





# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

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Gregory D. Gilson, Editor

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## FROM THE EDITOR

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**Gregory D. Gilson**

University of Texas–Pan American

This issue of the Newsletter contains Carlos Sanchez's essay, "The Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla: Relajo, Gelassenheit, and Liberation." Carlos Sanchez is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at San Jose State University. His essay examines Portilla's theories of value and nihilism, while comparing the concept of Relajo to Heidegger's Gelassenheit. The essay won the APA's Prize in Latin American Philosophy. I have also included a review of Jorge J. E. Gracia's new book, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality*.

The fall 2007 issue will be a special issue on teaching Latin American Philosophy. Please consider whether you have any relevant teaching materials (syllabi, course outlines/descriptions, study questions, and topics for papers) that you would like to submit. I also welcome submission of articles, interviews, and book reviews concerning the topic.

Looking further ahead, I propose that we publish a special issue on the topic of immigration. Please send comments and suggestions concerning this proposal. Send all materials to Gregory D. Gilson, The University of Texas–Pan American, Department of Philosophy, 1201 W University Ave., Edinburg, TX, 78541, gilsongreg@utpa.edu.

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## REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

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**Susana Nuccetelli**

University of Texas–Pan American

The Committee on Hispanics has undertaken a number of projects during the past two years intended to promote Latin American philosophy. As chair of the Committee, I'm happy to report that current trends in philosophy in the English-speaking world point to an increasing interest in this discipline. I believe that this interest has, at least in part, been motivated by the activities of our Committee. There can be no doubt that North American interest in Latin American philosophy is on the rise. In just the last two years, the National Endowment for the Humanities has sponsored no fewer than three projects in Latin American philosophy: two summer institutes/seminars at SUNY–Buffalo in 2005 and 2006. One of these, initially promoted by our Committee, was co-directed by Jorge Gracia and me at SUNY–Buffalo in 2005. Another consists of a series of workshops

for faculty at three colleges in South Texas which I'm co-directing during this academic year. The first of these events drew more than eighty applications from college instructors interested in participating (the second-largest response nationally among NEH Summer Institutes in 2005). Furthermore, all of these projects were resounding successes in terms of interest among participants and speakers. But that Latin American philosophy is attracting increasing attention is also evident from our special sessions at the APA's annual meetings, which are invariably well attended. Furthermore, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has now decided to have a section on Latin American philosophy and invited one of the Committee's members, Otávio Bueno, to co-edit it. Finally, I would like to welcome Gregory Gilson as Interim Editor of the APA Newsletter on Hispanics. He is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Texas–Pan American, officially designated as Hispanic Serving Institution and located in Edinburg, Texas, near the southwest border with Mexico. Although his research and teaching are focused on metaphysics and philosophy of mind, he also has an interest in Latin American philosophy. I'm sure that Greg will continue the tradition of devotion to high standards shown by our previous editor, Arleen L. F. Salles.

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## ARTICLE

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### *The Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla: Relajo, Gelassenheit, and Liberation*

**Carlos Alberto Sanchez**

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#### **Introduction**

Jorge Portilla (1919-1963) belonged to a generation of Mexican thinkers who dared undertake a radical and novel examination of post-Revolutionary Mexican social and historical reality almost half a century after the revolution. Arguably the most important member of el grupo Hiperion, or the Hiperion group, Portilla's work remains hidden here and there in obscure footnotes and passing references. In this paper I undertake a critical examination of Portilla's brilliant work on value, freedom, and nihilism, titled *Fenomenologia del Relajo* (1963), a work I first heard mentioned in a summary of Mexican phenomenologists published by Antonio Zirion Quijano in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Zirion Quijano, a Mexican professor of philosophy at UNAM, speaks of Portilla as "an almost forgotten figure who deserves to be remembered or even rescued,"<sup>2</sup> and calls upon the English speaking philosophical community to "study, rescue, and translate" Portilla's valuable contributions, especially his work on "relajo."<sup>3</sup> However, despite Professor Zirion Quijano's

praise of Portilla's study as "the most brilliant and penetrating phenomenological essay written in Mexico to date," nothing has appeared in English (to my knowledge) to answer Zirion's call. In this essay, my aim is to take up this invitation.

The first thing one notices about *Fenomenología del Relajo* is, of course, the title, which could easily be translated as "Phenomenology of to Relax." This would be a very odd way to translate the title, however; and it would not add anything to a critical interpretation except unnecessary confusion. The peculiarity of the translation is the logical consequence of translating "relajo," or its infinitive, "relajar," into its English equivalent, namely, "to relax." However, "to relax," which literally means "to loosen," or "to become lax," does not, as we will see, capture the full sense of what Portilla means by "relajo." Portilla defines "relajo" phenomenologically as "a suspension of seriousness [suspension de seriedad]" (18).<sup>4</sup> Because "to become lax" or "to loosen" falls short of capturing the sense of "relajo," Zirion, who gives us a brief yet alluring glimpse into this work, likewise finds himself unable to offer a suitable translation: "I'm keeping this last term [relajo] in Spanish, because I am more or less at a loss with its translation. It is not a regular Spanish term, although it is widely used in several Latin American countries with slightly different meanings, all of them derived from the verb relajar, in English simply to relax in the sense of letting loose or setting loose."<sup>5</sup> I, too, am at a loss for "relajo's" appropriate English counterpart (although, as we will see below, there is a suitable German equivalent), thus I will follow professor Zirion Quijano and keep "relajo" in Spanish.

*Fenomenología del relajo* (hereafter *The Phenomenology of Relajo*) was Portilla's final philosophical work. It was made available for publication after Portilla's death in 1963 by three close associates of Portilla: Victor Flores Olea, Alejandro Rossi, and Luis Villoro. The work itself was published in its unedited version, thus there are some unresolved moments in Portilla's phenomenological descriptions; nonetheless, the work gives us an insight into Portilla's phenomenology as a whole, and, more importantly, into what he considered a certain nihilistic attitude standing in the way of an authentic Mexican culture.

My aim in what follows is three-fold: first, to offer an overview of Portilla's phenomenology as we find it in *Phenomenology of Relajo*. Due to the richness of the text, this overview takes up three main themes in Portilla's discussion, namely, the theory of signification, or value, the act of relajo, and its opposite, seriousness, and, finally, Portilla's phenomenological theory of liberation. Second, in order to draw attention to terminological distinctiveness, I associate and identify Portilla's concept of relajo to Martin Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* and argue that only the former fully appreciated the negative implications of what Heidegger translators refer to as the act of "releasement." And, third, I maintain that in Portilla's *Phenomenology of Relajo* we also find a phenomenological description of resistance and liberation, which is, in effect, a prescription, so to speak, for what Leopoldo Zea calls an "assumptive project."

### Section 1: Seriousness and *Relajo*

Portilla's phenomenology can best be characterized as a phenomenology of consciousness in the tradition of Husserl and Sartre. Portilla's consciousness, however, more unlike Husserl and most like Sartre, is an embodied consciousness, a contextualized consciousness, living and working (or not working) in a particular time and place. This place is Mexico (more specifically, Mexico City). The goal of *Fenomenología del Relajo* is thus to investigate what Portilla calls a pervasive "phenomenon of our daily life," namely, a "form of consciousness" that accounts for the characteristic irresponsibility and nihilism of certain individuals and certain communities (13-15). Portilla's focus is on Mexican culture

itself, particularly post-World War II Mexico, a time, Portilla tells us, made up of a generation of "serious men" who suffered from a "lack of seriousness" (15). By specifying the object of study in such a way, Portilla follows in the tradition of other Mexican philosophers such as Antonio Caso and, later, Samuel Ramos, who likewise undertook a project of illuminating certain phenomena of daily (Mexican) life. Portilla's project is motivated by his observation that "[these serious men who lack seriousness] are afraid of their own excellence and feel impelled to get in the way of its manifestation" (15). He asks how one "gets in the way" of manifesting one's excellence, and concludes that it must be a particular mindset one adopts, a "form of consciousness" that prohibits forward movement and personal fulfillment. Large numbers of post-World War II Mexicans, Portilla suggests, sabotaged their growth and development by not attending to the exigencies of their lives and destinies. Once grasped, this sabotage takes the form of a lack of seriousness, a flight from responsibility, in other words, a letting be. As a phenomenological study, *The Phenomenology of Relajo* describes the situation that, he believes, ultimately "impedes...the constitution of a Mexican community, of an authentic community and not merely of a society fragmented between the haves and the have-nots [y no de una sociedad escindida en propietarios y desposeídos]" (95). Portilla thinks of his task as one of "taking philosophy out into the street [sacar la filosofía a la calle]" (15) and bringing it face to face with what hinders individual and collective overcoming; with what impedes the revolutionary act; with what threatens seriousness, namely, a consciousness in a state of relajo.

As suggested above, "relajo" is not to be regarded as a simple behavior, such as sitting beneath a tree on a hot summer's day drinking lemonade and reading a good book. It is more closely related to releasement, but again, not in the sense of "releasing one's worries" and "taking it easy." It is a "complex conduct," says Portilla (17), which cannot be easily compartmentalized.<sup>6</sup> Thus the initial definition of relajo as "the suspension of seriousness" (18).

We must ask, however, what constitutes "seriousness." *Prima facie*, seriousness is a positive attitude or state. We respect a person for being "a serious individual"; we respect the situation for being a "serious situation," and so forth. But what makes a serious person serious? What comprises the serious situation? Seriousness, according to Portilla, is a certain comportment (*comportamiento*) toward what individuals and societies deem significant, or, as Portilla says, it is a certain comportment toward values (social, religious, economic, political, and historical values). This manner of being is one characterized by rigidly, and dogmatically, adhering to established values, to those values imposed by society, religion, the ruling class, history, and so on. I am a serious person, for instance, if I never deviate from what I am supposed to do given my job, my social class, or my character in relation to an object or state of affairs; both my status as a member of a community and the object of my consciousness have value, and I am a serious person if I rigidly adhere to what those values demand. If I am serious about teaching philosophy, I teach the canon, I teach as I was taught, and I teach what I was taught. Seriousness means, Portilla says, "to go along with a value" (19). In contradistinction, relajo involves "suspending the adhesion of the subject toward a value imposed [proposed] on his/her freedom [libertad]" (18). Consequently, in an attitude of relajo I teach if I want to teach and if I teach I teach any way, and whatever, I want. In this form, relajo appears as a kind of liberation, a breaking away, or a releasing of certain bonds and obligations to convention. (We will see below if this appearance is not merely a seeming.)

Seriousness, however, proves to be more than going along with the demands of value. It is, Portilla finds, “a profound and intimate commitment with oneself in order to sustain value in one’s existence” (19). I am serious, in other words, not only if I do not deviate from what the valued object requires of me, but also if I make explicit my commitment to go along with values so as to lend value to my own life. Here, however, we find the troublesome aspect of seriousness.

Failing to place Portilla in his proper (Latin American) context allows one to miss something obvious about his work, namely, that a “phenomenology” of *relajo*, where *relajo* is a “suspension of seriousness,” might be motivated by a need to highlight (i.e., describe) the manner in which colonized peoples rebel against systems of social control that have existed since the conquest. Seen in this context, seriousness (as described by Portilla) proves to be the most corrosive form of obedience (to values), leading, ultimately, to what Samuel Ramos called an “inferiority complex.”<sup>7</sup> According to Ramos, one of the main causes of this inferiority complex is an “exalted idea of the self” held by the colonized coupled with an inability to realize this idea (or ideal)<sup>8</sup>; this inability to fully live up to an ideal, or to fully go along with the value, results in a sense of inferiority and resentment.<sup>9</sup> Seriousness can thus be characterized as the attempt to fully live up to ideals imposed, so to speak, from the outside, to go along with what the dominant discourse proposes as valuable, and thus to perpetuate an oppressive self-interpretation; thus, negatively put, to be serious is to willingly, or dogmatically, uphold an established interpretative scheme that ultimately distorts an individual’s sense of self and history.

I say that the serious individual “willingly” perpetuates a negative sense of self because, by being herself a victim of the conquest and colonization (or at least a product of it), she thinks herself to be upholding that which is valuable to uphold. Again, she is merely “going along with” the value, but in so doing she is also willing the continuation of the social structures that created it. Portilla refers to this overly serious person as an “apretado” (87ff). I will translate “apretado” as “stiff,” as when we refer to someone who refuses to have a good time as “a stiff.”<sup>10</sup> “Our colonialist ingenuity,” writes Portilla, “says that [the stiff] is ‘too British,’ and [the stiff] himself feels a weakness...for what he calls ‘good English taste’” (88). This “weakness,” I take it, is that conscious disposition to accept the objective validity of the “valuable,” the “good,” the “godly,” etc., simply because it, the valuable or the good, is foreign, i.e., English, North American, European.

It is in this way that *relajo* is a reaction against the spirit of seriousness; it is a “suspension” of seriousness and, by extension, a suspension of the value of the valued object. Again, however, *relajo* is not a simple act reducible to a mere suspension or “looking away.” In fact, Portilla describes it as being an act divisible into three moments which are nonetheless indivisible in *relajo*’s temporal manifestation. *Relajo*’s three moments are:

- i. “a displacement of attention [desplazamiento de la atención].”
- ii. Antagonism toward the proposed value (“desolidarización del valor que le es propuesto”).
- iii. An invitation to others to participate in the rejection of value (“una invitación a otros para que participen conmigo en esa desolidarización”) (19).

To “relajar,” in this phenomenological sense, is thus to direct our conscious rays of attention away from the object or state of affairs (i), but to do it in a way that keeps the object or state of affairs in the periphery (ii), in other words, to ignore it while making it explicitly known that it is being ignored, and, finally,

by communicating to others that the value of some object or state of affairs is being rejected, thus extending an invitation to those around us to do the same, namely, to not take that which is being ignored seriously (iii).

The significant moment in the phenomenon of *relajo*, however, is the displacement of attention. This moment, Portilla writes, “is merely a change in the intentional object of consciousness and not a deliberate act in which a subject ‘concentrates’ upon a new object” (20). Portilla, I take it, has in mind Husserl’s conception of attention, and means by attention “simply the direction of intentionality toward an object” (20).<sup>11</sup> Thus, *relajo* primarily consists in displacing the direction of intentionality toward an object; of dislocating the rays of attention enough so that the object of value loosens its hold on our consciousness (or vice versa). If I am in a state of *relajo*, for instance, I look at my historical situation not as the dominant discourse demands (i.e., the value placed on my historical situation by others), but, by displacing my attention, I attend to my historical situation as a series of events dictated by cause and effect and intrinsically bereft of value, thus expressing my antagonism toward the value given to my circumstances. By doing this, I invite others in my circle to reject (or not care about) any interpretations of their *mestizaje*, of the conquest, of a historical destiny, and so on, which have been handed down generation after generation; moreover, by not committing myself to any established interpretation of history, the self, or society, I simultaneously refuse to take a stand on the value of the future and consequently of any future possibilities. In this way, I reject the demands of the common interpretation regarding what history should mean to me and simply let it go; in other words, I adopt an attitude of *relajo*.

It could be the case that this state (of *relajo*) persists indefinitely and that I navigate my circumstances in a constant attitude of *relajo*. Portilla refers to an individual such as this as a “relajiento” (39). In my example, I am in the state of *relajo* when I reject the value that my personal or cultural history has been given in the past or will be given in the future. Likewise, the *relajiento* “refuses to take anything seriously, to commit himself [comprometerse] to anything, that is, he refuses to guarantee his conduct in the future” (39). We will see the negative implications of this attitude below; for now, what we must keep in mind is that this refusal to commit manifests itself as a refusal to be oppressed, or, more importantly, it manifests itself as an expression of one’s freedom.<sup>12</sup>

## Section 2: *Relajo* as an Act of Liberation or Negation?

This characteristic of *relajo*, namely, that it loosens the hold that the supposed valued object has on us, mimics an act of liberation. That it mimics an act of liberation, however, already shows that it is not. Portilla calls *relajo* an act of negation. “This negation is not a direct negation of value,” writes Portilla, “but rather of the essential bond [vínculo esencial] that ties the subject with value” (20). As negation, it is a refusal to take part or a refusal to accept. It is not yet liberation since the “breaking away” that takes place in *relajo* does not take one to a new spiritual, political, or historical dimension where freedom could be more fully exercised or realized. Portilla puts it thus: “*relajo* is worldly action and not an introspection, in which the subject would take as object her own internal states or decisions” (22). This means that although *relajo* somehow frees us from the demands [exigencias] of value, our triumph over this “essential bond [vínculo esencial]” is not internalized; thus, there is no drastic change in terms of our intimate relation to our selves or to our world.

Furthermore, *relajo* is not an act of liberation since, by suspending seriousness, by frustrating a value, and so on, *relajo* does not do away with the value or with seriousness. We would

think that in an act of liberation, the oppressor would be done away with, disposed, or oppressed himself (or itself, as the case may be). This is not the case with *relajo*. According to Portilla, “a single act [of *relajo*] is not enough to eliminate or sufficiently reduce the invocations of value” (24). The reason for this is that a value stands to intentional consciousness as what constitutes the meaningfulness of experience, and, therefore, persists after (and in spite of) *relajo* in “demanding my assistance in order to come into existence [reclamando mi apoyo para entrar en la existencia]” (24). Value, in other words, is not something that can easily be continuously ignored.

*Relajo* as negation, consequently, is not an expression of one’s freedom, since an expression of freedom would tend toward affirming or overcoming certain values rather than toward the nihilistic attitude that cancels all seriousness and all value. Conceived in this way, *relajo*, as a human attitude Portilla sees represented in Mexico, leads to “an atmosphere of disorder in which the realization of value is impossible” (25). The possibility to realize values is important because it (the possibility) offers itself as something toward which to aim, as an ideal, as a human purpose. When I am confronted with an object, this object presents itself with its own significance but is grasped by my consciousness only from a particular side or profile. I do not appreciate its full value, nor can I. Take, for instance, the phenomenon of immigration as an object of conscious awareness. I can reflect on this phenomenon and its diverse manifestation (e.g., as migration or exile), but it could take me years—if at all—to fully understand its full significance. If I choose not to take it seriously, to break the bond that ties my attentive consciousness to this phenomenon, thus to take an attitude of *relajo*, I miss the opportunity to engage the phenomenon and the value that it has accumulated in spite of me. It is through its ideality that value opens up a realm of authentic possibilities for me; value, Portilla says, “absorbs me toward my possibilities in the future [me absorbe hacia mis posibilidades en el futuro]” (35). However, if I engage the value and respond to its demands, I might be overcome by the spirit of seriousness, which is not altogether a positive spirit as we saw above. But neither is its opposite, *relajo*, an attractive alternative. As Portilla reiterates, “*relajo* is a conduct of dissidence that could be an expression of a will-toward self-destruction [voluntad de autodestrucción]” (34).

### Section 3 Some Comments on Heidegger’s Concept of “*Gelassenheit*”

As I understand it, it is Martin Heidegger’s concept of “*Gelassenheit*” that most closely parallels what Portilla calls *relajo*. In his 1955 speech translated as the “Memorial Address,” delivered eight years before the publication of Portilla’s *Fenomenología*, Heidegger speaks about the dangers of what he calls “calculative thinking” which to him signifies the type of thinking that characterizes the modern technological age. “Calculative thinking,” writes Heidegger, “computes. It computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities. ...Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself.”<sup>13</sup> Opposed to this type of technological thinking is “meditative thinking” or “thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is.”<sup>14</sup> We could say that the meditative individual is overcome by the spirit of seriousness that Portilla describes. But this would be misleading. The serious individual does not “contemplate the meaning” of everything; rather, he goes along with meaning. Meditative thinking, I believe, is precisely the type of thinking Portilla has in mind as the type of thinking that recognizes the power that values possess in opening us up to our future possibilities. Heidegger puts it in the following way: “Meditative thinking demands of us not to cling one-

sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all.”<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, however, meditative thinking, by demanding that we “engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all” invokes the essence of *relajo*. “What is essential to *relajo*,” writes Portilla, “is the intimate decision to not commit oneself before the demand that emanates from the presented value” (21). In *relajo*, in other words, what is avoided is the exigency of the demand, of that which is given “at first sight.”

Heidegger, however, is only calling us to think otherwise than in the manner of the technological, namely, to exercise meditative thinking. But he goes further: thinking otherwise than in the manner of the technological sometimes requires, he says, that we let go, that we exercise an attitude of “releasement toward things,” or what he calls, “*Gelassenheit*.” But isn’t “*Gelassenheit*” the opposite of meditative thinking? I will not go into the problems (or my own confusions) with Heidegger’s views here. For now, it is only pertinent to point out the following: Isn’t *Gelassenheit* what we have been calling “*relajo*,” a letting go of the value of the object or state of affairs, a stepping back, a “releasement”? More poignantly, isn’t “*Gelassenheit*” precisely a “displacement of attention”? Heidegger says: “Having this comportment we no longer view things only in a technical way.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, what Portilla calls a “displacement of attention” is just the act of not viewing things “only” in the normal way.

My reason for making this comparison is that Heidegger seems to think that he has stumbled onto a positive (and possible) way of being in the world. *Relajo*, as we said before, is a negation; as a negation, it is an “act of dissidence,” which is an expression of a self-destructive will (34). Heidegger talks of “letting go,” of “releasement,” as offering the possibility to “dwell in the world in a totally different way,” which ultimately allows one to “stand and endure the world of technology without being imperiled by it” due to that suspension of the “meaning pervading technology” that releasement brings about.<sup>17</sup> But this dwelling in the world in a totally different way is, according to Portilla, “precisely an attitude contrary to the normal and spontaneous attitude of human beings in the face of values when values act upon consciousness as guidelines [pauta] of constitution [autoconstitución]” (39).

My claim is that *relajo* and *Gelassenheit* are synonymous terms. This is made especially evident when one looks at the manner in which translators render *Gelassenheit* as the attitude of “letting be,” “releasement,” or “renunciation.”<sup>18</sup> As renunciation, we can even think of *Gelassenheit* as the opposite of unrest, namely, rest, relaxation, or *relajo*. However, if *Gelassenheit* is a manifestation of renunciation and *relajo*, then how could it be a positive possibility? What Heidegger calls a “releasement toward things,” or a “letting things be,” so as to “dwell in the world in a different way” has the possible consequence for an individual’s existence that *relajo* has for Portilla’s “*relajiento*.” Portilla writes:

The “*relajiento*” ends by losing sight that his indifference has its origin in his own freedom and that [letting things be] is nothing else but personal and contingent option, [thus] he ends by believing that the negation has its basis in the things themselves...he loses the means [pauta] of affirmation and blinds himself toward value. (41)

It is clear to me that Heidegger’s notion of *Gelassenheit*, or renunciation, can only lead to nihilism, as with *relajo*. Indeed, as Portilla warns, if we “let things be,” as Heidegger suggests—in the manner of releasement or *relajo*—we run the

risk of negating every meaningful option. Neither *Gelassenheit* nor *relajo* lead to liberation, but simply are, as Portilla tells us, affectations of a will to negation.

#### Section 4 *Relajo, Fiestas, Joy, Humor, and Liberation*

The presumption of *relajo*, as a resistance of value, as we see, proves to be an expression of nihilism and not of liberation. The confusion arises when we associate *relajo* to events or situations that do seem to free us from our mundane existence, from what is ordinary; events or situation, in other words, which seem to hand us over to a state of renunciation toward those aspects of the ordinary that oppress us. In Hispanic America an event of this kind is the “fiesta.”

A fiesta is a celebration that raises the ordinary into the extra-ordinary. What would otherwise be an ordinary Saturday is transformed into a “pachanga,” into an event where all our worries are left at the gates and we are enveloped by music, laughter, and the bonds of family and community that let the hours pass without notice. We tell ourselves to, at least for the day, renounce our ordinary circumstances and “relax,” or, as we say in English, “chill out.” Thus, it is easy to confound *relajo* with something like the joy we feel when we are at a festive event. As Portilla argues, however, the fiesta is itself a value that we, while we are “in” the fiesta, aim to realize. In other words, we do not go to fiestas to “relajar,” or even to “chill out”; rather, we go to fiestas to realize the possibilities of the fiesta itself. The possibility that the fiesta promises, its value, according to Portilla, is “joy.” Portilla writes:

In a fiesta value is realized by the situation. . . in the fiesta the value to be realized [alcanzar] is joy [alegría]. Its purpose is to actualize joy; the joy of communicating through joy and delight [regocijo]; perhaps the fiesta is one of the privileged forms of communication. However, in order for there to really be joy in the fiesta it is necessary that the participants adopt a conduct regulated by that vital value. It is necessary that no one adopt a conduct that ruins the value. (38)

*Relajo* is consequently anti-climactic and prohibitive; it does not allow the realization of the possibilities of the celebration since, as we said above, in *relajo* one does not “adopt a conduct regulated by” any value. This is, in fact, its definition. If I am invited to a fiesta, I am expected to behave in a certain way; I am expected not to begin scuffles and I am also expected to take part in the celebration, but I am not expected to sit around and not care, *relajar*, or do nothing.

Related to this, another important distinction Portilla makes is between *relajo* and humor. Unlike *relajo*, humor is not an attempt to “suspend seriousness,” or to break off the bonds of value and let things be. If anything, humor is an attempt to lend attention to a certain value without “displacing” attention. Humor is closer to seriousness, but only in the sense that humor is merely a resistance, and not a suspension, of it. I resist the serious situation by “making fun” of it; I resist the pull of value in voluntarily moving towards it by “cracking” a joke that exposes an unexposed aspect of its significance. Think, for instance, of Mexico’s greatest comedic actor (and once, according to Charlie Chaplin, “the greatest comedian in the world”), Cantinflas.<sup>19</sup> For the sake of brevity, consider one of his more famous catchphrases: “ahí está el detalle,” or as Hamlet put it, “ay, there’s the rub.” Cantinflas utters this phrase in order to focus attention on an aspect of the situation that those around him have not considered. Of course, he does it in order to get himself out of trouble, and he succeeds by getting others to reflect on what he has pointed out. Most times, however, Cantinflas merely sounds magnificently knowledgeable while ultimately saying absolutely nothing. “There’s the rub” is a

comedic tool, a way to force attention on the backside of things, a way to shed light on the darkest corner of a situation.

In the humor of Cantinflas seriousness is never suspended and value is never abandoned; instead, our focus goes straight to those values; our consciousness is forced to resist the temptation to interpret the situation in the familiar way, and we are allowed to see the hidden aspect of things. And perhaps this is the genius of Cantinflas, that he allows those around him, the down-trodden, the marginalized, to transcend their determined perspectives and see the world anew. Portilla writes that “the moral subject is transformed into a humorist when she begins to understand suffering as necessarily derived from finitude, as something essential to the human condition” (80). Humor is thus the expression of an existential insight. But humor is more than that; humor is also the expression of freedom, since while I act in accordance to the demands of value, I nonetheless seek to reveal the full significance of the value, I seek to penetrate it and transcend it. In this way, humor is an act of liberation. Portilla sums up the difference between *relajo* and humor in the following way:

To the work [a la acción] of the humorist corresponds a world free of the temptation towards the pathos that proclaims that all is useless and that man is a being irremediably unlucky and incapable of remedying his situation. To the work of *relajo* corresponds a world in which everything remains the same as before, but one in which the business of bringing about values has had one more failure. (84)

I could sum up the basic difference between humor and *relajo* as one between resistance and inaction. In humor, one resists the sometimes overwhelming temptation to turn away from our existential condition and let go of the responsibility to ourselves and our circumstance and take up a mode of pessimism and, ultimately, indifference. In *relajo*, by doing nothing to realize a value, one accomplishes nothing—which is its goal. Portilla says that “*relajo* kills action in its crib [El *relajo* mata la acción en su cuna]” (85). By killing action, *relajo* accomplishes nothing and leads us nowhere. “After *relajo*,” writes Portilla, “things continue exactly as before. For this very reason *relajo* cannot be considered a ‘revolutionary’ attitude” (85). Ultimately, humor “seeks liberty,” while “*relajo* seeks irresponsibility” (84).

#### Section 5 *Relajo and the “Assumptive Project”*

That humor seeks liberty might sound odd. What sort of liberty does it seek? As we see with the example of Cantinflas, it does not seek physical liberation from oppressive political or economic conditions, but merely a spiritual liberation; it seeks to intrude past the normative parameters placed by values, themselves set by political, economic, and social institutions, on our circumstances. It is the liberty, moreover, to engage the psychological barriers manifested in those complexes of inferiority that Ramos, for instance, discusses. In humor one resists the temptation for pessimism and irresponsibility by emphasizing that one cannot simply cancel out this responsibility by letting things go. One takes the values imposed on our circumstances “head on” and resolutely.

Portilla’s Phenomenology of *Relajo* gives us, therefore, a phenomenology of liberation. It is a descriptive project highlighting three distinct movements of consciousness: negation, dogmatism, and resistance. A negating consciousness is a consciousness of *relajo*; a dogmatic consciousness is a serious consciousness; and a consciousness in the act of liberation is a consciousness of humor (and also, he says, irony).<sup>20</sup> Although *relajo* offers itself as a form of liberation, it is but a pseudo-liberation, a presumptive liberation that phenomenological investigation reveals as a negation and an

irresponsible mode of being in the world with others. Relajo is a temptation, ultimately, that must be overcome if we are ever to undertake what Leopoldo Zea has called “the assumptive project,” or the owning up to our (the Latin American) historical situation in a project of liberation.<sup>21</sup> In such a project the task is to accept the past; to accept, that is, our historical circumstances regardless of what these are and assume responsibility for them, thereby assuming responsibility for ourselves and our destiny. Mario Saenz describes this project:

By the assumptive project Zea means... the “dialectical” negation of the Latin American past and reality, that is, the reappropriation of a reality long rejected by dominant Latin American ideologies. Zea has in mind the kind of negation that simultaneously preserves in an appropriation process what is negated. This kind of negation includes the preservation and cancellation of what is negated in another form. It becomes one’s own, and, by becoming one’s own, its original appearance is transcended. It is digested and by being digested, it is transformed. Thus, the realities of the conquest, colonization, the nineteenth century wars of independence, failed experiments, the repetition of the beginning, and so on, all become one’s reality. Thus their continual appearance as a beginning is transformed, argues Zea, into a lived experience.<sup>22</sup>

Relajo, as an attitude that negates value, is thus an attitude that seems to negate the “dominant Latin American ideology.” As we have seen, however, relajo does not negate in this way; in relajo the “simultaneous preservation” of what is negated does not take place; after all, relajo “kills action in its crib.” Instead, it is humor that more readily lends itself to the assumptive project. “Humor,” writes Portilla, is “an affirming negation; a negation that refuses itself in an ulterior affirmation” (86). And this is how Saenz characterizes Zea’s project: it involves a “negation” that “includes the preservation and cancellation of what is negated in another form.”<sup>23</sup> According to our discussion, it is the humor, and not relajo, that preserves and cancels in this way.

I am not arguing that all humor is an instance of reappropriation. This is clearly not the case (just think of what we call “sick humor”). What I take Portilla to be suggesting is that some humor—call it “serious humor”—is capable of resisting the dominance of established values while not “suspending” them. Through serious humor, it is possible that “the realities of the conquest, colonization, the nineteenth century wars of independence.... all become one’s reality.”<sup>24</sup> Serious humor, however, is merely one possible change of attitude among many capable of realizing the assumptive, or liberatory, project. Nevertheless, as I said at the beginning it is an assumptive project—or something similar—that motivates Portilla’s critique of relajo. He writes:

In internalization we also find a subjective activity, a centrifugal movement analogous to the one involved in the realization of an act toward the exterior. A process definitely similar to this is the acquisition of a consciousness of class, in which the worker internalizes, that is, makes actively his, a situation which before was merely suffered and external, and that in the process of its internalization brings with it a certain liberation. (56)

This process of internalization is an assumptive project whose goal is to bring with it a certain liberation. This “liberation” does not come about as an act of negation—negation in the sense of relajo—but comes about as a result of a “subjective activity,” a “centrifugal movement,” an “act.” In his *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega y Gasset proposed, “I am myself and my

circumstance, and if I do not rescue it, I do not rescue myself [si no la salvo a ella, no me salvo yo].”<sup>25</sup> It is around this principle that we find Zea’s and Portilla’s projects evolve and revolve. If the circumstances are not rescued, engaged, internalized, reappropriated, the agent falls into what Portilla calls either a state of grave seriousness or a state of relajo, neither of which is conducive to liberation; if one is too serious, then one takes values as absolute demands on our comportment without engaging their justification or their possibilities; if one is a relajiento, the value is suspended and negated, again, without engaging its possibilities or its justification. Portilla says that circumstances “only trip me over [me traban] and torment me if I resist to integrate them in my comportment just as they are; if I refuse to count on them” (56). As Ortega suggests, it is one’s responsibility to rescue one’s circumstances and thus rescue oneself. This emphasis on responsibility (or the lack thereof) is crucial. Portilla writes: “As soon as one takes responsibility one becomes free, and as soon as one becomes free, one reaffirms oneself as a person” (55). The relajiento, by being indifferent and inactive, Portilla suggests, has taken up the being of things as his or her mode of being.

### **Conclusion: Relajientos, Stiffs, and the Possibility of Authentic Community**

According to Portilla liberation is a result of autonomous action. The pseudo-liberation that relajo mimics is nothing but an “inconsequential” negation; nothing changes after relajo. The point, however, is not to be dogmatically committed to values to the extent that gaining insight into their full potentiality becomes inconceivable. Both seriousness and its opposite, relajo, are incapable of allowing for a genuine manifestation of one’s freedom. If either the spirit of seriousness, exemplified by the “apretado,” or the “stiff,” or the spirit of relajo exemplified by the “relajiento,” are appropriated as modes of being, then those possibilities are threatened that affect not only those individuals involved but the entire community and, consequently, the entire culture.

As both Portilla and Zea recognized, the reappropriation of the past is necessary for the realization of one’s destiny. Negating past and present values, however, is also a negation of the past and of the present. For this reason, the relajiento seems to lack a future. “The relajiento,” says Portilla, “is literally a man without a future [porvenir]” (39). That the future is not a “to come” [por-venir] for the relajiento, means that he has nowhere to go. Indeed, there are those individuals who evoke in us the thought: “he will never get anywhere.” The reason for this is that these individuals constantly negate the value of what is immediately before them, instead of resisting what presents itself in a constructive and productive way. Conversely, the stiff, the most serious of individuals, because he accepts the value of the valuable object without objection, refuses to enter into the type of dialogue—or dialectic—which opens up the possibilities of the future (of the as-yet to come); “with him dialogue is impossible,” says Portilla (94). Moreover, the stiff resists participating in the reappropriation of values made possible by, for instance, humor. In fact, “the stiff is the individual lacking a ‘sense of humor’” (87). The stiff thus represents the status quo, the established order.

These two forms of consciousness, as extremes, are thus obstacles to the future. And, because these individuals represent members of a community, they are obstacles to all the future possibilities of that community. In the case of the stiff, who holds steadfast to the objectivity of value, authentic dialogue is impossible, thus authentic community is impossible. “Authentic dialogue assumes the transcendence and the evanescence of value,” writes Portilla, “but, when value is right there in the form of the stiff, made completely of flesh and English cashmere, the

only thing to do is to listen with attention and respectfully assent” (94). As the stiff refuses to recognize the other, she negates the other in order to affirm herself. This creates class divisions and oppression. The same can be said of *relajo*. *Relajo* “closes the channels of communication between the immanence of the situation and the transcendence of value and promotes an atmosphere of closure and non-communication” (83). This closing of the channels is a result of the “displacement of attention” that characterizes *relajo*; the immanence of the now is cut off from its significance in an act of negation, thus denying, as with the stiff, the possibility of communication, or dialogue.

Ultimately, authentic community is possible only when values are taken not as absolute demands but as guides and ideals to be realized by the community itself. This does not mean that one cannot deviate from the demands of the valued object; rather, it means that one possesses precisely the autonomous will to deviate in respect to the value, while not simply “letting things be.” The achievement of authentic community requires, therefore, an assumptive project, a re-appropriation of values already established in history and by historical events; values that, although oppressive as they may be, define its members however incompletely. Portilla refers to this project as a “movement of pure interiority”:

...freedom can be actualized in two clearly discernable ways: It may consist in an external liberation which may involve the removal, destruction, or overcoming of an obstacle really in the world. ...Freedom is here the end and result of an act carried out upon things or situations. But it can also consist in a pure movement of interiority. It can consist simply in a change of attitude. There are possibilities for freedom that ...do not require a new real ordering of the world but rather that are free variations of attitude in pure interiority. (62)

In this way, the phenomenology of *relajo*, I claim, is a philosophy of liberation emphasizing the view that the possibility for liberation and thus authentic community lay inside each individual as the possibility to change one’s attitude and, with this, one’s circumstance.

Jorge Portilla thus offers us a phenomenology of consciousness much different than that of his predecessors, including, and particularly, Husserl himself. He takes phenomenology a step further and brings us closer to understanding a consciousness lacking the motivation to know, which is what Husserl gave us, namely, the phenomenology of a perpetually interested consciousness. Moreover, Portilla taps into the philosophical consciousness of his own time and place and gives us a phenomenology of seriousness, a theory of liberation, and, hidden in all of this, a political commentary on class division and class struggle, a commentary on, he says, “una sociedad escindida en propietarios y desposeídos” (95).

#### Endnotes

1. Antonio Q. Ziron. “Phenomenology in Mexico: A Historical Profile,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000): 75-92
2. *Ibid.*, 75
3. *Ibid.*, 89
4. Jorge Portilla. *Fenomenología del Relajo* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Era, S.A., 1966). I will place the page numbers referring to this work in parentheses throughout. All translations of this text are my own.
5. “Phenomenology in Mexico,” p. 88
6. Portilla thinks that categorizing physical activities in this way is “the error of behaviorism” (18). Complex physical behavior; e.g., sitting under a tree on a hot summer’s day, can be defined by behaviorists only in a very reductivist fashion; it leaves out the existential elements of performing the action in the first place. To put it simply, Portilla thinks there is more behind our behavior. I leave Portilla’s critique of behaviorism for future study.
7. Samuel Ramos. *Profile of Culture and Man in Mexico*, translated by Peter Earle (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1962).
8. *Ibid.*, 8
9. *Ibid.*, 103
10. I will return to the discussion of “*apretado*” below. For now, the following comment should suffice: I understand that this is not the best translation of “*apretado*,” which literally means “the tight one.” In English, when the word “stiff” refers to persons, it refers to someone who is lifeless or unbending; for instance, we refer to a dead person as a stiff, or we refer to a helpless factory worker as a “working stiff”; however, Portilla’s characterization of the *apretado* as someone who does not react to the discrepancies in the valued object or in the social structures that perpetuate these values does seem to characterize someone who is, in fact, lifeless, or even dead.
11. See §92 of *Ideas I*: “Attention is usually compared to a spot of light. The object of attention...lies in the cone of more or less bright light; but it can also move into the penumbra and into the completely dark region.” Edmund Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, translated by F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998). *Relajo* is thus the moment when the object of attention moves “into the completely dark region.”
12. Italicize “manifest” to emphasize that we are still not sure if “*relajo*” is, indeed, a form, or a manifestation, of liberation, or freedom.
13. Martin Heidegger. “Memorial Address.” In *Discourse on Thinking*, translated by John Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1966), 46
14. *Ibid.*, 46
15. *Ibid.*, 53
16. *Ibid.*, 54; emphasis mine.
17. *Ibid.*, 55
18. See, for instance, Iain Thomson, “From the Question Concerning Technology to the Quest for a Democratic Technology: Heidegger, Marcuse, Feenberg,” *Inquiry* 43 (2000): 208; also, the English translation of Martin Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy: (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 273
19. Cantinflas, a.k.a. Mario Moreno Reyes, lived from 1911-1993 and was a widely successful actor: He was known for playing “a campesino-cum-slumdweller that came to represent the national identity of Mexico.” See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantinflas>, retrieved April 30 2006
20. Due to space constraints, I forgo the discussion of irony here. See pp. 64ff.
21. For a discussion of Zea’s “assumptive project,” see Mario Saenz, *Latin American Historicism and the Phenomenology of Leopoldo Zea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), ch. 4. See also Leopoldo Zea, *El pensamiento latinoamericano* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1976).
22. *Latin American Historicism*, p. 251.
23. *Ibid.* My emphasis.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Jose Ortega y Gasset. *Meditaciones del quijote* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1960 [Sexta Edición]), 18. *Meditations on Quixote*, English translation by Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 45

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality: A Challenge for the Twenty-first Century*

Jorge J. E. Gracia (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

Reviewed by Gregory D. Gilson  
University of Texas–Pan American

Jorge Gracia begins his latest book, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality*, by arguing that the discipline of philosophy is uniquely suited to contribute to the understanding of race, ethnicity, and nationality (hereafter RE&N). Philosophy is supremely interdisciplinary in that it is not tied by any particular methodology and its goal is to put together a complete and comprehensive view of the world. Gracia gives priority to metaphysical and epistemological analysis in this book. On his view, metaphysics provides the most general categories of thought and studies the relation of those general categories to the more specific categories of particular academic disciplines. Thus, Gracia advocates that the academic disciplines that use the concepts of RE&N (e.g., history, linguistics, geography, anthropology, cultural studies) be more closely linked to philosophy in general and the philosophic analyses of the categories of RE&N in particular. He suggests the relationship that philosophy currently has with cognitive science and biology as a model.

According to Gracia, the relationship between philosophy and the other academic disciplines ought to be active in both directions. Philosophy provides the logical, ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological underpinnings essential for the creation of human knowledge and action. In particular, philosophy critiques the categories and concepts of other disciplines ensuring that they meet the most general criteria of understanding. In turn, philosophy ought to pay close attention to the latest empirical theories and discoveries in all disciplines. Thus, philosophy should serve as both watchdog and tool of conceptual formation for academic disciplines that use the categories of RE&N.

In addition to the application of metaphysics, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality* perspicuously applies concepts and theories from contemporary analytic philosophy of language and epistemology to explicate the concepts of RE&N. The book is also rich with historical references and illustrations from ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy. Questions of ontology are sharply distinguished from questions of how we know of, refer to, and speak of RE&N. Our concepts of RE&N are clearly distinguished from the categories themselves. Gracia reminds us that evidence of how we speak of, refer to, or think about objects does not, in general, establish facts about how things are. He takes pains to illustrate that much confusion can result from not separating these issues. Gracia is surely right to demand such precision and rigor; but as Aristotle reminds us at 1094b line 25 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, we must also be careful “to look for precision in a class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits...”

The bulk of *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality* is devoted to the careful explication of the categories of RE&N. I shall get to Gracia’s analyses of these categories in a moment, but I need to first say a bit more about why he thinks the project is worthwhile. According to Gracia, the problem with most contemporary analyses of RE&N is that they assume

these categories to be essentialist. In contrast, Gracia denies the existence of necessary and sufficient conditions that define or metaphysically categorize RE&N. Perhaps the most significant philosophic achievement of *Surviving Race, Ethnicity and Nationality* is providing referentially objective and yet non-essentialist analyses of RE&N. The thesis that RE&N are objective and yet non-essentialist is important for a number of reasons. First, it is the failure to discover an essence behind RE&N that has led many to deny their existence. Second, confusion about essence causes the categories of RE&N to be confused or even intentionally identified with one another. Third, essentialist thinking about RE&N leads to unrealistic and sometimes dangerous expectations of homogeneity and purity. Finally, denying the existence of or confusing RE&N for one another causes us to make incoherent or at least misunderstand the role that RE&N have played in history, and continue to play in contemporary power relations in society and in the lives of individuals.

Gracia calls his analysis of ethnicity the “familial-historical view.” It maintains that:

An ethnos is a subgroup of individual humans who satisfy the following conditions: (1) they belong to many generations; (2) they are organized as families and break down into extended families; and (3) they are united through historical relations that produce features that, in context, serve (i) to identify members of the group and (ii) to distinguish them from members of other groups. (54)

The first two conditions are relatively straightforward. An ethnos can only be created over several generations. The second condition draws an analogy between an ethnos and extended families. Recall that one need not enter into a family by descent. There are a whole host of legal and socially constructed relations (e.g., marriage, adoption) that constitute family membership. Similarly, membership in an ethnos need not come about by birth but can be acquired in various ways.

The third condition for an ethnos is his most significant and original contribution to our understanding of ethnicity. An ethnos is created by a series of historically contingent events that occur to a given group of people over several generations. These events produce identifiable features that serve to form these people into an ethnos. The events are often, but not always, acts of oppression and discrimination against the given group of people.

Gracia calls his analysis of race the “genetic common bundle view.” According to this view:

A race is a subgroup of individual human beings who satisfy the following two conditions: (1) each member of the group is linked by descent to another member of the group, who is in turn linked by descent to at least some third member of the group; and (2) each member of the group has one or more physical features that are (i) genetically transmittable, (ii) generally associated with the group and (iii) perspicuous. (85)

Like ethnicity, Gracia analyzes race in terms of extended families tied together through historical relations. Nevertheless, the categories are importantly different and should not be confused with one another. There are two primary differences between race and ethnicity. First, descent is a necessary condition for racial but not for ethnic membership. Second, the particular features that identify members of a race must be transmitted genetically. This makes race more objective than ethnicity in that racial membership is not a matter of choice or social convention. At the same time, race is less objective

than ethnicity in that the features which identify members of a race are those genetically transmitted, perspicuous features that happen to be chosen by social convention. In contrast, the features that identify members of an ethnicity are constructed by historical events largely independently of any social convention.

Gracia calls his analysis of nationality the “political view.” According to this view:

A nation is a subgroup of individual human beings who satisfy the following conditions: they (1) reside in a territory (2) are free and informed and (3) have a common political will to live under a system of laws that (i) aims to ensure justice and the common good, regulating their organization, interrelations, and governance, and (ii) is not subordinated to any other system of laws within the territory in question. (130)

Whereas *ethnos* and race are essentially kinds of families, nationality is characterized by sovereignty over individuals residing in a particular territory. Territories and rules or laws often play important roles in particular *ethnos*, but they aren't necessary features. In contrast, territory and laws seem necessary but not sufficient for nationhood. They are not sufficient because Gracia insists that the members of legitimate nations be free and voluntarily agree to live under a set of just laws that support justice and the common good. The laws themselves must be the result of the common political will. Territories whose laws do not have these features are called states. It is important to note that Gracia's characterization does not require a nation to have a common language, culture, religion, or value system.

Gracia tells us that the above formulae for RE&N are part definition, part metaphysical categorization. Regardless, they look suspiciously like (perhaps incomplete) sets of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. This would seem to indicate that RE&N have an essence after all. But this criticism misunderstands Gracia's claim. It's not the metaphysical categories of RE&N themselves but, rather, individual races, *ethnos*, and nations that are claimed to be non-essentialist.

Gracia's accounts of RE&N are non-essentialist in the sense that there is no a priori identifiable set of features that characterize all races, *ethnos*, and nations. Different races, *ethnos*, and nations satisfy the criteria presented in his formulae in different ways. For example, we cannot say that ethnicity consists in (say) a shared religion, homeland, and language—some ethnicities will be individuated by these features and others will not. The relevant features are constructed by the contingent historical events that create the *ethnos*. Since different *ethnos* are created by different types of events, different *ethnos* consist of different and even different types of characteristics. For some races hair texture will be an identifying feature and for others it won't. Membership criteria for nations look to be equally non-essentialist. Different common political wills and interpretations of justice and common good are surely possible. Gracia's accounts of ethnicity and race are also non-essentialist in that even within a particular *ethnos* or race there is no list of features that all and only members must possess. Thus, Gracia's account maximizes diversity within particular *ethnos*, races, and nations.

Gracia tells us that his goal is not to provide complete characterizations of RE&N, but to flesh them out only well enough to make clear the important differences between the three categories. It seems to me that he has clearly identified three group classifications that are crucial to understanding personal identity, history, and contemporary power relations in society. It also seems right that these classifications ought not

to be confused or identified with one another. Much damage can result if this is done. The danger of identifying nationhood with race or ethnicity is obvious. We ought not to expect, let alone demand, that all citizens of a nation be of the same race or adopt a particular culture, religion, or language. Nor should we expect this homogeneity of all members of a particular race. Finally, members of an *ethnos* can be members of different nations and be of different races.

I wonder, however, whether the concepts of RE&N are not connected in a more fundamental way than Gracia's analysis suggests. One of Gracia's primary arguments in favor of not abandoning the categorizations of RE&N is that personal identity, history, and contemporary power relations in society are not comprehensible without them. But surely the categories of RE&N themselves cannot be understood in isolation of the historical and contemporary relations between these categorizations. In particular, it seems impossible to understand ethnicity and race in isolation of political and economic considerations. Yet this is exactly what Gracia requires by confining political and economic considerations to the category of nation. While I share Gracia's goal of disentangling RE&N and certainly acknowledge the abuse that has resulted from confusing the categories, it seems to me that there are essential connections between these categories that ought to be reflected in their metaphysical categorizations.

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## CALLS FOR MATERIALS

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### Call for Papers:

“In Honor of John Haddox: 50 Years of Philosophy at UTEP”  
March 2-3, 2007  
The Department of Philosophy  
at the  
University of Texas–El Paso

**Abstract Deadline:** January 30, 2007

**Keynote Speaker:** Oscar Marti, California State University–Northridge, Current President of the Society for Iberian and Latin American Thought

You are invited to participate in a two-day conference honoring the life and work of Professor John Haddox. The participants at the conference will speak from the many areas of philosophy, scholarship, and social interests that have characterized the generous spirit of John Haddox during the fifty years of his service in philosophy at the University of Texas–El Paso and on the border of the U.S. and Latin America. A principal focus of the event will be to highlight his pioneering work begun more than forty years ago in Latin American Philosophy by helping to establish this field as a distinct discipline of study. For example, his books on Vasconcelos and Caso are still used as scholarly references to their work and influence. Over his many years of working as a philosopher, however, Haddox has passionately attended to several other areas of social concern, including Native American Studies, Religious Existentialism, the Chicano movement, peace activism, Latin American education theory, the arts, international relations, and family and community life. Papers involving any of these areas will be considered, especially those that connect the work of Haddox with the relevant issue. Proposals for papers written and presented in Spanish will also be considered. In order to further establish

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Please submit by email an abstract of 500 words by January 30, 2007, to:

Dr. Jules Simon  
Department of Philosophy  
The University of Texas–El Paso  
El Paso, Texas 79968  
jsimon@utep.edu

Conference website: <http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?alias=academics.utep.edu/philosophy>

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The fall 2007 issue of the Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy will be a special issue on teaching Latin American Philosophy. Please submit any relevant teaching materials (syllabi, course outlines/descriptions, study questions, and topics for papers). I hope to receive material for both graduate and undergraduate courses. I also welcome submission of articles, interviews, and book reviews concerning the topic of teaching Latin American Philosophy.

Please send all materials to Gregory D. Gilson, The University of Texas–Pan American, Department of Philosophy, 1201 W. University Ave., Edinburg, TX, 78541, [gilsongreg@utpa.edu](mailto:gilsongreg@utpa.edu).