PREFACE

Critique of Latin American Reason is a book I wrote twenty-five years ago that reflects my impressions of and experiences in a world very different from the one we live in today. A world in which the Internet, where social networks as we know them did not yet exist, had just started to take shape. A world in which the two great geopolitical blocks associated with the Soviet Union and the United States struggled for global hegemony. Latin America was a crucial zone of that struggle, and a broad segment of the left hoped that the region would become a stronghold for socialism and a bulwark against capitalism. It was a world full of "morbid symptoms," as Antonio Gramsci said, in which the new was visible on the horizon, but the old refused to die. Protest music and Cuban nueva trova coexisted with Rock en español. Dependency theory and liberation theology coexisted with cultural studies and debates on postmodernity. And the impoverished masses coexisted with an emerging urban middle class symbolically connected to a world that became increasingly globalized by mass media. I spent my adolescence in this zombie world, into which my country was rapidly transforming. I was introduced to television when I was twelve years old, on the occasion of the moon landing in 1969, and from that point on I was a fan of North American canned goods and science programs. In the 1970s I studied with Spanish priests at a small school in the Bogotá neighborhood of Chapinero, and several of my teachers sympathized with

liberation theology. Some of the older kids in the neighborhood joined the urban guerrilla movement M-19, believing that socialism was just around the corner. But the truth is that almost all of my friends were afraid, because Colombia was becoming more and more besieged by the drug-trafficking mafias that, in alliance with sections of the political right, terrorized the country with bombs and wanted nothing to do with socialism. I wasn't able to understand it at the time, but a new country was being born, one that was completely unknown up to that point in time.

It was in the midst of all this that I began my studies in philosophy at the Universidad Santo Tomás in the early 1980s. The Dominican priests who were the regents of the university had made political commitment to Latin American reality their official aim. Along with seminars on Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, and G. W. F. Hegel, I attended seminars dedicated to the work of unknown thinkers like Arturo Andrés Roig, Enrique Dussel, and Leopoldo Zea. The Bogotá Group, a name given to the professors I studied with at Santo Tomás, enthusiastically welcomed the project of Latin American philosophy. However, at that time no distinction was made between the two primary tendencies of this project, historicism and liberationism, which were instead seen as complementary or even identical to one another. I became enthusiastic about the history of ideas and the possibility of philosophically re-creating Latin America's intellectual past, but I had many problems with the philosophy of liberation, with its heavy messianic and populist influences. I did not identify with the idea that Latin America was a "cultural unity" that must be understood as existing outside the parameters developed by modern philosophy. Perhaps it was due to my rebellion against this that I decided to write my thesis on the epistemology of John Locke. Moreover, my comrades from the university and I were beginning to discover the debate on postmodernity, which at that time was most famously connected to the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, and Gianni Vattimo. One of the central professors of the Bogotá Group, Roberto Salazar Ramos (who would eventually direct my thesis), understood that this debate could shed some light on how we might rethink the project of Latin American philosophy, as, at the time, he was involved in a crisis within the group. Thus it was with Roberto, and against the backdrop of a crisis threatening to dissolve the Bogotá Group, that I first read some of Michel Foucault's writings.

In the midst of all this, having recently completed my bachelor's thesis, I decided to apply to study in Germany. It was 1986, and my prospects of finding work with a bachelor's degree in philosophy were very slim. But the truth is that I wanted to escape from the onerous atmosphere in Colombia and see the world—I wanted to open myself to new experiences, learn another language, and continue to study philosophy. I was interested in the Frankfurt School because while at university I read several works by Herbert Marcuse, but I was also eager to deepen the discussion of postmodernity that was at that time being led by Habermas. Germany seemed to be the best place to go. I wrote to a professor at the University of Tübingen to express my interest in pursuing this line of study there and, to my surprise, just a short while later I received an affirmative response. The process for obtaining a student visa was easy enough; a few months later, in April 1987, I boarded an airplane headed for Germany. I could never have imagined that while I was there I would witness the fall of the Berlin Wall, an experience that made clear to me what I had not understood back in Colombia: an old world was collapsing and another new one was emerging in its place. From that moment on, I was no longer afraid of monsters and I became interested in a series of theoretical debates that were virtually unknown in Colombia: cultural studies, postcolonial theory, deconstruction, contemporary political philosophy. Specifically, in the field of philosophy, I was drawn to authors like Friedrich Nietzsche and Foucault, but I also began to acquire a familiarity with the theory of reason developed by Habermas.

I believe that everything I have just written constitutes the ingredients that would come together to make up the book you have before you: *Critique of Latin American Reason*. The uncertainty I felt in Colombia, the seminars on Latin American philosophy I attended at Santo Tomás, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the debate between Habermas and the postmodernists, the emergence of postcolonial theory, and my readings of Foucault—all these things were swimming around together in my head without ever synthesizing. The opportunity to reflect on them arrived when, one morning in the library at the University of Tübingen, I saw an announcement that the Barcelona-based publishing house Editorial Puvill was sponsoring a contest for essays about Latin America. Although I had not even finished my master's degree in philosophy, I figured I had nothing to lose, so for three months (the summer of 1995) I diligently sat down and wrote the five chapters that originally made up the book.

The first surprise was that my book was selected for publication. The second was that, once the first edition was published in 1996, criticism of it began to appear. I wasn't really expecting this, since I figured the book would hardly be noticed, given all the other academic texts being published. Despite what I expected, several reviews of the book emerged in various countries, and the majority of them expressed discomfort about "mixing" Latin America into the debate on postmodernity, which, I suppose, was for them a "European" debate that had absolutely nothing to do with "we Latin Americans." But that was precisely the point of the book! What I sought to do with it was "disrupt" that sector of the philosophical left in Latin America that was entrenched behind the region's supposed "exteriority" to the modern Western world. This was an intellectual tendency that continued to insist on ideas such as a romanticized notion of the people, the moral perfection of the Indigenous world, and the "telluric" and "Dionysian" condition of popular culture, all of which were diametrically opposed to the odious European world governed by reason and science. I was left with the impression that such a representational strategy was nothing other than a colonial discourse that was paradoxically uttered by intellectuals who claimed to want to defend the interests of the oppressed—in whom they had entrusted their hopes for "redemption." Ever since my days at Universidad Santo Tomás, I had been mistrustful of this literary exaltation of the people as the "subject of philosophy," endowed with a special kind of "wisdom" based solely in the fact that they are poor. This was the moralist discourse of the philosophy and theology of liberation, which saw "Christ's image" in the poor, interpellating us and moving us to transformative action.

As you can imagine, my criticisms of this discourse were not well received. The book was dismissed as "Eurocentric" for making use of the debate on postmodernity in a discussion of Latin America. It was also derided as "reactionary" for daring to criticize figures who were considered irreproachable by the Latin American philosophical left. However, what was not properly recognized at the time was that I did not make my criticisms simply by invoking the authority of European philosophers but rather by entering into a dialogue with new Latin American cultural theory. Authors like Nelly Richard, Néstor García Canclini, José Joaquín Brunner, Renato Ortiz, and Jesús Martín Barbero were reassessing some of the assumptions that had been used for decades to think Latin

America, especially those of Marxist sociology. The postmodernity debate had given them plenty of ammunition for a similar critique. In the same way, postcolonial theories destabilized the old assumptions of the critique of imperialism and introduced new elements beyond strictly economic and sociological variables. It is true that the book makes frequent use of Foucault's theory of power (which I was reproached for right away), but it does so in dialogue with readings of Foucault by two non-European theorists: the Uruguayan Ángel Rama (in his book *The Lettered City*) and the Egyptian Edward Said (in his book *Orientalism*). Both proved to be central to my argument, as they allowed me to understand how to "use" Foucault beyond Foucault himself.

Curiously, and in spite of the bitter criticisms I received at the time, the book became for me a central element that ended up defining my entire professional life. The publication of *Critique of Latin American Reason* and the much-talked-about debate it gave rise to in different intellectual circles led the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá to take an interest in my work. On my return to Colombia after having completed my master's work in Germany, the university hired me to develop the research program set out in the book. At the Instituto Pensar at Javeriana, I attempted to fulfill this program, which was given the title "Genealogies of Colombianness." The conceptual horizon opened up by *Critique of Latin American Reason* allowed me to write my books *La hybris del punto cero* (2005; *Zero-Point Hubris: Science, Race, and Enlightenment in New Granada (1750–1816)*, forthcoming) and *Tejidos oníricos* (2009). Today I see these three books as a "trilogy" that makes use of Foucauldian genealogy to rethink the colonial inheritances of Latin America, especially those of my country, Colombia. In short, *Critique of Latin American Reason* was a true event in my life; it was the book that changed everything.

I have had to take this detour in order to explain why *Critique of Latin American Reason* should be understood as a "book of its time." This era in which it was first published was, as I am sure you can understand, very different (both geopolitically and philosophically) from our contemporary era, nearly three decades later. But it must also be understood as a "youthful" book written by a thirty-five-year-old philosophy student who suddenly had the opportunity to write an untimely text. However, I am not interested in providing a retrospective reading of the book;

rather, I would like to go over some of the central themes that run through it. The first and undoubtedly most important is the critique of Latin Americanism. With this notion I am referring to all those discourses or families of discourses that create an object of knowledge called "Latin America" and generate a "truth" about this object. Of course, I am not saying that Latin America "does not exist," or that it is an "illusion." What I am doing is questioning a certain mode of the narrative existence of Latin America as a cultural unity located outside of and antagonistic to modernity, with this latter understood as a geopolitical and cultural unity marked by technological and scientific rationality, colonialism, and the will to power. The construction of Latin America as a unitary, collective "We" therefore entails the construction of an "Other," also unitary, who is seen as an obstacle to achieving "liberation."

The book attempts to trace the genealogy of this kind of identitarian discourse and explores this genealogy in different registers: the Catholic sociology of culture in chapter 2, the history of ideas in chapter 3, literary modernism in chapter 5, postcolonial semiotics in chapter 6, and Latin American philosophy in chapter 7. My thesis is that this kind of narrative construction exemplifies the colonial motif of Othering, in which the Indigenous world, savage nature, impoverished peoples, *mestizaje,* or popular religiosity appear as radical alternatives to a modern, capitalist, imperial Europe that encroaches from outside. In short, the book argues that, just as Orientalism constructs the "Orient" as an exotic object that is external to Europe, Latin Americanism constructs "Latin America" in the same way. Except in this case the exoticizing discourses are not propagated by nineteenth-century European travelers, but rather by twentieth-century Latin American intellectuals. Latin America is nostalgically represented as a world outside the globalizing reach of technology, global symbolic markets, and deterritorialized mass culture, none of which reflect the "soul of the people" but are instead seen as simple expressions of "cultural colonialism." This hypothesis was already being challenged at the time, empirically by communication studies (Martín-Barbero) and by the new cultural studies (García Canclini, Brunner, Ortiz). *Critique of Latin American Reason* criticizes the construction of a "Latin American identity" that ignores the creative appropriation of (now outdated) technologies by broad segments of the population that

destabilized the borders between high culture and popular culture. While one group of intellectuals continued to see modernity as the expression of a "reifying rationality," many people took advantage of the new market for symbolic goods that emerged in the 1980s in order to both "enter and exit modernity."

From a methodological point of view, the book takes on the mode of "critique" developed by Foucault, for whom critique must be above all else genealogical; it must show the historicity of the forms of power, denaturalize their absolute pretensions, and expose their techniques and their complicity with the production of certain "truth effects." All of this was extremely useful for me in my efforts to show how Latin America (or at least a specific narrative about it) was the product of the intersections between certain mechanisms of power and certain academic discourses. The purpose of the book was to trace the genealogy of these intersections, to examine how a supposed "Latin American reason" is produced out of and against a homogeneous and totalizing entity called "modernity." This should be the critical gesture of philosophy. Instead of presupposing a transcendental entity called "Latin America" and on that basis constructing a series of categories appropriate to that entity, philosophy should begin by doing away with this presupposition. Is this not precisely the inaugural gesture of *Kritik?* This book attempts to show that when we speak philosophically of Latin America we are not referring to a "thing in itself" but rather to a historically constructed meaning. The central purpose of the book is to reconstruct this construction through genealogical critique.

I would like to conclude this brief "author's note" by reflecting on what elements of this book written twenty-five years ago still remain with me today. Twenty-five years really is a long time, and philosophical reflection (at least as I understand it) is always changing and exploring new paths. It is true that one book leads to another, but new problems always appear, as do new theoretical challenges. I do not understand philosophy as the construction of a "system," or as the elaboration of a "conceptual architectonic," but rather as a practice of permanent experimentation. *Critique of Latin American Reason* is the beginning of a long philosophical road on which many of the problems that preoccupied me at the time were slowly losing their grip on my attention. However, at the same time, some of the problems I addressed in the book are still present

today. One of these is the issue of politics. Although *Critique of Latin American Reason* does take up the question of democracy at certain points (let us recall that at the time the Southern Cone was just emerging out of a series of ferocious military dictatorships), the book does not offer any kind of systematic reflection on the matter. Very much in line with Foucault, the book focuses on exploring the mutual relations between power and truth, but it does not ask whether democratic politics contains an internal "excess" with regard to the exercise of power—which is to say, whether or not there are any normative criteria we can refer to in order to justify this exercise of power. My book *Revoluciones sin sujeto* (2015) reflects on this complicated problem by entering into dialogue with political philosophers like Enrique Dussel and Ernesto Laclau. Another line of thought opened up by *Critique of Latin American Reason* that remains a central focus of my work is the attempt to rethink the historicist tradition of Ortega, Gaos, and Zea—the so-called history of ideas. Only now I do not use the genealogy of power as a method; rather I have come closer to the approach of intellectual history developed in Latin America by thinkers like Elías Palti. I am interested in knowing how certain "conceptual regimes" emerged at specific moments in history and how they operated as an "epochal condition of thought." This is the task I have set out to accomplish in the book I am currently completing on the political thought of Left Hegelianism in Germany between 1835 and 1846. It is not a "history of ideas" of the young Marx, but rather a conceptual genealogy that examines the discursive universe of the Young Hegelians.

Nevertheless, in spite of it having been published twenty-five years ago, *Critique of Latin American Reason* continues to be a contemporary work, particularly because of the antimodern turn that certain currents of decolonial thought have taken. There are more than a few decolonial thinkers who see modernity as identical to capitalism and colonialism, assigning to it responsibility for all the misfortunes suffered by the Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations of the Americas—populations that these thinkers in turn situate in a kind of "epistemic exteriority" with regard to modernity. It appears that some decolonial theorists are repeating the same gesture toward radical exteriority that I criticized in my book in 1995. This gesture has motivated me once again to offer a critique of it in my most recent book, *El tonto y los canallas* (2018).