

# Bolívar Echeverría

## (1941-2010)

Ignacio Díaz de la Serna\*



*For Raquel, Alberto, Carlos and Andrés*

**B**olívar is one of four people I have laughed the most with in my life. In 1976 or 1977, in the third or fourth semester of my undergraduate studies at the School of Philosophy and Letters, I enrolled in an elective entitled “Political Economy.” I had no idea what it was about. I had even less idea about who was teaching it: Bolívar Echeverría.

After so much time, I can still recall perfectly certain sensations connected to this course. The lecturer was incredibly shy. I didn’t always understand what he said or what he was talking about. The students barely participated or asked ques-

tions in the class. Not because the lecturer prevented us, not at all; we awaited his explanations in a kind of rapture. More than ideas, at least for me—and I was receptive to this—Bolívar transmitted a kind of controlled passion. From a great distance, you could sense that he was passionate about what he taught. Fortunately, his passion managed to overcome his shyness.

I’ll say one more thing about his shyness: it was inevitable that he was going to seem shy to me, since the very same semester I was taking a course on Descartes with that marvelous, irreverent, unstoppable whirlwind by the name of Elia Nathan. Elia taught us a Descartes in an analytical guise, to be sure, but amidst the vulgarities, jokes and irreverent ex-

---

\* CISAN researcher and professor at the UNAM school of Philosophy and Letters College of Philosophy.

### **A Brief Biography**

*Bolívar Echeverría was born in Riobamba, Ecuador, and died in Mexico City on June 5 this year. He was awarded the title of magister artium in philosophy from the Freie Universität of Berlin. He took a master's degree in economics and a doctorate in philosophy at the UNAM in Mexico City. From 1973 on, he taught and did research at our university. He was the editor of a number of journals, including Cuadernos políticos and Theoria. He was awarded the National University Prize for Teaching (1997), the Pío Jaramillo Alvarado Prize (Flacso-Quito, 2004), and the Liberator's Prize for Critical Thinking (Caracas, 2007). The author of numerous books, his main fields of research encompassed a critical rereading of Marx's Capital, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, culture theory, the definition of modernity, and the interpretation of the Latin American baroque.<sup>1</sup>*

*In 2009 he was named professor emeritus of the School of Philosophy and Letters. He coordinated the UNAM seminar "Modernity: Versions and Dimensions" up until his death.*

<sup>1</sup> Bolívar Echeverría was also a noted scholar of the thought of Walter Benjamin, about whom he published, among other works, *La mirada del ángel. En torno a las tesis de la historia* (Mexico: UNAM/ERA, 2005). [Editor's Note.]

pressions that were her wont and which made her the delightful being she was. While Elia showed me an unusual way of dealing with the weightiness of philosophy, Bolívar, without my knowing it, was teaching me firmness and passion, complementary ways of dealing with lightness.

There are two other things I remember about that political economy teacher. One, his curious form of dress. By that I mean he looked different from the rest of my lecturers. Years later I understood where this difference lay. Bolívar at that time had recently returned from Berlin. His clothes were from there. And then there's the fact that most of the readings he gave us were in German. Later, too, I understood that this was not pedantic, it was just what he knew and was familiar with after his years of training in Germany.

At that time we didn't yet laugh together. Many years ago there was a philosophy conference in Jalapa that later passed into myth. It was one of the first held by the Mexican Philosophical Association, when it was still on a human scale and offered a genuine opportunity to spend time together. One night, as happens in a good jazz improvisation, unexpectedly several of us found ourselves around a table. There were a couple of Spaniards, Mariflor Aguilar and Marina Fe, among others. Bolívar was next to me—or I was next to him, which amounts to the same. At some point I began to chat with him. I reminded him that I'd taken his course on political economy some time previously. I regaled him with my impressions, mentioned above. And that was when he told me that at the time he'd only just returned from Berlin, etc., etc.

That night, everyone at the table clowned around like kids from an orphanage suddenly unleashed onto the streets to enjoy the world they've been denied for centuries. We

More than ideas, Bolívar transmitted  
a kind of controlled passion. From a great distance,  
you could sense that he was passionate about what  
he taught. Fortunately, his passion managed  
to overcome his shyness.

couldn't stop laughing. Time and again we choked on our own laughter. We talked of everything and nothing, and laughed and laughed.

That's when I began to laugh with him. At two later conferences something similar occurred. For me, Bolívar, philosophy conferences, and dying of laughter formed a sort of trinity: the three were different, but at the same time they were one. Nonetheless, in between conferences, I hardly ever ran into Bolívar; clearly our timetables in the corridors of the School of Philosophy and Letters did not match.

The years passed. One fine day I looked Bolívar up to ask him to be one of the seven committee members for my doctoral exam. He accepted immediately. He read my thesis quickly and closely. I can be sure of that because of his later comments.

The day of the exam arrived. The first examiner to speak was an illustrious member of the Institute for Philological Research, who monopolized proceedings for 45 minutes to

demonstrate that he understood little or nothing about Georges Bataille, and above all, that he had not read the thesis, or —worse still— that he had read it, but had understood nothing it discussed. When he had finished, Bolívar admonished him for his inconsiderate attitude. It was simply a question of basic arithmetic. If every examiner took this long, the question and answer session would last until the following day. Fortunately, the rest of the exam was uneventful. Next up were Mariflor, Óscar, and Carlos Pereda. Finally, as president of the examination committee, Bolívar spoke. He limited himself to a single question: what, in my opinion, was the most distinctive feature of Bataille’s thought? The exam had been underway for almost three hours.

His question excited me because it gave me the opportunity to underline a point about Bataille’s work that seemed to me to be crucial, definitive. I replied that, alongside Bataille’s reflection on subjects like transgression or sacrifice,

Bolívar never stopped surprising me. Sooner or later, I would try to turn the conversation toward my field, naively believing that this would grant me a certain advantage. Every time I was proved wrong through and through.

he had some extraordinary intuitions on the problem of writing and the communication of experience. I then said I would read a passage, a quote from a passage Bataille had included as a footnote in his book *The Impossible*, where he affirmed something terrible, something that few would dare to confess. I transcribe it here: “I recognize without vacillation my abuses, my lies. What I have just written, outside of me, is, in one sense, false: I was the puppet of a piece of trickery. In another sense, I was *inspired*, undergoing what I wrote. At the moment of writing, I was suffocating, with no exit, locked up in myself like in a prison, a being who lacks the courage to think what he is thinking. In this state of unease, like a shipwrecked person who grabs the first thing at hand, I followed the rules of rhetoric, seeking to produce an effect. I embodied the gallery (those who listen), the desire that needs to be moved.”

I added that much more than a confession, this comment, barely perceptible among thousands of printed pages,

constituted the core of what Bataille had created as a thinker and writer. For him —I pursued the train of thought— thinking was synonymous with *dramatizing*; staging the ambiguities, the paradoxes, the mistaken desires that tear apart the one who thinks and writes. The individual is not the nucleus from which images, thoughts, ideas or words radiate; rather, he is the stage where *this thing* he undergoes and *this thing* that moves the gallery are expressed simultaneously. Thus, the author offers himself as a pulsating drama that hurts those who listen. The more he exposes himself, dramatizing the “intimacy” of what he experiences, what tears him apart, the more his individual experience takes on unlikely proportions. Out of empathy, the others end up being *this thing* he suffers, and no longer *this thing* that only listened.

I ended my answer with the following phrase: “And that’s really fucked up.” This way of expressing it came from deep within. I’ll never forget Bolívar’s reaction. He shot me a very strange look. Unlike what might be expected, it wasn’t disapproving. In part, it was a reminder that I take stock of where we were and the conventions ruling such a situation. But at the same time, with this glance he allowed me to see just to what degree he *understood* what I’d said. With that, he declared the exam at an end.

That was when Bolívar appeared as an *accomplice*. Such moments, sometimes filled with a jocular complicity, would come to weave together our encounters.

Later, when a piece of mischief of mine was published, that book by Bataille that isn’t Bataille’s but is largely mine, entitled *La oscuridad no miente* (Darkness Doesn’t Lie), I asked Bolívar to be one of the commentators at the book launch. He accepted without demur. He arrived punctually, along with David Huerta, Philippe Ollé-Laprune, and Nicolás Cabral. On that occasion he was generous, but not unconditional. He was similarly generous when I asked him, early last year, if I could interview him for *Norteamérica*, the academic journal of the UNAM’s Center for Research on North America. He said yes without hesitation. We agreed I would send him the questions by e-mail, and set a deadline for delivery so the editing of the issue would not be delayed. He agreed. When the date drew near, I sent him a message reminding him of the commitment. I didn’t realize he was abroad. He replied to me from Ecuador, telling me his father was ill, but that he would keep to what we’d agreed. In fact, his father was on his deathbed. He promised to send me his answers within a week, and kept his promise to the letter.

Time passed. One day I got a call from Raquel. She told me briefly about the seminar Bolívar was leading on modernity. She asked me if I'd like to attend. I accepted right away. Since then, this has been an important experience for me. After each session, we'd fire the question at each other: where are we going to have lunch?

In the last few years, the first Monday of each month has turned into a veritable fiesta. During these meals-cum-literary gatherings, we recover the healthy custom of behaving like naughty children. Those who attend—regulars and occasional visitors—talk of everything and nothing, and, of course, we laugh at the top of our voices. I remember one time especially. We went to new restaurant Ramón had recommended. Raquel, Maricarmen, Ramón, Bolívar, and I hardly ate, but the five of us laughed until we cried.

Then came the wedding of Raquel and Bolívar. For those of us who accompanied them and their children, Alberto and Carlos, in the house of Nora and Eligio, it already looked like a family reunion. Not long after, this was repeated and renewed with a surprise birthday party for Raquel.

Despite all this, Bolívar and I did often talk seriously. He never stopped surprising me. He, an incorrigible Germanophile, and I, an incorrigible Francophile, understood each other perfectly. I have to confess that his knowledge of French philosophy, French writers, and French history greatly surpassed my knowledge of German philosophy, German writers, and German history. Sooner or later, I would try to turn the conversation toward my field, naively believing that this would grant me a certain advantage. Every time I was proved throughly wrong.

One day we were talking about materialism. Mistakenly, I supposed that his knowledge of the materialist tradition was limited to the decorous role it played as a forerunner for Marx. He left me open-mouthed. We spoke at length of Holbach and Offray de la Mettrie. In the end, I told him that I thought it was very telling that this early eighteenth-century tradition had not prospered, given that it wholly eradicated the possibility of hanging on to anything we might call the "spirit," a notion that remained central to our culture, both before and after Hegel, despite the best efforts of modernity to secularize our world. By obliging us to feel this perpetual thirst for the "spirit," materialism had been proscribed by modern and contemporary thought. Bolívar responded to my words with that same look as the day of my doctoral exam. I had in him an *accomplice* for what I'd said.

On another occasion, on the basis of a comment about Chateaubriand he had made during the seminar, I pursued a conversation about the writer. Anyone would think that nothing was further from Bolívar's interests than the conservative Chateaubriand and his work. As usual, I was bowled over. We talked about *The Genius of Christianity*, about those lyrical moments in Chateaubriand that are unique in the history of literature.

The last time I saw Bolívar was in the San Jerónimo mall. We ran into each other by chance. He had just bought bread and I was heading to the bakery. We spoke for a few minutes about this and that. And we laughed, naturally. We said goodbye, saying we'd see each other at the next seminar session. Bolívar didn't make it. He died two days before. So now, who am I going to laugh with? **VM**

Visit our website

[www.cisan.unam.mx](http://www.cisan.unam.mx)

research • publications • events • library • exchange programs