

Juan E. De Castro. *Mario Vargas Llosa. Public Intellectual in Neoliberal Latin America*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. Print. 179 Pp.

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Mario Vargas Llosa, one of Latin America's most important writers and intellectuals and the recipient of, among numerous other awards, the 2010 Nobel Prize in literature, is not only the author of an admirable corpus of novels, theater plays, and essays on literary criticism, but also somebody that has been at the center on countless political and literary controversies ever since he came into the literary and political spotlight in 1962 when he won the Biblioteca Breve award for his novel *Time of the Hero* at the age of twenty-six: the novel was received with great hostility in his home country, Peru, where prominent members of the military accused him of being a Communist and a traitor; in 1967, when he won the Rómulo Gallegos prize for his novel *The Green House*, he engaged in a dispute (at that time private) with Cuban officials such as Haydeé Santamaría who allegedly wanted him to make a fake donation of the cash prize to Che Guevara's guerrilla movements; in 1971, he publicly and loudly denounced the Cuban government after the imprisonment and public recounting of Heberto Padilla and other writers accused of counter-revolutionary activities; in 1974, he criticized the confiscation of media in Peru by a military regime that he had hitherto supported and became the subject of a fierce polemic in his country; in 1976, he was the protagonist of a famous fight with Gabriel García Márquez, who ended up receiving a knock-out punch from his (until then) close Peruvian friend; a film based on his novel *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* was banned both in Peru and Spain in 1977; in 1983, he led an official Commission to investigate the murder of eight journalists in the Andean village of Uchuraccay, whose report generated a huge controversy, as he was accused of covering up the military role in the massacre; in 1987, he led the opposition against the nationalization of banks ordered by President Alan García, which eventually catapulted him to become Presidential candidate in 1990, an election he would eventually lose; in 1990, he caused quite a stir in Mexico when he called the PRI-led regime "the perfect dictatorship"; in 1992, he openly challenged Fujimori's *autogolpe* in Peru, which led to the threat of having his

Peruvian nationality withdrawn and his adoption of Spanish citizenship, which in turn triggered accusations of anti patriotism; his 1993 memoir *A Fish in the Water* publicly ventilated both the stormy relationship with his father when he was a young boy and the inner story of the 1990 electoral campaign, making along the way numerous and polemical revelations; and we can go on and on. In fact, just a few weeks ago, an article he wrote on the Dominican Republic Constitutional Tribunal's decision to deny citizenship to the children of (mostly Haitian) undocumented immigrants (in which he compared that decision with Nazi Germany's treatment of Jewish people) prompted, once again, protests, accusations, and the burning of his book *The Feast of the Goat*, a novel based on the story of Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. This (certainly incomplete) list of debates and controversies offers plenty of evidence of Vargas Llosa's continuous presence in political and cultural debates over the last 50 years not only in Peru but also in Latin America and beyond. As Beatriz Sarlo once wrote, Vargas Llosa has consistently been an intellectual "who openly takes sides on the major questions", and those questions include almost everything from issues of democracy and authoritarianism to abortion, gay marriage, immigration, censorship, nationalism, racism, the Israel-Palestine conflict, religion, and many more. It is hard to think of another intellectual –not just Latin American but from any other region of the world- that has made it customary to not only think about these issues but also write articles and give lectures on them. He is arguably the most visible public intellectual in contemporary Latin America. Whether he is also the most influential is more debatable.

Juan E. de Castro has written an important book in which he tries to "understand and explain the manner in which a novelist became a major public figure in some ways equivalent to a world leader of [former Venezuelan President] Chávez's stature" (4). Along with this evolution from novelist to public intellectual, the book also attempts to chart the transformation of Vargas Llosa from a supporter of socialism and the Cuban revolution to a "hero of the right" and a neoliberal thinker. Finally, and probably most interestingly, the book also depicts Vargas Llosa as an intellectual that, although clearly aligned with neoliberal ideas, has defended causes and expressed opinions that are rather uncomfortable for right-wing leaders and movements and has maintained an independence that, I would add, can also be traced to the times in which he was on the opposite side of the political spectrum. In this short and well-crafted book, De Castro offers a nuanced and at times provocative

account of Vargas Llosa's career as a public intellectual, especially, as the title indicates, during the neoliberal period in Latin America.

Despite his explicit political differences with Vargas Llosa, De Castro does not hesitate to consider the Peruvian novelist "the most influential public voice in the Hispanophone media and cultural field" (16). In fact, De Castro argues that Vargas Llosa has expanded his influence "beyond the Spanish-speaking world" and "has become a cultural and media figure not only in his native Peru, his adopted Spain, or Europe (where he has lived on and off), but increasingly in the United States, where he is a growing presence in conservative and neoconservative publications" (16). The 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature, De Castro states, would only enhance Vargas Llosa's "authority as a public intellectual" (19).

De Castro divides his book into five chapters. The first, "Mario Vargas Llosa, Public Intellectual," charts the trajectory that took Vargas Llosa from a prominent novelist and protagonist of the literary boom in the 1960s to being the conservative (or neo-liberal) "political figure" of these days. Being a successful writer was, of course, the necessary condition for him to occupy the latter position, but it was Vargas Llosa's conviction that intellectuals ought to play a role in public and political debates –something that he learned from Jean Paul Sartre in the 1950s- that ought to be the main explanation behind his unwavering interest in expressing his opinions about the important issues affecting society. De Castro looks at Vargas Llosa's tireless journalistic activity, his proximity to individuals and institutions of the right, his direct participation in electoral politics in Peru in the late 1980s, his championing of many political and intellectual causes, and more. His rupture with the Cuban revolution is an important turning point in the trajectory of Vargas Llosa, and De Castro correctly argues that, unlike Carlos Fuentes, the only other writer of his generation who had a comparable public presence, and who can be considered a mostly "Mexican intellectual," Vargas Llosa has been "from the beginning of his career a pan-Hispanic figure" (37). Two points De Castro makes in this chapter, however, need to be commented upon and probably deserve some revision. First, De Castro seems to suggest that Vargas Llosa's status as renowned public intellectual coincides –or even is the result of- his conversion into a conservative thinker. Although with age and more ample readership of his novels and essays his visibility has increased, he was actually a very important public intellectual already in the 1960s, during his "leftist" period. There is plenty of evidence of that, including his signing of numerous manifestos in the 1960s, his public support to guerrillas and the Cuban

revolution, his membership on the Casa de las Américas editorial board, his participation with Jean Paul Sartre and others in various political events in Paris and elsewhere, his influential and widely commented 1967 Rómulo Gallegos speech, his writing of the letter that intellectuals from around the world, including Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag, Carlos Fuentes, and Rossana Rossanda, sent to Fidel Castro in 1971 to protest against the Padilla affair, and his election as president of the PEN Club in 1976. Second, De Castro's view that "Vargas Llosa contradicts all jeremiads about the decline of the intellectual as an influential public figure" (44) is not entirely convincing. In fact, the kind of intellectual that Vargas Llosa represents is, today, quite rare, so his case may very well be the exception and not the rule. Public intellectuals who "openly take sides on major questions" and do so as consistently as Vargas Llosa does are, indeed, a breed in decline.

Chapter 2, "Mr. Vargas Llosa Goes to Washington," looks at Vargas Llosa's free-market ideas in the context of neo-liberal hegemony in Latin America and the United States. De Castro makes two interesting points. First, that Vargas Llosa, despite his identification with the Cuban revolution and guerrilla movements in the 1960s, was never actually "part of the left," as Jean Franco argues and De Castro agrees with. "It is possible to characterize Vargas Llosa, at his most radical, as a fellow traveler of the Latin American left rather than as a full-fledged member of any socialist –even less, Marxist- cultural community" (48). Moreover, for De Castro, "Vargas Llosa's participation in the left had always been emotional and rhetorical rather than intellectual" (10). The basis for these assertions seems to be Vargas Llosa's criticisms of the Cuban revolution even while being a supporter of it and his rejection of any type of "consent, subordination and official complicity" with any type of regime, including socialist ones. His defense of intellectual freedom over political allegiance or his lack of interest in Marxism seems to be taken by De Castro as a sign that he was not "part of the left." The second point De Castro makes is that, despite his alignment with neoliberalism, Vargas Llosa espouses ideas that clearly depart from it, including his "stress on the need to eliminate economic inequality" (51), his advocacy for "social justice" (50), and his celebration of "multiculturalism" and "cultural difference" (57). Vargas Llosa's defense of the rights of immigrants and of gay marriage, as well as his rejection of religious fundamentalism, also place him apart from mainstream neoconservative stands. In this regard, De Castro rightly points out that Vargas Llosa "exhibits surprising points of contact with contemporary progressive ideas" (59). But what De Castro fails to notice is that what

actually unites both moments is the fact that Vargas Llosa has always strived to maintain his freedom as a thinker, never sacrificing the independence of his ideas in the name of higher political ideals or tactics. This does not mean, in my view, that he was not a “real” leftist, as De Castro argues, in the same way that his maverick opinions of his neoliberal stage do not mean that he is not a “real” conservative. A more fully recognition of Vargas Llosa’s intellectual autonomy throughout his trajectory from the 1960s and on, in fact, would have strengthened De Castro’s otherwise very solid account of Vargas Llosa’s evolution as public intellectual.

Chapter 3, “Mario Vargas Llosa and popular capitalism,” takes a look at Vargas Llosa’s enthusiasm for what is known as “popular capitalism,” particularly visible in his endorsement of the ideas of Hernando de Soto in *The Other Path* (1986). As is well known, De Soto offered an astute –although, in my opinion, greatly flawed- account of capitalism as the only viable economic model in regions such as Latin America but which, to be successful, needed to reduce or eliminate state intervention (he was particularly critical of bureaucratic and legalistic obstacles to private initiative) and promote individual entrepreneurship, especially among the lower tiers of society. De Castro offers a convincing discussion of the contradiction in Vargas Llosa’s (and De Soto’s) thought between a celebration of popular initiative and a strongly negative view of Andean peoples, including migrants. We will return to this issue below.

Chapter 4, “Mario Vargas Llosa versus Barbarism,” is probably the most polemical section of the book. De Castro detects in Vargas Llosa’s thought a version of the old dichotomy between “barbarism” and “civilization” posited by, among many others, nineteenth-century intellectuals such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. In Vargas Llosa’s literary works (especially, but not only, in *Death in the Andes*), “Andean culture is presented as characterized by cannibalism, human sacrifice, and nearly inconceivable brutality” (77). But, De Castro argues, unlike the cases of Sarmiento or Echeverría, for whom “race was a crucial component of what constituted civilization” (80), for Vargas Llosa (and De Soto) “race is not a significant factor in determining the degree of ‘civilization’ that an individual or community has acquired” (81). Furthermore, “throughout his [Vargas Llosa’s] writings, race is not a factor in determining human behavior” (82). His interpretation of Latin American societies, the author concludes, is “based on the opposition between civilization and barbarism that is not racist” (91). This may be true if one hangs on to a strictly biological

understanding of race but, as numerous scholars have amply shown, “culture” became over time a surrogate for “race” or, put in another way, biological understandings of race were displaced by a culturalist notion of it. To consider Andean peoples as primitives and savages may not carry on an explicitly biological explanation but it is clear that the notions of civilization and barbarism that Vargas Llosa and others adhere to are based on a hierarchical view of societies that, implicitly or explicitly, condemn non-White peoples as inferior. De Castro’s discussion seeks to demonstrate that for Vargas Llosa “civilization” is a stage in human development that peoples can reach regardless of their “racial” configuration. But there is enough evidence in his writings to substantiate the notion that Vargas Llosa sees Indigenous peoples as irremediably “alien to modernity” (or civilization), as Jean Franco has convincingly argued. De Castro wants to believe that “while he [Vargas Llosa] establishes hierarchies among human groups, these are based on cultural, not racial, criteria” (82), but I remain unconvinced that we can so clearly detach “culture” from “race” as the author suggests. In fact, on page 80, De Castro quotes the most explicit pronouncement that Vargas Llosa has made in this regard: “Perhaps there is no realistic way of integrating our societies other than asking Indians to pay this high price”, by which he meant “[to] renounce their culture –their language, their beliefs, their traditions and customs- and adopt those of their former overlords.”

Finally, in Chapter 5, “Mario Vargas Llosa’s (Mis) Encounter with Theory,” De Castro discusses the hostility Vargas Llosa has always expressed towards fashionable (mostly French) intellectual trends informed by post structuralism and postmodernism. Also discussed in this chapter is Vargas Llosa’s well-known lack of sympathy towards contemporary cultural trends that he identifies with the decline of traditional values and hierarchies and the emergence of what he calls the “civilization of spectacle.” Behind this hostility De Castro correctly identifies a pessimistic attitude in Vargas Llosa’s view of contemporary societies, which is reflected not only in his negative views about fashionable (and usually frivolous and superficial) art, journalism, and cinema, but also in his uncertainty towards “the market’s ultimate effects on contemporary culture” (109). This is an astute observation and an issue that deserves further discussion, since Vargas Llosa refuses to see any *causal* connection between the downward trend he identifies in contemporary cultural developments and the triumph of neoliberalism and the expansion of free-market globalization.

This is an important contribution to the already abundant bibliography on Vargas Llosa's lengthy trajectory and oceanic literary and intellectual output, and is one of the very few works that focuses on his role as public intellectual. Precisely because of that, this reviewer was surprised that the author does not cite the important work by Maasteen van Delden and Yvon Grenier, *Gunshots at the Fiesta. Literature and Politics in Latin America* (2009), in one of whose chapters, "The Private and the Public: Mario Vargas Llosa on Literature and Politics," they address some of the same issues that De Castro tackles in his book. Van Delden and Grenier make the relevant points that "his [Vargas Llosa's] positions have changed, but not his dispositions or attitudes," thus pointing to a continuity in his role as public intellectual, and that "Vargas Llosa is a fairly consistent and outspoken public intellectual without being as predictable as one might think" (196), which speaks to his trajectory as an independent and at times maverick intellectual.

Despite my reservations with some of its arguments, I will strongly recommend this book to anybody interested in Vargas Llosa's trajectory and ideas or, more generally, in the role of intellectuals in modern Latin America. This is an important and timely contribution that deserves critical attention and debate.