

Translation as Revolutionary Praxis: Marx and Gramsci in Argentina

In *Lo Terciario/The Tertiary* (2017) Puerto Rican poet Raquel Salas Rivera draws on key lines from Karl Marx's *Capital* to ground his lyrical investigation of debt, gender, and colonialism in contemporary Puerto Rico. The text itself is a fascinating work of auto-translation, and in his translator's note Salas Rivera emphasizes the importance of a specific Spanish translation of *Capital*: Pedro Scarón's 1976 critical edition, published by Siglo XXI Editores, and according to Salas Rivera, "commonly used by the puerto rican left as part of political formation programs in the 70s and 80s."

In his introduction to *Lo Terciario/The Tertiary*, Urayoán Noel give further background on the significance of the Scarón translation: "[it] is an attempt at a critical edition that navigates the several versions of Marx's text and maps Marx's slippery poetics of self-revision, and thus is itself a model for Salas Rivera's capacious and revisionist (self-)translatorly practices." (Salas Rivera, Noel ii). After reading *Lo Terciario/The Tertiary*, I became interested in the circumstances of Scarón's edition of *Capital* as an intervention in the Latin American left of the 1970s, one that formed part of a collective intellectual effort to shift thinking, priorities, and organizational forms on the left through writing, translation, and publishing.

***Pasado y Presente* and the "Argentinean Gramscians"**

Scarón's translation of *Capital* has its roots in a circle of Marxist intellectuals who became interested in heterodox Marxism, Italian Marxist thought, and the writing of Antonio Gramsci in particular. In the beginning of the 1960s, this was a relatively young group of Argentinean Communist Party (PCA) members, many of whom lived in the city of Córdoba. At the time, the PCA was an orthodox Communist party still closely linked to the Stalinist apparatus. Following Stalin's death and the rise of "third world" Communism (with the Cuban Revolution of particular note), the Córdoba circle, centered around Aricó (1931-1991) and Juan Carlos Portantiero (1934-2007), turned to Gramsci to elaborate different readings of Marx in general and the Argentine situation in particular, with an emphasis on Gramsci's writing about the connection between culture and politics and the role of the "organic intellectual," militant intellectuals whose work is enmeshed with working-class politics.

In 1963 the Gramscians founded the journal *Pasado y Presente*. Writing later about the journal, Aricó states that it "helped to foster the conviction that there was a reinvigorating current inside the Argentinean Communist Party that the journal, although not by itself, would help to build. Looking back, I believe that this current did exist and that a little later, in 1967, it would produce the cascade of ruptures that would form the Revolutionary Communist Party and the Castroist guerrilla currents" (Aricó 856)¹. The translation of theoretical works was an important part of that goal. Of the 115 pages of the first issue of *Pasado y Presente*, approximately half are devoted to translated texts (a short document by Marx, the rest by Italian writers), particularly focused on historical materialism and the nature of dialectics. Other articles include

¹ Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

an introduction by Aricó, an analysis of class composition in Argentina by Portantiero, and other essays on the role of culture in politics, particularly literature.

Pasado y Presente's focus on "reinvigoration" brought its members into conflict with the PCA, which in turn led to the PCA's expulsion of the entire editorial team of *Pasado y Presente* after their second issue, apparently for their promotion of "focoismo," the strategy of small guerrilla groups along the Cuban model. *Pasado y Presente* continued to be published until 1965. In 1968, Aricó created the editorial series Cuadernos Pasado y Presente, which entirely focused on publishing complete works of heterodox Marxism and left-communism, including previously untranslated texts by European revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg, but also works situated within the Latin American context, including those of the Peruvian Communist José Carlos Mariátegui. In total, Cuadernos Pasado y Presente published almost 100 texts over the course of a few years, most of them original translations.

As "organic intellectuals," the *Pasado y Presente* group was involved in political organizing as well as editorial work, often in advisory roles to student, worker, and militant groups organizing outside of the auspices of the ACP. *Pasado y Presente* was linked to new left student groups (particularly notable in light of the 1969 "Córdobazo" student uprising), militant automobile workers, and guerrilla groups (Popovitch 117). *Pasado y Presente's* focus on strikes and worker militancy outside of party and union bureaucracy, student uprisings, and eventually armed struggle further link their praxis to that of "operaist" (workerist), left-communist currents within the Italian left. Both Córdoba and Bologna, for example, were political hotbeds in which major strikes were organized by rank-and-file workers (with the support of students and youth organizations) at Fiat factories in 1969. The group returned to the texts of Marx and his interpreters in order to develop a current that emphasized direct democracy and spontaneous worker action over party discipline and electoral politics (Aricó, *Pasado y Presente*, 858). While it is difficult to tease out the exact impact of their intellectual work in inspiring wider organizing of that nature, it aligned with a turn towards "Marxism from below" in Argentina and Latin America in general in the 1960s and 1970s.

Siglo XXI and Capital

Pasado y Presente eventually dissolved both as a journal and editorial project. However, Aricó and the Gramscian circle continued to lead publishing projects, culminating in Aricó's work in Siglo XXI Editores Argentina. At Siglo XXI, Aricó commissioned an ambitious project that typified the translation and intellectual work of the Gramscian circle in the 1960s and 1970s: a critical edition of Marx's *Capital*. It would be translated by Pedro Scarón, who was originally from Uruguay and, in keeping with the heterodox tradition of the Gramscians, mostly translated anarchist works in the 1960s before moving to Argentina and working with Aricó at Siglo XXI.

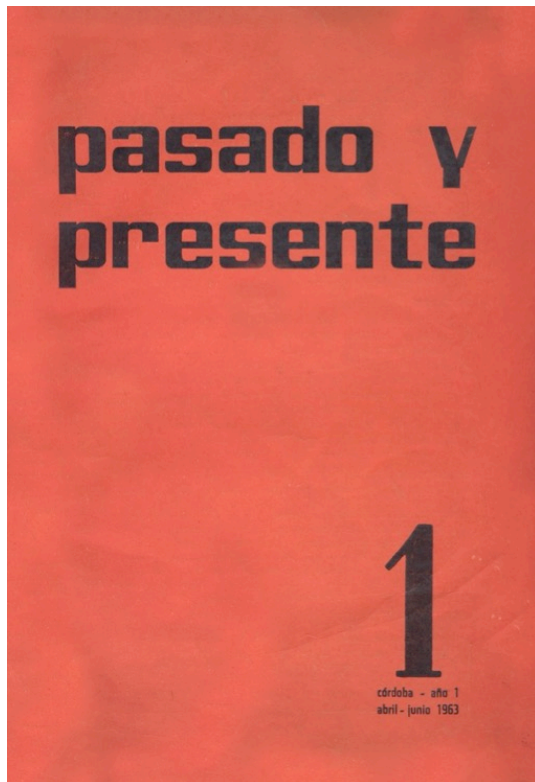
Translating *Capital* was a monumental task, not only for its length, density, and style, which bridges the literary and the technical, but also because of the lack of a single definitive version of the text. Not only did Marx and Engels revise and augment *Capital* in several German editions, but they made changes and additions to the French and English translations as well.

For the Siglo XXI translation, Scarón worked with a team of about five other translators and editors. Scarón himself read through every edition of Capital Volumes I-III that were published during the lifetimes of Marx and Engels and that Marx or Engels themselves had reviewed. All in all, he read six editions of Capital Vol. I and two of II and III. He selected the second German edition as a source text, added additions and clarifications made by Marx in other versions, and added the footnotes indexed by Eleanor Marx in the English translation (Rodríguez 420). In his translator's note, Scarón describes Volume I as "an enormous palimpsest in which the *generally (although not always)* richer layers of revision recover a good part of the original edition," (Marx, Scarón 13).

In the translator's note, Scarón calls attention to the technical language in *Capital*. The text contains many key terms that are either used in very specific ways by Marx, or complete neologisms created by Marx. For example, Scarón uses the term "plusvalor" for Marx's "Mehrwert," a term that is rendered in English as "surplus value" (Marx, Scarón 18). As Marx's concepts of value are both key to his thought and distinct from traditional economic forms of value, the language used for these terms has real implications for the interpretations of Marx's work. In the same section, Scarón alludes to the collaborative nature of this translation when he gives credit to the Siglo XXI editor Miguel Murmis as a "staunch- perhaps inflexibly so, in our judgment- defender" of the consistent use of technical terms. Through this close attention, Scarón and Siglo XXI hoped to present a version of Marx's work that was less mediated by some of its later interpreters (particularly Lenin and Stalin) and that would allow leftists to become "critical readers," who would be able to use their reading to generative, revolutionary ends (Rodríguez 429).

In the end, this task of the formation of a revolutionary Argentinean left was interrupted. The first volume (of eight) of Scarón's translation of Capital I-III was published in 1975. The military overthrew Isabel Perón in a coup in 1976, Siglo XXI Argentina was banned, and almost everybody involved, including Aricó and Scarón, went into exile. Aricó, like many of the Gramscian circle, went to Mexico City, and continued to work with Siglo XXI Mexico. Scarón completed his translation of *Capital* from Paris. Nevertheless, the careful editorial interventions of the *Pasado y Presente* circle encouraged new understandings and interplays of revolutionary praxis that, as Salas Rivera demonstrates, would echo among future generations of the left in Latin America.

In thinking about translation, I always return to the importance of the beginning of the process. How, or why, do we decide to translate something in the first place? And even before that, how might one best read with an eye for translation? The Gramscian circle provides an example of writing, translating, and publishing that is done with a sense of political urgency, the need to intervene in an ongoing historical process, and a desire to put texts -both translated and original- into play in dynamic and unexpected ways.



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