

## Notes on Fernando Escalante (by Claudio Lomnitz).

As everyone in our department knows, the COVID edition of our Boas Seminar is promoting new formats for collective engagement, one of which involves a Zoom-platform dialogue between members of the faculty and some of their closest interlocutors, supplemented by non-synchronous engagements between students, faculty, and our guest.

I was invited by Vanessa Agard-Jones and Hannah Chazin to inaugurate this new format, and I in turn made a bid for an open discussion with Fernando Escalante (Mexico City, 1962), who is one of my closest friends and a person with whom I have been in constant dialogue for several decades.

So, who is Fernando Escalante, and why do I like to talk to him so much?

The fact that the question needs to be raised at all is already reason enough to stage a discussion with him in the context of our Departmental seminar. After all, Escalante is arguably Mexico's foremost political sociologist, and certainly its foremost historical sociologist. He has also been engaged with Anthropology, a field that he has helped bring to the center of Mexican social sciences, despite much resistance. In the public sphere, Escalante shines for his bold and deeply original interventions, but also for his personality as a writer. Stylistically, he is one of the most distinctive writers of the Spanish language today.

And yet, he is practically unknown in this country (outside of regional specialists). Why? Because authors who write in Spanish, *and for a Spanish-reading audience*, are by and large ignored here. There's a 'If it's not in English, it is not worth reading or discussing,' practice that is prevalent, even if this sometimes means that debate of critical work ends up being out of sync (I am thinking, for instance, of the waves generated by the English-language publication of Habermas's *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in the late 80's and 90s, while the book's German date of publication was 1962).

If an author writes in Spanish, the likelihood of their work being recognized outside of the field of area specialists is practically nill. One might say that writing in Spanish is provincialized in English, because it is turned over to the province of area specialists. I offer as an example the case of José Carlos Mariátegui, a famous Peruvian Marxist who died in 1930 (who I discuss a little in my forthcoming family memoir). That personage has been compared-- not unfairly-- with contemporaries such as Antonio Gramsci or Rosa Luxemburg, but the first edited volume of selected readings in English was published as a curiosity, in 2011.

Like any decent anthropologist, Escalante focuses on local, historically grounded, problems, but he has always come at them from a richly historical and deeply literate perspective. His doctoral thesis, published in 1992 under the title *Ciudadanos imaginarios* ("Imaginary Citizens") was a deeply innovative and entertaining account of political culture in Mexico's 19th century, that produced shock-waves, followers and imitators throughout

Latin America. It was one of the first works that offered an historical sociology of corruption, and of the tension between corporate organization and the rhetoric and politics of citizenship. His second book on the subject, published soon thereafter with the title *El principito* (The Little Prince) is written in the manner of Machiavelli, as a book of advice to the Mexican Prince, filled not only with malicious (and very useful) advice, but also with until then unknown examples of the political history of Mexico and the Spanish-speaking world. It was a rather scandalous book, not least because it was published by a very young person, and like *Ciudadanos imaginarios*, it went through a couple of editions quickly, before going out of print.

One of the proverbs that Escalante dwelled on-- sometimes attributed to none other than Liberal hero and indigenous president Benito Juárez--, was the formula: "For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law." This saying was also deployed elsewhere in Latin America, and it relates to the theme of our conversation for this Wednesday, about the rule of law in Mexico, a program that, Escalante writes, has only one flaw: that it doesn't work.

Fernando Escalante has written many other books since *El principito*, including a remarkable book on sentimentalism, a book about books, readership and publishing in the Spanish language, study of the representation of crime and criminality, and a brief history of neoliberalism, among others.

I'm delighted to share one of my closest friends with the department. For me he has been my steadiest interlocutor these past thirty years. Perhaps I've been selfish about that connection long enough.