Research Article

Stefan Gandler*

Critical Theory and Semiotics: Contributions from Latin America to a Marxist Discussion[1]

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0013
Received March 19, 2018; accepted May 20, 2018

Abstract: How is it possible to understand a specific cultural determination of human praxis, especially the productive and consumptive one, without falling into ethnologising human subjects in their everyday forms of reproduction, or construct biological fixations? The former senior faculty of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Bolívar Echeverría (Riobamba, Ecuador 1941—Mexico City 2010), who does not limit human culture to its "elevated" forms and bases his analysis in the precise manner of material reproduction, finds an adequate image of this relationship between freedom and tradition, between individuality and a historically- and geographically-determined collectivity. This image lies in human languages, their innumerable speech acts and in a science that studies the relation of interdependence among them: semiotics. Starting from that concrete philosophical problem, retaking Saussure's conceptual proposals and confronting them philosophically with Marx's and Echeverría's theories, we try to construct a basis for a critical epistemological contribution from the *Global South*, overcoming in that way one of the most powerful and destructive *rests* of the *old* colonial processes: "intellectual" Eurocentrism.

Keywords: language, faculty of speech, productive consumption, instrument of labour, use value

In recent years, Latin America has begun in the social plane to distance itself from worldwide loci of power, reorganising economic and political relations; this trend, however, is hardly visible in the field of social philosophy. It is now urgent to reorganise the international philosophical and social-sciences discussion, using Critical Theory as its starting point. Critical Theory is one of the few existing social theories with the ability to develop and reconstruct the remains of the capability for auto-critique in the existing world society. A result of this theoretical reorganisation could be to overcome the ongoing dominance of *philosophical* Eurocentrism; a dominance that actually is no less virulent than it was in the times of the Colonialism. Only through an open and non-Eurocentric reorganisation of the international discussion on social theory and philosophy, will it be possible to give society the conceptual tools it needs in order to leave the state of reflective stagnation it has been trapped in for over the past three decades. This stagnation, reflected in our inability to leave behind the so-called neoliberal ideology, has propelled us into going about our everyday lives in a world where both the social and ecological consequences of this ideology are becoming irreversible.

1 In this article, I am retaking two preoccupations and two arguments that I have discussed previously on separate occasions and in different venues ("Ethnocentrism and Critical Theory, Two Cases: United States and Mexico" in *Comunicações*, v. 24, n. 2, pp. 33-56; and *Critical Marxism in Mexico. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría*, Brill, Leiden, 2015). In doing so, I want to re-think Bolivar Echeverría in and through Saussure, and thus to reflect on the particular question of Marx and semiotics that this Special Issue on the 200th anniversary of Marx brings to the fore. More concretely, my aim has been to reconsider that relationship between Marx and semiotics from the Global South, both through my reflections on Bolivar Echeverría, and through the discussions I have held, and the theoretical sources I have engaged with here in Latin America over the past few years.

***Corresponding author: Stefan Gandler**, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales. Email: stefan.gandler@gmail.com

Critical Theory, originally developed by the Frankfurt School in the 1920's, 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's, has a certain decisive flaw it shares with the vast majority of other European philosophies, as well. Namely, it contains within it a trend towards generalising its place of origin in two distinct ways. First, it only considers theories originating from the European continent as "fundamental," and second, it only takes the social realities of Europe and the United States into account. Despite this crucial limitation, however, we remain profoundly convinced that this school of thought is the only way to interpret the "real" world in a non-superficial way. In addition to needing new input in order to do so, however, we also need a way to overcome the problem of Eurocentrism earlier described.

In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, the key concept needed to understand the specific dynamics of the formation of consciousness (partially formed by the collective unconscious and also the spontaneous forms of organization in collective life) is that of *reification*, inherited from George Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, especially the essay *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*. Despite the vast relevance of this work for understanding capitalist society, one of its foremost disadvantages is in its inability to significantly describe the breadth of forms of everyday life that underlie capitalist reproduction. In a certain sense, we can see the concept of "reification" as something which captures a specifically prevalent form in North-Western Europe, one which Bolívar Echeverría, a former senior philosophy professor at the UNAM, who passed away eight years ago, conceives as the "realist ethos." It is because of reification that one is unable to perceive the inherent contradictions in social forms today. In turn, it redefines them as "things" which are unquestionable, eternal and no longer subject to change. The "baroque ethos," on the other hand, allows both to perceive and to live with these contradictions without negating or denying them; unlike the realist ethos, it plays with them and, in a certain sense, "refunctionalizes" them. (Hence, certain social phenomena arise out of the "baroque ethos," such as a permanent suspicion of possible corruption, that is then combined with the belief that without this corruption, things may become even more complicated or the use of double-speak and ironic plays with language etc.) On the one hand, what Echeverría calls the "baroque ethos," which in Latin America and Mexico coexists with the "realist ethos," is not adequately acknowledged by classical critique of ideology based solely upon the concept of reification; on the other, we can note—for further discussions—that Echeverría's theory of the historical ethe pays a certain price for the contributions it makes, thereby falling prey to some of the limitations that have actually been overcome by the critique of ideology.[2]

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In order to open the necessary international debate on a possible reconstruction of Critical Theory, starting from contributions made outside the self-called *first world*, we discuss in the following lines one of the central theoretical contributions of the Ecuadorian-Mexican philosopher Bolívar Echeverría (1941-2010)—who, in our way of analysing the today's international philosophical debate, is one of the most important authors in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, even when he was born and died outside the economical and military centres of our brave and wonderful world[3] (Moraña 9-10)—the relationship between use-value and communication, which is the conceptual base of his above-mentioned theory of the four *ethe* of capitalist modernity. Echeverría set himself a task that cannot be resolved easily. He wanted to provide a concrete content to the concept of praxis, and thereby to grasp it in its historical dimension. According to all indications, the problem consists of the following: if the concept of praxis is inseparably linked to the concept of the (autonomous) subject who freely decides, then how can this be understood as something determinate, with concrete content? How can we theoretically reproduce this complex ensemble of

2 Compare our lecture at the *Primer coloquio Teoría crítica desde las Américas*, Querétaro, September 17 to 19, 2015: "Reflexiones para una Teoría crítica desde las Américas. Retos y límites de las lecturas de Bolívar Echeverría", video recording in two parts: https://youtu.be/ZOEjfcW6vkg (part 1) and https://youtu.be/sIhxJ1CkhKQ (part 2).

3 The idea that Bolívar Echeverría belongs to the group of thinkers inspired by the Critical Theory is supported by others, one of the most notable is Mabel Moraña. In her introduction to the volume *Para una crítica de la modernidad capitalista* she states that Echeverría's thought is, in some way, inheritor of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin theories explaining his capacity to appel to "the 70's reader, marked by fire by the Cuban Revolution, by the experience of Vietnam and by the 68" (Moraña 9–10).

particular subjective decisions on the basis of historical-concrete conceptual determinations, which must necessarily seek out the *general*?

Or, to put it differently, and more closely in line with the materialist theory of culture toward which Echeverría aspires: how is it possible to understand a specific cultural determination of human praxis, especially the productive (and consumptive) one, without falling into ethnologising human subjects in their respective everyday forms of reproduction, or even construct biological fixations?

Echeverría is not interested in diluting Marxian theory in bourgeois waters, as he has been accused of occasionally, but rather—on the contrary—to deprive of arguments the superficial naturalising and culturalising interpretations of bourgeois society and capitalist relations of production. Now, it has been the case just as often that natural and cultural aspects—which no doubt exist in every society and frequently slow their direct transformation, which is the reason why such interpretations tend to be applauded by conservative theories—have been studied by such authors with as little seriousness as with they studied the immediate social relations and the human praxis that grounds them. The terminological occupation of the social terrain and that created directly through praxis, by naturalising and culturalising tendencies has pressed the true analysis of nature-society and culture-society relations out of the conceptual terrain.

Echeverría's purpose in locating these two relations at the centre of his analysis should be understood as another step in what was already Marx's theoretical project: the successive demystification of bourgeois ideas regarding their own existence. Echeverría attempts to overcome the problem that is contained in this mystification, namely, the sovereign negation of what effectively is "nature" or "culture." This "nature," "culture," and such like, which are inserted merely as substitutes for aspects of social relations which are conceptually inaccessible to bourgeois theory, due to its ideological and historical limitations, must now be studied as factors of reality which exist beyond the ideological utilisation of these terms.

Obviously, the descent into deep strata cannot be accomplished without the loss of previously developed knowledges, since the prevailing naturalisation and culturalisation of social relations has occupied the terminological terrain with ideological concepts, to such a degree that it is almost impossible to penetrate therein and escape unscathed. Just as Alfred Schmidt rightly emphasises time and again (Schmidt, 1971) that the philosophy of praxis must necessarily turn for help to the idealist philosophy of knowledge in order to be able to confront mechanical materialism and dogmatic Marxism conceptually, in Echeverría's case, things work very similarly. His effort to overcome the tendency to underestimate the relevance of the natural form of social reproduction, as well as the cultural foundations of all material reproduction and social organisation in the majority of Marxist theories, cannot survive in the face of this conceptual predominance if it does not turn to specific idealist [and Heideggerian] terms and knowledges. Echeverría, who, as we have said, does not limit human culture to its "elevated" forms—for example, art at a gallery—and bases his analysis, rather, in the precise manner of material reproduction (as the unity of production and consumption), finds an adequate image of this relationship between freedom and tradition, between individuality and a historically- and geographically-determined collectivity. This image lies in human languages and their innumerable speech acts and in a science that studies the relation of interdependence among them: semiotics, founded by Ferdinand de Saussure. To do so, he refers to authors like Roman Jakobson and Louis Hjelmslev.[4]

In his article "La 'forma natural' de la reproducción social," he does so through the use of not only text, but also, on average every two pages, graphics with schematic representations of the processes of communication and reproduction which, no doubt, allow us to grasp their similarity visually.[5] We should

4 Bolívar Echeverría emphasises the importance of these two authors in his study of the natural form: "To a certain degree I approximated above all Jakobson and Hjelmslev, they are the two that I treat as crucial in questions of semiology and linguistics" (Interview with Bolívar Echeverría [by Stefan Gandler], September 11, 1996, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). In the absence of a unified counting method, the tape position is indicated according to the apparatus utilised (Panasonic 608), here: cassette I, side A, pos. 247–50, cited hereafter as Interview with Bolívar Echeverría.)

5 This mention of the schematic representarion and its capacity to represent the problem visually must not be taken as a secondary subject. More authors have noted the importance of these exercises within Echeverría's thought. As it is clearly noted by Carlos Oliva, Echeverría's "reflection, in much of his work, is full of figures. They are not an exercise of youth or training." Moreover, the author adds that these figures are "metaphysical schemas that try to show the primordial relation of the human being with the nature and the matter" (Oliva 186–187).

not overlook his affinity for Saussure's figures, although Echeverría's are much more complex and can only be understood after a meticulous study of the primary text in question. Here, what is crucial is the fact that Echeverría does not refer to semiotics in order to grasp all reality as a mere sign and thereby to see history only as an "unfinished text," but the opposite.

> Echeverría posits the indissoluble unity between the process of production of use values and the process of production of meanings. In this sense, the work process is conceived as a process of social communication, process of production, circulation and consumption of message goods, as a sign process. Every time we work, we inscribe a meaning in the matter worked (Tonda 163).

Not only does he want to demonstrate that the first and fundamental human sign system is, in every case, that of the various forms of producing and consuming use values, but he wants to show even more than this: for Echeverría, the communication process is a dimension of the process of reproduction. He explains:

"So I make visible a parallel between the process of reproduction and that of communication. … That is to say, the latter (the process of communication) is an aspect, a dimension of the former [which is to say, the process of reproduction]"[6]; that is, the process of reproduction can be compared to the process of communication not because the world as a totality can only be grasped as a complicated combination of "texts" and "ways of reading," but the reverse; communication, as the unity of the production and consumption of signs, is in itself one among many productive and consumptive acts that human beings must undertake in order to be able to organise and maintain their lives, but it isn't the fundamental form and always has an inevitable materiality as its foundation.

"Speech [el lenguaje][7] in its basic, verbal realisation is also a process of the production/consumption of objects. The speaker presents to the listener a transformation of nature: his voice modifies the acoustic state of the atmosphere, and this change, this object, is perceived or consumed as such by the ear of the other".[8]

Bolívar Echeverría is concerned with explaining the process of producing and consuming use values through reference to the theoretical contributions of semiotics, but without denying the primacy of nature and the primacy of the material as the inalienable foundation of idealism. Here, we find an essential difference *vis-à-vis* a series of contemporary approaches which are caught up in the concept of communication (or related conceptions, for example, that of 'articulation'), and which see in it the most diverse forms, real or imagined, the explanation, and, at the same time, the salvation of the world.

While Saussure subordinates linguistics to semiotics [*sémiologie*][9] and realises that knowledge of the "true nature of language" is only possible if it is correctly classified under the most general field of "all other systems of the same order [tous les autres systèmes du meme ordre]"[10] which semiotics studies, Echeverría seeks to classify semiotics (understood by him as the production and consumption of signs) under the even broader field of production and consumption in general. It is clear that Saussure and Echeverría differ notably from one another since Saussure considers semiotics to be embedded within social psychology, and this, in turn, within psychology in general, while Echeverría's system of reference is the critique of political

6 Interview with Bolívar Echeverría, cassette 1, side A, pos. 264–7.

7 Evidently, by "lenguaje" ['speech'] Echeverría understands what Ferdinand de Saussure (whom he cited at various points in the text here analysed) calls "*langage*." Saussure also uses this term as a synonym for "*faculté de langage*", and explains: "*l'exercice du langage repose sur une faculté que nous tenons de la nature*." Ferdinand de Saussure 1979. English translation: "the use of speech is based on a natural faculty," (Saussure 9). Saussure already indicates here that we should understand by "*langage*" ["speech" in English, "lenguaje" in Spanish] not only the languages ["langue" in French, "lengua" in Spanish] spoken, but also the totality of all *possible* forms of expression or also of forms of exteriorisation; it should be used to refer to any systematisation or homogenisation of any forms of expression. Note: "Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous … Language, once its boundaries have been marked off within the speech data, can be classified among human phenomena, whereas speech cannot" (Saussure 15) Compare also: "faculty of speech" (10).

8 Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 45. Echeverría refers here to Troubetzkoy (*Principes de Phonologie* 38).

9 "Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts" (Saussure 16).

10 Note: "But to me the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact. If we are to discover the true nature of language, we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems" (Saussure 17).

economy.[11] We can find a parallel between the two, since in order to study the most general object, that which is necessary for the understanding of particulars, they both set out from the most complex among particular objects. Hence Saussure writes:

> Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system. (Saussure 68).

Here, what attracts our attention—despite all of the differences—is a degree of similarity with Marx's methodological procedure, clearly summarised in the phrase: "The anatomy of the human being is the key to the anatomy of the ape" (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 300). Formulated differently: Saussure's method reminds us of the Marxian distinction between the trajectory of research and the trajectory of explanation, which, for example, in the case of *Capital*, move to a large extent in opposite directions. Echeverría, who as we have seen wants to link Marx with semiotics, also seeks to employ a similar method in his research. For the analysis of the general fact of the production and consumption of objects, he refers largely to the production/consumption of signs. He does not choose this approach because the latter are more important than other forms of production/consumption, but quite simply because it is in it that we can grasp something general, and moreover because the production/consumption of anything, above all with reference to use value, always contains a production/consumption of signs.

Once this has been clarified, we must state the fact that there is a broad presence of communicative elements in material reproduction itself. On this point, one could feel tempted to say lightly: "naturally, since to organise the process of reproduction it is necessary to communicate, it is necessary to discuss projects, to resolve problems orally and to carry out other linguistic acts." While this is correct, it is not the central aspect of Echeverría's understanding of how similar and interwoven reproduction and communication are. Rather, he sees in the very production and consumption of these use values an act of "communication,"[12] and possibly the most decisive communicative act for social life itself. For example, to prepare a meal and the following act of eating it is, at the same time, to produce a determinate sign and to interpret it.

> To produce and consume objects is to produce and consume meanings [*significaciones*]. To produce is to communicate [*mitteilen*], to propose a use value of nature to someone else; to consume is to interpret [*auslegen*], to validate this use value that another has found. To appropriate nature is to make it meaningful [*significativa*] (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 42).

We find, here, an important difference with regard to the production of value, which tendentially can leave aside the real satisfaction of human needs, if only the creation of value and with it surplus value remains guaranteed. The catch lies in the fact that, after all, the production of value cannot completely refrain from the production of use value, which is its "natural" foundation. It is from this point, for Echeverría, that the possibility of overcoming the apparently eternal capitalist mode of production emerges. In his theories, Marx based his hopes for putting an end to the ruling relations—without the disappearance of the subjects who uphold them—on the fact that the current social formation cannot exist without proletarians, and yet they are the potential revolutionary subject. In contrast with this view, Echeverría is not fixated exclusively on production:

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11 "*A science that studies the life of signs within society* is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *sēmîon* 'sign')" (Saussure 16). Elsewhere he speaks not of "social psychology" but "group psychology" (Saussure 78). Note that Saussure implicitly understands social psychology as a science whose object is "*society* ["*la vie sociale*"]. So what interests Saussure is to establish the semiotics he has founded within the social sciences, with the only limitation being that he here thinks about above all in social psychology, which is to say, he seems to see society first of all determined by one aspect of those dynamics that Marx calls "ideological forms", distinguishing them from the "economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science" (see Marx, *Contribution to the Critique* 12)

12 Already in his earliest works, Echeverría suggests the importance of other types of "languages" distinct from commonplace ones. However, in so doing he does not refer to economic praxis, as in his more recent works, but rather to political praxis. See, in this regard: "For the guerrilla discursive propaganda is essential, but this arrives afterward when it can fall upon fertile soil" (Echeverría, "Einführung" in Guevara 16f).

Echeverría emphasises that in Marx's work there is no thematisation of what should be understood by "concretion" of life; there is no specific problematization of the consistency of the use value of things, nor of the natural form of social reproduction (Fuentes 238).[13] His point of departure lies more in the unity of production and consumption, and with it, in the unity of the production of value and the production of use value, since it is only in consumption that we can determine if an object effectively has use value and with it value as well (which Marx formulates succinctly when he says that a product must realise its value in the market).[14] It is only product's use-value that makes it possible for it to be really consumed and, therefore, to be bought in the first place. Thus, Echeverría, inspired by Marx, takes as his starting point the fact that the production of value does not proceed without the production of use value, but rather that it simultaneously and by necessity controls, oppresses to an increasing degree, and tends toward the destruction of that use value. This antagonistic contradiction inherent to the capitalist mode of production gives him some indication of a possible way out. Dogmatic, Soviet-style Marxism presumed that the way out lay in simply overcoming shortages of working-class consumer products, to be accomplished through a massive and continuous increase in the productive forces, which in theory entailed narrow productivism, a naïve progressivism, and the most brutal methods for increasing productivity under Stalinism.[15] In addition, with the rejection of Soviet-style Marxism, Echeverría separates himself from the local orthodox-dogmatic leftist thinking; while the Mexican-Ecuadorian thinker appropriates critically the concept of use-value, Enrique Ramírez y Ramírez, Miguel Aroche Parra, Arnoldo Martínez Verdugo and Carlos Sánchez Cárdenas enclose themselves in a pragmatic-mechanic style to approach Marx:

> Mexican Marxism from the 1930s to the 1960s gained the status of "dogmatic" on the basis of his reluctance to think for himself and, in contrast, his docility and complete surrender, as far as theory is concerned, to the Dictates of Soviet Marxism in their Stalinist and post-Stalinist versions, themselves examples of evident dogmatism and a scandalously erroneous interpretation of the original ideas of Karl Marx (Ortega Esquivel 185– 6).[16]

Echeverría, like the majority of the thinkers of Western Marxism, believed that in quantitative terms, the question of supplying all human beings is one which was long since easily accomplishable through the deployment of a relatively limited amount of labour. According to him, the problem lies not in the quantitative, but in the qualitative: *what* is produced and *how* it is produced, or in other words, the question of production and consumption insofar as these refer to use value: "Only the reconstruction of the critical and radical concept of use-value can demonstrate the absence of a basis for that identification of Marxism

13 As mentioned before, is here where Echeverría believes that, through the task of providing a concrete content to praxis, is possible to reconstruct Critical Theory.

14 "Hence commodities must be realised as values before they can be realised as use-values. On the other hand, they must stand the test as use-values before they can be realised as values. For the labour expended on them only counts in so far as it is expended in a form, which is useful for others. However, only the act of exchange can prove whether that labour is useful for others, and its product consequently capable of satisfying the needs of others" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 179–80).

15 Observe also, in this respect, the powerfully Eurocentric tendency of Stalinism, in which the scarce efforts (by Lenin, above all) in the first post-revolutionary years to eliminate or soften racist oppression toward the non-Russian inhabitants of the Soviet Union (efforts which materialised as a degree of sovereignty, in particular autonomous regions under the banner of different nationalities), were practically abandoned, restoring the Tsarist model of Russian control over the entire territory.

16 According to Aureliano Ortega Esquivel, Mexican commitment to leftist thinking and Marx's works can be classified into four different groups: dogmatic Marxism, academic Marxism, pre-critical or non-dogmatic Marxism, and critical Marxism. Of these, the only group that actually interpreted Marx taking into account the Mexican context without subordinating it to the Eurocentric point of view was the last one. Among other, the most important members where: José Revueltas, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, Pedro López Díaz and in a second moment Jaime Labastida, Carlos Pereyra, Juan Garzón Bates and Bolívar Echeverría. Following Ortega Esquivel, the theoretical distance between the first group and the last one can be explained, mostly, by two reasons: first of all, the dogmatic thinkers were more politically than philosophically active, with their works presenting anecdotical and descriptive studies of Mexican reality. Thereby is possible to find books like *La derrota ferrocarrilera de 1959* (Aroche Parra 1960) and *Evolución del movimiento juvenile mexicano* (Ramírez y Ramírez 1966). And, lastly, the critical group, in addition to their philosophical vocation, had an important poetic and literary background, mostly incarnated by Revueltas, who wrote *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza* (1962). This allowed their thinkers, in the next decades, to write *El sujeto de la historia* (Pereyra 1976) and *La filosofía política: arma opresiva o liberadora en América Latina* (López Díaz 1981).

with Western productivism, the economistic progressivism of capitalism, and bourgeois political statism" (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 34).[17]

In this passage, two themes are touched when Echeverría makes a critique of the "identification of Marxism with Western productivism"; in the first place, he indicates the need for a critique of Eurocentrism, something which mostly has not be surmounted on the Left, even in important sectors of the non-dogmatic Left. Even the terminology of "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries—naïvely taken up all too often—expresses a deeply-rooted economistic productivism which underhandedly elevates the productive forces and its technical-industrial perfection (in the sense of being competitive under capitalist conditions) to the characteristic of "development" in general. At the same time, this includes the presumption of a "natural" need for constant further development of the productive forces in the previously indicated sense (moreover, in very determined ways), which, however, is an unavoidable necessity exclusively under ruling social conditions. In the framework of this logic, then, some countries are "more developed" than others, but the resulting hierarchisation of the world acquires a life of its own and continues to function even in the heads of critics of the capitalist mode of production. (In a certain sense, Eurocentrism is more problematic on the Left than in conservative theory. For conservatives, Eurocentrism emerges necessarily from their uncritical reflection on power relations; on the Left, on the contrary, it can only be explained as an ideological remnant of cultural chauvinism).[18]

Secondly, this passage cited from Echeverría contains, moreover, an implicit response to a philosopher whose work kept our author occupied during many years of his youth. When Echeverría insists that Marx does not constitute an integral part of "Western" thought, but that the concept of use value "necessarily moves beyond Western metaphysics" (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 35), we are dealing with an unequivocal rejection of Martin Heidegger's assertion that Karl Marx is the ultimate representative of Western metaphysics.

With regard to the question of how we can think the relationship between subject and object as profoundly marked by determination (by the laws of nature, for example), as well as and at the same time by human freedom, we can sketch out Echeverría's effort to approach the question in the following terms. As indicated, it is possible to trace the parallel between the processes of reproduction and communication without de-materialising the former or reinterpreting it idealistically. But in the process of communication, we find the peculiarity of this same singular coexistence of freedom and new creation in each speech-act and the simultaneous determination by the language in which the communication occurs in each case. It is only because in each moment a new speech act with a certain degree of freedom is created that the speaker can more or less correspond to each constellation that he should capture. But at the same time, he only can make himself understood to another because he moves within the respective language and broadly accepts its rules.

Something similar can be said of the production and consumption of use values. The producer cannot simply fabricate anything whatsoever if he wants it to be recognised by others as a use value, which is to say, to be purchased. Here, it is not merely the biological capacity of the human organism to consume determinate products that is decisive. It is precisely here that the decisive difference between humans and animals lies. In the human being, the process of distinguishing between a useful and a useless thing, which is to say between use value and non-use value, is largely influenced by historical factors. Marx already indicates as much in the previously cited passage: "The discovery ... of the manifold uses of things is the work of history" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 125). In Echeverría's exposition of Marx's theory of use value, the concept of history additionally includes geographical "asynchronies" (in the sense that place, and not only time, also enters into historical factors).

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17 The cited phrase continues: "[an identification] that led K. Korsch in 1950 ... to raise again, for the second half of the century, the theme, vulgarised in the 70s, of the inadequacy of Marxist discourse for the requirements of the new historical form of the revolution." Echeverría is here referring to "10 Thesen über Marxismus heute" (Korsch 89–90).

18 In this question Echeverría can be distinguished—despite all the similarities—from Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School. Thus, for example, while the critique and analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* admittedly mentions "European civilisation" as the central object of the investigation, its ethnocentric character is not taken as a theme. (Horkheimer and Adorno 9). Neither in its scientific behaviour or its interests has the Frankfurt School been able to remove itself from common Eurocentric prejudice, and it has largely ignored authors from the so-called Third World.

In the comparison of reproduction with communication, it is of great importance that in both processes we find those instances that the founder of semiotics distinguishes as "signified" and "signifier," whose unity is represented by the sign. In language, the first represents the "concept" and the second the "acoustic image." The pure concept, however, contains just as few as the pure image; both are, thrown back on their own resources, lost, or to put it more precisely, not imaginable as isolated from each other. So, for example, Saussure suggests that the presumption of a pure concept, without an image, contains the thought that there can exist mature ideas prior to their linguistic expression (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 97), a view that he clearly rejects.

Before again broaching the comparison with the production of use values, we must moreover keep in mind the fact that Echeverría, in referring to Walter Benjamin, takes as his point of departure the fact that human beings express themselves and make themselves understood not only *through* languages but also *in them*, which should be understood to mean that languages are not fixed systems which are merely employed as means of communication, but are created anew and modified with each communicative act.[19] Echeverría interprets Benjamin's claim as one, which is valid for all sign systems (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 44),[20] but just as every speech-act or speaking ("*parole*" in Saussure) calls into question the language as a totality ("*langue*" in Saussure), the same occurs in the production and consumption of use values.

Echeverría understands the unity of the production and consumption of use values in the same way that semiotics understands *langage* [speech], as the faculty of speech, or, in other words, the capacity to make oneself understood in a way that, is not chaotic, but nevertheless free. Not free in the sense that completely new signs can be invented at any moment out of nothing, because in this case, in the end, the very functioning of the sign system would be put into doubt,[21] but at least free enough for us not to communicate merely as animals, according to forms of stimulus and reaction which are fixed by the biological, in the instincts.[22]

So, in the act of producing a use value, we simultaneously find the production of a sign, and it is consumption, its interpretation. Here, we also have a signifier and a signified, which, together, constitute a sign. Echeverría does not tell the reader in a totally unambiguous way which is the signifier and which is the signified in the sign contained in the use value. But in one place, he observes that raw materials tend to come nearer to the signified, and the used instruments of labour nearer to the signifier, but without

19 Echeverría refers here to Walter Benjamin's "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt" 10f. See Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 44 n31.)

20 "Like the instrumental field to which it pertains, the code has a history because the process of communication/interpretation is not only fulfilled *with* it but also *in* it; because in serving on the evident level, it is itself modified on the profound level. In principle, every time the code is used in the production/consumption of meanings, its project of meaning is put into play and can be at risk of ceasing to be what it is. The project of meaning, which is the establishment of a horizon of possible meanings, can be transcended by another project and move on to constitute the *substantial stratum of a new establishment of semiotic possibilities* [*posibilidades sémicas*]. In truth the history of the code takes place as a succession of layers of patterns for meaning, resulting from the refunctionalisation—more or less deep and more or less broad—of earlier projects for new meaning-granting impulses" (44f). In this regard, see moreover a similar reference to the same text by Benjamin elsewhere: "In Benjamin's essay *On Language in General and Human Language in Particular* an idea predominates which has been central to the history of twentieth-century thought ... human beings do not only speak *with* a language, using it as an instrument, but, above all, speak *in* that language ... In principle, in all singular speaking it is the language that is expressed. But also—and with an equal hierarchy—all singular speaking involves that language as a totality. The entire speech [lenguaje] is in play in every individual act of expression; what each of those acts does or ceases to do alters that language in an essential way. The specific language is nothing less than the totalisation of all of these speakings" (Echeverría, "La identidad evanescente" *Las ilusiones de la modernidad* 60).

21 Saussure says in this regard: "Language is no longer free, for time will allow the social forces at work on it to carry out their effects. This brings us back to the principle of continuity, which cancels freedom. But continuity necessarily implies change, varying degrees of shifts in the relationship between the signified and the signifier" (Saussure 78).

22 On this difference in the process of production see: "A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax" (Marx, *Capital* 284).

pigeonholing them definitively.[23] Rather, it would seem that both raw materials and instruments of labour can possess both functions, but that the second element plays a predominant position in the generation of signs in general.[24]

But the instruments of labour (tools) are distinguished because their effectiveness, in most cases, is not exhausted in a single combined act of production/consumption, as occurs with those use values which are immediately consumed as food. This tendency toward durability in the means of labour draws us much closer to a solution to our previously mentioned doubt, since here the parallel with other sign systems becomes clearer, a parallel which up to this point perhaps remained in a degree of obscurity. Just as we do not speak *through language* but rather *in it*, we do not produce only through means of labour, but rather in them. On the one hand, in many cases these are of a durable nature but, on the other hand, they are exposed in most cases to the possibility of a constant transformation. In mentioning this, we are not referring only to their wearing out, but to the constantly emerging need (or also the desire arising in the subject) to transform them. As a result, we can broaden the parallel to Saussure's semiotics in the sense that every singular act of production (and also of consumption) of a use value is a *parole*, or speaking, but the totality of these acts in a particular society,[25] under particular conditions and in a particular historical epoch, can be understood as *langue*, as language.

The problem in the previous reflections (on the question of the "signified" and "signifier") which has not been completely resolved—regarding the relationship between the means of labour and the objects of labour,[26] and, therefore, also of the relationship of the tool to raw materials—points to the need to refer to Marx's "theory of the tool" (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 103). For Marx, all that which humans find pre-existing on Earth and on which they can work can be considered an "object of labour." Therefore, the Earth in its totality constitutes an "object of labour" for the human beings who inhabit it (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 284). Here, Marx distinguishes between "objects of labour spontaneously provided by nature," which humans merely "separate from immediate connection with their environment," and "raw material" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 284). The "raw material" is differentiated from the "object of labour" in that it has already undergone a treatment which goes beyond mere detachment from nature as a whole, "for example, ore already extracted and ready for washing," which has thus already been "filtered through previous labour" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 284). Hence, the concept of the object of labour is broader than that of raw materials.[27] Evidently, for Marx something analogous happens with the conceptual pairing of "instrument of labour" (means of labour) and "tool":

> An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object. He makes use of the mechanical, physical and chemical properties of some substances in order to set them to work on other substances as instruments of his power, and in accordance with his purposes. (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 285).

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23 "Among the means that intervene in productive consumption there are some that only offer it an indication of form for themselves: raw materials or objects of labour; there are others, by contrast, that open up before labour itself an entire set of possibilities for giving form, between which labour can choose for transforming raw materials: these are *instruments*" (Echeverría "La 'forma natural'" 40f, italics by S.G.).

24 "The most completed form of the social object is without a doubt that of the *instrument*. In it, the two tensions that determine all objective forms—the pretension of a form for the subject and his disposition to adopt it—remain in a state of confrontation, in an unstable equilibrium that can be decided differently in each case. The proposition of a formative action on raw materials, inscribed in the instrumental form as a technical structure, not only allows—as in all social objects—but also demands, to be effective, a formative will to action that takes it up and makes it concrete. The general transformative dynamic that the instrument entails must be completed and singularised by labour" (Echeverría, "La 'forma natural'" 41).

25 This concept should be clarified precisely, since within a single society there can exist various codes at the same moment. Echeverría speaks elsewhere of "a subjective-objective being, provided with a particular historic-cultural identity..., the historico-concrete existence of the productive and consumptive forces, that is, ... the substance of the nation" (Echeverría, *El discurso crítico de Marx* 192f.).

26 "The simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work" (Marx, *Capital* 284).

27 "All raw material is an object of labour [*Arbeitsgegenstand*], but not every object of labour is raw material; the object of labour counts as raw material only when it has already undergone some alteration by means of labour" (Marx, *Capital* 284–5).

But Marx understands the instruments of labour, which have already been transformed by human labour, as "tools" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 1976, p. 285).[28] This concept of the tools as already-produced means of labour can also be found in Benjamin Franklin's definition of the human being as a "tool-making animal" (Benjamin Franklin qtd. in Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 286). Marx does not make this distinction between instruments of labour in general and those which are produced—that is, tools—as unequivocally as the previously mentioned distinction between objects of labour in general and those which have been worked, which is to say, raw materials. In any case, Marx repeatedly observes the particularity which characterises the "instruments [of labour] [*Arbeitsmittel*] ... which have already been mediated through past labour" from those pre-existing instruments of labour which are used just as they were found.[29]

According to Alfred Schmidt, Marx's theory of the tool in *Das Kapital* is that of "the existing, the materialised mediator between the labourer and the object of labour [*Arbeitsgegenstand*]" (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 103). In saying this, he stresses the importance of tool-making for the entirety of human development, and above all the development of human intellectual capacities: "There can be hardly any doubt that the most basic abstractions have arisen in the context of labour-processes, i.e. in the context of tool-making" (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 102).

In this sense, Echeverría's attempt to see a parallel between the processes of production and communication stands in the non-dogmatic Marxist tradition, above all if we bear in mind the fact that after the "linguistic turn" in idealist and related philosophies, the concept of spirit or reason was generally substituted by that of communication or discourse. To the question of whether or not Echeverría's attempt makes him an idealist philosopher, we could respond that in such matters a separation cannot always be established with the kind of clarity we find in the textbooks of dogmatic Marxism. In this context, it is worth emphasising the close consistency between Hegel and Marx regarding the theory of the tool. In this respect, Schmidt underlines Hegel's contribution to understanding the tight relationship between the development of tools and the human capacity for communication:

> Hegel, as well as Marx, was aware of the historical interpenetration of intelligence, language and the tool. The tool connects man's purposes with the object of his labour. It brings the conceptual element, logical unity, into the human mode of life. Hegel wrote in the *Jenenser Realphilosophie* [the Jena manuscripts]: "The *tool* is the existent rational mean, the existent universality of the practical process; it appears on the side of the active against the passive, is itself passive in relation to the labourer, and active in relation to the object of labour" (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 102).[30]

It is precisely in Hegel's linking of the processes of production and communication in his formulations on the tool that Schmidt sees Hegel's importance for historical materialism (Schmidt *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 105).[31] Incidentally, this importance of Hegel for the Marxian theory of the tool is recognised by Marx himself. In his discussion of the tool in *Capital*, Marx cites Hegel's understanding of the "cunning of reason" in an effort to understand philosophically the "cunning of ma" in the use of tools (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 105), as Schmidt describes it in summarising Marx. The human being—Marx writes—"makes use of the mechanical, physical and chemical properties of some substances in order to set them to work on other substances as instruments of his power, and in accordance with his purposes" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 285). In a footnote inserted at this point in *Capital*, Marx immediately quotes the following well-known phrase from Hegel's *Logic*:

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28 Compare: "As soon as the labour process has undergone the slightest development, it requires specially prepared instruments. Thus we find stone tools [*Werkzeug*] and weapons in the oldest caves" (Marx, Capital 285).

29 Among other things, Marx distinguishes between means of labour "in general" and those "already mediated by labour," referring to the subcategory of those which, without intervening directly in the labour process, are nevertheless its unconditional premise: "Once again, the earth itself is a universal *instrument* of this kind, for it provides the worker with the ground beneath his feet and a 'field of employment' for his own particular process. *Instruments* of this kind, which have *already been mediated through past labour*, include workshops, canals, roads, etc." (Marx, *Capital* 286–7, italics by S.G.).

30 Here Schmidt cites Hegel (*Jenenser Realphilosophie* 221).

31 Schmidt notes: "Lenin stated correctly that Hegel was a precursor of historical materialism because he emphasised the role played by the tool both in the labour-process and in the process of cognition" (Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* 105).

> The reason is as cunning as it is powerful. Cunning may be said to lie in the intermediative action which, while it permits the objects to follow their own bent and act upon one another till they waste away, and does not itself directly interfere in the process, is nevertheless only working out its own aims. (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie* §209, appendix, p. 365, qtd. in Marx, *Capital* 285 n2.)[32]

At this point, we can return to Bolívar Echeverría's studies on the role of use value in the process of reproduction and on the possible application of the semiotic categories of "signifier" and "signified" to this process and its objects. The above-mentioned vagueness as to whether the tool constitutes the signifier and the raw material the signified should be discussed as follows. At first glance, the response to this question would be the following: the tool is the signifier, the raw material the signified. But with this, we would come too close to Hegel's concept of the tool, not only in his tendency to establish a hierarchy between the tool and raw material, but moreover the danger of favouring a static assignment (which we just criticised) of specific components of the process of reproduction to some pre-given role.

Certainly, we could say that the Hegelian conception could grasp these components again at any moment of production and that insofar as his philosophy is dialectical, he ought to be able to understand the double form of objects conceptually. However, Hegel's emphatic discourse on the tool as the "more honourable" and his disparaging valorisation of consumption indicate a static element in his theory. The concept of "productive consumption" (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 290), which is central for Marx and indicates precisely the difficulty of fixing determinate elements of reproduction on one factor and in one static form, as does Hegel, is unfamiliar to the great dialectician, who, in his turn, gave Marx important indications for his theory of the tool.

The fact that Echeverría scarcely touches on the question of signifier and signified in social reproduction (and in the end, leaves this question unresolved) could, therefore, be interpreted as follows: Echeverría perceives the concomitant danger of an idealist reduction of the Marxian theory of the tool and of reproduction. He wants to enrich or make more comprehensible the Marxian theory of use value through the semiotic approach, while simultaneously avoiding the possibility of an idealistic softening of the Marxian critique.

At this point, the reader might be asking himself: and all this, what is it good for? What does this confrontation of the production and consumption of use values with semiotics clarify that could not be clarified in some other manner? To such a question, we see two possible responses: on the one hand, Echeverría's recourse to the semiotic approach should be understood as polemical. In understanding the production and consumption of use values as the most fundamental of semiotic systems, he is taking the wind out of the sails of those theoretical currents which, without the least consideration, declare spoken language to be the most important of human sign systems. We must, then, liberate semiotics from the slavery into which it has fallen, *after Ferdinand de Saussure*, at the hands of linguistics, and as the mere supplier of the latter:

> ... do you see it like these "radical" discourse theorists, for whom the only thing that exists is discourse?
> No, to the contrary; precisely against this tendency of the most radical structuralism, I tried to disconnect semiotics from structuralism as far as possible and integrate it into Marx's conceptual apparatus.[33]

On the other hand, we could give the following answer to the same question: through the combination of Marxian theory with Saussure's semiotics, Echeverría seeks to oppose a specific interpretation of the former. According to this interpretation, what is decisive in the relations of production is the value side of production; on the basis of this, we can explain and evaluate everything else, which is to say, including the use value side of production. This view results in the fact that the use values produced in the framework of

32 Compare, moreover, Hegel's observations which precede his reflections on tools in the *Logic*: "That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means ... may be regarded as *violence* ... But that the end posits itself in a *mediate* relation with the object and *interposes* another object *between* itself and it, may be regarded as the *cunning* of reason" (Hegel, *Science of Logic* 746.)

33 Interview with Bolívar Echeverría, cassette I, side A, pos. 258–65.

a society in which there exists a relatively high degree of industrialisation will lead them to be automatically conceived as "more developed" than others. And, moreover, since it is known that use values are in every case connected with the cultural constitution of a country, one can draw the conclusion that particular cultural forms are "more developed" than others merely because they are found in a region in which a higher degree of industrialisation reigns than in other regions. Even if there are ever fewer theories explicitly defending such a view in an aggressive manner, this is, nevertheless, implicitly the prevailing view in everyday life as in the sciences. The fact that it is not proclaimed all the time does not for a moment undermine its almost absolute omnipresence between the lines.

One example from everyday life in Mexico would be the predilection of the urban middle class for white bread, above all sliced bread for toasting ["*pan bimbo*"]. From a medical and nutritional perspective, such bread has an incomparably inferior use value to corn tortillas, which are more common among the poor population in fulfilling the same function of accompanying meals. But as white bread is identified with a culture that has become predominant due to a more powerful development of productive forces (and with these, weaponry as well) and due to its empires—who with this development were thus in a position to dominate more than one continent—the middle class set out from the idea that nothing beats white bread. Even though the motives that are explicitly formulated for this choice may be different on any given occasion, that does not in the slightest degree alter the foundation of this preference.

But we can also observe the same mechanism on the theoretical and political planes. Since the term "underdeveloped countries" came under critique, these are now referred to as "developing countries," or very fashionably as "emerging countries"; however, it remains clear in which direction their aspiration points and to what they are aspiring, namely the threshold that must be crossed with the utmost haste: that leading to the "first world," which also implies subordination to the cultural forms that prevail there. All of this terminology is not typically Marxist, although it also appears frequently at the heart of Marxist debates. In this form—lightly concealed—what prevails is the idea that sooner or later all human beings should live as the inhabitants of Europe and the United States live today, and that this will represent true "development." A fixation on the production and consumption of values, alongside a naïve progressivism, form an ideological breeding ground in which Eurocentrism is unlikely to cease to flourish.

On the contrary, the serenity with which Saussure places the many existing languages side-by-side, without undertaking the effort to establish hierarchies between them, is without a doubt what Echeverría appreciates in his work. And Echeverría imagines something similar for use values: a sort of analysis which does not begin by considering some better than others merely on account of having emerged within the framework of a more industrialised form of value creation. In this context, it would also be interesting to study, without establishing hierarchies, the various existing regional forms of living and moving about intellectually in capitalist everydayness.

The application of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics to the theory of use-value, therefore, has the following facet: alongside *langue* [*language* in English, *idioma* in Spanish], that is to say, the totality of multiple productions and consumptions of use values in a particular historical constellation, there exists moreover the general *langage* or *faculté de langage* [*speech* or *faculty of speech* in English, *lenguaje*, or *capacidad de hablar* in Spanish]. This is the fundamental point. What is specifically human—that is the question in Echeverría's article "La 'forma natural' de la reproducción social," and it is *not langue* (a particular language) but rather *langage*, the faculty of speech in and of itself. What distinguishes human beings and their self-creation is not a specific form of use values that are made and used, but the very capacity to do so at all.

With the distinction of language from speech (faculty of speech) and the application of this distinction to the sphere of production, we can no longer arrive so easily at the conclusion that a determinate constellation of use values exists in a state of "superior" or "inferior" development. Similarly, if we compare, for example, French to German, we cannot reasonably say that one is "superior" to the other. So, in Saussure's theory, the things discussed are ones in which Marxist theories do not feature. Thus the Swiss Saussure speaks with an almost insurmountable naturalness about the "differences among languages and … the very existence of different languages" (Saussure 68).

For him, there is absolutely no possibility of discussing whether a language is more valuable than another or something of the like. Such questions absolutely do not exist for him. This is what Saussure's semiotics and linguistics can teach us: what unifies humans is not their common language, but rather the common faculty of speech they share. Or, better put, their capacity to understand one another through signs, and in this speech is but one of many forms, the fundamental form being the production and consumption of use values.

So Echeverría's interest in Saussurean semiotics can be understood as a theoretical auxiliary for combating "false universalism," which is nothing more than the self-elevation of one existing particularity to the status of "general" (for example, the self-elevation of European culture to the status of human culture in general), and to do so without falling into a general whatever-ism. This is not to say that no universal exists, as many tend to argue today; a universal factor that unites human beings does, indeed, exist, but it is one which allows within itself the most diverse of forms. This is the faculty of speech in its broadest sense, as discussed above, with the possibility that this entails (and realises) of the formation of the most diverse sign systems, which is to say, in other words, the most diverse ways of organizing everyday life, assuring reproduction through the most diverse sorts of use values.

Elsewhere, in the article "La identidad evanescente" ["The Evanescent Identity"], Echeverría formulates a similar idea with regard to the non-Eurocentric approaches of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of comparative philology, in the sense that beyond false and abstract Eurocentric universalism there can also exist a "concrete universalism" in which subjects—individual as well as collective—are fully conscious of the need for the "other," be it inside or outside themselves. The "concrete universalism of a humanity which is at the same time unitary and unconditionally plural," (Echeverría, "La identidad evanescente" *Las ilusiones de la modernidad* 59) which is possible in principle in modernity, has, nevertheless, been impossible, due to the previous and present capitalist form of modernity and due to the "artificial scarcity" which it necessarily produces (Echeverría, "La identidad evanescente" *Las ilusiones de la modernidad* 59).[34] This concrete universalism is already delineated in the history of European theory, but only in the "self-critical dimension of European culture."

Echeverría writes: "Humboldt's *Sprachphilosophie* ... sought the general human [*lo humano*] more in the very capacity for symbolisation or 'codification' ... than in a specific result of certain particular symbolisations" (Echeverría, "La identidad evanescente" *Las ilusiones de la modernidad* 57).[35] Here, the vast gulf separating Bolívar Echeverría from the central tendencies of so-called postmodern theories becomes obvious. He is not interested in a simple condemnation of the concept of universalism, but rather a critique of the prevailing false universalism, which is abstract in nature, in favour of a "concrete universalism" that takes as its point of departure that which all humans hold in common and which thus represents the possibility of their coexistence, while recognising at the same time the various different cultures and forms of life, without falsely (which is to say, abstractly) establishing hierarchies in that universalism in the sense of less or more developed forms of some general human culture—which is always, of course, that of the conquerors.

In this context, Bolívar Echeverría can be distinguished—despite all the similarities—from Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School. Thus, for example, while the critique and analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* admittedly mentions "European civilisation" as the central object of the investigation, its ethnocentric character is not taken as a theme (Horkheimer and Adorno 9). Neither in its scientific behaviour or its interests has the Frankfurt School been able to remove itself from common Eurocentric prejudice, and it has largely ignored authors from the so-called Third World.

In the present work, two central ideas of the Mexican-Ecuatorian thinker have been discussed: the

34 Echeverría refers explicitly to Marx, here, and writes: "from an instrument of abundance, the technical revolution becomes, in the hands of capitalism, a generator of scarcity" (Echeverría, "La identidad evanescente" *Las ilusiones de la modernidad* 59). This is necessary to maintain the capitalist mode of production, which functions only on the basis of exploiting the labour of others and, in turn, requires a general scarcity that, according to Marx, and followed on this point by Echeverría and other serious economists, under current technical conditions can only be guaranteed artificially (see ibid.). In this respect, *Capital* Vol. I, Chapter 15, "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" (Marx, *Capital* 492ff).

35 "*Sprachphilosophie*" means "philosophy of language".

inclusion of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics to the critical study of production and the task to seek out a possible concrete content for praxis. The possible link between the political economy approach to semiotics and the true concretion of universality as a way to de-Europeanize production can be found in two different aspects. First of all, this interpretation, in which the mere process of production and consumption of objects is, at the same time, the production and consumption of meanings, shows the antagonistic contradiction between value and use-value inherent to capitalism giving some indication of a possible way out. And, in second place, as a consequence of the prior, the critical and radical reconstruction of *use-value* becomes a way of overcoming the naïve ideas—typical of the occident interpretation of capitalism—of Western productivism, economist progressivism and bourgeois statism.

The philosophical contributions of Bolívar Echeverría to Critical Cultural Studies, discussed in this article, as well as his other contributions, which should be discussed widely, could help in a special way to overcome the problematic practical and theoretical limitation for the imperative emancipation of the human beings from exploitation, exclusion and repression from other human beings.

In the meantime, to begin—not only in the institutions and journals of Latin American Studies—the discussions on the conceptual contributions from Bolívar Echeverría and other social theorists and philosophers south of the Rio Grande, possibly will facilitate finishing the active role that social sciences are often playing in the banalization and oblivion of the auto consciousness existing on a high theoretical level in the Global South.[36]

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36 We must and want to speak about these contributions from "The South," being witnesses of its existence, in my personal case since 25 years, the time I am now living, and academically working, in Mexico, after leaving Germany, where the contributions of social theorist, including my professor J. Habermas at Frankfurt University, did not satisfy the intellectual necessities of a whole generation of critical students.

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