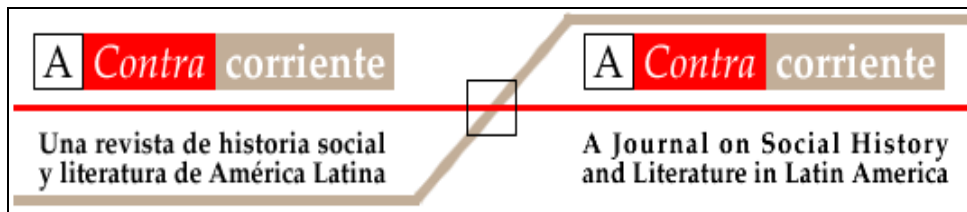


Spring 2015

Discovering/Recovering Arguedas, the Political
Philosopher: Review of Rethinking Community
from Peru: The Political Philosophy of José María
Arguedas by Irina Alexandra Feldman

Anne Lambright

Trinity College, anne.lambright@trincoll.edu



Vol. 12, No. 3, Spring 2015, 478-486

Review/Reseña

Irina Alexandra Feldman. *Rethinking Community from Peru: The Political Philosophy of José María Arguedas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.

Discovering/Recovering Arguedas, the Political Philosopher

Anne Lambright

Trinity College

Irina Alexandra Feldman's *Rethinking Community from Peru: The Political Philosophy of José María Arguedas* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of Arguedian criticism in English. By examining Peruvian writer and anthropologist José María Arguedas's political philosophy through his literary fiction, Feldman accomplishes three important tasks: first, she insists—correctly—that philosophy in Latin America is not carried out exclusively within the realm of what the North American academy most readily recognizes as philosophy (she breaks with a restrictive disciplinary perspective); second, she rightly highlights this important Peruvian writer as a political thinker, a role many critics have alluded to in one way or

another; third, she provides a close, and in many ways original, reading of Arguedas's ambitious novel, *Todas las sangres* (1964), providing English-speaking readers some further access to this surprisingly still un-translated work.

Rethinking Community examines the political thinking of Arguedas as it contemplates this titular concept, community, and related sub-themes (sovereignty and authority, law and justice, revolutionary change), through Arguedas's creative fiction, almost exclusively in the 1964 novel *Todas las sangres*.¹ Feldman highlights in the introduction her reliance on the theories of Walter Benjamin, Jean-Luc Nancy, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Slavoj Žižek, and Álvaro García Linera in elaborating her close reading of the novel. Quoting Tracy B. Strong, Feldman explains that, "one characteristic that unites Arguedas's political thought and this heterogeneous group of philosophers is the feeling that 'the liberal tradition no longer offers the intellectual resources to meet the challenges...of the modern world' (2). Feldman's insistence on the originality and complexity of Arguedian political thought, and on its relevance to a global philosophical discussion of the concept of community and its implications, is one of the more welcome aspects of her work.

Regarding her focus on *Todas las sangres*, Arguedas's fourth novel and perhaps his most underappreciated, Feldman explains that her interest was piqued by her reading of the 1965 *Mesa Redonda sobre "Todas las sangres,"* a gathering of social scientists and literary scholars at the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, to discuss the representation of Peruvian reality in the novel. The debate, for which Arguedas was present, centered on how accurately the society created in the ambitious and complex novel reflected contemporary Andean sociocultural reality. Disciplinary and political passions perhaps got the best of the discussants, and sensitive Arguedas was adversely affected by the rather disastrous event.² In her

¹ The final chapter touches on *El Sexto* (1961) and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (posthumous, 1969), and elsewhere in the study there are brief references to *Yawar Fiesta* (1951) and *Los ríos profundos* (1958).

² Shortly after the program ended, Arguedas penned his famous missive, "¿He vivido en vano?," which begins "Creo que hoy mi vida ha dejado por entero de tener razón de ser" (in Rochabrún, 65). This letter was one of several

brief analysis of roundtable, Feldman finds that the “most acute point of divergence between the discussants was the identity of the persons who lived in the Peruvian sierra” (3). For Arguedas, an anthropologist, the inhabitants were Indians, while for social scientists, particularly (in Feldman’s reading) Henri Favre and Aníbal Quijano, they were peasants (campesinos): “Arguedas put on the table categories of a cultural, anthropological nature: for him, the people of the sierra could be Indians, mestizos, or cholos. For Favre and Quijano, the economic categories were prevalent. Therefore, they spoke of peasants, workers, and the feudal elites” (3). For Feldman, these different interpretations have implications that point to differing concepts of nationalist projects and nation building: Favre and Quijano were concerned with the role class struggle to the exclusion of ethnic issues, while Arguedas honed in cultural heterogeneity as both obstacle and creative potential in any national unifying project in Peru (3-4).

In Chapter One, “Sovereignty and Authority in *Todas las sangres*,” Feldman argues that in *Todas las sangres* Arguedas exposes both the lack of sovereignty and the lack of authority of the Peruvian state. The official Peru portrayed in the novel has relinquished its sovereignty to foreign economic and political powers and reveals its lack of real authority through arbitrary use of violence. However, Arguedas proposes alternative models of sovereignty, “sovereignties of different orders” (23) through the principal hacienda portrayed in the novel and through the indigenous ayllu (a uniquely Andean form of community). These spaces become models of sovereignty due to the types of authority invested in their leaders. For the former, the gamonal don Bruno Aragón acquires his authority from the Christian God and thus models a “kingly” sovereignty that ultimate permits him greater identification with his indigenous subjects, whilst the indigenous leaders, Rendón Willka and the *varayoks*, derive their authority through the direct democracy of the *ayllu*.

For Feldman, while the Peruvian state is “an oligarchy that only claims to be a democracy” (27) and seeks to violently oppress indigenous

announcements of his desire to commit suicide and lists the roundtable as one of many factors in his despair.

culture, don Bruno and the indigenous leaders provide “opposing examples to the state” (30) and the hacienda and the *ayllu* “models of functional sovereignty” (31). Central to Feldman’s analysis is her assertion that “the narrative underlines similarities between the formations of the hacienda and *ayllu* and explores them as theoretical ground on which the projection of the sovereignty of the Peruvian state can be built” (31-32). Feldman’s interesting conclusion in this chapter is that while Arguedas recognizes multiple, competing sovereignties in the contemporary Peru as a detriment to national cohesion, he insists that certain “premodern” models of sovereignty (the—somewhat—benevolent kingship *cum* hacienda and the indigenous *ayllu*) are not detriments to a modern nation state (as assumed by dominant forces in Peru), but rather could provide models for a more solid sovereign nation for Peru as a whole.

Chapter Two, “Andean Community: Beyond the Limits of Death Demand,” evokes the theories of community and the centrality of death to community building in modern Western culture, as articulated by Jean-Luc Nancy. For Feldman, in *Todas las sangres*, of the multiple sovereign communities analyzed in Chapter One, “a particular relation to death and afterlife engenders different political subjectivities within those communities. From this point of view, the *ayllu* and the Peruvian nation are the two entities where the political subjectivities function differently due to the divergent relation to death and afterlife” (48). Feldman argues that in *Todas las sangres* Arguedas articulates a “nonproject” (Nancy) through which “the Indians’ experiences of physical pain and death, their vision of afterlife, and their concept of work...(teach) the reader a very concrete lesson: we must move away from essential thought on community by confronting in all honesty our own finitude” (49). Feldman specifically examines Rendón’s death as a central element in articulating a collaboration of ethnic and class political subjectivities and communities capable of resisting the forces of transnational capital that assault the sovereignty of the Peruvian nation. In exploring and developing this assertion, she examines Andean understandings of death and the afterlife and their relationship to indigenous attitudes towards work and physical suffering.

The third chapter, “‘Why Have You Killed Me’: Violence, Law and Justice in *Todas las sangres*,” points to the many unjustified deaths in the novel and asks what structures, according to the narrative, facilitate arbitrary violence in Peru. Turning to theories of violence and law articulated by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben, Feldman identifies key factors: the lack of hegemony of the state, “due to the postcolonial heterogeneous framework (that) makes impossible the functioning of the prescriptive liberal theory of relation between law, state, and subjects” (87); and a “state of exception” (Agamben) which, Feldman astutely notes, “seems to be permanent in Arguedian Peru” (87). In examining the interrelationship of law, justice, and violence, Feldman notes Arguedas’s portrayal of a “judicial heterogeneity” in Peru, marked by competing understandings and systems of justice whereby the diverse inhabitants of the nation-state are unequally constructed as subjects of the law. Feldman concludes that, “the failure of the Peruvian state to construct a shared notion of normativity among its supposed subjects creates a situation where the shared public sphere is absent, and the state does not exist, either as a receptor of demands or as the object of rebellion” (108). This structure creates the possibility for indigenous resistance and rebellion as a means of “negatively creating the absent state” (94).

Within this context, the final chapter, “Moments of Revolutionary Transformation in Arguedian Novels,” offers a reading of diverse Arguedian portrayals of indigenous resistance informed by the “Latin American Marxist tradition” (110). Examining specific passages from Arguedas’s final three novels, *El Sexto*, *Todas las sangres*, and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, “in a genealogical context of other socialist documents,” Feldman considers a possible “call to revolutionary action” by Arguedas through his narrative (112). In this chapter, Feldman turns more concretely (and perhaps belatedly) to the political essays of José Carlos Mariátegui, whom, she does note, Arguedas himself recognized as a significant influence on his narrative. For Feldman, *El Sexto*, a semi-autobiographical novel based on Arguedas’s own experiences as a political prisoner, “stages the moment of consolidation of class-consciousness as the articulation of anti-imperialist struggle” (115). Connecting this novel with her previous analysis of *Todas*

las sangres, Feldman finds that a “ritual and ‘magic’ dimension of Arguedian socialism” perceived in the first novel “emerges as powerful and hope inspiring” in the second (116). However, in the complex *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (famous in part for the author’s suicide, which left the novel unfinished), Feldman notes an “anguish about the end of the political” (117). In her analysis, Feldman perceives a critique of recognized political spheres (parties) in Peru and preference for a focus on political acts (events) throughout Arguedian narrative. Thus, for Feldman, Arguedian fiction “widens the sphere of the political by separating it from party politics” (119). She ends this chapter with a Žižek-informed rejection of liberal tolerance as articulated by specific, pointed critiques in Arguedian fiction and with a brief reflection on the revolutionary potential of language.

This last chapter, with which the study somewhat abruptly ends (there is no dedicated concluding chapter and even this chapter comes to an abrupt stop), indicates that Feldman’s overall study could have been strengthened through greater attention to Arguedas’s other novels, and the reader tends to wonder why she would focus almost exclusively on an untranslated novel when producing a study for an English-speaking audience. *Yawar Fiesta*, *Los ríos profundos*, and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* each have fine English-language versions as well as important insights into the very political issues that concern Feldman. Furthermore, including these novels more integrally in her study would have provided greater insight into how Arguedas’s political philosophy developed over time.

Given that Feldman highlights that her work stems from the discipline of literary criticism, it is surprising that she does not engage current, and even older, criticism of Arguedas’s work by literary scholars in a more dynamic and in-depth manner. Feldman states that, “Arguedas’s novels have generally been considered from the point of view of identity criticism, emphasizing the culturally malleable, negotiable identities of the characters” (9). Not only does she reference only two scholars in this regard (Melissa Moore and Angel Rama, cited in an endnote with no commentary), Feldman’s assertion neglects the rich complexity of literary

scholarship on Arguedas, works that certainly go beyond “identity criticism.” I am thinking of Silvia Spitta’s elegantly nuanced reading of the theme of transculturation in *Todas las sangres*, or Alberto Escobar’s study of the linguistic subversion inherent in Arguedian narrative. These works are cited in the bibliography but do not appear in the study itself. Other important current literary studies of Arguedas’s work are absent altogether, such as Misha Kokotovich’s study of social and cultural conflict in Arguedian fiction, which includes a reading of the *Mesa redonda* quite similar to Feldman’s, or Alberto Moreiras’ theorizing of *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* as the “end of transculturation,” which is as much a political reading of the novel as it is an aesthetic one. Certainly these readings, and many others absent from Feldman’s bibliography, can hardly be dismissed as identity criticism. Dealing with more Arguedian literary criticism more directly in her study might have strengthened Feldman’s argument that literature is a viable vehicle for political philosophy in Latin America, and it might have sharpened how she draws the literature/philosophy connection beyond the level of the novel’s plot. For example, she mentions in the introduction that in *Todas las sangres* Arguedas “subvert(s) the form of the novel” (12), but she does not thoroughly explore the political implications of that subversion; there are many excellent analyses of Arguedas’s fiction that do so.

Another weakness of the study lies in Feldman’s overreliance on European theorists and lack of attention to Latin American, and especially Peruvian, intellectuals who theorize the very terms central to her study (community, political subjectivity, modernity, resistance to Western modernity, liberal thought, and capitalism). Do we really need Habermas to talk about the hacienda as feudal (Feldman 35), when we have Mariátegui’s detailed and culturally-specific analysis, upon which Arguedas himself relied?

This weakness becomes especially apparent in the case of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, with whom Feldman quibbles throughout the study for his criticism of Arguedas during the roundtable.³ Quijano and

³ Quijano’s participation in the debate was apparently quite reluctant, as he insists his letter to José M. Oviedo, included Rochabrún’s the edited publication on the

Arguedas were close friends who on occasion enjoyed long discussions on literature, culture, and Peruvian society (see, for example, Quijano, “El nudo arguediano”), yet that relationship is not at all apparent in Feldman’s study. Instead, Feldman cites only a young and reluctant Quijano early in his career, and neglects a significant body of work that could have been central to the development of her argument. His theories of the colonality of power, de-colonization, and intercultural communication, and his theorization of what he terms the “imaginary dimension” in relation to social action and knowledge production,⁴ resonate well with Feldman’s explorations and would have given her the opportunity to strengthen her argument through the incorporation of Peruvian theoretical perspectives.⁵ Because of this neglect, Feldman’s sporadic references to Quijano become an annoying distraction that hinders, rather than helps, her argument.

Indeed, Feldman seems unaware of essential Latin American- and Peruvian-based conversations on decoloniality that directly relate to her explorations of Arguedas’s political philosophy. Other Latin American-based theories that might have strengthened [and de-(euro)centered] her argument, include Enrique Dussel’s theory of transmodernity, as developed in *The Invention of the Americas: The Eclipse of the Other and the Myth of Modernity*, or Walter Dignolo’s elaboration of border gnosis in *Local Histories/Global Designs* and his discussion of the colonial logic in works such as *The Darker Side of Modernity*. For an Andean-based political theory, Feldman’s primary (almost exclusive) recourse to the work of the current Bolivian vice president, sociologist Álvaro García Linera, and his discussion of the 2000 Bolivian Water Wars, is insufficient. While the European thinkers that inform her reading can and do facilitate interesting insights, relying almost exclusively on them severely weakens Feldman’s

Mesa redonda. Even as he defends aspects of his intervention in the debate, Quijano declares that “*Todas las sangres es, para mí, la más importante empresa narrativa llevada a cabo sobre la sociedad peruana*” (in Rochabrún, 72). This letter is the only text by Quijano that Feldman herself cites.

⁴ See, for example, Quijano’s article “The Return of the Future and Questions about Knowledge,” which resonates well with the Feldman’s description of the “ritual and ‘magic’ dimension” in “Arguedian socialism” (Feldman 116).

⁵ Quijano himself initiates an application of his theories to Arguedas’s life and work in his essay “El nudo arguediano.”

analysis and distracts from what is otherwise a very valuable contribution to Arguedian studies.

Works cited

- Dussel, Enrique. *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity*. Translated by Michael D. Barber. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Escobar, Alberto. *Arguedas o la utopia de la lengua*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1984.
- Feldman, Irina Alexandra. *Rethinking Community from Peru: The Political Philosophy of José María Arguedas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.
- Kokotovic, Misha. *The Colonial Divide in Peruvian Narrative: Social Conflict and Transculturation*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- . *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Moreiras, Alberto. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Quijano, Aníbal. "El nudo arguediano." in *Centenario de José María Arguedas: Sociedad, Nación y Literatura*. Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2011. 13-20.
- . "The Return of the Future and Questions about Knowledge." *Current Sociology* 50.1 (January 2002): 75-87.
- Rochabrún, Guillermo, ed. *La Mesa Redonda sobre "Todas las Sangres"*. 2nd edition. Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and IEP Ediciones, 2000.