

# Lost in Apologies: A Reply to W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz

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## Abstract

*W. George Lovell and Christopher Luz have written a reply to Marco Fonseca's critique of their translation of La patria del criollo into English. It is good that they have taken the time to read such an extensive critical review of their translation and editing of such an important work and offer their response. But it appears that the title of their response to Fonseca's critique is more exaggerated than the rest of the piece actually demonstrates. Given that they speak of "misrepresentation" in the title of their piece, it was to be expected that they would offer concrete and substantial examples drawn from Fonseca's comments that would actually demonstrate exactly in what sense Fonseca's critique is "lost in misrepresentation." Disappointingly, however, Lovell and Lutz's reply contains no proof of it. Once again, the authors formulate a purely formal apology for what they did with La patria del criollo, offer a new attempt to justify it by appealing to the popular reception that their translation has had among colleagues, some in effect "award-winning" representatives of the field of Latin American Studies, and thus essentially avoid the substantial philosophical and methodological problems raised by Fonseca's critique. What Lovell and Lutz fail to do in their reply to Fonseca, therefore, is to point out at least a single "misrepresentation" that actually deserves that name.*

## Keywords

Translation, epistemicide, appropriation, misrepresentation, subaltern intellectuals, cultural translation, philosophy, methodology, Marxism, critical theory, testimony, colonialism, epistemological extractivismo, cancel culture, censorship, historicism

W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Luz have written a rejoinder to my critique of their translation of *La patria del criollo* (LPC) into English. It is good that they have taken the time to read my extensive critical review of their translation and editing of such an important work and to compose their response.

It seems to me that the title of their response to my review is more exaggerated than the rest of the piece actually demonstrates, if it demonstrates anything at all. The title is copied from the film "Lost in Translation" (2003) but, in my case, they call it "lost in misrepresentation." Because of that title I was expecting at least one or two exemplary and substantial texts drawn from my lengthy comments and actually showing exactly how my critique is "lost in misrepresentation." Disappointingly, however, there is no demonstration of it. What the Lovell and Lutz reply does contain is an apology and a new attempt to justify what they did. In addition, as if this were a popularity contest among friends, what they call "critical reception" actually consists of quotes from positive comments by certain academics, some in effect "prize winners" and representatives of the field of Latin American Studies, who are also part of the academic and ideological circles where the editors move like fish in their own aquarium. What Lovell and Lutz fail to do is point out at least a single "misrepresentation" in my comment that actually deserves that name. On the contrary, they comment on a passage of mine and completely twist it to accommodate a caricature of what they think I am saying. Here the original passage:

*"The value of a work like La patria del criollo is not only what is understandable and easily translatable, but also what appears at first glance as historically or methodologically incomprehensible, obscure, unnecessary or even wrong". (Fonseca, 2020, p. 92 added emphasis).*

Here's the passage as Lovell and Lutz misrepresent it:

*"Fonseca argues that La patria del criollo is "easily translatable", although it definitely is not ..." (Lovell & Lutz, 2020b, p. 53 emphasis added, 2020a, p. 66).*



The devil really is in the details. Nowhere and at no time do I state that *La patria del criollo* is an “easily translatable” work as the editors misrepresent it. What I maintain, as I clearly state in the original passage, is that the value of a work like *La Patria del criollo* is not only **what is** understandable and easily translatable, which is what they generally translated into English, but also what seems to the editors as historically or methodologically incomprehensible, obscure, unnecessary or even wrong, as it clearly seems to the editors that Marxism is as well as key elements of the Severian interpretation of Guatemalan colonial history and that, therefore, they proceeded to scissor out in their editing and translation work. In other words, I argue that even elements that at first glance appear obscure or unnecessary could easily have been translated as the product of an editorial decision and should not have been left out, ignored, macheted out. I contend that these passages should have been translated even if this required extending the edition or even finding a new publisher to publish it in order to preserve the philosophical integrity of the original work. By no means do I claim that the very act of translation is like a walk in the park. The passages cited above are in themselves an illustration of how the editors have ample ability and even intent to misrepresent critical issues that, in my case, are relatively simple and transparent. But what they did with *La patria del criollo* is even much worse and, really, not only do they not say anything about that, but they do not offer a single apology beyond continuing to justify what was done as a product of the demands of the English edition.

As a whole, Lovell and Lutz’s reply offers editorial excuses, but without discussing the underlying philosophical and methodological issues that I point out in my review. They speak, yes, of “the constraints under which we operated while collaborating with Susan M. Neve in producing an English-language version of *La patria del criollo*” and that, according to them, “appear to have been lost on Dr. Fonseca” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 65). In fact, in my review I begin precisely with a comment on these constraints and I argue that they simply do not explain what they did with the original work. If it is true that, as the quote that the editors make of Gregory Rabassa says, “Translation is impossible: the best you can do is get closer to something”, my argument is that the approximation to *La patria del criollo* that the editors offer in English is, in fact, a distancing from its beating philosophical heart. For me, none of those reasons excuse the snipping they did to the work. And although in the second part of my review I dedicate between 30 and 40 pages to make detailed, verbatim, word-for-word critiques of the translation, pointing out in special and substantial cases the philosophical and methodological issues that were systematically excluded

and what was translated in a problematic way, the editors say - as if simply saying it would make it a reality - that these “are not, per se, critiques about the English-language version of *La patria del criollo* he was asked to review; they are, rather, formulations about what Fonseca considers a translation of Martínez Peláez’s sprawling treatise should be.” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020, p. 65). They couldn’t be more wrong.

I repeat, at no time did the editorial limitations of the translation escape me. In fact, I explicitly point them out in the first part of my critical comment. But my argument is that beyond these editorial limitations, the editors did a philosophical and methodological extra-editorial work of execution that cannot be explained in any other way than by the deep and open hostility of the translators / editors towards the Marxism of Martínez Peláez.

If it is true that “Translation is impossible: the best you can do is get close to it”, this does not and should not imply a new academic colonialism expressed in the philosophical and methodological destruction of the original and in the extraction of its most acceptable and digestible data. At least an attempt to preserve a balance between the translation of digestible data and the translation of philosophy and critical theory would have been somewhat acceptable. However, we are not talking here about a translation that really tried to “get close” to the philosophy of SMP, but on the contrary, one that sought to get away from the epistemology, philosophy and methodology of the original work - not just the title of the book - as much as possible, but without completely sacrificing the aesthetic ceremony of a translation that is somewhat close to the original that came from the pen of the great master. But in translation it is also necessary to do what de Sousa Santos calls an “intercultural translation” that overcomes the “epistemology of blindness” and the “abyssal division” between what the intellectuals of the Global North believe deserves to be translated and, therefore, so much, extracted and commercialized, and what they should learn from the intellectuals of the Global South such as SMP and try to translate in a self-critical and rebellious way (de Sousa Santos, 2010, p. 19, 2015, pp. 124, 136). Without this intercultural translation of knowledge, philosophies and emancipatory epistemologies, the task of dialogue, let alone that of translation, falls into what Álvaro García Linera calls “a theoretical blindness and an epistemological blockage” (Cited in de Sousa Santos, 2010, p. 19).

For an intercultural, critical and self-critical translation, there are also “conditions and procedures” - as de Sousa Santos calls them (de Sousa Santos, 2015, p. 227) - which, in philosophical and methodological terms,

simply were not even remotely observed in the translation work that concerns us here. One of these conditions of the translation is that “the translators must have a profile similar to that of the philosophical scholar identified by H. Odera Oruka in his search for African sagacity”. What’s more, those who do this type of translation:

*“must be deeply embedded in the practices and knowledges they represent, having of both a profound and critical understanding. This critical dimension, which Odera Oruka designates as didactic sageness, grounds the want, the feeling of incompleteness, and the motivation to discover in other knowledges and practices the answers that are not to be found within the limits of a given knowledge or practice. Translators of cultures must be good subaltern cosmopolitan intellectuals.” (de Sousa Santos, 2015, p. 231).*

If there is something truly lost in translation - let alone “lost in misrepresentation” - it is the deep and critical understanding of SMP, its political and historical philosophy, a whole didactic wisdom specific to 1970s Guatemalan Marxism, a way of thinking, interpreting and knowing Guatemalan reality, that has not only been discarded by Lovell and Lutz, but also by the bulk of Latin Americanist historiography in the English world. But it was that wisdom, that “epistemology of the South”, which our teacher SMP left indelibly imprinted in his work and which, as I demonstrate in my work through the many passages of the original *La patria del criollo* offered as examples, was intentionally left suppressed in the scissored translation provided by the English version. We are not talking, then, of a popularity contest based on the opinions of academics who, themselves, do not share either the philosophical thought of SMP or his practical political interests, but we are facing a philosophically illustrative case of epistemicide, the killing of a form of cultural and political knowledge in the name of supposedly “higher” colonialist assumptions. This is something that SMP himself obviously cannot judge, so it is dishonest to invoke the master’s memory as the last word on the translation. But it is also something that not only the editors have not recognized, but they have chosen to describe the criticism that points to it as if it were “misrepresentation” and, indeed, “police” work, censorship.

The epistemicide of translation that concerns us here is subtle, but no less destructive or colonialist for that. Although SMP is not an indigenous intellectual or an ancestral representative of the Mayan cultures, his “essay on the interpretation of Guatemalan colonial reality” - a subtitle not very difficult to translate either - is part of the knowledge and epistemologies of Guatemala in the 1970s, a true epistemology of the south that claims its own place in the emancipatory projects of contemporary Guatemala. For this reason, we can unreservedly extend to *La patria del criollo* what de Sousa Santos reserves for the knowledge of the South:

*Colonial domination involves the deliberate destruction of other cultures. The destruction of knowledge (besides the genocide of indigenous people) is what I call epistemicide: the destruction of the knowledge and cultures of these populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature. Their legal and political forms – everything – is destroyed and subordinated to the colonial occupation. (de Sousa Santos, 2016, p. 18)*

*La patria del criollo* is not just an academic book. It is also the testimony of a way of thinking, a work of historical memory, a critical remembrance of Guatemala’s history seen from the conflicts, struggles and contradictions within Spanish colonialism and, also, a work of resistance, rupture and emancipation. It is not a mere continuation of colonial chronicles, but neither is it a mere modernization of historical narrative and research. It is more than all that. It is a work whose critical theory is as important as the sources that support it and the data that nourish it and that, in the best way that SMP was able to undertake from within his own hermeneutical and vital horizon, also justify it.

Making a translation is making a value judgment and, as I maintain in my critical review of the work done by Lovell and Lutz, the value judgment that they applied to their selection of some texts and marginalization of others effectively devalued what was more philosophical and more critical - what the editors consider as obsolete - and that, having done so, those judgments or prejudices in fact generated a narrative of impeded memory, lacking the vital nexus that links the history of the past as a struggle for its meaning and the history of the present as a political project, the Marxist theory that inspires it and the political praxis that guides it. The result of this type

of translation, from a philosophical point of view, consists of a work - in the words of Paul Ricoeur - “taken from time”. Paradoxical since one of the objectives of this translation was to bring this work back into the present time, to “update it”, and to offer it to a new generation of readers in English who did not know the central historical work of contemporary Guatemala. Let us remember, however, that the point of *La patria del criollo* is not only to educate curious people about the colonial history of Guatemala - as ordinary textbooks do, even if they are wonderfully written, or translations of similar texts however competent they might be in purely idiomatic terms. The point of LPC is the critical emancipation of the past, a real battle over interpretations, the political emancipation of peoples in the present from both ethnic and cultural domination, and the economic emancipation of nations from the domination of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. These are not principles or tasks that reflect *my* Marxism. These are methodological and political principles of Severo Martínez Peláez himself. It is therefore not *my* Marxism that is at stake as the editors cynically maintain, it is not a matter of a simple reader who is unhappy with the translation (although, of course, as editors they should be more sensitive to the reaction of their readers), but rather the Marxism of SMP himself and its critical and militant commitment to the emancipation of those from below. To suppress these principles of translation is, to my mind, a classic act of epistemicide even though it is clothed with much literary and aesthetic competence and is, for its elegant aesthetic form, widely praised in review after review by people who perhaps share the class sensibilities of the editors.

At no point do I “advocate for alternatives” of how I would have undertaken the task of translating LPC. I said and I repeat that as a basic and introductory translation (although excessively summarized), the work is good and even recommended. I have suggested it myself to many students in Canada who are looking for introductory materials on the history of Guatemala or Latin America. But as a critical and self-critical translation that also strives to translate the political philosophy of the work, I am afraid that the translation leaves much to be desired and that is not the product of mere chance or the result of the fact that every translation is always imperfect. I believe that we are facing an act of deliberate epistemicide and, therefore, something much more objectionable.

The editors argue that “what Fonseca seems to want, and manifestly did not get, is a rendering that constitutes a literal reproduction, to the nth Marxist degree” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 66) As I already indicated above, this assertion is not only poor in philosophical terms, but it is

also objectionable in editorial terms, since it is assumed that as editors, Lovell and Lutz should be much more sensitive to the reaction of their readers. It is in philosophical terms, however, where the editors err in the extreme, since, in my case, it is not a question of having wanted any “literal reproduction to the nth Marxist degree”, but simply a philosophically honest and critical translation of the Marxism that is already there in the work that concerns us here and without which, frankly, it makes no sense. What I reject is a domesticated translation, supposedly updated, fundamentally purified of practically every Marxist element that defines the classic and perhaps most mature work of Guatemalan Marxism. It does not matter that it is the Marxism of the 1970s that SMP handled at the highest level and with which I myself - as my published work demonstrates - have serious problems and philosophical reservations. And if in fact it turns out to be so, it also does not matter that it is a Marxism tinged with historicism, as professor Edelberto Cifuentes Méndez maintains in many of his illuminating comments. What matters is that any translation of this work does not marginalize, colonialize or infuse a cardiac arrest into what is the beating heart of the work. But it is precisely this aspect of the work, the Marxist knowledge of the work, that the editors/translators - and they say so explicitly in their preface to the English translation - disagree with and in fact consider as something obsolete and, therefore, not worthy of any “literal translation to the nth Marxist degree.” I consider that such disagreement is rooted in a long academic career, also completely divorced from a practical and emancipatory commitment, which has relegated all kinds of Marxism to the trunk of 20th century philosophical dysfunctionalities. It is not surprising, although it does disappoint, that the editors have carried out a literary operation on *La patria del criollo*, which I here describe as a perfect case of epistemicide, and that, in the process, they have discarded its most living and emancipatory contents.

To engage in critique, many times, requires making a decision and taking the “wrong” side of history or the established order in academic or national contexts. And for the current established order, both inside and outside of academia, especially in North America, criticism has now become “cancel culture”, the “political correctness” against which academics like Jordan Peterson or political ideologues like Steve Bannon have railed. For Lovell and Lutz, then, it turns out that my criticism is equivalent to the censorship of those who demand political correctness, such as the people who demand that Peterson use gender-neutral pronouns. For Peterson this is intolerable and turns out to be the product of the “cultural police” exercised by militant Feminists who demand respect to the nth degree. Similarly, Lovell and Lutz now jump on

the reactionary bandwagon of those who want to defend epistemological extractivism and the theft of intellectual resources against whom we demand accountability when they commit their crime. That is why they accuse me as follows: “Fonseca belongs to that cadre of watchdogs dubbed by Alastair Reid, translator of (among other Latin American luminaries) Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges, as “the translation police.” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 66) If defending the philosophical integrity of *La patria del criollo* and demanding accountability in the best possible way makes me a “translation police” for these extractivists and dispossessors of Guatemalan historical knowledge, I accept the label as a badge of honor.

The editors write that “We have no inclination to take on Fonseca point by plodding point – let readers judge the matter for themselves.” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 67) All the plodding points that I highlight in my review are precisely the points where I point out and illustrate precisely how an epistemicide has been committed against *La patria del criollo*. If the editors wanted to show any misrepresentation on my part, I am afraid it is only by responding to those substantial points that they could have done so. For readers in Guatemala to be able to judge for themselves, they have before them the task of comparatively and critically reading both the original work and *La otra patria del criollo*. That is something that very few people in Guatemala, even at the highest levels of academic work, have the capacity and the time to do and it is, therefore, dishonest to remove the duty of accountability by passing the responsibility to the reading public even as highly specialized as that public may be. However, for those with the ability and the time, I still hope that they will in fact take on the task of judging the matter for themselves. But I also invite them to read my extensive and detailed account of the translation and the consequent epistemicide of *La patria del criollo*.

The duty of accountability for the translation is not and cannot be reduced to an account of the conditions imposed on publication by the publisher. But that is precisely what editors do and it is one of the aspects in which they spend the most time. They write: “allow us to reiterate how *La patria del criollo* in English came to be.” (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 67) This is simply called an apology. It is not adequate accountability. This does not justify the philosophical snipping to which they subjected the original work. This does not justify the epistemicide against *La patria del criollo*. It can be deeply doubted that SMP would have “endorsed” or expressed any “appreciation” for the chopping up of his work although of course he did express to the editors, in writing, his appreciation for the idea of translating his work. SMP is,

regrettably, no longer with us to offer us his thoughts on the results of the translation.

I want to conclude with the following words from Lovell and Lutz themselves: “What we undertook, therefore, called for us to make any number of concessions, for the most part related to creating a text that is an offspring of the original but that does not mimic it, word by word, line by line. Above all, modifications had to be made to suit the needs of a North American university press and an English-reading public by trimming Martínez Peláez’s lengthy text and discursive notes”. (Lovell & Lutz, 2020a, p. 69) Yes, they are, right, I “rail” at this extractivist operation and I call it an amputation of the original not because it resulted in an introductory text like many others, but because it resulted in *La otra patria del criollo*, not the original, and this not because of a lack of literal translation and “in the nth Marxist degree”, but because of its philosophical violation and epistemicide. From this point of view, therefore, it does not matter who they wanted to imitate, Lesley Byrd Simpson or Walter Benjamin himself. What matters is that they do not respond seriously and in detail to the essence of the criticism that has been made. Instead of being held accountable, they just dodge it. Despite all this, there is something on which we do agree at the end of it all: “Martínez Peláez has the last word, as it should be.”

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