euro-Western philosophical models and approaches;
- (iv) It values *difference*, heterogeneity, and hybridity of all kinds;
- (v) It is proposed as a *nepantla philosophical tradition*, that is, as committed neither to Western philosophical orthodoxy nor to any other established tradition;
- (vi) It is deployed in the service of *our* concerns (where “our” is all-inclusive).

Again, this list is not exhaustive. I set it here as a provocation and an exhortation, namely, to think from, about, or after Mexican philosophy.

When we speak of Mexican philosophy, we thus refer to a twentieth and twenty-first-century tradition with its own distinctive approaches, concepts, and figures which are “Mexican” in the sense that they are historically anchored to considerations of the Mexican circumstance but have not remained there. In thinking with and about these approaches, concepts, and figures we grapple with Mexican philosophy and learn from it.



In the long run, there is a global scope to the project of making the case for Mexican philosophy, one framed by the idea that what Mexican philosophy contributes to our contemporary world is a conceptual archive as well as various methodologies which themselves offer ways to approach and engage plurivalent, postcolonial, and contemporary realities by taking seriously the formative and grounding nature of circumstance, identity, and difference, a project that makes *thinking* about its normalization a critical project of philosophical decolonization.

## 8. The Plan of This Book

There is, among Mexican philosophers, an effort to prioritize what Western philosophy has deprioritized. Perhaps due to its post-Westernness, Mexican philosophy seeks to promote what has been previously demoted, to affirm what has been denied, and to lend a voice to what has been silenced. We see this in the concepts and themes that Mexican philosophers chose to champion, and with which I will be preoccupied for the remainder of this book: *relajo*, *zozobra*, *nepantla*, and *corazonada*. Of course, this doesn't mean that Mexican philosophers will shy away from other more traditionally philosophical themes. Hence, in what follows, I will also consider the arrogance of reason, inclusive notions of community, and existentialism *a la Mexicana* (Mexistentialism). When these more traditional philosophical themes are treated, they will nonetheless retain some of their "local color," to use a phrase of Jorge Portilla's, and we will see in that treatment the unique difference that Mexican philosophy represents.

The following chapters present those concepts in Mexican philosophy that can help us make better sense of our world or, at the very least, diversify our conceptual arsenal in our efforts to make better sense of it. In Chapter 1, I consider the concept of **relajo**. My claim is that *relajo* captures a particular social phenomenon where one finds oneself "caught up" in acts of value-inversion or value destruction; in short, *relajo* is the suspension of seriousness. In Chapter 2, I consider

the concept of **nepantla**. Nepantla describes a being in-between, that is, a being in the middle of things. I make the claim that nepantla describes the being of persons who are constantly in the process of finding their way, always en route, and never settled. Related to nepantla, in Chapter 3 I treat the concept of **zozobra**. Zozobra names the anxiety of not knowing where one stands at any one time, the feeling of sinking and drowning that overtakes one in moments of despair or in times of catastrophe, or the feeling of being pulled from all sides by conflicting demands.

Moving to questions of knowledge, Chapter 4 discusses and reflects on Uranga's notion of "ontological intimation," or **corazonada**. An "ontological corazonada" or "ontological intimation" refers to an experience of certainty rooted in the immediacy of an emotional/affective encounter/immersion with or in a determinate or familiar state of affairs.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the idea of community as radical inclusivity. The thrust of this chapter is the indigenous notion of **tik**, or "we-ness." Tik refers to a radical conception of community as an inclusive, participatory, plurality where the priority of the individual is displaced in favor of the needs, wants, and care of the other. Tik is an indigenous concept describing the community as an organic and radical we-ness (*grupo nostrico*).

While not necessarily confined to Mexican philosophy, I then reflect on the hermeneutical notion of "**figure of the world**" in Chapter 6. The "figure of the world" is the basic interpretive framework belonging to any culture or peoples that delimits its experience and circumscribe what it allows to make sense. The "Western" figure of the world explains the tendency to dehumanize, objectify, or marginalize other-than-Anglo Europeans. It applies to any use of reason, knowledge, or understanding that takes itself as the standard measure for all others.

Finally, Chapter 7 deals with a concept that is not found in Mexican philosophy but is definitely suggested by my readings of this tradition, what I call **Mexistentialism**. Mexistentialism is short for Mexican existentialism. Like traditional existentialism, it takes seriously

the concreteness or facticity of human existence, its situatedness, its finiteness, and its various limitations. Unlike traditional, or European, existentialism, Mexistentialism locates the human struggle in a determinate space-time, one which affects our being human in a definite way, always depending on *where* and *when* one happens to find oneself. For Mexistentialism, that determinate space-time is Mexico, particularly, postcolonial and post-revolutionary Mexico.

The book ends with a section on Questions for Discussion and a list of Further Reading.