

The Machete and the Pen

February 10, 2013

IN *REDEEMERS: Ideas and Power in Latin America*, Enrique Krauze is interested in all of the most romantic figures of the modern left in Latin America, those who lived as militant missionaries, often died as martyrs, and were canonized by the left as saints, men like José Martí, Che Guevara, Subcomandante Marcos, and Hugo Chávez. He is also concerned with the authors, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, who in their poems, novels, dramas and essays — and through their lives and political-literary debates — expressed this political temperament and often actually represented in their fictions the military dictators and the leftists guerrillas who fought for control of Latin America in the twentieth century.

The political leader as savior emerged from Latin America's experience under the political domination of the Spanish state and the Catholic Church, argues Krauze, as well as from the liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century and the populist and Communist revolutions of the twentieth. His political outlook provides a vantage point from which he criticizes relentlessly both the caudillo in Spanish America's history, as well military dictators, populist demagogues, and Communist governments. His examination and critique of this literary-political culture produces a captivating intellectual history, though its striking omission of women as political actors and writers — the only woman he discusses in one of the book's shortest chapter is Eva Perón — results in an incomplete picture.

Krauze is a self-described "liberal," though most Americans would call him a conservative or a neoliberal. An intellectual entrepreneur who heads the successful publishing house Editorial Clío, edits the journal *Letras Libres*, produces documentary films, and appears frequently on television as a commentator on Mexican culture and politics, he has become both an economic and an intellectual force to be reckoned with in Mexican intellectual circles. His life experience and his interests lead him to focus on intellectual history, and though he does touch on them, he does not root his analysis in the continent's economic and social realities. He is interested in the flowers, not the roots, not the soil.

I had been fascinated by Krauze's first book *Caudillos culturales de la revolución mexicana* [*Cultural Caudillos of the Mexican Revolution - 1976*] about the "Seven Wisemen," the leading intellectual and political figures of the Generation of 1915, most important among them Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the Mexican labor official who became Stalin's man in Latin America, and Manuel Gómez Morín who founded the conservative National Action Party (PAN) of Mexico. I found Krauze's *Mexico: Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, disappointing: a detailed history without a clear thesis. Consequently, I began *The Redeemers* with low expectations, but my doubts were overcome by the grand conception of Krauze's project, by the fascinating figures he had chosen to discuss, and by the depth of his knowledge of Latin American politics and literature and the relationship between them. Krauze opens *Redeemers* by setting the bar high, explaining that his book was inspired by Isaiah Berlin's *Russian Thinkers* and Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, that is, that he aspired as those authors had done for other times and places, to combine biography and history in such a way as to provide an overview and an analysis of the major intellectual and political currents of Latin America between the late nineteenth and the early twenty-first century. And so he has.

The book is a collection of essays on twelve major literary and political figures, all of them important in the continent's history, particularly in the history of the left, and several the subject of enormous controversy. They are: José Martí, José Enrique Rodo, José Vasconcelos, José Carlos

Mariátegui, Octavio Paz, Eva Perón, Che Guevara, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Samuel Ruiz, Subcomandante Marcos, and Hugo Chávez. One might say that the theme of this book is the failure of these historical figures and the writers among and around them, despite their often insightful ideas and radical political proposals, to produce a viable social and political alternative for Latin America. Saints and saviors have led Latin America through a century that produced a series of political upheavals — Cuba's failed revolutions in the nineteenth century, the victorious Mexican Revolution of 1910 - 1940, the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, Peronism in Argentina in the 1950s, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, Che Guevara's involvement in Bolivia in the late 1960s, the Zapatista revolt in 1994 in Mexico, Hugo Chávez in the 1990s and 2000s in Venezuela, and many others—yet all of these, Krauze suggests, have led to the rise of caudillos, the foundation of one-party states, or simply to the perpetuation of a religious conception of politics.

Krauze's book begins with the intellectuals — Rodo of Uruguay, Martí of Cuba, Vasconcelos of Mexico, and Mariátegui of Peru—who strove at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth to create both an anti-imperialist consciousness and a Latin American self-identity opposed to that of the Protestant, capitalist, and expansionist United States. He calls them "The Prophets," and so they were recognizing the power and genius of the Colossus of the North, its drive to dominate the South, and the need to organize "Our America" (the title of Martí's great essay) to resist. Each in his own way attempted to give expression to what he saw as the essence of Latin American culture, society, and politics, variously emphasizing the Hispanic or the indigenous, the working class or the peasant character of the continent. Three of them, all but Rodo, were writer-revolutionaries who took up the pen to support those who had taken up the machete and the gun. Martí's legacy was claimed by both Castro and his democratic opponents. Mariátegui's attempt to combine Marxism with Latin America's indigenous reality influenced virtually every current of radical thought in Latin America. Vasconcelos' writings and patronage of the arts as Minister of Education in the revolutionary government of Álvaro Obregón established the new nationalist ideology of Mexico. Their impact continues to be felt.

Krauze's remarkable ability to both identify with and to appreciate the men and one woman about whom he writes, even as he criticizes them, may be the result of his having wrestled with and reconciled himself to his complicated relationship with the poet and essayist Octavio Paz who was simultaneously his employer, mentor, friend, and perhaps even his literary ideal and personal hero. Paz hired the young historian Krauze at the age of 30 to join the editorial staff of his magazine *Vuelta* (meaning "turn," "return," or "revolution"). The essay on Paz, "A Man in His Century," which makes up a third of the book, examines the ambiguities of the famous poet's life and career, and shows Krauze's capacity for empathy.

Born into a family with a revolutionary history—his grandfather, a liberal revolutionary against the conservatives, and his father, a supporter of Emiliano Zapata—by the time he was a youth Paz, like his father, identified with Zapata and considered himself to be a socialist. Unfortunately he became a Communist fellow traveler, even though he knew better from his friends the Trotskyist Jorge Cuesta and the Russian dissident Victor Serge, and from the liberal democratic critique of Andrés Gide's *Retour de la URSS [Return from Russia]*. Paz only finally broke with Soviet Communism during the Cold War of the 1950s.

BREAKING WITH ONE REVOLUTION betrayed, Paz became the servant of another, serving as an ambassador of the Mexican government for two decades, years during which the Mexican government dispatched the army to fight and crush the peasant movement led by Rubén Jaramillo and then to smash the Mexican railroad workers strike of 1959. Paz well understood the reactionary character of the government he represented, only finally resigning when President Gustavo Díaz

Ordaz's administration massacred the students at Tlatelolco in 1968. Paz's decisions to align himself with the Stalinists and later with the Mexican state were largely opportunistic, decisions that in the case of the former eased his way in Mexican cultural circles, and in the case of the Mexican government provided him with a sinecure that included being stationed in Paris and Delhi. In those years of the 1950s and 60s, Paz came to be considered Mexico's greatest poet, famous as well as an essayist and author of *The Mexican Labyrinth*. What Krauze appears to admire most about his mentor Paz was his ability to change his political position, his capacity for self-transformation. Krauze's appreciation of his mentor, with whom he frequently came to disagree about political issues, seems to have allowed him to become capable of identifying with other authors with whom he disagrees, but appreciates, even while criticizing.

Turning to what he calls the "Popular Icons," Krauze takes up Eva Perón, "The Madonna of the Shirtless Ones," and Che Guevara, "The Saint Enraged." These two chapters, together with those on Samuel Ruiz, "Apostle of the Indians"; Subcomandante Marcos, "The Rise and Fall of a Guerrillero"; and Hugo Chávez, "The Hero Worshipper," represent a political discussion of the role of the caudillo in modern Latin American history. Whether Evita on the right or Che on the left, whether we are talking about Marcos in Mexico or Chávez in Venezuela, the caudillo is a larger than life romantic figure who believes that he or she gives direct expression to the will and desires of the people. They live to uplift the people, and if they must act sometimes contrary to the will of the people, it is always for their own good. For leaders like these, democracy has no role, rights have little significance, and others exist only to follow. The caudillo believes that he or she is right, sometimes believes that God, history, or the nation has called him or her to lead. Krauze's liberal, republican perspective provides him a lever with which to criticize the authoritarians of the left and the right, not only Perón but also the military dictators of the 1964-1985 period throughout Latin America.

Finally, in the section titled "Politics and the Novel," Krauze takes up the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa. While Krauze recognizes both as great writers, he loathes García Márquez for being, in the words of Vargas Llosa "Castro's lackey." At the same time he admires Vargas Llosa who though a socialist in his youth broke with the left, became an admirer of classical liberalism (conservatism in American terms), and stood as a candidate for president of Peru in 1990 as the neoliberal candidate. Krauze's accounts of the writing and the political activities of both men are fascinating portraits and wonderful explorations of the relationship between writers, their literature, and politics in Latin America.

The author dedicates no chapter to Mexico's most famous writer Carlos Fuentes, but this is not surprising considering that in 1988 in Paz's magazine *Vuelta*, Krauze had dismissed Fuentes as a "guerrilla dandy," "a foreigner in his own country," "an author who uses Mexico as a theme, distorting it for a North American public, claiming credentials that he does not have." Such a pseudo-Latin American would apparently not warrant inclusion in Krauze's most recent book. Though how in a book on Latin American politics and literature one could omit a discussion of the author and his *Death of Artemio Cruz*, as well as other of Fuentes' novels that take up the issues of concern to Krauze is beyond me.

Krauze's criticism of the Latin American left's anti-democratic culture and practice, especially that of the caudillos, hits the mark. What he fails to do, however, is to discuss the relationship of the demagogues, guerrillas, and one-party states to the mass movements of workers, peasants, and the urban poor, movements which, though they all too often fall prey to the caudillos, have had their own independent social and political life. Where are the voices of those who while they are neither great political leaders nor great writers, contribute to the continent's political-literary intellectual history? One thinks, for example, of the testimonial literature of Latin American women writers who tell the story of these movements, such as the Bolivian miner's wife Domitila *If They Let Me Speak* or of Benita da Silva's *An Afro-Brazilian Woman's Story*. Krauze has no interest in the democratic,

independent, and revolutionary left, only in the various larger-than-life figures who emerged from it.

What else has Krauze left out of this book? Who else is missing and why? One may be surprised to find that Salvador Allende, the Marxist president of Chile until the U.S.-inspired coup of September 11, 1973, is not here. Nor did he include a chapter on the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a Communist who during the period of his worst poetry and his worst politics wrote a paean of praise to Joseph Stalin. Communist politics, almost entirely reformist throughout the Popular Front and the post-World War II period, hold no interest for Krauze. Allende represents a political and literary mentalité utterly alien to Che and García Márquez. Allende's elected socialist government was a study in gradualism, in reformism, without the romantic daring of Che and the guerrillas. (In Chile only the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, the MIR, has that sort of quality.) Similarly, Neruda's political poetry — as opposed to his brilliant personal poems — followed the Soviet line assiduously. It is clear why these two are utterly unattractive to Krauze.

What is also missing is Brazil, a country — practically a continent — with another history, language and political culture, and understandably Krauze has omitted it altogether. Had he taken on Brazil, he might have included the story of Luis Carlos Prestes, the "Knight of Hope," who in the mid-1920s led a Communist rebellion against the authoritarian government of Getulio Vargas. Prestes represents exactly the sort of political figure that intrigues Krauze. Then too he could have followed the fascinating story of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and his remarkable transformation from labor union official and social democratic leader of the Workers Party to neoliberal president of Brazil. Yet, though da Silva led a workers' revolt against the military dictatorship in Brazil, having settled down to preside over a typically corrupt capitalist state, he would have ceased to be attractive to Krauze. In any case, he had apparently ruled out Brazil.

Finally, with the exception of Eva Perón, women are missing from this book, particularly women writers. The gender imbalance — one woman and eleven men — is astonishing and distorts the book insofar as it gives a misrepresentation of the Latin American political and literary reality. Why did Krauze not include a chapter about Rigoberta Menchú, the Guatemalan whose controversial autobiography documenting her passage from Indian peasant to revolutionary leaders fascinates us? Why not a chapter on the women of the Plaza de Mayo whose peaceful protests demanding to know what had happened to their disappeared children helped to bring about the downfall of the Argentine military dictatorship? Krauze does not dedicate a single chapter to a woman writer and hardly mentions them. The Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska whose novels, such as *Tinisima*, a fictional biography of Tina Modotti in the early Communist milieu, *Massacre in Mexico* [*La Noche de Tlatlolco*], about the 1968 student massacre, *Here's to You, Jesusa* [*Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*], about a woman's experience in the Mexican Revolution, and *El tren pasa primero* [*The Train Goes By First*], about the 1959 railroad strike, all deal with all of the political issues with which Krauze is concerned, and could easily have formed part of this book. And given that Krauze dedicates two chapters to figures who emerge to importance in Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz and Subcomandante Marcos, he might well have made use of the novels of Mexican author Rosario Castellanos, such as *City of Kings*, *The Book of Lamentations*, *The Nine Guardians*, particularly *Oficio de tinieblas* [*Obscure Calling*] which deals with a revolution in Chiapas. Krauze, however, seems simply to have ignored Latin American women writers, even the Mexican ones such as these that he knows well. One cannot imagine a contemporary American author, or other Latin American authors, especially younger ones, writing such a book and omitting women writers. Krauze has a blind spot. Where others see women, he sees apparently nothing.

Krauze's *Redeemers* may not equal *To the Finland Station*, but he has done an admirable job of providing a panoramic view of the leading figures of Latin America's twentieth century political and intellectual world — with the exception of omitting women — and setting us to think about many of the important issues that confronted the continent. While we might want to see these conflicts better

set within the economic and social reality of the continent, of the wealthy few and the millions of low-aid workers and poor peasants, while we might have preferred to his this intellectual history set in the broader history of the democratic and independent social and labor movements throughout the continent in the period he covers, we cannot deny that he has presented a good account of the literary conflicts and acrimonious debates among the writers — with the exception of his blind spot regarding females. We can agree with him about this: Latin America will not find its salvation through redeemers, but only through real politics. For Krauze those would be the politics of classical liberalism, republican institutions and the free market, yet every economic crisis suggests that they will be the politics of mass working class movements, independent socialist parties, and revolutionary upheavals.