

Carlos Alberto Sánchez. *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. 170 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-5945-5.

Reviewed by Fernando Calderón

Published on H-LatAm (March, 2018)

Commissioned by Michele McArdle Stephens (West Virginia University)

In the 1930s and 1940s, Mexico emerged as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world thanks in part to the mystique the 1910 Mexican Revolution transmitted outside the country and Mexico City's vibrant cultural and art scene. The famous muralist movement spearheaded by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco drew the attention of some of Europe's most well-known figures. People like French surrealist André Breton, the radical Italian photographer Tina Modotti, the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, blacklisted Americans, and political exiles were swept up by the "cultural revolution" unfolding in the country. Many engrossed themselves in artistic and intellectual circles, hobnobbed with some of its emerging personalities and found inspiration for their own works in Mexico's landscape, indigenous past, and radical politics.

Likewise, this period encompassed a time in which European philosophies, revolutionary ideas, and commentary on colonialism and imperialism penetrated the Mexican public sphere and influenced a new crop of emerging Mexican philosophers and intellectuals. Unsurprisingly, existentialist works found a receptive audience in intellectual circles. However, how this complex philosophical theory was appropriated and used

by Mexican thinkers remains an enigma. In his book *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*, Carlos Alberto Sánchez chronicles the existentialist movement in Mexico from the perspective of the Grupo Hiperión, a collective of Mexican thinkers who embarked on a journey in the late 1940s to "unconceal, bring to light, expose, and respond to the hidden and given aspects that make up the complex sociohistorical and existential reality that is Mexico" (p. 1). Sánchez places special emphasis on analyzing the interpretations of prominent Mexican intellectuals like Jorge Portilla, Ricardo Guerra, Emilio Uranga, Leopoldo Zea, Joaquín Sánchez Macgrégor, and Luis Villoro, and gives their ideas relevancy in an arena dominated by European theorists. Throughout the book, Sánchez also spends time describing the criticisms Mexican intellectuals suffered for engaging in a supposedly inauthentic philosophy and introducing people to a "cult of irresponsibility" (pp. 41-42). Broadly speaking, while Sánchez's study deals with Mexico, the book demonstrates that Latin American intellectuals, in general, did not remain idle, but rather were active participants in this vibrant period. *Contingency and Commitment* in some respect seeks to place Mexican intellectu-

als within the pantheon of recognized European philosophers.

The book is comprised of five chapters, each intended “to showcase how philosophy is appropriated and the power that this appropriation can bestow not only on the particular reader but on an entire generation of thinkers” (p. 14). The first chapter focuses on contextualizing the existentialist movement in 1940s Mexico. According to Sánchez, “existentialism’s appearance” can be traced back to Spanish intellectuals fleeing the Civil War; the availability of works by key existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre (and many others); the keenness of inspired Mexican intellectuals returning from France, and—of course—the Grupo Hiperión. To explain the meteoric rise of the existentialist movement in Mexico, the chapter introduces the reader to its leading protagonists. Here Sánchez avoids writing a straightforward biographical overview of each figure. Instead, he provides a journey into their minds, how they read and interpreted works, and the burning questions and ideas that particularly captivated them. The remaining chapters examine more specifically the debates and themes the collective engaged in the 1940s.

The remaining chapters do not follow a case study framework, but rather present a meticulous narrative and analysis of the debates Mexican existentialists embraced on topics such as *mestizaje*, dialectics, faith, and the interconnection between philosophy and history. Perhaps the most pressing quest to occupy the Grupo Hiperión was understanding Mexicanness. Finding a tenable definition has proven to be a never-ending endeavor to this day, and even though the Grupo Hiperión made some headway in the debate, their analyses have come under tremendous scrutiny. Perhaps this is exactly what the collective intended in the first place: to cause the debate to go mainstream.

After reading *Contingency and Commitment*, the reader might be left with a series of unanswered questions and a yearning for more in-

depth explanations. For instance, how did Mexican intellectuals’ social background and education impact their interpretations? Did that insulate them from having a better understanding of Mexico’s political, social, and economic problems? What was the state-intellectual relationship like in general?

In the end, Sánchez has written a thought-provoking study that is absent of philosophical jargon and accessible to readers unfamiliar with the topic. As the first major English-language book on the existentialist movement in Mexico, *Contingency and Commitment* is no doubt a welcome addition to the steadily growing Latin American intellectual history library. This book is a must-read for (graduate) students of history, sociology, critical theory, and philosophy.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Fernando Calderón. Review of Sánchez, Carlos Alberto. *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47734>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.