

CHAPTER ONE

Matters of Life and Death

And López Wilson, astigmatic revolutionist come to spy upon his enemy's terrain, to piss on that frivolous earth and be eyewitness to the dying of capitalism while at the same time enjoying its death-orgies.

—Carlos Fuentes, *La región más transparente* (1958)

Introduction

Twentieth-century Mexican philosophy properly considered boasts of a number of great thinkers worthy of inclusion in any and all philosophical narratives. The better known of these, Leopoldo Zea, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Samuel Ramos, and, to a great extent, Octavio Paz, have received their fair share of attention in the United States over the last fifty years, partly due to a concerted effort by a few philosophy professors in the US academy who find it necessary to discombobulate the Eurocentric philosophical canon with *outsiders*. For reasons which I hope to make clear in what follows, Jorge Portilla is not one of these *outsiders* to which attention has been paid—even in his homeland, where he is more likely to be recognized, not as one of Mexico's most penetrating and attuned minds, but rather by his replicant, López Wilson, a caricature of intelligence and hedonism immortalized by Carlos Fuentes in his first novel. This oversight is unfortunate, since Portilla is by far more *outside* than the rest; in fact, the rest find approval precisely because they do not stray too far afield, keeping to themes and methodologies in tune with the Western canon. One major reason for

the lack of attention paid to Portilla has to do with his output, restricted as it is to a handful of essays and the posthumously published text of his major work, *Fenomenología del relajo*.

Fenomenología del relajo, hereafter *Fenomenología*, should have firmly situated Portilla as a central figure in Mexico's rich philosophical history. His premature death (at forty-five) and the mythology that hovered about him while alive, a mythology that followed him to his grave, and beyond, to the posthumous publication of the *Fenomenología*, instead relegated Portilla to the realm of legend and his work to that of curiosity. So Portilla has yet to be given his proper place in the history of philosophy—Latin American or otherwise. Placing Portilla would require a return to the *Fenomenología* with the intent of drawing out the significant consequences of this work.

Portilla was introduced to the English-speaking philosophical community for the first time by the contemporary Mexican philosopher Antonio Ziri3n Quijano, who in 2000 published a paper on the history of phenomenology in Mexico, listing Portilla as a key figure (Ziri3n 2000). However, Ziri3n tells us there that Portilla is an “an almost forgotten figure who deserves to be remembered or even rescued” (Ziri3n 2000, 75) and calls upon the English-speaking philosophical community to “study, rescue, and translate” Portilla's valuable contributions, especially his work on “relajo” (Ziri3n 2000, 89). Ziri3n goes on to praise Portilla's *Fenomenología* as “the most brilliant and penetrating phenomenological essay written in Mexico to date” (Ziri3n 2000, 89). He repeats this again in 2004, calling it “the *only* original essay properly phenomenological which has been written by a Mexican philosopher” (Ziri3n 2004, 302). He laments that “there is very little written about Jorge Portilla, and about his most ambitious essay, *Fenomenología del relajo*, there is even less” (Ziri3n 2004, 301). In spite of Ziri3n Quijano's pleas, nothing has yet appeared to answer his call for work that “rescues” Portilla from eternal anonymity.

What follows is a rescue attempt by way of a recovery and introduction of Jorge Portilla *and* his *Fenomenología*. The chapters that follow will critically engage Portilla's text and in the process draw out Portilla's unique appropriation of the history of Western philosophy, especially existentialism and phenomenology, culminating in, what I take to be, a critique of modernity and subjectivity that I believe best represents the struggle and the triumph of post-World War II Mexican philosophy. Ultimately, the picture I hope to paint is one of a monumental figure

whose encounters with that which was most familiar in his circumstance gave rise to a philosophical vision that allows us to understand not only certain predicaments of twentieth-century Mexican culture but also our post-911 world and its complex crises of value, commitment, and identity.

The present chapter is introductory in several senses: it introduces us to Jorge Portilla, his life, and his death; it gives us the theme of his *Fenomenología*, namely, “*relajo*”; it invites us to attend to the complexities of his *method*; and, finally, it readies us for the critique of modern subjectivity that, I claim, is the more significant contribution of Portilla’s text. My treatment in this chapter relies primarily on four sources; while these are brief introductions, and while they are all in Spanish, they are the only instances in which Portilla’s life and thought have become thematic. The first, by Rosa Krauze, appears as a eulogy in 1966 in *Revista de la Universidad de México*; the second, thirty-seven years after Krauze’s, is an article from 2003 by Juan José Reyes in *La Cronica de Hoy*; the third is included in Antonio Ziri6n Quijano’s impressive *Historia de la fenomenología en México*, which appeared in 2004; and the fourth, and most recent treatment, is by Guillermo Hurtado in his introduction to the anthology *Hiperión*, published in 2006. After a summary view of his life, thought, and method, I provide an outline for the chapters to follow.

Jorge Portilla: An Anonymous Life

Jorge Portilla was born in Mexico City in 1919 and died of a heart attack in 1963, at the age of forty-four. In between, he studied law and philosophy; became a father and a prominent member of the philosophical group el Hiperión (founded in 1947); was an existentialist, a Marxist, a phenomenologist, and, some say, a devout Catholic. He is said to be the model for several fictional eccentrics in a couple of Mexican novels, for instance, and most prominently, for López Wilson, the “eyewitness to the dying of capitalism” in *La región mas transparente* (1958). Despite Fuentes’ close association with Portilla,¹ the picture that emerges there is one of a Marxist whose disillusionment hides whatever philosophical prowess he might have possessed. In this way, aside from certain facts, such as his membership in el Hiperión and his death, most of what we know about Jorge Portilla is pieced together from clues he leaves in his

own writings, memories of friends, or just hearsay. After all is said, and the layers are properly peeled, a nonfictional picture emerges of a Mexican Socrates, one who frequented the intellectual hot spots and cafés of Mexico City during the 1940s and '50s with the aim of disturbing the bourgeois complacency of those in the know, as *gadflies* are prone to do, while carefully noting and dissecting the forms of life that would later come to preoccupy him, including those “death orgies” that Fuentes has him enjoying.

There is not much information on his youth or adolescence. We know that Portilla's father, Segundo, owned a bar on the outskirts of the Zócalo, the old historical center of the Mexican capital (Reyes 2003). Here, the younger Portilla would begin to gather the themes that would populate his *Fenomenología*—themes such as revelry, drunkenness, nihilism, irony, laughter, seriousness, and what he calls “*relajo*.” In the 1940s, Portilla attends the University of Mascarones, at that time Mexico City's intellectual center. After Mascarones (it is not clear if he graduates) he dedicates himself to the life of the intellectual. The Mexican novelist Juan José Reyes, son of Portilla's fellow *hiperión*, José Reyes Nevarez, provides a snippet of Portilla's intellectual bent: “He was open to conversation, life amongst friends, to happiness or to tremendous misery, among women or in solitude; he loved Mexican popular music as much as the realm of ideas which were no match for his exceptional intelligence” (Reyes 2003, 1). And he knew he was exceptionally intelligent, which led to a widespread conviction that Portilla was arrogant and mean. It is said that he sought others with whom he could engage and who could challenge him intellectually; some say that what motivated him was not the possibility of intelligent conversation, but the prospect of victory in argument (Reyes 2003, 1).² While this suggests arrogance, others saw it as a manifestation of his love of *being with others*. As Rosa Krauze puts it: “His life escaped him in conversation . . . Indubitably, Jorge Portilla would give everything away when he spoke, and would give it with the warmest generosity” (Krauze 1966, 9).

Accounts indicate, however, that this generosity disguised as arrogance was but a facet of a more complex personality—one that informs his philosophy through and through. Christopher Domínguez Michael summarizes the man in the following way: “Charming and paradoxical, star of barrooms and cenacles, Jorge Portilla was ‘a drinker, a wanderer and a gambler’ in the most tender and pathetic sense of that Mexican

expression” (Michael 1996, 10).³ Guillermo Hurtado, who in 2006 publishes the first anthology of *Hiperión* essays, introduces Portilla as “incapable of being measured within academic parameters: he was a man of superior intelligence, charismatic, and tormented” (Hurtado 2006, x). Indeed, most accounts agree that Portilla was tormented, that he was a drinker—and even more, *a drunk*. Krauze recounts a man who would “take sleeping pills while asking for whiskey” (Krauze 1966, 9). Domínguez Michael identifies Portilla with his philosophy, or, rather, with the themes which preoccupied him, and diagnoses him as a “bohemian” and a *relajiento*, terms that, as we will see, are synonymous with irresponsibility. In the end, Michael concludes, Portilla becomes a “*filósofo fracasado*,” a failed philosopher (Michael 1996, 10).⁴

The conclusion that Portilla was a *filósofo fracasado* is based, however, on a narrow understanding of the philosophical life in general, and of a superficial reading of Portilla’s *Fenomenología* in particular. The narrow view of the philosophical life finds the “philosopher” institutionalized in the classroom or in the faculty—indeed “measured by academic parameters.” But what would that make Socrates? Or Spinoza? Like them, Portilla never held a university position; however, “he gave lectures, and turned his kitchen table into a classroom [*aula*] where he explained Hegel’s texts to a group of university students” on a regular basis (Krauze 1966, 9). As for his *Fenomenología*, it is a much more complex work than Domínguez Michael leads one to believe. Michael unsympathetically categorizes it as some version of Sartrean existentialism, one seeking ground in the later Sartre’s Marxist-Leninism. The result is a failed Marxist text! Michael, like many before him, misunderstands the *Fenomenología*.

Portilla’s death on August 18, 1963, was announced in several Mexico City news outlets. From these quick obituaries we get a sense that his death was both tragic and anticipated. It was tragic by virtue of it being *the death of someone*. The weekly *México en la Cultura* (September 1, 1963, 754) posts a small picture of Portilla with the caption, “Jorge Portilla has died. May he rest in peace. Of his intelligence no one could speak without enthusiasm.” But his death was also anticipated, and anticipated in a double sense: in one sense, it was commonly believed that the life he led, one of heavy drinking, drugs, and *parranda* (as Krauze recounts) could only result in an early death; and, more interestingly, his death was anticipated because it signaled the arrival of his

unpublished work. Indeed, in a late notice of his death, one published almost four months after the fact (December 1, 1963; *Cultura Nacional*, no. 857), we read: “Portilla died recently and we now hope to see some of those essays he promised and that will certainly be of the highest quality, like all of his work.” As if Portilla’s *life* was an obstacle to the revelation of his thought, as if his talent never belonged to him at all, but to us all: “He died just in time,” writes Domínguez Michael, “before he subjected that damned talent of his to the hateful tyranny of [another philosophy in vogue]” (Michael 1996, 10).

The anticipated work would come three years later as *Fenomenología del relajo*. Collected by his friends and fellow philosophers, Luis Villoro, Alejandro Rossi, and Víctor Flores Olea, it required some editing on their part, although they claim not to have disturbed either the ideas or the style of its author “*en lo más mínimo*” (in the least).

A Crisis of *Relajo*

In the introduction to the *Fenomenología*, Villoro, Rossi, and Olea write that “philosophy for [Portilla] was not the exclusive preoccupation of schools or academics, but a form of life which demanded, to whomever would embrace it, the painful task of ceaselessly questioning the world in its everydayness [*el mundo cotidiano*]” (Portilla 1984, 3). This conception of philosophy explains Portilla’s principal theme in the *Fenomenología*, namely, what he calls “relajo.”

“Relajo” is a complex term indicating both an attitude and a manner of being for which there is no straightforward equivalent in English. It comes from the Latin *relaxare*, to loosen, which translates into English as “to relax.” In colloquial Spanish it is used in the phrase “ *echar relajo*,” which is equivalent to the meaning of the phrase “letting loose.” But “relax” or “letting loose” does not capture Portilla’s phenomenological reading of the term, which he redefines to mean “a suspension of seriousness” [18, 25].⁵ By “seriousness,” Portilla has in mind the way in which we commit ourselves to values. Our commitment is such that we want to work toward their realization. Every situation is regulated by a value or values which make that situation what it is. For instance, a religious ceremony is governed by values which prescribe religious obedience, such as the value of silence, the value of prayer, the value

of offering, and so on. While the ceremony is taking place, one is committed to those values—one is *serious* about them and their realization, since they are “what matters” in the situation. “Relajo” is the suspension of that seriousness and, thus, the impossibility of the realization of “what matters” in the moment.

Because of the lack of an English equivalent, I will “translate” “relajo” as *relajo*.⁶

There are few works in English that treat of *relajo* in one way or another. All of these cite Portilla as the most original in his conception. But none of them treats *relajo* extensively, and, none of them dedicates more than a paragraph to Portilla’s treatment (Sobrevilla 1989; Lomnitz 1992; Levinson 2001; Castro 2000; Taylor 2003; Farr 2006; and Carpenter 2010). Most agree that *relajo* is an interruption or a disruption of mundane situations, while some conceive it literally, as an event of relaxation or jovial humor.

Portilla approaches the phenomenon of *relajo* in its everydayness, as it normally appears to people in their quixotic dealings with the world. His initial characterization is thus that it is “that form of repeated and sometimes loud collective joking that emerges sporadically in the daily life of our country [Mexico].” However, the everydayness of *relajo* is but a point of departure. Portilla will diagnose it as a “condition” which is at the root of that lack of community, solidarity, and responsibility that Portilla believes defines modern Mexico, and, more broadly, as I will argue, modernity in general. The recognition of this condition motivates Portilla’s appeal to philosophy; the philosophical treatment of this condition is carried out from a sense of *personal responsibility* that Portilla feels for Mexico and Mexicans. The restriction of this feeling to the most familiar is necessary, as the familiar is what is closest to us. Beginning with what is closest, Portilla initiates his phenomenological analysis from the first-person perspective, situating himself in the time-space of contemporary Mexico, which is the historical moment of *relajo*:

I belong to a generation whose best representatives lived for many years in an environment of the most unbearable and loud irresponsibility that could be imagined; in spite of this, I unflinchingly consider them the best representatives of that generation. Some of them were men of talent, others of a noble and generous character; all of them seemed absolutely incapable of

resisting any occasion for releasing a stream of coarse humor that, once flowing, became uncontrollable and continuously thwarted the emergence of their better qualities. It was as if they were afraid of their own excellence and as if they felt obligated to forbid its manifestation. They would only bring their excellence out when in conversation with a friend or when in a state of inebriation. I almost never witnessed them taking anything with real seriousness, even less so, their own capabilities and their own destiny. They were—I can see it clearly now—a Nietzschean generation *avant la lettre* that, in the midst of continual laughter, lived dangerously, devoted in actual fact to a slow process of self-destruction. [14–15]

This is Portilla hovering above those “death-orgies” Carlos Fuentes attributes to Lopéz Wilson. Portilla calls them manifestations of *relajo*, which is the real crisis. It is a crisis belonging to Mexico *and* Portilla. It is a *generational* crisis of history, spirit, and subjectivity that Portilla *assumes*—he takes it as his—it was his to “enjoy,” and it is his to denounce. As Rosa Krauze recalls, for Portilla “the intellectual who lives on the margins of political and social circumstances does not have justification. . . . Portilla believed that the intellectual who was not shocked by what happened around him, was as guilty as everyone else” (Krauze 1966, 10). In this way, Portilla’s philosophy begins from a sense of responsibility *for his generation*. And, as he confesses in the quote above, he digs it out of, what Juan José Reyes calls, “autobiographical depths” (Reyes 2003, 1).

As to what *relajo* “is,” Portilla finds its essence and provides guidelines for its overcoming. In general terms, *relajo* is the suspension of a determinate event through a repetitious interruption of the values which hold it together. The following minor example should suffice for now: during a visit to a local career training center, a congresswoman’s speech promoting job creation was interrupted by an audience member who yelled out a question regarding the moral fortitude of a fellow congressman (who, he said, had been caught “with his pants down”). The question caught the congresswoman by surprise and, besides interrupting her speech, immediately diverted attention away from her point, namely, the promotion of programs that create jobs. Follow-up comments and questions on her colleague’s questionable character took the discussion in a different direction: soon there was tension, laughter, and chaos. The

value which held the meeting room together was a serious discussion about jobs and training. The interruption suspended the seriousness and the repetition of the interruption through follow-up comments, mocking remarks, and irreverent observations completely displaced the value that the speech aimed to highlight. The audience's focus was now on a different set of meanings and a different, and unorganized, context of significance which had no bearing on jobs or the economy. Simply put, the congresswoman's speech was overtaken by *relajo*.

This is a minor example. *Relajo* is a more encompassing phenomenon of daily life with possibly more serious consequences—even in *our* time and place. While today, and in that geopolitical space we call home, we might not call it “relajo,” it is a recognizable happening that we often try to avoid by maintaining our focus on the matter at hand, or keeping our attention focused on the situation in which we might find ourselves, or at least, on that aspect of it that we consider important and for which we are willing to sacrifice our time and effort. The situation—for example, lecture, conversation, and charity work—will make its own demands upon us, requiring us to see it through to the end (via a fulfillment of its demands). This transcultural aspect of *relajo* must be kept in mind as we go on.

The Context of the Method

Portilla's philosophy is tied to his autobiography—to whom he is *as* a Mexican and an intellectual. That is, it begins in the existential dimension of his own life. It begins in Mexico and in the drama of his own generation. As the editors (Villoro, Rossi, and Olea) put it in their “introductory note,” or “*advertencia*”: “A man of crisis, Portilla lived the spiritual and social conflicts of our time, *in the flesh*” [10]. He was an *existentialist* in the most common sense of that term. But he was a phenomenologist in his philosophical approach. Hence, while the *Fenomenología's* existential feel at times leaves it without method—it is at times fragmented and unsystematic—it is deeply rooted in a phenomenological tradition that includes Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, and, of course, Jean-Paul Sartre.

This is not surprising. Midtwentieth-century Mexico City is alive with existentialism and phenomenology, largely due to the efforts of Spanish intellectuals fleeing Franco's Spain after the breakout of the Spanish Civil War (July 1936 to April 1939). One of these exiles, José

Gaos, spearheads an existential-phenomenological “movement” rooted in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and French existentialism.⁷ Another, Eduardo Nicol, tells his students that “philosophy [is] phenomenology or it isn’t philosophy” (Camarena 2004, 153). Gaos’ students convene el Grupo Hiperión and hold conferences and lectures where they study, analyze, and apply the lessons of Sartre and Heidegger to the search for a Mexican philosophical identity (“lo mexicano”). In Portilla’s *Fenomenología*, the obvious influences are Sartre, Edmund Husserl, and a mutated version of Marxist criticism. But these influences are *appropriated*, which means that Portilla takes from them only those methodological or conceptual elements best capable of disclosing the “truth” of his theme. What we get is Portilla’s own philosophical method. My working assumption here at the start is that it is possible to pry open the appropriation and recover the Sartrean, the Husserlian, and the “critical” influences.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Portilla, the man, can best be described as an existentialist, but not because of his philosophical method, rather because of his *attitude*. Krauze recounts: “Jorge Portilla despaired at his own impotence. He felt devoured by neurosis. He was afraid of *this and that* and he suffered a nervous anxiety that would take him to the arms of women or the analyst’s chair” (Krauze 1966, 9). This existentialist attitude is clearly displayed in Portilla’s “autobiographical” beginning to his *Fenomenología*, one that situates him in that “Nietzschean generation *avant la lettre* that, in the midst of continual laughter, lived dangerously devoted in actual fact to a slow process of self-destruction” (15). Thus, his beginning is a reactionary one; Portilla is assuming responsibility for his life and the lives of those around him. Portilla’s philosophical assumption of responsibility personifies Sartre’s insight, when the latter writes: “When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that, that *in making this choice he also chooses all men*” (Sartre 1947, 20; my emphasis).⁸

While Portilla was a Catholic—or at least claimed to be (Krauze 1966)—he assumed Sartre’s position regarding the lack of God-given, or objective, values. Values are to be found in the world in which one lives, and not in an a priori hierarchy on the top of which one finds “supreme” values (Max Scheler held this view, for instance [Scheler

1973]). Portilla's attraction to his theme, that is, *relajo*, can be understood as rooted in the belief that, when in a state of *relajo*, the modern Mexican subject is *choosing not to choose*. Sartre wrote that the human person "is condemned every moment to invent" herself (Sartre 1947, 48). What Portilla realizes is that those around him are choosing not to choose this condemnation. Hence, Mexicans, when fallen in *relajo*, have ceased inventing themselves and, as such, are stuck in a perpetually repeating now. They have lost the future.

As we will see, the situation of fallenness that Portilla describes in his *Fenomenología* is as severe as are the quietism, bad faith, and false consciousness that Sartre analyses, for instance, in *Being and Nothingness* and in *Existentialism*. Not surprisingly, Sartre's analysis of freedom plays a crucial role in Portilla's text. But while Portilla echoes much of what Sartre says about freedom and the ways of its realization, he stops short of appealing to a "Sartrean" method of investigation. And this, perhaps, is because Sartre's method is itself indebted to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Martin Heidegger's existential analytic. But neither does Portilla obediently subscribe to the orthodoxy of the phenomenological method. Given that Sartre's, Husserl's, and Heidegger's crises are their own, European, crises (whatever they might be), Portilla appropriates aspects of the Husserlian method in such a way that the appropriation responds and is adapted to his own, historical and subjective, crisis.

EDMUND HUSSERL

Husserl's phenomenology heavily informs Portilla's method of analysis. Portilla aims to find the invariant essence of *relajo*, and to do this, he appropriates Husserl's methods. But, as Ziri3n Quijano points out, we should not expect to find the "systematic scientific vision" that we find in Husserl (Ziri3n 2004, 303). The method Portilla appropriates is the phenomenological method as expounded in Husserl's 1913 *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Husserl 1998). While Husserl's own ambitions for the "method" were grand—he wanted it to found "systematic scientific vision"—those who followed (philosophers and social scientists alike) have enjoyed and benefited from the method in less spectacular ways.

The goal of Husserl's phenomenological method is straightforward: to "seize upon essences" (Husserl 1998, 156), or to put it another way,

to come to understand the “whatness” of a thing, to understand what makes it *what* it is. Theoretically, we can come to know or understand the essence of atoms, tables, practices, commitments, concepts, and even human existence, by subjecting these to the method of phenomenological reduction, which involves *perception, suspension, variation, and intuition* of the *essence* of those things or states of affairs.

Portilla’s starting point, for instance, is his own life—his life as Mexican among Mexicans. He notices the pervasiveness of *relajo*. He considers *relajo* as it is given in experience; he is confronted with *relajo* as phenomenon of experience. The goal, however, is to arrive at the *essence* of “relajo” and the particular, individual manifestation of the *relajo* phenomenon is insufficient for this task. The next step is, therefore, to “suspend” whatever beliefs are attached to the phenomenon of *relajo*, for instance, that it is a harmless commotion or laughter. Husserl says that one must “put [those beliefs] out of action” (Husserl 1998, 59). Consequently, Portilla cannot continue to believe that *relajo* is *simply* the state of being relaxed or letting loose or laughing or causing a stir. But how to get the essence of *relajo*—how to *seize upon the essence*? Portilla must imagine every possible manifestation of *relajo* both in his own experience and in any possible experience. Husserl calls this exercise “free phantasy,” or imaginative variation, and its purpose is to allow the phenomenological investigator to “attain clear intuitions from which [she] is exempted” by the particular experience (Husserl 1998, 158–59). Said differently: in imagination the phenomenological investigator is able to sort through the multitude of *relajo* instances, to run through every possible manifestation of the conduct. Interestingly enough, this imaginative exercise “is the source from which the cognition of ‘eternal truths’ is fed” as the phenomenologist runs through real and imagined encounters of the phenomenon, thereby opening up “access to the expanse of essential possibilities” (Husserl 1998, 160). This “expanse” allows Portilla to begin to *see* what remains invariant in the variation. This invariant is the essence, namely, that *relajo* is *essentially* “a suspension of seriousness.”

CRITICISM/DECONSTRUCTION

There is no clear indication in the *Fenomenología* that Portilla subscribed to a Marxist-type of criticism that looks to unravel the immanent logic

of Mexican culture. If there is an indication, it is not explicit. However, we do find a *critical method*, one similar to Karl Marx's but, surprisingly, more in line with Martin Heidegger's. This is surprising because Portilla never mentions Heidegger, either in the *Fenomenología* or in any of his other published writings (which are few and include newspaper columns written during the 1950s and up to 1962). But in reading the *Fenomenología* one does bump into the "specter of Marx," especially when Marx writes in his "Introduction: Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," that "the essential task" of philosophy "is denunciation" (Marx 1977, 65). Portilla aims to denounce "an aspect of Mexican morality" [14] that he suspects is itself an aspect of "the human situation [*la situación del hombre*]" [13]. "So as to give them courage," wrote Marx, "we must teach the people to be shocked by themselves" (Marx 1977, 66). Indeed, a "phenomenology of *relajo*" is undertaken more in the spirit of denunciation and exposure than for the sake of pushing the boundaries of phenomenological practice.

Portilla's denunciations, making up his critical method, take the form of a "destruction" in the Heideggerian sense. By this we mean that Portilla destroys, or "deconstructs," the basic presuppositions that give rise to the cultural blindness which keeps people, and philosophers, ignorant of *relajo* and its negations. With this destructive approach, which Heidegger says when describing his own, is a "criticism . . . aimed at 'today'" (Heidegger 1962, 44), Portilla labors to denounce a crisis which he thinks blinds "today" to its promise and its potency—it is the "today" of *relajo*, which promises nothing but an impossible tomorrow. He says: "*Relajo* is a desperate attempt to prevent the moral life from manifesting itself as a spirited appeal to an ennobling and a spiritualization of human life" [84]. The critical destruction of "today" is not meant to bring about the "ennobling and spiritualization of human life," but through a deconstruction of those beliefs and behaviors that suffocate the moral life and keep it from showing itself, it is meant to expose the impotency of Mexicans on the grand stage of modernity, where this "spiritualization" is supposed to take place. In this complex manner, the "eidetic phenomenology" of Husserl is secretly married to a critical humanism resembling Marx's, and through phenomenological bloodlines, bolstered by the destructive/critical approach of Heidegger.

In the *Fenomenología*, critical humanism serves as a background for the moral considerations to which Portilla will have to attend; Sartre validates his effort, as *relajo* summons him to responsibility; and

Heidegger's destructive approach amends Husserl's method, which he takes as the most appropriate for his task. But perhaps "takes" is not the right word here. While Portilla certainly takes, the *taking* is not without consequence, since the taking manipulates what it takes, namely, the obligation, theme, or method, thereby transforming them. This is especially the case with Portilla's "taking" of Husserl's insight into the noetic-noematic correlation that emerges in intentional analysis. This taking, or appropriation, of the correlation serves to highlight the fact that "relajo" has a "sense" and not, as would be expected, to show "how" subjects experience *relajo* itself [22n3]. This appropriation shows that Portilla is dependent on Husserl's method to some extent, but, at the same time, it shows that he is willing to break with that method if and when the object demands it. Furthermore, Portilla's analysis of *relajo* will not involve a description of the structures of consciousness involved in the recognition or cognition of the phenomenon—as it would for Husserl.

Despite the methodological context which informs Portilla's *Fenomenología*, we do not find Portilla pledging allegiance to any one of these influences. Instead, we find him struggling with his theme in a genuine effort to unravel and possess it so as to expose its structure and its universal philosophical significance in the clearest possible way. This desire for clarity is a mark of Portilla's *philosophy* more generally: "Clarity is the very task of the philosopher, if one considers philosophy as a specific function of the culture of a community" [16]. In other words, if Portilla considers philosophy as a function of the culture of the community, which he does, then his own task is defined by the demands of "clarity." If the achievement of clarity requires a more aggressive manipulation of the tradition, then Portilla would be the one to aggressively manipulate it.

In Portilla, philosophy's role in culture is to make clarity possible by opening up the space of conversation by promoting reason. He puts it thus: "From this point of view, philosophy has the function of promoting reason in a specific society, of clearly putting before the collective consciousness the ultimate base of its thinking, of its feeling, and of its acting" [16]. But how else could this promotion take place if not through acts of destruction and denunciation? Portilla's appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology, Sartrean existentialism, Heideggerian destruction, and Marxist criticism are appropriations in the service of promoting reason via a denouncing of cultural configurations (i.e., *relajo*) which hinder the promotion of reason. In this way, Portilla's philosophy takes

shape as a philosophy of liberation, but not liberation in the political sense, rather liberation in the existential, personal, sense. Not a general liberation, but a particular, and specific, liberation. Portilla sums it up in the following way: “The truth sets me free, and perhaps the ultimate sense of all authentic philosophy is this liberating operation of ‘logos’ and not the creation of a framework of concepts as a mirror of reality” [16]. Ultimately, clarity, as made possible by philosophy, is liberation.

We can provisionally categorize Portilla’s *method* in the *Fenomenología* as a *critical-phenomenological appropriation*: using autobiography as the sphere of givenness of the phenomenon (Sartre), Portilla *reconstructs* (through eidetic variation) the various manifestation of *relajo* to reveal its essential relations and its “noema” (Husserl), which, he says, is “value” [22n3]. Afterward, Portilla *deconstructs* (Heidegger) the *place*, and *time*, of the *relajo* event to uncover its subjective and intersubjective dimensions. This deconstruction reveals different forces at work in the time-space, that is, in the culture, of *relajo*. The revelation itself serves as a denunciation (criticism) which calls for a *prescriptive* account, what I will call “dialogical ethics.” Portilla’s normative account is set against a critique of modern subjectivity which, overtaken by *relajo*, is in need of salvation.

In the end, what we discover is that, unlike Husserl’s “pure” phenomenology, or even Heidegger’s existential hermeneutic, Portilla does not hold back in addressing those problems of existence usually reserved for philosophical anthropology, such as investigating the manners of existence belonging to the individual possessed by *relajo*. So long as the investigation is sanctioned by reason, then the investigation is worthy of being carried out, since, he says, “no subject is too insignificant for reason” [13]. Rationally treating the theme in question gives the investigation and whatever conclusions emerge, what Husserl called, “a mark of distinction” (Husserl 1998, 327).

On Subjectivity

A significant contribution to issues of contemporary concern is Portilla’s critique of modern subjectivity by way of his critique of the individual who succumbs to or initiates *relajo*. This individual, the “relajiento,” is emblematic of the more general crisis of modernity that I believe Portilla is addressing. In order to draw contrasts, three other modes of being a subject are presented in Portilla’s text. In each case, the subject is

conceived in accordance to the specific relationship that subject has to value(s) and/or its realization—to whether or not he or she is committed to, embodies, or creates value(s) in some way. Those “subjects,” or that subjectivity, toward which Portilla directs his critical gaze, what we can refer to as the “nonsubjects” of modernity, will be characterized below by (a) “*relajiento*” and (b) “*apretado*,” while (c), the “Socratic/Ironic” subject, is the contrast; (d), the “transcendental subject,” is the “ideal” subject.

A. *RELAJIENTO*

The individual who embodies the crisis of *relajo*, Portilla calls a “*relajiento*.” The *relajiento* has assumed the life of a perpetual suspension. Values that demand realization are suspended, and with that, the processes of subjectivity. Portilla describes *relajientos* in the following way: “A ‘relajiento’ is, literally, an individual without a future . . . He or she refuses to take anything seriously, to commit to anything; that is to say, a ‘relajiento’ refuses to guarantee any of his or her own behavior in the future. The ‘relajiento’ assumes no responsibility for anything; he or she does not risk doing anything; he or she is simply a good-humored witness of the banality of life” [39–40]. The *relajiento* individual is thus someone who has suspended the event of subjectivity altogether. The *relajiento* is, literally, “one who is full of *relajo*,” overflowing with suspensions and without a future. In Portilla’s account, then, the *relajiento* is a *subject in suspense*; he or she is not fully a subject, or even subject-in-progress, but a *nonsubject*. While Portilla finds in this nonsubject the root of nihilism and irresponsibility in modern Mexico, below I will explore the positive aspects of this idea of suspending seriousness, and consequently, subjectivity—an idea now in vogue in certain postcolonial and postmodern accounts. I will also suggest that the *relajiento* is a concept of critique applicable to the subject of modernity more generally understood.

B. *APRETADO*

The *apretado*, of which “snob” is a translation, *embodies* value.

The spirit of seriousness is that attitude of consciousness which refuses to take notice of the distance between “being” and “value,” in any manner in which this could occur. In this sense, it can be an incidental determination of any individual. But in the individual that is called an “apretado” in Mexico, this attitude is a habit. The “apretado” individual considers him or herself valuable, without any considerations or reservations of any type. The external expression of this attitude, its most peripheral manifestation, is this individual’s outward appearance. “Apretado” individuals worry about their physical appearance, which is the expression of their internal being. They dress impeccably; they are elegant people, or at least they try to be at all costs. Their exterior shows the massiveness with no fissures according to which they interpret their own interiority. “Apretado” individuals are a little bit too impeccable; their self-esteem shines forth in their meticulous care for all the details of their external figure. Our colonialist naïveté says that these individuals are “very British,” and they themselves have [a]—often self-proclaimed—weakness for what they call “good English taste.” [87–88]

The *apretado* is the dialectical other of the *relajiento*—he represents the *relajiento*’s extreme opposite in the spectrum of *being human* in terms of mannerism, world-views, and commitments. The subjectivity of the *apretado* is defined through his identification with values imposed from the outside, values definitive of behavior, style, taste, and so on. The *apretado* allows the external world to constitute his or her identity. He embodies values and thus lacks the freedom to deviate from them. That he *lacks freedom* makes authentic subjectivity impossible. The *apretado*, like the *relajiento*, is a “nonsubject,” or what Portilla calls a “negated subject.”

C. SOCRATIC/IRONIC

The Mexican comedic actor Mario Moreno, a.k.a. “Cantinflas,” serves as a model for a subjectivity *beyond relajo*. Like Socrates, Cantinflas’ deployment of irony before the demands of seriousness is meant not to

suspend value but to “unravel” it. Portilla says, “There is no situation, no matter how serious, that is not completely defused by the demolishing expressiveness of this great mime” [27]. Of course, the unraveling of seriousness is also constitutive of *relajo*, so Portilla adds to this the importance of Socratic irony. Irony proves to be the antidote to *relajo*. The Socratic irony-subject is a subject who searches for truth by unraveling that which is proposed as truth. The irony-subject is, in existentialist terms, always in the process of becoming. Portilla writes: “Irony is, then, immanent to a consciousness that judges and that notices the distance between the possible realization of a value and its supposed realization by someone with a pretense of fulfilling it. It is, so to speak, the adequate response to the ‘pretentious person’” [65]. Further, “Irony is something which can penetrate logic and reality” [68]. And, “In Socrates, irony is an act of liberation; it is distancing oneself from mere appearances in order to adequately orient the pursuit of truth. In irony, one transcends an obstacle toward truth” [69]. In other words, the irony- or Socratic subject is a *transcending* subject. Most important, however, the irony-subject is, opposed to the *relajiento*, a committed subject, and opposed to the *apretado*, always in the process of becoming due to her unrelenting pursuit of truth.

D. THE TRANSCENDENTAL SUBJECT

Portilla idealized the subject. According to this idealization, subjectivity is an inwardness which projects out to the world in acts of engagement and world making. Throughout his *Fenomenología*, Portilla’s concern is the arrival of a subject who will take responsibility for the future of Mexico, one who transcends the appeal of nonsubjectivity, of suspense (or suspension), and undertakes the drama of world building. This is a responsible, liberated subject and a maker of worlds. He hints at this authentic subjectivity in several places (I go into more detail in chapter 5). For instance: “The free variations of my subjectivity, the changes of attitude in pure interiority—some of which can be characterized as liberations and that produce a concomitant change in the appearance of the world—in operating this change of appearance open up several different possibilities for my behavior: This is what interests us here” [63].

Perhaps the Socratic/Ironic subject is the condition for the possibility for the “ideal” subject, one who is free of its determinations and

willing to create. A subjectivity unencumbered by history and circumstance is an authentic subjectivity. It is, he says, “pure interiority,” and an “*interior* event” [63] that “produces” change in the world, which is, in other words, world-constituting. This is a subjectivity beyond the determination that oppresses the *relajiento* and the *apretado*, but also beyond Socrates, since it is free of the need for irony and humor as tools for liberation.

A Critic of Modernity

The promises of modernity cannot be realized unless they are taken *seriously*. The modernizing project, whose internal logic aims to make Mexico more economically productive and competitive, demands seriousness. At its core, it requires a sober attitude toward what might be perceived as a nostalgic relationship Mexicans have toward their own history (the conquest, colonization, independence, revolution). Simultaneously, it requires a recalibration of cultural attitudes and commitments toward capital, efficiency, management, and labor. The modernizing project seeks the future of Mexico in the emerging opportunities presenting themselves ever more rapidly in the global marketplace. But its fulfillment also demands that the *relajiento*, and the social and cultural conditions that make *relajo* possible, be subsumed. *Relajo* must be overcome. But neither will a dogmatic defense of values, some of which are obviously oppressive and impediments to social progress, bring about the completion of a modernizing project begun five hundred years prior. The *apretado* must also be transcended. Socratic seriousness provides the *model* for the type of commitment needed to welcome the future.

But what is sought is a free and transcendent subjectivity. The person who embodies this ideal will freely choose what is right, valuable, and good in agreement with a free and liberated intersubjectivity, that is, community. The Socratic irony-subject is not yet the realization of this ideal, but it makes it possible. No longer oppressed by the determinations of history and circumstance, authentic intersubjectivity expresses itself in communal acts of dialogue, generosity, and creative world making.

We can dare to generalize and say that Portilla’s idealized subjectivity is the hope of those on the margins of world history. That this idealized subjectivity is left unrealized even in the modern centers of power tells us that, perhaps, we are all marginal in some way—that modernity

is the state of *being* marginal. That Portilla structured his critique of *relajo* as a critique of an essential way of displacing this ideal suggests that his critique is more ambitious than it first appears. Portilla's is a critique of our inability to be who we can be—Mexicans or not, then or now.

Predictions

Portilla suggested that what must be overcome in order to achieve a meaningful life is the seduction of *relajo*, the seduction of its irresponsibility and its call for detachment from those values constitutive of meaningful experience. What must be transcended, in other words, are the suspensions of *relajo*. Mexican history, as well as the history of Hispanic America, is one of violence, encroachment, and erasure; thus, it is tempting to hold off on taking a stand, on declaring one's subjectivity before the ills of that history. The "suspensions of *relajo*" are harmful to the historically colonized and marginalized: in their displacements and suspensions they seem to further colonize and marginalize. From this acknowledgment we get Portilla's efforts to expose the phenomenon from *autobiographical depths*. Portilla's life grounds a phenomenological investigation that seeks to uncover the path to authentic or genuine subjectivity. His appropriations and deconstructions provide the method for such a task.

What follows is the attempt at recovery first urged by Ziri6n Quijano. Chapters 2 and 3 offer a reading of the *Fenomenología*. There, I unravel Portilla's main themes, such as *relajo*, seriousness, and those acts usually mistaken for *relajo*. I provide *relajo*'s definition and its essential characteristics. Chapter 4 attempts to isolate Portilla's *method*. My claim is that Portilla's method is an "appropriation" of different strands of phenomenology, such as Husserl's eidetic method and Heidegger's deconstructive approach; Portilla's method also involves an ethical dimension, which I refer to as a "dialogical ethics." In chapter 5, I flush out Portilla's metaphysics of the subject. The claim will be that Portilla recognized the "ideal" of subjectivity as necessary for the overcoming of the crisis of modernity to which he was responding. Finally, chapter 6 provides a critical appreciation of Portilla's *Fenomenología*, paying particular attention to his methodological commitments

and presuppositions. In this chapter I also argue that Portilla's critique of that form of life which he finds troubling is, more dramatically, a critique of the failed project of modernity. Portilla, I claim, is a critic of modernity, and not just of the trace of it he finds in Mexico. His is a universal concern.